Who is Plato and why should we care what he says?

What’s his ideal of a good government?

Why does he have a bad opinion of democracy?

What is democracy, anyway?

What about the differences between his democracy and ours?

Should we worry?
A cautionary note: current personalities, campaigns, and officeholders may make this issue more obvious, but the problem goes beyond any one current person or campaign.
Who is Plato and why should we care what he says?

Plato (429?–347 B.C.E.) An Athenian citizen of high status, absorbed in the political events and intellectual movements of his time, and the questions he raises are so profound and the strategies he uses for tackling them so richly suggestive and provocative that educated readers of nearly every period have in some way been influenced by him.

He was not the first thinker or writer to whom the word "philosopher" should be applied. But he was so self-conscious about how philosophy should be conceived, and he so transformed the intellectual currents with which he grappled, that the subject of philosophy—a rigorous and systematic examination of ethical, political, metaphysical, and epistemological issues, armed with a distinctive method—can be called his invention.

Few other authors in the history of Western philosophy approximate him in depth and range: perhaps only Aristotle (who studied with him)
What’s Plato’s ideal government?
“It is hard to perceive that the true craft (*tekhne*) of politics (*ta politika*: things concerned with the *polis*, the city) must be concerned with the common, not with the private (*idion*)--the common tending to cement society, the private to disrupt it--and that it is to the advantage of the common and private, both of them, **that common well-being should be considered before private.**” The Laws, 875a-d)

- there is a craft of politics
- the common space of interaction needs to be structured and cared for
- there is no invisible hand, selfishness is disruptive
So, ideally you want to raise a generation of rulers completely devoted to the city, extremely skilled and fully trained, with no private interests to disrupt their care for the city.

In the popular parlance these are “philosopher kings” – people in whom wisdom and power come together. That wisdom includes an ability to perceive the right measures and ratios for mixing and matching the components of the city, in economics, politics, population, commerce, and the like.

This is an activist government intervening visibly and sometimes secretly into all phases of life to keep things balanced and prosperous.
So, what could possibly go wrong?

**Time and Change**
**Inadequate Knowledge**
**Human Nature**
Time and Change

- And since the Form is eternal and nothing that is made can be eternal,
- [the workman] devised a moving image of eternity, which we call time.

Plato, *Timaeus*

- A city which is thus constituted can hardly be shaken; but, seeing that everything which has a beginning has also an end, even a constitution such as yours will not last for ever, but will in time be dissolved.

Plato, *Republic*
Now that which is of divine birth has a period which is contained in a perfect number, but the period of human birth is comprehended in a number in which first increments by involution and evolution (or squared and cubed) obtaining three intervals and four terms of like and unlike, waxing and waning numbers, make all the terms commensurable and agreeable to one another. The base of these (3) with a third added (4) when combined with five (20) and raised to the third power furnishes two harmonies; the first a square which is a hundred times as great (400 = 4 X 100), and the other a figure having one side equal to the former, but oblong, consisting of a hundred numbers squared upon rational diameters of a square (i.e. omitting fractions), the side of which is five (7 X 7 = 49 X 100 = 4900), each of them being less by one (than the perfect square which includes the fractions, sc. 50) or less by two perfect squares of irrational diameters (of a square the side of which is five = 50 + 50 = 100); and a hundred cubes of three (27 X 100 = 2700 + 4900 + 400 = 8000). Now this number represents a geometrical figure which has control over the good and evil of births.

Inadequate Knowledge

Plato illustrates the inadequacies of our knowledge by writing a paragraph of mathematical gobbledegook that no one has ever figured out, to show that not even a theory of mathematical Forms, such as he may have taught, will be adequate to the contingencies of our empirical life.
Human Nature

Even one who had attained clear perception of this principle [put the common interest before the private] as a point of craft, mortal nature will always urge him to aggrandizement (*pleonexian*) and self-seeking (*idiopragian*), unreasonably (*alogos*) fleeing pain and pursuing pleasure, and putting these ends before the just (*dikioterou*) and the best. This blindness will sink him and his whole city into all sorts of evils.
The city degenerates

Here is another defect of oligarchy...

