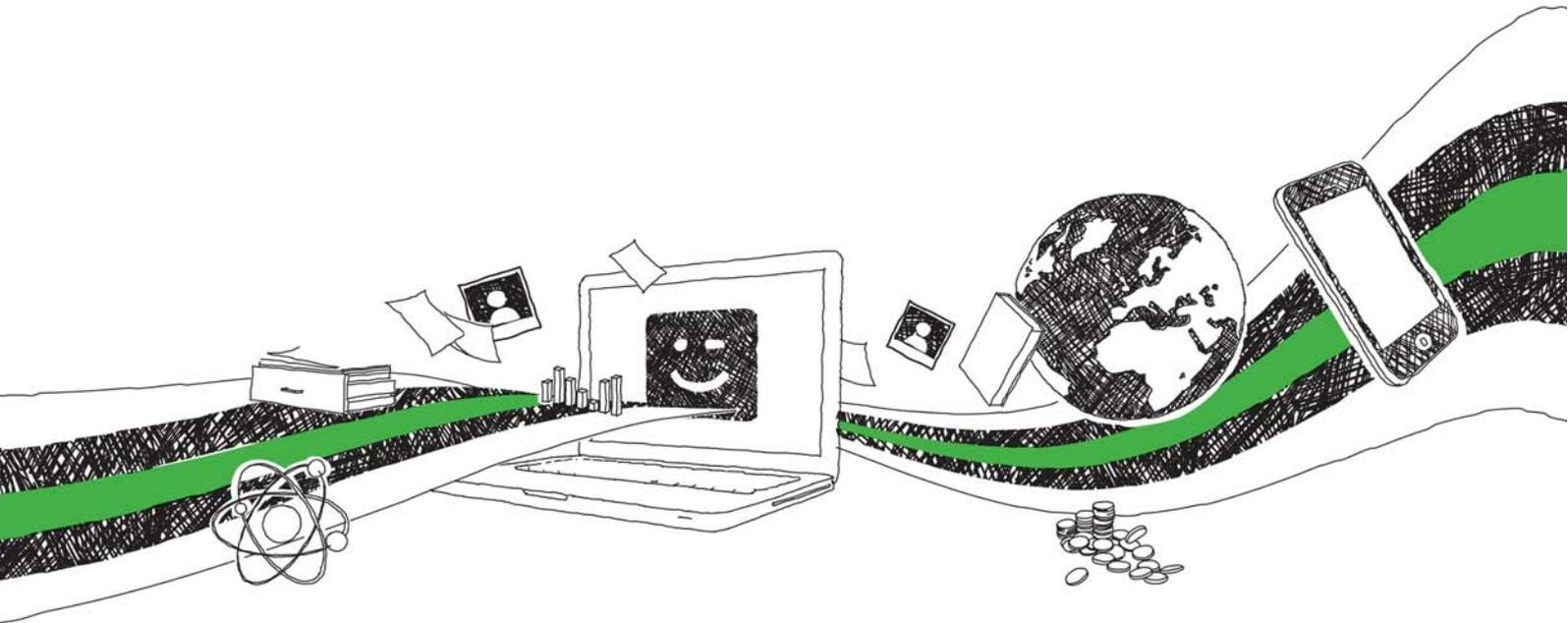


**Naseer Ahmad Habibi**

Plato's idea of democracy

**Scientific Essay**

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**Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:**

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**Imprint:**

Copyright © 2011 GRIN Verlag  
ISBN: 9783656188186

**This book at GRIN:**

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## **Plato's idea of democracy**

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FYS: Section 17  
By: Naseer Ahmad

Long assignment essay

***Plato finds democracy next to tyranny. Why does he think so low of democracy? Explain your position towards his criticism. Can his argumentation be applied to contemporary democracies?***

This essay seeks to address the above questions. First it explains Plato's concept of democracy, which shapes his attitude towards this form of government. Then it discusses my position towards Plato's criticism of democracy, provides a definition of contemporary democracy, and finally shows how Plato's argumentation can be applied to present day democracies.

Plato's idea of democracy which was conceptualized in around 300 B.C is quite different from the present day understanding of democracy. According to Plato, democracy originates "when the poor win, kill or exile their opponents, and give the rest equal civil rights and opportunities of office, appointment to office being as rule by lot" (Plato, p. 292). In another word, for Plato only philosopher kings were entitled to rule a society and apart from them ordinary people were perceived as barbaric and not worthy of governing. Plato's perception of democracy was shaped by his aristocratic background. For him only the elite which were described as "gold" had the right to rule the regular people who according to Plato were destined to be ruled. In Plato's word elite is a person who born with capacity and ability of being "gold". He doesn't want the people to take power and hold office.

Plato believed that anyone who did not have exceptional gifts could not grow into a good man unless he was brought up from childhood in a good environment and trained in good habits. Plato asserts that " democracy with a complicated gesture sweeps all this away" (Plato, p.294)

11 October 2011

and doesn't mind what the habits, and background of its politician are; provided they profess themselves the people's friends, they are duly praised.

