

# Plato's Argument for Rule by Philosopher Kings

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## Plato's Argument for Rule by Philosopher Kings

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### What is Plato's Argument for the Conclusion That Philosophers Should Rule? Is it Persuasive?

#### Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine whether or how far Plato's argument that philosophers should be the rulers of the Republic is valid and persuasive. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that kings should become philosophers or that philosophers should become kings, or philosopher kings, as they possess a special level of knowledge, which is required to rule the Republic successfully. The essay will argue that Plato's argument for the philosopher kings' rule is neither persuasive nor realistic in theory, but that traces of the characteristics of his ideal form of rule do appear in the modern state. To set out this argument, the essay will firstly consider Plato's argument for the philosopher kings, as well as its limitations, and secondly and finally consider what characteristics of the philosopher kings' rule are valid and realistic in terms of the modern state.

#### Introduction

In Plato's work, *The Republic*, there is a systematic questioning of being, as *The Republic* itself is an attempt to answer a problem in human behaviour: justice. To deal with the problem of justice, Plato considers the ideal polis, a collective unit of self-government, and the relationship between the structure of the Republic and the attainment of justice. Plato argues that philosopher kings should be the rulers, as all philosophers aim to discover the ideal polis. The 'kallipolis', or the beautiful city, is a just city where political rule depends on knowledge, which philosopher kings possess, and not power. Although theoretically it would be ideal if the Republic and the modern state were ruled by knowledge, and not power, power is crucial in the make-up of political activity. This is one of the flaws of Plato's argument, which the essay will discuss. The question of who should rule emerges, to which the essay will conclude by saying that, in terms of Plato's argument, the philosopher kings should not be the rulers, as Plato is advertising an undemocratic political system led by a benevolent dictator. At the same time, it is inevitable to pick out some features of the modern state congruent to those of the ideal polis.

#### Plato's Argument

The definition of democracy is key in understanding Plato's argument for rule by philosophers. Nowadays, most modern states are democratic, in the sense that people have a say in the running of the state. Since Plato's time there has been a debate regarding what democracy is: whether it is the idea of majority rule, or what has come to be known as the 'Madisonian view' that democracy involves the protection of minorities. To Plato, it all boils down to what democracy means, literally. Democracy is 'the rule by the demos', where 'demos' can be understood as 'the people', and as "'the mob'...the unfit" (Wolff; 2006, 67). As Wolff argues, "Making political decisions requires judgement and skill. It should, Plato urges, be left to the experts." (Wolff; 2006, 67). To further emphasize this, Plato uses the 'craft analogy', drawing on the allegory of the ship. In Plato's *The Republic*, Socrates sets out an example of a ship led by men ignorant of navigation, who

"don't understand that a true captain must pay attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft, if he's really to be the ruler of a ship. And they don't believe that there is any craft that

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would enable him to determine how he should steer the ship, whether the others want him to or not, or any possibility of mastering this alleged craft or of practicing it at the same time as the craft of navigation. Don't you think that the true captain will be called a real stargazer, a babbler, and a good-for-nothing by those who sail in ships governed in that way?" (Plato; 2007, 204)

With this allegory, Plato is not only stressing the idea that specialization is key to the running of the Republic, but also that philosophers were unappreciated in 420 BC Athens, and thus useless because the world would not use them and their knowledge. It also stresses the dangers of liberty and equality, as well as the unnaturalness of democracy.

Plato's idea of specialization is also linked to justice, which he considers to be structural, as political justice is a result of a structured city, where individual justice is a result of a structured soul, and where each member of the polis has a "specific craft for which he has a natural aptitude" (Reeve; 2009, 69). "Ruling ... is a skill" (Wolff; 2006, 68), which requires special training available to few. At the same time, philosophers must possess qualities that enable them to rule; for instance, they must be able to recognize the difference between friend and foe, good and bad. Above all, philosophers must "love wisdom"[1] (Nichols; 1984, 254), as the rule of the wise leads to the reigning of justice, as philosophy becomes sovereign. Justice is a virtue, as is knowledge, which requires understanding. Understanding refers to goodness, and thus, knowledge and goodness are one. The philosopher kings have virtue as they have knowledge, and thus, according to Plato, their rule is justified.

