

**The principles of Athenian democracy espoused by Pericles in the "funeral oration" stand in sharp contrast to Plato's notion of the "Good City". (Discuss)**

Democracy is a concept that affects many different people in various ways. It is the method of governance in numerous countries, allowing citizens to participate in what governs them and who can make the rules. This concept of democracy can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece, specifically the city of Athens. The Greeks were known to study all aspects of politics and search for the best method of organizing themselves. Everyone who was considered a citizen had rights and were expected to exercise these rights. The Greeks valued participation, and this is shown through democracy.<sup>1</sup> There were many people in these ancient times who praised the practice of democracy, such as the well-known general and politician Pericles. On the other hand, there were critics of this practice and had their own ideas of governance, like the well-known philosopher, Plato. The principles of Athenian democracy, strongly supported by Pericles, is in sharp contrast to Plato's ideas because he favoured more of an aristocracy-like governance. This can be seen when comparing Pericles' "Funeral Oration" to Plato's notion of the "Good City."

The principles of Athenian democracy were highly praised in Pericles' famous speech known as the "Funeral Oration," given during the Peloponnesian war. It was accounted in Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War. In his speech, Pericles mentions the main features of the idea of a democracy. He talks about considering a man's abilities rather than social class when it comes to those who are in power. He also mentions the concepts of the private and public lives of citizens in the city of Athens, with private referring to the individual

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Koerner, "Introduction to the Origins of Political Thought," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 9, 2019).

lives of the citizens and public meaning the welfare of the city as a whole. Citizens were adult men and women who were born in the city and had parents born there as well — slaves were not considered.<sup>2</sup> In his speech, it is easy to see that to Pericles, freedom and equality among citizens is a major component in having a democracy. In terms of private lives, Pericles wants citizens to live their lives freely and as they please, as long as they follow the laws of the city. Everyone should have the right to live their lives according to themselves but should also have respect towards the law. With public life, citizens are expected to collectively make decisions and laws for the wellness of the city-state.<sup>3</sup> It is about doing what is right for the city and deciding what that entails together. The importance of the relationship between the private and public lives of the citizens as well as the notion of ability over wealth is highly stressed in Pericles' discussion of democracy in the speech. These factors can be interpreted as some of the principles of Athenian democracy, which can be compared to Plato's version of governance.

While Pericles was praising democracy, Plato wrote against it in his philosophical writings. While he was criticizing democracy, Plato had his own ideas what an ideal city would look like and how it can be used as an example to improve society. In what Plato called the "Good City," individuals are put into three different classes based on what best suits them. The first class is known as the Rulers and they govern the city. Some traits of good ruler include honesty, temperance, humility, and courage.<sup>4</sup> The Rulers must have lots of wisdom and knowledge, making them philosopher kings. Therefore, Rulers must be highly educated, including ten years of mathematics, five years of dialectic, and fifteen years of experience in

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Koerner, "Introduction to the Origins of Political Thought,," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 9, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 145.

<sup>4</sup> Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 145.

lesser traits.<sup>5</sup> They must not be manipulative for personal gain reasons and should rule as if they were a god. The second class of citizens are known as the Guardians and they are the protectors of the city. For the Guardians, education is also important as they must use their power for the people and care for the common good. The Guardians must have a perfect love of the polis and not be concerned for their private good. The last class in the “Good City” are the artisans, who are supposed to provide material goods for the city. Each of these classes play an important role in the wellbeing of the city. Not only do they have a job, but they must also have a proper understanding of that job.<sup>6</sup> By looking at the three classes of the “Good City,” democracy is quite different from this idea of a city because of the organization into classes and the distribution of power. While the three classes of the “Good City,” are important, the smaller details of Plato’s description of the ideal city can also be considered to show the contrast to Athenian democracy.

In his writings about the “Good City,” Plato also talks about significant virtues and the specific time of when decisions should be made. To Plato, the most important virtues were wisdom, courage, and moderation. Wisdom is found within the rulers or philosopher kings as they are intelligent and continue to learn with the power they have. Courage is found in the guardians as they put the safety of others before themselves. Moderation is found in all parts of the “Good City.”<sup>7</sup> It is meant to be seen through the agreement between the naturally superior and inferior on who should rule. Plato also had the idea of a nocturnal council since he believed that the best decisions are made at night. During the time of early morning or late night, Plato believes that passions are in control, which results in better decision-making skills.<sup>8</sup> From

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<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Koerner, "Plato: Republic," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 26, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Koerner, "Plato: Republic," (Lecture, Ottawa, September 26, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

considering the three classes and the other details of Plato's "Good City," it can be inferred that his view of the ideal city resembles an aristocracy, where only a small a small number of people who are the highest in society make the decisions. While this form of government is praised by Plato, it is quite different to the principles of Athenian democracy, which was in place during his time.

By looking at Athenian democracy in what Pericles in his "Funeral Oration" and at Plato's notion of a "Good City," it is fully apparent that the two are contrasting. Firstly, democracy and aristocracy, which is most similar to Plato's organization of the "Good City", are two different types of government. With democracy all the citizens are able to make decisions for the city collectively and they are able to make decisions on their ruling together. In Plato's "Good City," only the philosopher king is able to rule over the people. This type of ruler has to meet the requirements of Plato, such as having the love of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it can be inferred from comparing Plato and Pericles' governance that they place importance on different values or virtues. For Pericles, democracy has an emphasis on freedom and equal cooperation. Plato, on the other hand, specifically states that the virtues of wisdom for the ruler, courage for the guardians, and moderation for the whole city are the most important. Thirdly, Pericles talks about how private and public lives are equally valued in democracy.<sup>10</sup> With Plato, the classes, especially the guardians and the ruler, must put their roles before their private lives, when it is needed.<sup>11</sup> Through Pericles, it is seen that democracy values the private lives of citizens far more than Plato's "Good City" does. Another difference is that in a democracy there is more freedom, while in the "Good City" there is not much freedom since everyone is placed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 145.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 145.

into specific classes and must attend to their specific jobs. There is also the point that the rulers of democracy are chosen by the people while the ruler of the “Good City” is chosen based on specific characteristics and abilities, regardless of the people.

There are many ideas on how a state should be organized and while the Athenians practiced democracy, others had put a lot of thought into others forms of an ideal city. One of the more significant philosophers, Plato, had done just that when he wrote about the “Good City.” His views of the ideal city were unlike Athenian democracy, the governance strongly endorsed by Pericles in his “Funeral Oration.” This can be seen through the class organization, the values, and the approaches to governing the city, among other reasons. In conclusion, the principles of democracy were sharply contrasted with Plato’s aristocracy-like “Good City” simply because they are two completely different organizations and governance of a city-state.

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