

Plato and Aristotle on Tyranny and the Rule of Law

Nearly 2,400 years ago, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle explored political philosophy. Aristotle concluded that “it is evident that the form of government is best in which every man, whoever he is, can act best and live happily.”

In Philadelphia some 2,000 years after Plato and Aristotle’s time, a group of men was trying to write a constitution. George Washington, James Madison, and the other framers of the Constitution were dedicated to constructing a just government. Americans had overthrown what they considered a tyrannous British government. The framers wanted to create a national government free of tyranny, governed by the rule of law.

The new American nation was quite different from the ancient Greek city-states. Still, many of the framers at Philadelphia had studied and understood Plato’s and Aristotle’s political philosophies. And they were grappling with many of the same political questions.

Tyranny and the Rule of Law

Plato and Aristotle both developed important ideas about government and politics. Two of the many political subjects that these men wrote about were tyranny and the rule of law. Tyranny occurs when absolute power is granted to a ruler. In a tyrannical government, the ruler becomes corrupt and uses his power to further his own interests instead of working for the common good.

The rule of law is the principle that no one is exempt from the law, even those who are in a position of power. The rule of law can serve as a safeguard against tyranny, because just laws ensure that rulers do not become corrupt.

Athenian Democracy

Both Plato and Aristotle lived in the democratic Greek city-state of Athens. In Athenian democracy, all male citizens directly participated in making laws and deciding jury trials. Yearly elections decided who would fill important government positions. Citizens drew lots to see who would staff the remaining posts.

Athens had reached its height in political power before Plato was born. Its decline began with a long war with Sparta, a rival city-state. The war ended in 404 B.C. with Athens’ defeat. Athens regained its democracy, but shortly after Plato’s death, the city-state fell under the control of Macedon, a kingdom north of Greece. The city remained, however, a cultural center.

Plato (c. 428–347 B.C.)

Plato was a student of Socrates. Socrates taught by asking questions about a subject and getting his students to think critically about it. Today, this is known as the Socratic method, used by many professors in law schools.

Socrates’ questioning often led to criticism of Athenian democracy and its politicians. An increasing number of Athenians viewed Socrates as a threat to their city-state.

A few years after losing the war with Sparta, Athens put the 70-year-old Socrates on trial for not accepting the gods of Athens and for corrupting the young. Socrates denied the accusations, but he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

When Socrates died, Plato concluded that democracy was a corrupt and unjust form of government. He left Athens for a decade. Returning in 387 B.C., he established a school of higher learning called the Academy.

Plato’s *Republic*

Plato's most important work on politics is his *Republic*, published around 380 B.C. Written as a dialogue among characters and set in a private home, the book describes a small group of Athenians discussing political philosophy. The main character is Socrates, who voiced Plato's ideas. (The real Socrates never wrote down his ideas.)

The Republic examines the meaning of justice, looks at different types of government, and outlines the ideal state. It touches on many subjects, including law and tyranny.

Plato looked at four existing forms of government and found them unstable. The best, in his view, is timocracy, a military state, like Sparta, based on honor. But such a state will fall apart:

The accumulation of gold in the treasury of private individuals is the ruin of timocracy; they invent illegal modes of expenditure; for what do they or their wives care about the law? . . . And then one, seeing another grow rich, seeks to rival him, and thus the great mass of the citizens become lovers of money. . . . And so at last, instead of loving contention and glory, men become lovers of trade and money; they honor and look up to the rich man, and make a ruler of him, and dishonor the poor man.

An oligarchy, the rule of a few (the rich), leads to

a city of the rich and a city of the poor, dwelling together, and always plotting against one another. . . . [The government] will not be able to wage war, because of the necessity of either arming and employing the multitude, and fearing them more than the enemy, or else, if they do not make use of them, of finding themselves on the field of battle And to this must be added their reluctance to contribute money, because they are lovers of money.

The poor will overthrow the oligarchy and set up a democracy, the rule of the people (the poor). Plato thought that democratic "life has neither law nor order." An unquenchable desire for limitless liberty causes disorder, because the citizens begin to

chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority and at length, . . . they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them.

Stressing moderation, Plato warned that "the excessive increase of anything often causes a reaction in the opposite direction," such that the "excess of liberty, whether in states or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery."

Like an oligarchy, a democracy pits the poor against the rich. The poor see the rich plotting, and they seek protection:

The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness. . . . This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears above ground he is a protector. . . . having a mob entirely at his disposal, he is not restrained from shedding the blood of kinsmen; . . . he brings them into court and murders them . . . at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands. . . . After a while he is driven out, but comes back, in spite of his enemies, a tyrant full grown.

Plato deemed tyranny the "fourth and worst disorder of a state." Tyrants lack "the very faculty that is the instrument of judgment"—reason. The tyrannical man is enslaved because the best part of him (reason) is enslaved, and likewise, the tyrannical state is enslaved, because it too lacks reason and order.

