

The Problem of Freedom

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The main argument in Plato's *Republic* is first sketched through the attempt to define and characterize the concept of justice. This endeavor immediately proves to be a very problematic and challenging one. It is not until we reach book VII that we have a more concrete reason as to why the early attempts of defining justice became quickly frustrated. Closely tied to the search for justice is the concept of freedom, and we learn later on that it is impossible to understand Plato's conception of justice without first considering freedom's role in creating both a just society and a just man. Freedom is not a simple concept for Plato—he has Socrates equate it with unmixed wine (562d). Freedom as unmixed wine is a useful metaphor for the following reasons. First, in an immediate sense, this metaphor helps to illustrate how democracy can easily deteriorate into tyranny, as the people become drunk with freedom and choose an unfit leader. Second, and more generally, this metaphor helps to characterize freedom and define its challenge. Like wine, it is treasured, desirable, and potentially dangerous. The danger that arises from freedom is excess, and since Socrates takes the just man to be a man with a harmonious and moderate soul, the problem of freedom must be resolved, or else justice is not an ideal form at all. Plato seems to suggest that to preserve the ideal of justice, freedom is required—the freedom to fulfill one's purpose—but there are also limits to freedom, and it is not immediately clear how these limits come about or whether they can be sustained. This seeming contradiction is the problem of freedom in Plato's *Republic*.

Textual difficulties such as these make it necessary to explore the relationship between the just man and freedom and to demonstrate the ways in which the problem of freedom presents itself in democracy and in tyranny. What are the extents and limits of freedom in the soul of a just man? How do the limitations on freedom evolve as we devolve from one kind of constitution to the next? What is the relationship between freedom and slavery, and how does it relate to the question of justice? By developing answers to these questions, we will learn more about the general relationship between freedom and justice, as well as the rules that grow up around this relationship. These rules are illustrated through metaphors like the Myth of the Metals (a political discussion) and the Allegory of the Cave (a discussion on the centrality of education), and through the discussion of the various types of constitutions and characters. In what follows I will consider these questions and metaphors in *Republic* to then draw the conclusion that in order to understand the concept of freedom, and ultimately justice, Plato is asking us to think actively and to consider two realms: the political and the educational.

Is the just man free? This question is an important starting point, because it is closely linked to the overall search for justice in the *Republic*. The answer is not simple; the philosopher-king is free in some ways while not free in others. Looking at the society as a whole, the same holds true. The members of the three classes of society—the rulers, the guardians, and the common people—are bound by the quality of their soul, as defined by the Myth of the Metals (414d). According to this myth, no man advances beyond his abilities, and in the *kallipolis*, led by the philosopher-king, each person does the job for which he is best suited. This rationale follows from Plato's discussion of the *kallipolis* (literally, "beautiful city"), which stands for the ideal of a well-governed, virtue-oriented city. Beauty, in the Platonic

sense, is intrinsically related to order and harmony. In the context of *Republic*, Plato wants to show the *kallipolis* as a political ideal, permeated by virtue and philosophy.

Following from the myth, most couples will give birth to children who will inhabit the same class as they do, but this generalization will not always apply, as men and women are both equally capable of rising above or falling below their parents' situation. In attempting to maximize the happiness of the city, Plato reduces the freedom of action of its inhabitants. Modern notions of social mobility in the West dispense with such rigid adherence to class structures, but in the *Republic*, they are essential to the preservation of a just order and to the moderate character of a just man.

The aristocratic constitution is not free, nor is the character of the man who mirrors it, the philosopher-king. As a ruler, he would seem to have free license to do anything he wanted, yet he does not rule as a tyrant. Instead, rather than doing what he wills, he does what his just nature wills him to do—against natural appetites. The Allegory of the Cave helps to further establish this point. As Socrates puts it, “We mustn’t allow [those who ascend to the realm of Understanding] to do what they’re allowed to do today ... To stay there and refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors, whether they are of less worth or of greater” (519c-d). When Glaucon protests that forcing the philosophers back to the cave is an injustice, Socrates reminds him that the objective is to spread happiness throughout the city and to maintain it through the law (519d-520a). Thus, the advancement and preservation of the *kallipolis* depends on its rulers being, to some extent, not free. The founders of the city will set in motion a system whereby “the best natures” are found, educated, elevated, and enlightened, but ultimately also limited by their own good character

and forced to take power. This description goes directly to what Plato believes makes the philosopher the ideal ruler. If he were free to choose, the philosopher would never return to the Cave, eschewing lower matters like politics in favor of true understanding. Only a philosopher would choose the contemplative life, since it is the philosopher who knows of the difference between that which is visible and that which is intelligible. For the ideal, just constitution to arise, philosophers must rule. Nevertheless, if philosophers were free, they would not rule—the political freedom that belongs to a king comes at the price of personal freedom.

