

Academic Excellence Amid Democratic Decline: A Platonic Survival Story

Abstract:

Basking in the glow of the WWII triumph over Fascism, and staring headlong into the ominous promise of Marxism, Sir Winston Churchill made, on November 11, 1947, the frequently misquoted statement: “*No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*” Roughly 2,400 years earlier Plato had a front row seat to at least some of what Churchill was talking about regarding the ills of democracy. With Athenian political order in free fall Plato launched his Academy, the purpose of which was to encourage students to doggedly consider the best that reason could discover in the sorry flux of social impulse and human instinct. The Academy was hardly immune to the malignant drift of time, and 2,400 years later Plato would be simultaneously horrified by the virulence and toxicity that typifies the legacy of his precious Academy and unsurprised by the self-inflicted wounds of democracies. He had high hopes for education but very little hope that education could save democracy from its own self-destructive enthusiasms. No doubt a profound source of sadness for Plato *today* would be the degree to which present-day ‘academies’ have been *not* mere witnesses but agents and accelerants of democracy’s decline. Alas, democracies inevitably slump into tyrannies, so Plato argued. I will argue that a reconsideration of ‘virtue’ in the university can serve to alert its stewards and guardians of the tyrannies that threaten its own survival. Unknown by some and forgotten by others, Plato’s *Republic*, the Socratic dialogue celebrating the virtues *in* and *of* the ‘Ideal City’, was a ‘science fiction’ story written for the benefit of the Academy. It’s time for a twenty-first century ‘science fiction’ survival story of our own, one in which ‘excellence’ inspires us to avoid the very same fate that perennially imperils democracy.