The main reasons why Plato doesn't want people to be in power are the following: first, he says that "people are free, there is liberty and freedom of speech plenty, and every individual is free to do as he likes" (Plato, p 295). Therefore, people will abuse ultimate freedom and this will lead the state to chaos and instability. Plato refers to democracy as "an agreeable anarchic form of society" (Plato, p. 294) with lots of variety, which considers all people as equal, whether they are equal or not. In an anarchic society there is no protection of people's basic rights and complete chaos. In such a society without law and order, violence would be rampant and inevitably lead to oppression and tyranny.

Second, in Plato's point of view, a democratic society is a place for "constitution hunting" where a multitude of constitutions based on individuals' interests are available. Plato says "it's a shop in which one finds plenty of models to show" (Plato, p. 293). In Plato's word, model means constitutions mean the laws that people created by themselves and using that according to their own interests. He warns against leaving people with their own interests. Therefore, we can conclude that according to Plato finally it leads to anarchy and tyranny in a state. In an anarchic society there is no law, and the powerful person is the leader. He has his own law and he accommodates it on people. He does "what pleases him best", and becomes a tyrant. In order to prevent a society from becoming anarchy, we should have regulation on that society.

I think there is need for regulation within the rule of law in a democratic society, but Plato defines it differently. In my opinion, every citizen of a state has equal rights and responsibilities toward his country similar to the elite (philosopher king) part of society. In contemporary democracy, unlike Plato's time, the whole power belongs to people. However,

Plato wants the state to be ruled only by the “philosopher king” therefore denying the rights of other citizens of the state; this is not practical in contemporary democracy.

If we compare contemporary democracy with democracy in 300 BC, we can assert that Plato’s idea of democracy cannot be applied to the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s democracy. Contemporary democracy, in fact, is a form of government in which people collectively make decisions for themselves, rather than their political affairs being run by an irresponsible person. This means that the absolute power lies in the hands of people, and in addition, they are more aware of their rights than in Plato’s time. People can defend from their rights and the political culture is higher than 300 BC. One of the key features of contemporary democracy is universal suffrage. Which means that all adult citizens irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, and socio- economic background can vote and run for office. Separation of power, rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of association and respect for human rights are the other important features of contemporary democracy. In this part of the paper I want to discuss some features of contemporary democracy.

1. Separation of power in a country is the division of authority and power into branches, each has separate and independent powers and an areas of responsibility, so that no one branch has more power than the other branches. The normal division of branches is into an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary (Qasim, 2001). We cannot see this entire characteristic of contemporary democracy in Plato’s definition as it was not advanced enough to consider the separation of power. In Plato’s *Republic* there is not even an idea of separation of power. In *Republic*, the whole state should be run by the (Philosopher King), and that is the big difference between contemporary democracy and the democracy Plato describes.

2. Rule of law is a very important feature of contemporary democracy, which in fact is that individuals, persons and government shall submit to, obey and be regulated by law, and not arbitrary action by an individual or a group of individuals (Bingham, 2010 p. 8). In Plato's *Republic* we cannot find any passage about rule of law, but he emphasizes that only (philosopher king) can rule that state better than any other ruler.
3. Freedom of speech is the freedom to speak freely without censorship. The term freedom of expression is sometimes used synonymously, but includes any act of seeking, receiving and imparting information or ideas, regardless of the medium used.
4. Freedom of association is the individual right to come together with other individuals and collectively express, promote, pursue and defend common interests. The right to freedom of association has been included in a number of national constitutions and human rights instruments (Qasim, 2001p.112). In Plato's *Republic* freedom of association isn't mentioned, but I think freedom of association existed in Plato's time because *Republic* itself displays that people could gather and have their point of view about their common interests.
5. Human rights are "basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language, or other status." Human rights are conceived as universal and egalitarian, with all people having equal rights by virtue of being human (Qasim, 2001). Human rights were not considered in Plato's *Republic*. Plato says that the poor, weak, ill, and lazy people of society should be killed in order to establish a just state, which extremely shows violation of human rights.

By taking under consideration all important features of contemporary democracy, we can say that the democracy which existed in Plato's time is completely different than the democracy which exists today. In Republic Plato is talking about democracy without regulation which leads to anarchy, but in contemporary democracy we have regulation which will not lead to anarchy or tyranny. Furthermore, if we have an overview on the evolution of democracy, we can declare that the democracy which exists today is obtained by lots of efforts and sacrifices of those people who respected human beings and human rights.

The great French revolution is a well-known illustration of a democratic movement. At that time only the elite part of France had the right to vote and run for office, and they didn't even count poor and weak people as human beings and they believed that the only people who should rule are elites. By doing so, the people of France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century fought for their rights and the movement caused the entire Europe and even the whole world to wake up from centuries of ignorance and move toward equality and a bright future. This is similar to Plato's concept of not taking poor and weak under consideration.

The other example is the war for independence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the America, which was Great Britain's very beneficial colony. People were giving a big sum of their income as tax for the colonist which was not satisfactory for the people of America. They thought that the colonist is violating their rights. The people of America fought for their freedom, and gained their independence from the British Empire.

This paper referred to Plato's idea of democracy and compared it with contemporary democracy and its main features which include separation of power, rule of law, freedom of speech and association, and human rights. My position is that these features distinguish contemporary democracy from what Plato conceptualized. Based on the above arguments, Plato's idea of democracy which he thought was synonymous with tyranny cannot be applied to

the twenty-first century societies. Because the democracy which he describes is without regulation and as I mentioned in democracy of 21<sup>st</sup> century we have regulation.

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