## Criticizing Plato's Argument

Plato's argument is very much in line with what he defines as democracy, the rule of the unfit. His argument may be valid, in the sense that he explains that these philosophers have "capacity to grasp the eternal and immutable" (Plato; 2007, 204), while common men are blind as they have "no true knowledge of reality, and no clear standard of perfection in their mind to which they can turn" (Plato; 2007, 204-205). Nevertheless, this argument is not persuasive or realistic in contemporary politics and the modern state, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, all modern states stress that today democracy is defined as "government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'" (Wolff; 2006, 62). Therefore, all states have not only become supporters of the representative model of democracy, whereby voters determine who will represent them at governmental level, but have also adopted a pluralist attitude towards politics. In fact, the state is, in theory, no longer an instrument in the hands of an elite, or in the hands of Plato's philosophers, but a public and neutral arena where interest groups come together to argue and discuss policies, which are "mainly economic" (Dryzek and Dunleavy; 2009, 41). Ideally, these interest groups should have the necessary knowledge to bring about political change, but it is very hard to determine and quantify the necessary knowledge to bring about such change. As Wolff argues, "no one can be absolutely certain about anything at all. All claims of knowledge...are fallible" (Wolff; 2006, 70). Also, being a philosopher, and knowing about logic, ethics, metaphysics and political philosophy, does not necessarily make you an expert on the interests of the people. It is the people who, in theory, rulers are aiming to represent and support. Plato is obviously not concerned with a representative form of rule, but nowadays it is necessary, though difficult, to ensure that all the ruled are represented, at least to a certain extent, by their rulers.

Plato also argues that a specific education, available to few, will allow these few to become philosophers, but again this would create a ruling class that is not representative of the ruled. At the same time, it is hard to find a government that is 100% representative of its population. Take the members of the Chamber of Commons, many of whom have attended elite schools such as Eton and Oxford: they are not representative of the population, but are those running the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, Plato's argument has transcended time, as the Chamber of Lords, as well as the Senate, in bicameral systems, is an arena of experts who check and amend laws made by members of Parliament. Arguably the real experts are those who are aware of the people's interests, and voting will indicate these interests, since, as Mill argued, "the fallacy here is to think of the people as a homogenous mass with a single interest...we are not like this" (Wolff; 2006, 64).

Finally, the main flaw in Plato's argument, which renders it highly unpersuasive, is the fact that he is describing and arguing in favour of what Voltaire defined as a "benevolent dictatorship", where an enlightened despot, without the

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need to consult people, would nevertheless govern in their interests" (Wolff; 2006, 62). In terms of the modern state, where people are continuously asking for a greater say in the running of government, and with a negative view towards totalitarianism due to the happenings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Plato's argument becomes increasingly inapplicable. As Karl Popper argued, it is wrong to place political power in the hands of an elite. Nevertheless, it is also unrealistic to claim that an elite does not exist today, as, for instance, there are always several main political parties who take turns running governments.

## Conclusion

Plato argues that "there will be no end to the troubles of states... humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in the world... and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands" (Plato; 2007, 192). Perhaps, Plato's argument for a group of knowledgeable persons who have the ability to bring about happiness and justice in the Republic is ideal, but extremely unrealistic. As Aristotle argued, man is a political animal and it is inevitable for us all, not just for an elite of old men, to be interested and have a say in politics, as it is a force which inevitably affects us all. Plato's argument is asking us not only to be disinterested in the political process, but also to leave our rights and opinions in the hands of a benevolent dictator. For this reason his argument is not only unpersuasive but is also unrealistic.

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[1] Philosophy, from the Classical Greek 'philosophia', literally means "love of wisdom".

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Date written: December 2012