



**What is the relationship between democracy and desire, and what
 critical role might this desire play?
 Discuss in relation to *The Republic* and 'In The Loop'**

Jack Peachey

The critical role of desire in relation to a democratic system can be seen as a catalysing force in the development of governmental frameworks which promise to satisfy the demands of their constituents. In *The Republic*, Socrates suggests that liberty is the 'fairest possession' (p. 294) in the eyes of the democratic man, as it allows for the gratification of individual desires, thus defining a democratic system as the only environment in which 'a man who has a free nature can rightly dwell'. However, a distinction is drawn by Plato between 'necessary desires' (p. 289) which are beneficial to the individual, and 'unnecessary desires' (p. 289) which, if not adequately controlled, will result in societal decline and the gradual uprising of a tyrannical state. Both 'In The Loop' and *The Republic* address the power of rhetoric in the influence of popular opinion, but this serves to question the legitimacy of any democratic rule whose construction depends on the manipulation of its subjects. Furthermore, it brings the very nature of 'desire' into question with regards to the pursuit of 'liberty', as true freedom depends on independent choice, yet Plato argues that this cannot be achieved but through the rejection of societal influence. In this essay, I will first address the problems presented in the platonic democratic model by a lack of popular restraint. I will then analyse the contractual nature of representative democracy in 'In The Loop', examining the extent to which constituent desires are relegated in the face of a strict political 'party line'. I will then assert that the nature of public 'desire', the foundation of democratic government, is subject to the unelected influence of quasi-autonomous educational bodies such as the Sophist class of *The Republic* and the newspaper press of 'In The Loop'. Finally, I will examine Plato's notion of the 'philosopher' class, discussing an alternative political model which, though undemocratic in nature, would provide for a sustained satisfaction of collective desire.

Plato's main critique on the nature of democracy comes in Book VIII of *The Republic*, when he has already isolated the main forms of political vice' in the degenerate constitutions of timocracy' (p. 278) and 'oligarchy' (p. 279). The breadth of opportunity awarded to the democratic figure is noted as a fundamental vice, as though he is liberated in the pursuit of momentary interests and affections, he knows no order or necessity in life' (p. 293) and thus limits his importance to a city-state dependent on such an order:

Day after day he gratifies the pleasures as they come...one day in hard training, the next slacking and idling, and the third playing the philosopher. Often he will take to politics, leap to his feet and do or say whatever comes into his head; or he conceives an admiration for a general, and his interests are in war; or for a man of business, and straightway that is his line. (p.293)

There are two main concerns here. Firstly, the democratic man is inconsistent in his choice of occupation, which limits his capacity to perform and reduces his usefulness to the state. Plato does not specifically note a poor performance in either athletics or philosophy, but the nature of both pursuits is that of gradual focus-based melioration.

At the end of each Book in *The Republic*, Socrates and Glaucon draw precise conclusions regarding the nature of their discussions, but there is little purpose in this figure's pursuit of philosophy if it is only practiced for a short time and then abandoned. Furthermore, his desire for a martial occupation is fickle, being born out of 'admiration' rather than ability or actual usefulness. As field notes, Plato's image of an organized society depends on each member having 'a special contribution of his own in accordance with his natural capacities''. This man is not a trained politician, but carelessly speaks his mind, which is dangerous in a society susceptible to bold albeit vacant rhetoric; one which can be 'swamped by such a volume of condemnation and praise' (p. 210). If the pursuit of desire grants 'as much happiness as possible' (p. 120) to the individual, this occurs selfishly, and at the expense of 'giving happiness to the whole city' (p. 120). The platonic code that he whom 'nature intended for a shoemaker should attend to shoemaking and nothing else' is inverted for the sake of 'liberty' (p. 294), yet if every member of society was to act in this manner, the city structure would collapse in the absence of reliable craftsmen.

Whilst in *The Republic*, the prioritisation of individual 'desire' is noted as a flaw in the democratic system, Iannucci's *In The Loop* opens with a farm of enforcement to a model of collective responsibility, the political party line', which undermines a newly elected MP's capacity to make independent decisions. Despite a campaign promise not to 'back a war' [67 mins], the newly elected secretary of state for the Department of International Development is put under pressure by the Prime Minister's 'acid-tongued UK spin doctor', to 'walk the fucking line' [7mins] and disregard the desires of his constituents. The following scene between cabinet minister and enforcer is filmed in a series of close-angle, documentary-style shots on handheld cameras, emphasising Foster's difficult one-on-one decision between career sacrifice and political conscience:

Foster [speaking quickly in hushed anger, counting out potential deaths on his fingers]: So, this is all going to spin along from here. We're going to have a vote and go to war. Well fight people, kill them. Our children will get killed. This is exactly the sort of thing that I didn't want to do when I went into politics. This is the opposite of what I wanted to be doing.