Plato's Ideal State						
Class	Composed of . . .	Soul	Interest	Education	Property	Family
Lower	farmers, craftsmen, commoners	appetite	pleasure	NO	YES	YES
Warrior	soldiers & police	spirit	honor & glory	YES	NO	NO
Ruling	philosophers	reason	wisdom	YES	NO	NO

In a tyranny, no outside governing power controls the tyrant's selfish behavior. To Plato, the law can guard against tyranny. In the *Republic*, he called the law an "external authority" that functions as the "ally of the whole city."

Plato stressed the importance of law in his other works. In the *Crito*, a dialogue between Socrates and his friend Crito, Crito offers Socrates a way to escape his impending execution. Socrates refuses, explaining that when a citizen chooses to live in a state, he "has entered into an implied contract that he will do as . . . [the laws] command him." In Plato's *Laws*, his last book, he summarizes his stance on the rule of law:

Where the law is subject to some other authority and has none of its own, the collapse of the state, in my view, is not far off; but if law is the master of the government and the government is its slave, then the situation is full of promise and men enjoy all the blessings that the gods shower on a state.

Plato's ideal and just state is an aristocracy, the rule of the best. He believed leaders needed to be wise and trained in how to run a state, just as captains of ships are trained in how to run a ship.

He divided his ideal state into three classes. The lowest and largest class is the producers: the farmers, craftsmen, traders, and others involved in commerce. The next class is the warriors, those who defend the state. They are educated in sports, combat, and philosophy and tested by both terrifying and tempting situations. From the best of warrior class, the ruling class is drawn. Its members will study philosophy and be given government and military positions until age 50, when the best of them become philosopher kings.

Plato believed every human's soul is divided into three parts: appetite, spirit, and reason. Each of his three classes matches one aspect of a person's soul. The lower class is linked to appetite, and it owns all the land and controls all the wealth. The warrior class is spirited and lives by a code of honor. The ruling class is linked to reason and lives to gain wisdom.

The philosopher kings will prefer seeking truth to ruling, but a law will compel them to rule. They will obey the law and take their turns as rulers.

[T]he truth is that the State in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the State in which they are most eager, the worst.

The warrior and ruling classes live in barracks, eat together, and share possessions. None has families. All children of these classes are brought up without knowing their parents. In this way, Plato tries to keep these classes from gaining wealth or producing family dynasties.

Plato concluded:

Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, . . . cities will never have rest from their evils . . .

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.)

Born in the north of Greece, Aristotle came from a family linked to the kingdom of Macedon. His father worked for the king as a court doctor.

When Aristotle grew up, he studied philosophy at Plato's Academy for 20 years, leaving when Plato died. He traveled and then tutored the king of Macedon's 13-year-old son, Alexander (the future Alexander the Great).

When Alexander became king of Macedon in 335 B.C., Aristotle returned to Athens to set up his own school, called the Lyceum. He studied, catalogued, lectured, debated, and wrote about every area of human knowledge.

Although Plato had been his teacher, Aristotle disagreed with much of Plato's philosophy. Plato was an idealist, who believed that everything had an ideal form. Aristotle believed in looking at the real world and studying it.

Aristotle spent many years teaching in Athens, which was under the control of Macedon. When Alexander the Great died, however, anti-Macedonians took control of Athens. Linked to Macedon, Aristotle was accused of not accepting the gods of Athens, one of the same charges leveled against Socrates. Unlike Socrates, however, Aristotle did not stand trial. He fled to a home in the countryside, saying, as the story goes, that he did not want Athens to “sin twice against philosophy” (its first sin being the execution of Socrates). Aristotle died the following year in exile.

Aristotle’s Politics

Like Plato, Aristotle, wrote extensively on the subjects of tyranny and the rule of law. He hoped that his *Politics*, a collection of essays on government, would provide direction for rulers, statesmen, and politicians.

In *The Politics*, Aristotle *rejected* Plato’s ideal state. He said that it fails to address conflicts that will arise among its citizens. He claimed Plato’s ideal state will

contain two states in one, each hostile to the other . . . [Plato] makes the guardians [the warriors] into a mere occupying garrison, while the husbandmen and artisans and the rest are the real citizens. But if so, the suits and quarrels and all the evils which *Socrates* affirms to exist in other states, will exist equally among them. He says indeed that, having so good an education, the citizens will not need many laws, . . . but then he confines his education to the guardians.

Aristotle’s ‘True’ vs. ‘Despotic’ Forms of Government		
Number of Rulers	‘True’ (Common Interest)	‘Despotic’ (Selfish Interest)
one	Monarchy	Tyranny
few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
many	Polity	Democracy

Unlike *The Republic*, *The Politics* does not depict an ideal system of government. Instead, Aristotle explored practical constitutions that city-states can realistically put into effect. His aim was to “consider, not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable.”

He studied the different governments in Greece’s many city-states. He identified six different kinds of constitutions, and he classified them as either “true” or “defective.” He stated that

governments which have a regard to the 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 . . .

“True” constitutions served the common interests of all citizens. “Despotic” constitutions served only the selfish interests of a certain person or group. The chart below shows the “despotic” and “true” constitutions. (Despotic is a synonym for “tyrannic.”)

