

Prof. Mathie

POL 3133.001

29 November 2017

Plato's *The Republic* and St. Thomas Aquinas's 'De regimine principum' describe the rise, rule, and implications of the tyrant ruler. The latter paraphrases Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* to describe the tyrant, revealing the author's influence from his teacher, Plato. Parallels between how the tyrant is treated between the texts are present because of Plato's influence on St. Thomas Aquinas. The differences between the tyrant's treatments in the two texts lies in how the authors describe their upbringing. Socrates, dictated through Plato, believes that unjust elements are present in every man and, if left unchecked, develop a tyrannical behavior; specifically, if said man has a democratic upbringing. Aquinas sees democracy's institution, or the "rule of many¹," as a facilitator, rather than its values. Both authors agree that the tyrant is innate in human nature, but not how it is brought about. Both authors agree that kingship is the best means to govern a city. And both texts leave the reader with scenarios of how tyranny is resolved, which reveal the secular, human-centric thinking of Socrates, and the religious, institutionalized thinking of Aquinas.

Socrates describes tyrannical behaviors as innate, with "terrible, savage, and lawless form of desires" present in every man, even those who "seem to be ever so measured."² Aquinas believes the tyrant comes to a head in the "rule of several persons," where one man "is superior to the others and usurps to himself sole dominion over the country."³ Like Aquinas, Socrates

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, "De regimine principum," in *Aquinas: Political Writings*, ed. R.W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (United States of America, Basic Books, 1991), 252 (572 b).

³ Aquinas, "De regimine principum," 17.

Prof. Mathie

POL 3133.001

29 November 2017

believes these tyrannical behaviors emerge in the presence of others. In *The Republic*, however, a man who is around others that engage in the same desires, to the extent the man becomes “drunken, erotic, and melancholic⁴” develops into a tyrant. Aquinas’s assertion that the structure of democracy, with the multiple parties involved, as a facilitator of tyranny lends the government’s structure as the cause. Socrates’s notion of tyranny is a causal relationship of man imposing onto system, while Aquinas’s is system imposing onto man.

Socrates and Aquinas differ in how tyranny can be prevented within a city, but both are to retain the integrity of government. Aquinas advocates for a selection process, in order “to provide the community with a king who is of such a kind that it will not fall victim to a tyrant.⁵” Aquinas states that a ruler’s power should be restricted, to further reduce the chance of him becoming a tyrant. Socrates believes that a man who “has a healthy and moderate relationship with himself⁶” will avoid the pitfalls of tyranny by avoiding the pleasures derived from dreams (sex, murder). Aquinas’s measures for preventing tyranny hold the institution of monarchy, and the city, accountable, while Socrates holds the individual accountable. Both Socrates and Aquinas agree that kingship is the better means to rule a city, and they are aware that it is the quickest means to tyranny.

Both authors speak of tyranny as seemingly inevitable, where they have outlined how a tyrant is rid from a city. Absolving a tyrant from a city has little influence from citizens,

⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, 253 (573c).

⁵ Aquinas, “De regimine principum,” 17.

⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, 252 (571d).

Prof. Mathie

POL 3133.001

29 November 2017

according to Socrates. Socrates believes the longevity of a tyrant's rule inevitably leads to their demise, becoming a slave to themselves in their insatiable quest for desires. Socrates describes the tyrant as "in need of the most things and poor in truth" and "resembles the disposition of the city he rules," that is now "overflowing with convulsions and pains."⁷ While emphasizing one *The Republic's* central themes (that the state of a city is a reflection of its ruler), Socrates holds the tyrant as accountable for their own ousting. Aquinas's process is faithful to government's institutionality. Aquinas's description of a tyrant's downfall is dependant on the city's citizens. Out of fear of more severe tyranny, Aquinas believes it "is more advantageous to tolerate a degree of tyranny."⁸ However, if "a tyranny were so extreme as to be intolerable...it would be an act consistent with virtue if the mightier men were to slay the tyrant...in order to liberate the community."⁹ Aquinas advocates this in only extreme cases of tyranny, however, suggesting that citizens can "restrain a king whom it has appointed, if he should abuse royal power tyrannically."¹⁰ Aquinas's approach, in this aspect of tyranny, is more democratic, with possibility of a stable, virtuous ruler. Socrates's depiction of the tyrant as self-destructive leaves the reader to question the possibility of a competent ruler to replace the tyrant.

Aquinas's influence from Aristotle and Plato is apparent through the several parallels "De regimine principum" shares with *The Republic* in their treatment of tyrants. Readers can infer

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 260 (579e).

⁸ Aquinas, "De regimine principum," 18.

⁹ Aquinas, "De regimine principum," 19.

¹⁰ Aquinas, "De regimine principum," 20.

Prof. Mathie

POL 3133.001

29 November 2017

from Socrates's depiction of the tyrant that a ruler's behavior, in the context of their desires, is imperative to the state of the city they rule; Aquinas depicts the public as an authority, powered under a single ruler, with the former responsible for the integrity of the latter. Socrates, then, treats tyranny as a human-centric ailment of good government, that creates and destroys itself in cycles. Tyranny, for Aquinas, is only present if a city's citizens are not competent to stabilize their government via process.

Prof. Mathie

POL 3133.001

29 November 2017

Works Cited

St. Thomas Aquinas, "De regimine principum," in *Aquinas: Political Writings*, ed. R.W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16-20.

Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (United States of America, Basic Books, 1991), 252-261.