Malcolm: That's why you have to stay in Government, to influence things. In here [points at the office], you can influence things, you can delay things. Out there, you're just another mouthy, shouty mad fucker who people don't want to make eye contact with. [69-70 mins]

As Bradshaw notes, Foster's predicament lies in the fact that he wants to 'do the right thing, or as much of the right thing as is consistent with career survival'. In order to maintain any element of political influence, he must sacrifice his idealist sense of moral virtue, learning instead to influence the political atmosphere through the initiation of subtle internal manoeuvres, whilst running the risk of losing his constituency vote by going back on his campaign promise. So, despite Foster's open declaration of an antiwar agenda behind closed doors, the image of his character which is presented to the public must be tailored in accord with 'the government's cloudy neutral line'. Furthermore, Malcolm's consistent demand for Foster to 'say nothing' [37mins] and to 'stay detached' [38mins] suggests that any unscripted

utterance in the sphere of the political mass media could prompt a sea change in the public support of the incumbent government. Although it is the fundamental ‘desire’ of the mass public which has the potential to alter the face of government, however, this spirit can be manipulated, as Iannucci comments, with the impression of ‘looking like you know what you’re doing on the outside’ even when ‘on the inside it’s not quite right’.

If Plato considers the democratic model to encourage the pursuit of ‘unnecessary desires’ (p. 289) in the common man, which include an excessive desire for freedom’ and which ‘do no good, and... actually do harm’ (p. 289), then it is with the autonomous and unelected forces of the sophist educators that he takes issue. Because the figure of the sophist has developed the intelligence necessary to identify the desires of the democratic man, as McCoy notes, this allows him to manipulate the public for his own apparent benefit’. A modern day equivalent might be seen in the autonomous, unelected ownership of influential daily newspapers and television news channels, which have the power to exert political influence through the subtle layering of political spin, then encoded as standard information. In Book VI of *The Republic*, he compares the manipulation of public desire with the taming of a wild beast:

It is as though a man who is keeper of a huge and powerful beast had got to know its tempers and its desires, how best to approach and how best to handle it, when it has its sulkiest and when its mildest moods... what sounds will soothe or aggravate it. (p.211)

The crucial point is the sheer power and size of the ‘beast’ which has come to represent the common man, and the ensuing power which is granted to the sophist class which knows how to manipulate it. Being intelligent, these educating powers can ‘carefully educate and fashion to the character they want’ (p.209), which in this case happens to be whichever character form is in alignment with the base desires of the mass population. Because, Plato argues, the democratic man ‘bestows honour and praise in public and in private on rulers who are like their subjects’ (p. 295), this will inevitably lead to tyranny, as there is no incentive to follow the nature of what is ‘good’ if this poses more difficulty than that of ‘lawlessness’ (p. 295) and ‘liberty’ (p.295). In this respect, the sophist influence on a democratic system of ‘excessive liberty’ (p. 296) may lead to ‘nothing less than ‘excessive slavery’ (p. 296), yet this is unknown by the democratic man, who becomes accustomed to indulgence as a way of life, cannot differentiate between good and bad, and as such is a ‘victim of seeming’ (p. 238) like the prisoners of the cave parable. This is a notion which I will develop later, in relation to the difference between the ‘harmful, flattering rhetoric of the sophist and the beneficial, instructive rhetoric of the Philosopher’.

I have discussed earlier, in relation to both British politics and the shape-shifting sophists of Plato’s Athenian city, the importance of visual impression (or deception) in the influence of popular desire within a democratic system. This is not to suggest a lack of education or intelligence in contemporary society, but rather to accept that many people receive little exposure to the nature of political figures outside of what is reported through typical media outlets. Throughout ‘In The Loop’, Foster’s word, ‘unforeseeable’ [1min] in a BBC interview surrounding the potential war, is consistently circulated within political and press-related networks, together with a much regretted ensuing attempt at damage control, trying to ‘nail the line’ [16mins] with the ambiguously hostile phrase, ‘to walk the road of peace...sometimes we need to be ready to climb... the mountain of conflict’ [16mins]. As Quinn notes, the ensuing media frenzy surrounding these accidental sound bites and their links to governmental foreign policy, forms an example of why the politician should never have risked ‘telling the media anything it could use’. They also draw attention to the

individual desires and agendas held by the quietly warring factions of the US State Department, Iannucci states, as the 'different departments try to outflank each other. The war mongering Assistant Secretary, Linton Barwick, transcribes the phrase, 'Climb The Mountain Of Conflict' in logo form on a 'bumper sticker' (16mins), while his pacifist opponent, Karen Clark, tries to use Foster as 'meat in the room' [9mins] at the 'Interim Anglo-American Resources Forum' [13mins]. In this scene, a Pentagon delegation representative accidentally alludes to a secret war committee, which has already begun to discuss a foreign invasion:

Pentagon Representative: The committee feels a quicker deployment is possible.