Tyranny perverts monarchy, because it “has in view the interest of the monarch only.” To Aristotle, tyranny is the

arbitrary power of an individual . . . responsible to no one, [which] governs . . . with a view to its own advantage, not to that of its subjects, and therefore against their will.

Aristotle wrote, “No freeman, if he can escape from it, will endure such a government.”

Aristotle believed that tyranny is the “very reverse of a constitution.” He explained that

where the laws have no authority, there is no constitution. The law ought to be supreme over all.

Aristotle stressed that these laws must uphold just principles, such that “true forms of government will of necessity have just laws, and perverted forms of government will have unjust laws.”

Aristotle held views similar to Plato’s about the dangers of democracy and oligarchy. He feared that both pitted the rich against the poor. But he recognized that these types of governments took many forms. The worst were those without the rule of law. In democracies without law, demagogues (leaders appealing to emotions) took over.

For in democracies where the laws are not supreme, demagogues spring up. . . . [T]his sort of democracy . . . [is] what tyranny is to other forms of monarchy. The spirit of both is the same, and they alike exercise a despotic rule over the better citizens. The decrees of the [demagogues] correspond to the edicts of the tyrant Such a democracy is fairly open to the objection that it is not a constitution at all; for where the laws have no authority, there is no constitution. The law ought to be supreme over all

Aristotle made the same argument about oligarchies.

When . . . the rulers have great wealth and numerous friends, this sort of family despotism approaches a monarchy; individuals rule and not the law. This is the fourth sort of oligarchy, and is analogous to the last sort of democracy.

Aristotle stated that “the rule of law . . . is preferable to that of any individual.” This is because individuals possess flaws and could tailor government to their own individual interests, whereas the rule of law is objective.

[H]e who bids the law rule may be deemed to bid God and Reason alone rule, but he who bids man rule adds an element of the beast; for desire is a wild beast, and passion perverts the minds of rulers, even when they are the best of men. The law is reason unaffected by desire.

Rulers must be “the servants of the laws,” because “law is order, and good law is good order.”

In addition to law, Aristotle believed a large middle class would protect against the excesses of oligarchy and democracy:

[T]he best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered in which the middle class is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes . . . ; for the addition of the middle class turns the scale, and prevents either of the extremes from being dominant.

In fact, one of Aristotle’s true forms of government is a polity, a combination of oligarchy and democracy. This type of state arises when the middle class is strong.

The U.S. Constitution

Like Plato and Aristotle, our nation’s founders worried about tyrannical government. Recognizing that tyranny could come from a single powerful ruler or from “mob rule,” the founders wrote into the Constitution mechanisms to prevent tyranny and promote the rule of law. They separated the powers of government into three equal branches of government: the executive (the president), the legislative (Congress), and the judicial (the Supreme Court). Each branch can check the other to prevent corruption or tyranny. Congress itself is divided into the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House, elected for two-year terms, is more likely to be swayed by the passions of the people than the Senate, elected to six-year terms. The Constitution further limits the powers of the government by listing its powers: The government may not exercise any power beyond those listed. The first 10 amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, protect people’s liberties and freedoms from government encroachment. In creating the judicial branch of government, the framers gave federal judges lifetime terms, thus ensuring that judges would base their decisions on the law and not on politics.

ACTIVITY

Answer the following 6 questions on a separate sheet of paper:

1. What is the rule of law? How can it help prevent tyranny?
2. James Madison, the “father” of the U.S. Constitution, wrote in *The Federalist Papers* #55: “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.” What did he mean by this? Do you agree? Explain.
3. Which ideas of Plato might be useful in today’s society? Why? Which ideas of Aristotle? Why?
4. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) once said that “democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms” What did he mean? Do you agree? Explain.
5. At the end of their lives, Socrates and Aristotle faced a similar situation. In your opinion, who made the correct decision? Why?
6. What is a republic? Is Plato’s ideal state a republic? Explain.

Plato and Aristotle in Modern Times

In this activity, students will examine and discuss political quotations from Plato and Aristotle. Select 1 quote from the list below, and answer the questions below. (Answer the following 3 questions on the same paper you answered the first 6 above.)

1. What does the quotation mean?
2. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
3. How well does the American political system address or handle this issue?

(Be prepared to report your answers and reasons for them to the class. If you have extra time, discuss another quotation.)

Quotations

1. [T]he best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered in which the middle class is large, and stronger if possible than both the other classes —Aristotle
2. The best laws, though sanctioned by every citizen of the state, will be of no avail unless the young are trained by habit and education in the spirit of the constitution —Aristotle
3. [I]f law is the master of the government and the government is its slave, then the situation is full of promise and men enjoy all the blessings that the gods shower on a state. —Plato
4. If the poor . . . because they are more in number, divide among themselves the property of the rich—is not this unjust? . . . But is it just then that the few and the wealthy should be the rulers? And what if they, in like manner, rob and plunder the people—is this just? —Aristotle
5. The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness. . . . This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears above ground he is a protector. . . having a mob entirely at his disposal —Plato