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Plato on Tyranny and Rule of Law

Key words:

Rule of Law: The idea that no one is exempt from the law.

Tyranny: A type of government where the ruler becomes corrupt and has too much

power.

Tyrant: A bad ruler who is corrupt and selfish.

state: another word for a government. (Spelled with a lower case letter s)

Justice: Rightfulness or lawfulness.   
 Reason: To think, form conclusions or make a judgment.

Plato’s most important book on politics was called *The Republic*, published around 380 B.C. The book describes a small group of Greeks discussing political philosophy. The main character is Socrates, who was Plato’s teacher.

#1

*The Republic* examines the meaning of justice, looks at different types of government, and outlines the ideal state. It touches on many subjects, including rule of law and tyranny.

#2

Plato thought tyranny to be the “fourth and worst disorder of a state.” Tyrants do not have “the very faculty that is the instrument of judgment”—reason. In other words, Plato believes tyrants do not have the ability of judgment or reason. The tyrant is enslaved because the best part of him (reason) is enslaved or missing. This makes the state not have reason or order.

#3

Plato goes on to say: “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, he is not restrained from shedding the blood of kinsmen; . . . he brings them into court and murders them . . . at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands. . . . After a while he is driven out, but comes back, in spite of his enemies, a tyrant full grown.”

#4

In a tyranny, no outside governing power controls the tyrant’s selfish behavior. To Plato, the rule of law can guard against tyranny. In *The Republic*, he called the law an “external authority” that functions as the “ally of the whole city.”

#5

Plato summarizes his view on the rule of law: “Where the law is subject to some other authority and has none of its own, the collapse of the state, in my view, is not far off; but if law is the master of the government and the government is its slave, then the situation is full of promise and men enjoy all the blessings that the gods shower on a state.” Plato believed that if the state was a ‘slave’ to the rule of law, then a tyrant could not overtake the state.

#6

Reading Questions: Answer the following questions about the article on a separate sheet of paper and in complete sentences. You need to rewrite the questions.

1. What two main subjects did Plato discuss in The Republic? (refer to paragraph # 2)
2. Why are tyrants incapable of ruling a government with justice and equality? (refer to paragraph # 3)
3. What does Plato mean by the underlined quote in paragraph # 4? Can you think of any examples of people in history who were tyrants?
4. According to Plato, why is the rule of law important if there is a tyrant? (refer to paragraph # 5)
5. According to Plato, if the rule of law is in place and the tyrant is a slave to it, how might the citizens benefit? (refer to paragraph # 6)