Karen Clark: Ah, which committee?

Pentagon Representative: It was discussed in a number of committees. If I mentioned one committee...

Karen Clark: You did.

Pentagon Representative:...then it was a slip of the tongue.

Karen Clark: What, because you've accidentally alluded to a secret committee, a war committee?

[to her aide] Liza, do you know if Linton has set up a secret war committee?

Liza: No. I have no idea.

Karen Clark: Get me on it. [13mins]

This scene draws parallels with Plato's predicted shift, at the hands of unnecessary desires, from a democratic political model into a tyrannical form. Although Linton is a member of the democratic government, he holds the power not only to plot acts of violence on behalf of an entire nation, but to do so on the basis of independent resolve, leaving other elected officials (and thus other represented divisions of society) absent from the decision making process. Such a deceit is not necessarily justified away by the notion of a final 'vote' [69mins] on the matter, as the previously discussed conversation between Foster and Malcolm has already revealed the political impotence of moral desire or a personalised view of justice in an environment of pressure and fear of sudden unemployment.

It is for reasons such as this that Plato draws such a strong moral and political division between the logic of the 'democratic man' (p. 290) and that of the independently minded 'philosopher' (p. 199). Even if an honourable government minister like Foster believes something to be right, such as that compulsion not to support the war of 'In The Loop', this would still be 'nothing else than belief (p. 195) in Plato's view, because 'belief is distinct from knowledge' (p. 195), and unattainable to those who learn from society. As Ferrari notes, Plato associates any form of democracy with an underlying 'weakness of will, a phenomenon now understood...as the defeat of one's better judgement when it comes into conflict with a desire that proves the more powerful motivatory'. This is not specifically exclusive to the democratic figure, but to any individual who structures their systems of desire and belief on their natural environment, or any individual who accepts a form of social and political

conduct which is presented to them, however honourable, without justifying it in complete isolation from societal facets of thought. Whilst a democratic man is subject to desires, and all abroad among all sorts of aspects of many objects' (p. 199), a philosopher is said to be content with the mind itself, and 'able to grasp that which is always invariable and unchanging' (p.199). In this respect, Plato suggests that Democracy is incapable of escaping its unnecessary desires, whereas a society under the control of guardian philosophers would function together as a united 'body' (p. 176) which, when it was 'increasing and prosperous' (p. 176) would 'allow each class to partake of such happiness as their nature allows' (p.176).

In both *The Republic* and 'In The Loop', systems of desire are critical to the formation of democratic government. If it were not for the mass public, there would be no need to monitor political speeches, nor to enforce a party line against protesting constituents. However, this is not to suggest that these governments are always made better or more efficient because of the various desires which have helped to shape them. Instead, as the nature of democracy is subject to public desire, which in turn is subject to the influence of autonomous, unelected bodies such as the sophist class of *The Republic* or the mass media of 'In The Loop', this hints at a system of government which is primarily controlled (or at least kept very thoroughly in check) by a determined populous who may not always be sure as to why they are determined. The formation of policy, the passing of government bills and the creation of secret committees within a democratic state can also be impacted by the individual desires of government ministers, who can be self interested, malicious, war hungry or too terrified to act. Although Plato's thesis of the philosopher guardians is consistent and developed in its approach to the vices of excess liberty, it fails to account for the possibility that many of us would rather exist as an equal in a flawed system of shifting social decline, than as a subservient being, destined from birth to follow the orders of the wise ones.

What is the relationship between democracy and desire,
and what critical role might this desire play?
Discuss in relation to *The Republic* and 'In The Loop'

Bibliography

Aitkenhead, Decca, 'Interview with Armando Iannucci', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2009.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/apr/13/armando-iannucci-interview-decca-aitkenhead>> [accessed 11 January 2011]

Bradshaw, Peter, 'In The Loop Review', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2009

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/apr/17/in-the-loop-film-review-armandoiannucci>> [accessed 11 January 2011]

Blossner, Norbert, 'The City Soul Analogy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. by G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp.345-86.

Ferrari, G R F, 'The Three Part Soul' in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. by G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp.345-67

Field, G.C., *The Philosophy of Plato* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961)

Iannucci, Armando dir. 'In The Loop', (BBC Films, 2009) on DVD

Lindsay, A. D., *The Republic of Plato*, 4th edn. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1926)

Lowes Dickinson, G., *Plato and his Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950)

McCoy, Marina, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Quinn, Anthony, 'In The Loop Review', *The Independent*, 17 April 2009

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/in-the-loop-15-1669791.html>> [accessed on 11 January 2011]

Wise, Damon, 'In The Loop at Sundance Film Festival, Utah', *The Times*, 21 January

2009 <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/film_reviews/article5554802.ece> [accessed 11 January 2011]

Yunis, Harvey, 'The Prototrectic Rhetoric of the Republica' in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. by G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp.1- 27