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## Unmasking the Democratic Man: A Modern Application of Plato's *The Republic*

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### Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down and it has become clear how thin the human veneer truly is. In order to protect their citizens from contracting and spreading the coronavirus, governments have had to enact strict measures, including mandatory mask bylaws. With anti-mask protests emerging across the province of Alberta, it is difficult to understand the rationale behind the protesters. By applying Plato's description of the 'democratic man' to the anti-mask protests, the conclusion that previous thinkers' contributions cannot be underestimated, no matter the age of the text, is reached.*

### Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, all levels of government within Alberta have passed bills and bylaws to protect Albertans, such as physical distancing requirements, the closure of public spaces, and mask mandates. The latter, in particular, has created quite the controversy within Alberta, with anti-mask protests sweeping the province. This anger is felt by individuals who believe that the government is overstepping its boundaries by interfering with the private lives of Albertans. Interestingly, when reading Plato's, *The Republic*, there are clear similarities between Plato's description of a person that democracy produces and the individuals who are protesting against the mask mandates within Alberta. It is an unlikely connection but, when it is studied closely, *The Republic* provides an important philosophical insight to explain the motivations behind the anti-mask movement.

This paper sets out to investigate the extent to which Plato's 'democratic man' can be used to understand the anti-mask protests happening within Alberta. This will be accomplished through applying Plato's description of the 'democratic man' to the views expressed by the anti-mask movement. Plato provides insight into what led Alberta down this path of protest, eventually reaching the conclusion that it is essential to continue applying previous thinkers' knowledge to the modern world, in order to understand the anti-maskers' reaction to the current circumstances.

### Operationalizing Terms

To allow for a straightforward reading of this paper, there are terms that need to be operationalized. The first term to be defined is 'Socrates'. As a living man, Socrates was Plato's

teacher and was later put to death for corrupting the Athenian youth. As a character in *The Republic*, Socrates is utilized to articulate Plato's own ideas. In this paper, 'Socrates' will be in reference to the character in *The Republic*, unless otherwise stated. In *The Republic*, Plato outlines the kind of citizen that democracy inevitably produces, aptly naming them the 'democratic man.' When this term is used, it is in reference to an individual who only concerns themselves with protecting their freedom from infringement by the state. As Plato sees it, the ruling value of a democracy is freedom which, in turn, shapes the democratic man's ruling value. (Plato 2002, 422).

The phrase 'common good' is used to describe Plato's idea of an overarching concept of what is best for society. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that cohesion and unity provide the foundation for this common good, where "common feelings of pleasure and pain which you get when all members of a society are glad or sorry for the same successes and failures." (Plato 2003, 462a-b). The term 'demos' will be utilized to describe the people who participate within a democracy, as defined by the Oxford Languages dictionary. This term typically references the population in ancient Greece but it also can be used in the modern context. 'Tyranny of the majority' will be invoked to describe one of Plato's concerns with democratic rule, being that majority rule is a cornerstone for democracy. The will of the majority will always overpower the will of the minority and, as a result, the minority is oppressed at the hands of the majority. This idea was also raised by Aristotle, Tocqueville, and J.S. Mill.

### **Understanding the Democratic Man**

Plato was not supportive of democracy, believing that the demos did not understand what was in their own best interests. This was based on Plato's first encounter with democracy in practice when his teacher, Socrates, was voted to be put to death due to the charge of corrupting the youth. This use of direct democracy resulted in Plato's concern about the tyranny of the majority. In a democracy, there is no fundamental ethical basis, nor is there a set of guiding principles. This leaves the demos with no overarching moral compass to lead them, or political body to hold them accountable:

Neither does he receive or let pass into the fortress any true word of advice; if anyone says to him that some pleasures are the satisfactions of good and noble desires, and others of evil desires, and that he ought to use and honour some and chastise and master the others... he shakes his head and says that they are all alike, and that one is as good as another. (Plato 2002, 420)

This quotation showcases that democracy does not accept anything as a universal truth, because every topic is up for debate or negotiation. As demonstrated, there are no guiding ideas or broader acceptances that exist within a democracy.

In *The Republic*, Plato describes the type of man a democracy produces. The 'democratic man' is one who is concerned with his individual rights and freedoms above all else (Johnstone 2013). He gives into impulses, thinks not of the common good, and objects to the slightest imposition by the government (Johnstone 2013). This 'democratic man' has a focus on personal freedom and equality amongst his fellow citizens with no room for interference from the state.

Plato discusses that equality, within the eyes of the state, becomes a cornerstone for the ‘democratic man’s place within society.

Qualifications are set aside out of an allegiance to the equality of thought, brought forward when Plato notes that, “these and other kindred characteristics are proper to democracy...dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.” (Plato 2002, 417). Therefore, in a democracy, the demos are told that their ideas are legitimate and are backed by a right to have them heard. This is regardless of whether their claims would contribute to the common good. Inevitably, a struggle between members of society emerges, as they argue amongst themselves, lacking merit or evidence to support their opinions and beliefs.