While Plato attempts to establish aristocracy as the ideal form of government and philosopher-kings as the ideal rulers, he does not hold them to be perfect. Socrates paints the aristocratic constitution in organic terms, saying, “It is hard for a city composed in this way to change, but everything that comes into being must decay. Not even a constitution such as this will last for ever. It, too, must face dissolution” (546a). Eventually, the children chosen to rule will be unworthy, for reasons rooted in mathematics, as Socrates explains, and the class system will break down, leading to civil war (546b-547a). Having fallen from the pinnacle of human government, the city descends through various lesser constitutions, from timocracy to oligarchy to democracy to tyranny. In each new stage, children are brought up in the habits of their fathers, only to fall into excess, thereby creating an order more flawed and less harmonious (that is, less just) than the one before it.

Timocracy and oligarchy, the two constitutions that follow from aristocracy, are based on the rule of strength and wealth, respectively. Then when the poor overthrow the oligarchs and establish democracy, we see a new kind of rule—one based on freedom. Democracy is

described in alluring terms, but the problem of freedom presents itself yet again: free people give themselves over to excess, and the free man has “neither order nor necessity in his life, but he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and he follows it for as long as he lives” (561d). We see here a breakdown of the values that once governed the old order. Where before, the philosopher-kings ruled wisely, ensuring that people kept to their proper station in life, democracy makes equals out of both equals and unequals (558c). In other words, ability and character no longer serve to distinguish people from one another, as people do not necessarily lead the life for which they are best suited. We might say, perhaps too simply, that the problem of freedom in a democracy is that people with the freedom to choose might choose the wrong path. With no guardians in place to impose virtue on the population, there is no direction, and any positive outcomes may be attributed more to luck than to anything else. Still, democracy is a pleasant condition while it lasts, for the people are both free to choose and are tolerant by nature.

“Freedom: Surely you’d hear a democratic city say that this is the finest thing it has, so that as a result it is the only city worth living in for someone who is by nature free” (562c). When freedom is valued above all else, the people seek to maximize their own happiness according to their desires, rather than seeking to establish harmony in the city. For the democratic city, drunk on the unmixed wine of freedom, responsibility and law become too much to bear. Neglect and decay will ensue, because while the just man went against his own desires and accepted a power that had been thrust upon him, in democracy, the people will eventually know nothing but their own desires, the common good forgotten. The rich, according to their ability, will prosper, the jealousy of the poor will grow, and it is in the name

of their ultimate good—freedom—that the poor will choose a champion who exploits their passions to seek his own. It has been necessary to trace the descent from aristocracy to tyranny in some detail, in order to lay the foundations for discussing the relationship between freedom and slavery. This genealogy, as we shall see, will allow us to fully define the problem of freedom within Plato's *Republic*.

It is from absolute freedom that absolute slavery arises. For the tyrant himself, the two conditions are, in some sense, one and the same. The tyrant wields unparalleled political power, yet he is a slave to base desires: unwilling and unable to restrain himself. What is most significant psychologically about the tyrant is that those base desires that drive him are present in everyone, even in philosophers: "Our dreams make it clear that there is a dangerous, wild, and lawless form of desire in everyone, even in those of us who seem to be entirely moderate or measured" (572b). In something common to all—base desires—Plato reveals something about the nature of good government and the good life: a good constitution is one which guards against tyranny, while a good character is one that seeks to stave off base desires, while advancing the common good.

The tyrant is the one who draws the sharpest contrast between freedom and slavery—not only is he the furthest removed from the philosopher-king, but he is also the antithesis of the just man. Though he pursues his every desire with impunity, he is left unsatisfied and only wants more. The tyrant's power becomes meaningless, because Plato's true ultimate good, happiness, remains forever out of reach, in stark contrast to the condition of the philosopher-king, who finds happiness in understanding. Furthermore, the things the tyrant must do to save his power are the direct opposites of those things that a just ruler would do: the tyrant will

eliminate any potential threat, for he is driven by wrath and fear—he will destroy anyone “who is brave, large-minded, knowledgeable, or rich,” whereas the philosopher-king would have cultivated any such person to his full potential and allowed him to thrive (567b).

Both in character and in action, the tyrant is clearly the opposite of the philosopher-king. Nevertheless, does that mean that the philosopher-king is free, while the tyrant is a slave? What does the contrast between these two figures—the just man and the wretched tyrant—tell us about our own desire for freedom? In Plato’s conception, the philosopher-king is free, but not in a way that is relatable to modern readers, particularly Westerners. Having ascended to the realm of understanding and become king, the just man can do as he wishes, but he would never wish to do anything but establish justice. Likewise, having destroyed his enemies and seized power, the tyrant can do as he wishes, but he would never wish to do anything but seek pleasure. Whether such men are free or slaves is unclear; both have freedom of action in a political sense, but each man is bound by his own nature, be it just or tyrannical.

