Excerpts from Plato’s The Republic

Various city-states in Classical Greece, particularly Athens, have been admired for their demo­cratic institutions and practices. Yet Plato (427?-347 B.C.E.), the greatest political theorist of the time, was a harsh critic of democracy. An aristocratic Athenian who grew up during the Pelopon­nesian War, Plato became embittered by the trial and death of teacher, Socrates, in 399. After an extended absence from Athens, Plato returned in 386 and founded a school, the Academy, where he hoped to train philosopher-statesmen in accordance with his ideals expounded in *The Republic*. In the following selection from that work, Plato employs the dialogue form to examine democracy and its perils. This represents more than abstract thoughts, for at the time it was written, there was a rivalry between democratic forms of government, best represented by Athens, and more structured authoritarian forms, represented by Sparta.

…And then democracy comes into being after the poor have conquered their opponents, slaughtered some and banishing some, while to the remainder they give an equal share of freedom and power; and this is the form of government in which the mag­istrates are commonly elected by lot.

Yes, he said, that is the nature of democracy, whether the revolution has been effected by arms, or whether feat have caused the opposite party to withdraw.

And now what is their manner of life, and what sort of a government have they? For as the government is, such will be the man.

Clearly, he said.

In the first place, are they not free; and is not the city full of freedom and frankness- a man may say and do what he likes?

‘Tis said so, he replied. And where freedom is, the individual is clearly able to order for himself his own life as he pleases?

Clearly.

Then in this kind of state there will be the greatest vari­ety of human natures?

There will.

This, then, seems likely to be their fairest of states, being like an embroidered robe which is spangle with every sort of flower. And just as women and their children think a variety of colors to be of all things most charming, so there are many men to whom this State, which is spangled with the manners and char­acters of mankind, will appear to be the fairest of States.

Yes.

Yes, my good sir, and there will be no better in which to look for a government.

Why?

Because of the liberty which reigns there- they have a complete assortment of constitutions; and he who has a mind to establish a State, as we have been doing much, go to a democ­racy as he would to a bazaar at which they sell them, and pick out the one that suits him; then, when he has made his choice, he may found his State.

He will be sure to have patters enough.

And there being no necessity, I said, for you to govern in this State, even if you have the capacity, or to be governed, unless you like, or to go to war when the rest go to war, or to be at peace when others are at peace, unless you are so disposed-there being no necessity also, because some law forbids you to hold office or be a dicast, if you have a fancy- is not this a way of life which for the moment is supremely delightful?

For the moment, yes.

And is not their humanity to the condemned in some cases quite charming? Have you not observed how, in a democ­racy, many persons, although they have been sentenced to death or exile, just stay where they are and walk about the world- the gentleman parades like a hero, and nobody sees or cares?

Yes, he replied, many and many a one.

See too, I said, the forgiving spirit of democracy, and the ‘don’t care’ about trifles, and the disregard which she shows of all the fine principles which we solemnly laid down at the foundation of the city- as when we said that, except in the case of some rarely gifted nature, there never will be a good man who has not from his childhood been used to play amid things of beauty and make of them a joy and a study- how grandly does she trample all these fine notions of ours under her feet, never giving a thought to the pursuits which make a statesman, and promoting to honor any one who professes to be the people’s friend.

Yes, she is of a noble spirit.

These and other kindred characteristics are proper to democracy, which is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.

We know her well.

1. What does Plato say about Democracy? Provide details.
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Plato’s argument?
3. Examining these details, what is the big idea/

Excerpts from Aristotle’s: The Politics

**The Greek Philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) was a student of Plato. Like Plato, Aristotle was suspicious of democracy, which he thought could lead to mob rule. In­stead, Aristotle favored rule by a single strong and virtuous leader. In this excerpt from The Politics, Aristotle outlines the forms of government and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each form.**

First let us consider what is the purpose of a state and how many forms of government there are by which hu­man society is regulated. We have already said, earlier in this treatise… that man is by nature a political animal. And therefore men, even when they did not require one another’s help, desire to live together all the same, and are in fact brought together by their common interests… Well being is certainly the chief end of individuals and of states…

The conclusion is evident: governments which have a regard to common interest are constituted in ac­cordance with strict principles of justice, and are therefore true forms; but those which regard only the interest of the rulers are all defective and perverted forms. For they are despotic, whereas a state is a community of free men…

We call that form of government in which one rules, and which regards the common interest, kingship or royalty; that in which more than one, but not many, rule, aristocracy. It is so called, either because the rulers are the best men, or because they have at heart the best interest of the state and of the citizens. But when the citizens at large administer the state for the common interest, the government is call by the generic name- Con­stitutional government…

Of the above mentioned forms, the perversions are as follows: of royalty, tyranny; of aristocracy, oligar­chy; of constitutional government, democracy. For tyranny is a kind of monarchy which has in view the interest of the monarch only; oligarchy has in view the interest of the wealthy; democracy, of the needy; none of them the common good of all.

1. According to Aristotle, what is the corrupt form of aristocracy?
2. What does Aristotle mean when he said, “man is by nature a political animal?
3. How does Aristotle distinguish between good and bad governments?
4. What is his big idea?