In a democracy, the demos lack regard for the government’s authority within private life. This is because any attempt by the government to regulate private life is seen as an imposition upon the demos’ freedom regardless if it were beneficial to the common good. This enforces that citizens are too disordered to see the common good, concerning themselves only with personal gains and freedom: “[a]nd above all...see how sensitive citizens become; they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority...they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them” (Plato 2002, 423). This obsession over freedom and the demos’ interpretation of the role of freedom in private life clouds the ‘democratic man’s’ ability to place personal interests aside to serve a greater good within the community.

### **A Walk for Freedom: Understanding the Alberta Anti-Mask Movement**

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a unique challenge for all levels of government. All had to implement or consider implementing, new measures aimed towards keeping citizens safe and healthy. Political agendas during the beginning of the pandemic were adjusted to broadly protect the people and support the healthcare system, working together to prevent a surge of cases. As a result, some municipal governments within Alberta enacted bylaws that closed public areas, enforced physical distancing, and perhaps most controversially, mandated the use of face masks inside public spaces. On August 1, 2020, Edmonton’s and Calgary’s mask mandates came into effect. In November 2020, the Edmonton City Council extended their mask bylaw until December 31, 2021 (Ramsay 2020). As a response to the second wave of infections, the Alberta Government also made masks mandatory in all public spaces across the province beginning December 8, 2020. The initial mandates from the summer created a noticeable pushback from members of the public, who took to the streets in protest to air grievances with the new bylaws.

The protestors’ central claim was that individuals should have a choice over whether or not they wear a mask in public. Signs at rallies in Calgary and Edmonton included messages such as “[t]his is not about health; this is about control” and “fear is the *real* virus” (Bruch 2020). In December, after a province-wide mandatory mask bill was passed, the anti-mask protests grew in size and frequency (Bruch 2020). An organization titled “Walk for Freedom” organized mass protests in Calgary and Edmonton in an attempt to strong-arm the government into repealing mandatory mask legislation. During interviews conducted at a rally held on December 12, 2020, in Calgary, participants were noted to be at the protest for a variety of reasons, including anti-mask beliefs, anti-mandate beliefs, and Alberta separatism (Bruch 2020; Franklin 2020).

One protestor went so far as to file a \$565 million lawsuit against Edmonton City Council for infringing on his Charter rights by requiring masks in public places. An Edmonton judge ruled the case to be an abuse of the court, and the case was subsequently dismissed (Grummett 2020). Protests since the implementation of mandatory mask bylaws have had the central argument that these bylaws were an infringement on individual freedoms and an infringement on citizens self-autonomy—all fueled by a belief that the government had overstepped its allowed control over the people (Bruch 2020; Franklin 2020; Knight 2020).

### **Taking Off the Mask: The Democratic Men Among Us**

The rejection of government mandates in a global pandemic highlights the disregard for the common good that Plato outlines in *The Republic* as well as the climate of distrust that surrounds the provincial and municipal governments in Alberta. The ‘democratic man’ is alarmed by any state’s attempt to control daily life and rejects the slightest imposition upon personal freedom. When protestors carry signs reading “fear is the *real* virus.” It makes clear that there are distrust and conspiracy connected to the information from medical professionals and the government that the pandemic is real and should be taken seriously. Plato said that democracy would welcome claims that are heard frequently now with the uninformed opinion being weighed equally to the informed. Equality of thought is central to democracy and is expressed through voting, debate, town hall sessions, and canvassing on behalf of the government. In this climate, it is inevitable such entitlement towards one’s opinion over all others would prevail.

The responses to mandatory mask bylaws are direct examples of how Plato’s ‘democratic man’ disregards authority—favouring personal interest over the common good. These anti-mask protests broke the limitation on outdoor gatherings without social distancing, and without regard for the mandatory mask bylaws. According to Plato, this sense of entitlement is a direct result of a democratic system. The Greeks had believed politics to be a vehicle towards a better life, but within a democracy, the government cannot lead the people to greatness, because the ‘democratic man’ will not allow it to. As Plato remarked, “...see how sensitive the citizens become, they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority...they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them” (Plato 2002, 423). When such distinct parallels exist between the ‘democratic man’ and those who participate in anti-mask protests, the importance of reviewing historical philosophical texts is reiterated. Plato provides meaningful insight into the reactions of the demos during a time where government action is required to impact daily life for the common good.

### **Conclusion**

By reviewing Plato’s description of a ‘democratic man,’ a greater understanding of the philosophical reasoning behind the anti-mask protests can be reached. The government’s actions to regulate private life in order to uphold the common good of society are well-intentioned, yet it is consistently met with pushback and protest. The reaction of anti-maskers fearing for their rights and freedoms being infringed upon, all the while rejecting the common good and authority of the government and medical professionals, matches all too well with the spirit of the ‘democratic man’. After having reviewed *The Republic*, it is clear that historical thinkers such as Plato still provide key contributions to understanding the modern world.

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