In desiring freedom and in championing it as the ultimate good, modern societies find themselves at odds with Plato’s arguments about justice, happiness, and what it means to lead a good life. The *Republic* seems to define justice as a state in which all the people are doing that for which they are best suited, and it follows that a just constitution is one that permits people the freedom to do that for which they are best suited. While this state leads to standards of education and gender equality that seem quite progressive, it also restricts people’s ability to pursue happiness on their own, without direction from above. If freedom is seen as an absolute good, this situation is unacceptable. How can people be both free and just?

Near the end of Book IX, we are reminded of the centrality of education to Plato's ideas on justice and that these ideas have great import for our examination of freedom. Socrates asserts that it is best for each man to be ruled by divine reason; if people are not so ruled from within, they are to be ruled by the law, which he further calls the "ally of everyone" (590d). However, because no child is born with the ability to govern himself or herself in this way, Socrates compares the establishment of a constitution to the proper raising of a child. Parents, he says, "equip [children] with a guardian and ruler similar to our own to take our place. Then, and only then, we set them *free* [italics added]" (591a). This statement makes explicit the link between the search for justice and the problem of freedom and also reveals Plato's answer to the question of how to reconcile the two.

The only way to achieve both freedom and justice is through education. This premise is foundational for Plato. Education serves to imbue children with a constitution, a set of governing principles that will help to form their thoughts, shape their actions, and guide their lives. A constitution not only defines the functions of government; it also sets limits on the reach of the government. In governing himself, a man will guard against excess and vice, imposing moderation on himself in the same way constitutional governments do. The process is complementary. A community made up of such educated people will tend to form a constitutional government, which will in turn encourage education and continue the cycle. It is limitations, not freedoms, that define the good in a just society. This thread runs throughout Plato's *Republic*, in which we see limits on pleasure, limits on parenthood, limits on power. A just order is one that provides all people with the opportunity to fulfill their potential. This type

of freedom is separate from the pursuit of base desires, and it is dependent upon divine reason, without which the city falls into decline.

It was earlier established that the just man is not completely free—a philosophical nature that leads the just man to rule, not to pursue his own aimless, personal desires. The key to the continuation of the aristocracy, then, is to instill a philosophical nature in the best people, those whose souls, in accordance with the myth, contain gold. This orientation is accomplished through the careful program of education that Socrates describes. When a philosophical nature has been achieved, the just man regulates his own behavior and does what is best for the general happiness of the *kallipolis*. We found that democracy, the state in which people are most free, is not an ideal form of constitution for Plato, and taken together with our examination of the just man, Plato establishes that freedom presents problems for the kind of society that Socrates wants to build. While many modern readers might be inclined to argue that the best constitution is the one that maximizes freedom, the quality of Socrates' various constitutions is not judged in this way. Instead, the ultimate good is taken to be happiness—the just city will maximize overall happiness, which depends on harmony among the various parts of society. In the same way, the just man will maximize overall happiness, neither neglecting nor becoming excessive in any one part of his life.

From this understanding of justice, it follows that freedom is indeed like unmixed wine—that an excess of freedom could lead to disaster (562d). Indeed, it is from the absolute freedom of democracy that absolute slavery arises. If total freedom of action is paired with no philosophical education, then the ruler pursues not the common good, but a misguided or

uneducated vision of his own good; this vision is in fact a mirage, moving further away from him the closer he gets to it, for the tyrant can never be satisfied.

Taken together, our questions on the relationship have made clearer the problem of freedom in Plato's conception of the good life. The question of justice is inherently linked to the amount of freedom afforded to a man, but the amount of freedom does not correspond to the justice of the constitution—in fact, quite the contrary, as Plato tries to show. His insights into the dangers of unbridled democracy and the nature of the tyrant teach us that freedom is, to borrow the language of the Hebrew Bible, “life and death, the blessing and the curse” (Deuteronomy 30:19). To choose life is to accept certain limits on our freedom and to come to terms with our limited condition. To choose death is to deny and defy these limits in the hope of satisfying desires that are, in the end, unquenchable. The purpose of constitutions is to define those limits, and thus different constitutions arise from different definitions of what is good—happiness, honor, wealth, freedom. If we are to choose life, we are in some sense choosing freedom, with all its dangers; our task is to ensure that freedom and justice can coexist. Our duty is education.

Work Cited

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992. Print.