How did Plato view democracy?

The two political parties or social classes that vied for power in classical Athens, as in most other Greek city states, were the oligarchs and the democrats. The oligarchs tried to establish a state in which only owners of substantial amounts of property could vote and hold public office, while the democrats insisted that all male citizens have the same rights. An oligarchy is said to be that in which the few and the wealthy, and a democracy that in which the many and the poor are the rulers.

Athens was a democracy throughout most of the 5th and the 4th century. During that time, only twice did oligarchs succeed in establishing a government where the few and wealthy ruled over the many and mostly poor. Neither oligarchic regime lasted even as long as a year.

Tensions between oligarchs and democrats were always present in Athenian politics. There was rarely a time when the democrats did not suspect the oligarchs of conspiring against the democracy, or when the oligarchs did not fear that the poor were trying to take away their privileges or wealth. Plato notes in his book, the Republic, that every city consists really of "two cities that are at war with each other."

Plato had no faith in the rule of the rich, nor any confidence in the ability of ordinary citizens to run a city like Athens:

The rich, as he saw, had mostly their special interests in mind, and during the time of their short-lived regimes they had shown to what length they could go to defend the advantages of the few against the majority of ordinary people.

But the rule by the many was no remedy for the ills of oligarchy, according to Plato, because ordinary people were too easily swayed by the emotional and deceptive rhetoric of ambitious politicians. It was the demos, after all, the majority of ordinary people, who time and again had supported the disastrous campaigns of war by their votes, who had condoned numerous atrocities and breaches of the law, and who were also responsible for the questionable trial and execution of Socrates.

Athenian politics, in other words, seemed an irremediably corrupted affair, and all a rational person could do was to attend to personal matters, and to pursue wisdom in the privacy of one’s solitude and a small circle of friends.

**What was Plato’s utopian society?**

Plato describes the human soul as composed of three parts: bodily desires and appetites, “spirited emotions” like ambition and courage, and finally the ability of knowledge and reason. In a healthy individual all three parts fulfill their proper function.

* Bodily desires and appetites secure the physical survival of a person,
* the spirited emotions inspire his more far-reaching hopes, and
* the intellect makes sure that man remain reasonable and under rational control.

Without the self-discipline imposed by reason a person may easily become self-destructive, or be carried away by foolish emotions and thoughtless ambitions. Informed reason, according to Plato, is the way to make all the right and necessary decisions in a person’s life.

Plato’s utopian society also has a three part structure like the human soul.

* Corresponding to the bodily desires and appetites of the soul is the class of people who are involved in the economy of a state. This class makes up the majority of the people, and it comprises such groups as craftsmen, farmers, merchants, manufacturers, and money changers or bankers. Plato classifies all of them as “lovers of money.”
* Corresponding to the spirited emotions in the soul is the much smaller class of the armed forces, the class of professional warriors that is responsible for the safety of the community. Plato calls them “lovers of honor.” Their main desire is to gain fame and admiration by serving their fellow citizens—for whom they are willing to sacrifice their lives as well as their material possessions.
* Corresponding to the ability of reason is the smallest class of people—scientists, and scholars. Plato calls them “lovers of wisdom,” i. e., “philosophers.” Their most passionate interests are understanding and knowledge, and their greatest pleasure a lively life of the mind.

As a just and healthy person is governed by knowledge and reason, society must be under the control of society’s most cultivated and best informed minds, its “lovers of wisdom.” Societies cannot be run by big money or armed forces. Limitless desire for wealth and blind ambition must be watched and contained as potential public dangers. The most informed minds must determine with consideration of all points of view, what the most healthy and practical goals for the commonwealth are.

**Who should rule?**

The rule by society’s best minds is of Plato’s so-called “philosopher kings.” Until now crucial decisions concerning war, peace, and the welfare of society had always been left to corrupt or incompetent politicians, ignorant voters, over-ambitious generals, and other people unsuited to run a state. Bloodshed, hatred, waste of resources, and deplorable conditions had usually been the result. There is no chance for things to become better unless knowledge and reason are put in command—the best knowledge and the most competent reason that society can muster. Lovers of wisdom may not be eager to govern, as their main passions are more intellectual pursuits. But since they are the best trained and best informed minds, they must be obligated by law to run the state—as a sort of committee of technocrats.

"Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, … cities will never have rest from their evils,” as Plato suggests in the Republic.

Plato was fully aware of how crazy such an idea must have sounded in the ears of most of his contemporaries, an idea that was rendered even more fantastic by his contention that women are as capable of being philosophers and governors as men, and that no member of the government should be allowed to own or accumulate property while in office.

Plato himself poked fun at the strangeness of what he was proposing, and some scholars are not sure just how seriously Plato took the proposals of the Republic himself. Still, the book’s discussion of good government provides arguments that give us something to think about today.

**What was Plato’s Ship Analogy?**

Plato compares the state to an elaborate and expensive ship. A ship, to accomplish a safe and successful journey, needs an expert navigator at the helm, a captain who knows the capacities of the vessel, geography, meteorology, water currents, navigational astronomy, supplies management, and other related matters. An ignorant and untrained person at the helm of a ship would endanger vessel, cargo, crew, and passengers alike.

Similarly, Plato suggests, the ship of state needs expert governors at the helm, governors who are well informed about such things as law, economics, sociology, military strategy, history, and other relevant subjects. Ignorant and incompetent governors can be and have been disasters for citizens and states.

Democratic self-government does not work, according to Plato, because ordinary people have not learned how to run the ship of state. They are not familiar enough with such things as economics, military strategy, conditions in other countries, or the confusing intricacies of law and ethics. They are also not inclined to acquire such knowledge. The effort and self-discipline required for serious study is not something most people enjoy. In their ignorance they tend to vote for politicians who impress them with appearances and talk, and they inevitably find themselves at the mercy of administrations and conditions over which they have no control because they do not understand what is happening around them. They are guided by unreliable emotions more than by careful analysis, and they are lured into adventurous wars and victimized by costly defeats that could have been entirely avoided.

This is how the Republic portrays politics in a democracy:

Imagine then a ship or a fleet in which there is a captain who is taller and stronger than any of the crew, but who is a little deaf and has a similar problem with sight, and whose knowledge of navigation is not much better. The sailors are quarreling with one another about the steering—every one is of the opinion that he has a right to steer, though he has never learned the art of navigation …

The captain in this analogy is the owner of the ship or fleet; he represents the demos, the majority of ordinary people. The sailors are the politicians who compete to be at the helm. It had been their incompetence, as well as that of the owner, that has brought Athens to ruin in the past:

Sailors pester the captain, begging and praying him to commit the helm to them; and if at any time they do not succeed in steering the sip, but others do, they kill the others or throw them overboard, and having first chained up the noble captain’s senses with drink or some narcotic drug, they mutiny and take possession of the ship and take all the ship’s goods… thus eating and drinking.

They continue on their voyage. Whomever helps them in their plot for getting the ship out of the captain’s hands, they reward with the title of sailor, pilot, able seaman.Those that do not help they call a good-for-nothing.

The way to avoid the serious shortcomings of democracy as well as oligarchy is the installation of the government of people that will make all relevant and necessary decisions on the basis of objective analyses and unbiased deliberations. Since neither the demos nor ordinary politicians can be expected to acquire this sort of competence, it will have to be the committee of philosopher kings (and philosopher queens) that guarantees justice, public welfare, and peace.

Please answer the following questions after you do the reading:

1. Who were the two political groups that fought for power in Athens?
2. What did each group stand for?
3. Why did the democrats distrust the oligarchs?
4. Why did the ologarchs distrust the democrats?
5. How did Plato feel about the ability of the oligarchs to rule Athens? Why?
6. How did Plato feel about the ability of the democrats to rule Athens? Why?
7. What were the three parts that Plato described as the human soul?
8. What did each part do?
9. According to Plato, who are the "lovers of wisdom?"
10. Describe what Plato called the "philosopher king."
11. Why did he feel they should rule?
12. How did Plato feel about women and their ability to rule?