The inevitable division: such a State is not one, but two States, the one of poor, the other of rich men; they are living on the same spot and always conspiring against one another.
tyrant;  
a cruel and oppressive ruler.  
a person exercising power or control in a cruel, unreasonable, or arbitrary way.  
○ (especially in ancient Greece) a ruler who seized power without legal right.

- In Greece there were some "good" tyrants.
- But Plato is of the opinion that people in a tyrant’s position tend toward internal disorder in their personality and chaos in their city.
Why does Plato have a bad opinion of democracy?

What is a democracy?

Is it the machinery of elections and representatives?

Athens didn’t have elections and representatives.
What is democracy?

Demos
hoi polloi

Krasis

the people have power
to make and execute policy and law
by whatever machinery they use

BUT there’s more
Democracy requires **freedom**, people debating about policy, free to speak, tolerant of different opinions and willing to accept the democratic decisions.

**FREEDOM** from coercion and restriction and tolerant of others.
Why does Plato have a bad opinion of democracy?

Plato’s fear is that these positive qualities of a democracy are its weakness.
Democracy has her own good,
and insatiable desire for it brings her to dissolution.

Freedom, I replied; which, as they tell you in a democracy, is the glory of the State --and that therefore in a democracy alone will the freeman of nature deign to dwell.

I was going to observe, that the insatiable desire of this and the neglect of other things introduces the change in democracy, which occasions a demand for tyranny.
a city full of freedom and frankness - a man may say and do what he likes

the fairest of States,

an embroidered robe

which is spangled with every sort of flower.

freedom from censure and shame,

...and from principle and excellence

at best, a life and character

following modes and fads

and changing interests

no basis for discrimination or ordering

or harmony

among conflicting desires, values, ways of life
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.
see how sensitive the citizens become;

they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority

and at length, as you know, they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them.

Such, my friend, I said, is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs tyranny.
When a democracy which is *thirsting for freedom* has evil cupbearers presiding over the feast, and has drunk too deeply of the *strong wine of freedom*, then, unless her rulers are very amenable and give a plentiful draught, she calls them to account and punishes them, and says that they are cursed oligarchs.

Yes, I said; and *loyal citizens are insultingly termed by her slaves who hug their chains* ....

In such a state of society *the master fears and flatters his scholars, and the scholars despise their masters and tutors*; young and old are all alike; and the young man is on a level with the old, and is ready to compete with him in word or deed; and old men condescend to the young and are full of pleasantry and gaiety; they are *loth to be thought morose and authoritative, and therefore they adopt the manners of the young.*
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, …

by the favorite method of false accusation he brings them into court and murders them, … some he kills and others he banishes,

at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands:

…if they are unable to expel him … they conspire to assassinate him.

Then comes the famous request for a bodyguard,

which is the device of all those who have got thus far in their tyrannical career

--'Let not the people's friend,' as they say, 'be lost to them.'

The people readily assent; all their fears are for him --they have none for themselves.
...At first, in the early days of his power, he is full of smiles, and he salutes every one whom he meets; —

is he to be called a tyrant, who is making promises in public and also in private! liberating debtors, and distributing land to the people and his followers, and wanting to be so kind and good to every one!

....but when he has disposed of foreign enemies by conquest or treaty, and there is nothing to fear from them, then he is always stirring up some war or other, in order that the people may require a leader.
So, we have

economic inequality
tolerance in the extreme
no compulsion to serve
lack of agreement on principles
conflicting desires in the individual and in society
clashes
a champion protector benefactor

...
Can we deflect Plato’s criticisms by pointing to the differences between Athens and US?

http://www.agathe.gr/democracy/
Plato thought in an ideal city everyone should agree on basic values and principles and on what counts as an excellent human character and life.

He also tried to show that in nature there were Forms or patterns that could be known and that guaranteed those patterns.
We live in a society **without** basic agreements on values and principles?

Plato lived in a non-uniform but much less multiple Athens and he thought that was a weakness.

But note: his criticism becomes **more** biting if he is wrong about the existence of Forms for goodness and excellence because then the conflicting interests, desires, values have no harmonious resolution so a potential tyrant can find many handles to manipulate.

How do we sustain a multi-value, multi-cultural democracy? What basic agreements must we share?
A multi-level federal system *could* limit the spread of tyranny, either by confining it a local region, or by allowing local regions to resist the federal government.
During the 4th century BC, there might well have been some 250,000–300,000 people in Attica.

The percentage of the population that actually participated in the government was 10% to 20% of the total number of inhabitants, This excluded slaves, freed slaves, children, women and foreigners resident in Athens.

Citizen families could have amounted to 100,000 people and out of these some 30,000 would have been the adult male citizens entitled to vote in the assembly. From a modern perspective these figures may seem small, but among Greek city-states Athens was huge: most of the thousand or so Greek cities could only muster 1000–1500 adult male citizens each; and Corinth, a major power, had at most 15,000.
We have More participants

We have a less Homogeneous more Multipart Population

- These factors only *increase* the chances
- for the disintegration Plato is talking about.
Direct versus Representative Democracy

The Assembly (*Ekklesia*)

about every ten days,

(A quorum was 6,000)

Who could propose laws and decrees and changes? **Anyone.**
Council (Boule)

Members of the boule served for one year and no man could serve more than twice in his life, nor more than once a decade.

The leaders of the boule (the prytany) consisted of 50 men chosen from among the 500, and a new prytany was chosen every month.

The man in charge of the prytany was replaced every day from among the 50 members.

magistrates and officials

Juries and Courts

magistrates had only an administrative function and were laymen.

Most of the annual magistracies at Athens could only be held once in a lifetime.

There were no lawyers as such; litigants acted solely in their capacity as citizens.
Officials and magistrates were chosen by lottery

The use of a *lottery to select officeholders* was regarded as the most democratic means: elections would favor those who were rich, noble, eloquent and well-known,

...a lottery *spread the work of administration throughout the whole citizen body, engaging them in the crucial democratic experience* of, to use Aristotle's words, "ruling and being ruled in turn" (Politics 1317b28–30).

It gave citizens a *unique form of political equality* as all had an equal chance of obtaining government office.

**Elections** were held only for those required to handle large sums of money,

and for the 10 generals

Each office could be held by the same person only once.
Do we have more Checks and Balances?!

In our system three powers have to agree for things to go forward, though in practice the executive and the legislature are enough, with the court evaluating later.

That was the case in Athens, though there was no independent executive (usually). Courts were frequently brought into play to challenge decisions and laws.

Athens did not have court injunctions to stop or delay an action. On the other hand, courts normally decided cases in one day.

The Athenian assembly could act very quickly and impulsively. So it was susceptible to demagoguery. But it could reverse itself or be challenged in court the next day.
The **lottery** for offices and the lack of elections did not allow any individual to have a power position for any length of time.

There was no chance of the kind of **voting in a tyrant** that was so successful for Hitler.

Popular demagogues could cause changes of policy but could not get themselves put into permanent office. This is a real safeguard that we don't have.
A major difference might be inertia. It’s hard to get our government moving together in one direction. Some of this is built into the Constitution, and more comes from the expansion of the executive. Athenian government was leaner and could act fast, could reverse itself more quickly -- less inertia. Ours is big and cumbersome, which may a real defense against what Plato’s worrying about.

On the other hand the same inertia which makes it harder to change our system means that once it is changed, it’s very hard to change back.
The two systems have different kinds of defenses. Ours defends well against quick jagged changes of policy but less well against the installation of new power blocs. Their system protected well against new power blocks but not so well against quick changes of policy.

There were many more revolutions in Greece, big changes of structure
democracy is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality \textit{to equals and unequals alike}.  

Find the best and train them

then put them to work

France?, Germany?
It’s a legitimate and important question how to reconcile the principles of democracy with the need for expertise and thoughtful deliberation.
Plato’s fundamental issues remain today:

* severe economic inequality
* extreme tolerance for different principles
* no obligation for public service
* little emphasis on working for the common good
* people see little chance of a harmonious resolution of competing interests and desires

…So should we be afraid?
What do you think?

... and, why?
One contemporary invocation of Plato: Andrew Sullivan on the need for elites, plus a pointed response to his article
For another take on Plato’s contemporary political relevance, see this article from Aeon.
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