

Plato's Case Against the Philosopher King

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Abstract: Liberal democracies afford their citizens the opportunity to reflect seriously upon the perennial questions of politics and the fundamental alternatives. However, an unfortunate trend, indeed observable in both practical politics and the social sciences, has seen political philosophy largely supplanted by ideology, the co-opting of philosophic thought for partisan ends. Political philosophy is the serious reflection upon and inquiry into the core theme of political thought and practice: the best way to live and the regime that conduces to it. This paper seeks to demonstrate by example the possibility of preserving the serious study of political questions by challenging the dominant scholarly interpretation of Plato's political philosophy as presenting the philosopher king as the solution to the political problem. By offering some cursory remarks on Plato's *Apology* and *Republic* in order to suggest that philosophic rule is not a serious prescription for political action, this paper argues that Plato's aim is not to propose a doctrine but to compel us to reflect on the nature of politics, the permanent political questions, and the fundamental alternatives available to the human condition.

Introduction

In the fifth book of the *Republic*, Plato is commonly believed to espouse the argument that philosophers ought to rule as kings. A close reading of *The Apology of Socrates* and the *Republic*, however, presents a powerful challenge to this interpretation. This essay will argue that *The Apology of Socrates* presents Plato's demonstrative case for why philosophers are fundamentally unsuited to rule in the city, thereby complementing the argumentative case against such a form of rule which will be shown to be implicit in the *Republic*. The frequent misinterpretation of Plato's political philosophy as calling for the rule of philosophers only perpetuates the modern tendency to make ideology, or the popularized co-opting of philosophically-derived ideas for either the establishment or preservation of a given political order, out of philosophy, the uncompromising inquiry after the truth of all things. Ideologico-political

incentives thus encourage the overlooking of Plato's caution against visionary dogma and demagogic, utopian doctrine. A revisiting of Plato's "philosopher king," the alleged answer to the political question of the best way to order the regime, allows us to re-examine our contemporary "solutions" of this perennial and all-important problem. The essay will begin with a brief overview of the trial of Socrates as related in the *Apology*, and will then conduct a preliminary examination of the textual evidence in the *Apology* and the *Republic* to suggest both that Plato's Socrates is neither suited for nor desirous of political power and that both the city and the philosopher are ultimately better off free from the rule of philosophers. It will be shown that Plato's teaching is meant to demonstrate that the political problem admits of neither doctrinaire nor utopian "solutions." This essay is inspired by the work of Leo Strauss and his students in seeking to understand the

text (in this case, Plato's) as the author him- or herself understood it. As such, the essay relies exclusively on the primary texts and justifiably assumes the reader's having Plato's text in hand throughout, as well as the reader's taking Plato's text absolutely seriously and, to put it crudely, at face-value.

The Trial

In the *Apology*, Socrates is brought to trial by three individuals representing three important groups of Athenians: "Meletus attacked [Socrates], and Anytus and Lycon, Meletus being vexed on behalf of the *poets*, Anytus on behalf of the *craftsmen and the politicians*, and Lycon on behalf of the *orators*" (emphasis added).¹ These three Athenians are young up-and-comers in the classes that shape the beliefs and opinions of the *demos*, and they represent what Socrates refers to as his *new* accusers as distinguished from his old accusers. Thus there are two differing sets of charges against Socrates. Before responding to his present accusers, Socrates chooses to address the first and older accusation which holds that Socrates is a "wise man" and "a thinker on the things aloft, who has investigated all things under the earth, and who makes the weaker speech the stronger."² In other words, he was accused of being a natural philosopher or scientist (in modern parlance), as well as a sophist. The third component of this original accusation holds that Socrates is also guilty of teaching the means and objects of his investigations to others.³ Socrates denies that he is

knowledgeable of the things in the heavens and under the earth,⁴ but does admit that he may be wise with respect to certain human matters.⁵ His denial of his possession of natural science (i.e. knowledge of nature) is a response to the suspicion that he doubts the gods of Athens, and he gives as evidence of his piety his deferral to the Delphic Oracle. In investigating the oracle's proclamation that Socrates is the wisest human being, Socrates comes to realize that he is wise insofar as he does not claim to know that which he does not know, while those reputed to be wise claim to know what they in fact do not know.⁶

In revealing the ignorance of those reputed to be wise, Socrates claims to be doing the god's work, hence, he argues, he is not atheistic as his accusers claim. Furthermore, Socrates responds to the charge that he is a teacher by saying that the young come to him voluntarily, and that the opinion that he teaches them unjust things is due to the tendency of the young to imitate his style of conversation. The elders are incensed at being refuted in argument by the young, though they are unable to describe exactly what it is that they believe Socrates has taught their children.⁷ Since the old charges apparently do not stick (according to Socrates), the young and ambitious of the new generation, skilled in speaking, have trumped up a new set of charges.⁸ The present charges are two-fold: Socrates corrupts the young, and

¹ *Apology* 23e-24a.

² 18b.

³ 19b-c.

⁴ 19c.

⁵ 20d-e.

⁶ 21d.

⁷ 23c-d.

⁸ 23d-e.

replaces the gods of Athens with strange new *daimonia* foreign to the recognized divinities of the city.⁹ This charge accuses Socrates of propagating doubt regarding the underpinning beliefs of the polity. Socrates cannot have voluntarily corrupted the young, however, because no one knowingly seeks to make worse those around him, as this would endanger oneself, or so Socrates argues. Any corruption must have been involuntary, if it occurred at all. Therefore, it is just for Socrates to be taught and corrected, not punished.¹⁰ As for the charge of impiety, Socrates argues that if he believes in and introduces new *daimonia*, which are the children of gods, then he must believe in gods as well.¹¹

Socrates describes his way of life and likens himself to Achilles, choosing the noble life rather than the easy or comfortable life.¹² However, he has stayed out of politics because of his daimon's urging that he do so; had he entered politics, he would have been killed a long time ago.¹³ Rather, his public participation consists in acting as a gadfly so as to keep the city alert by constantly provoking its citizens with

questions about their opinions, much like a gadfly waking a drowsy horse with its constant biting.¹⁴ His daimonic way of life forbids him from begging for his life to be spared,¹⁵ and he is subsequently found guilty. Despite this, Socrates does not take advantage of the opportunity to secure an alternative penalty to death. Instead, he provokes the jury further with his apparent hubris, and is condemned to death. At the conclusion of the trial, Socrates divines that his accusers have not seen the end of his way of life and those like him.

Socrates' False Defence

An examination of Socrates' argument in defence of himself ultimately finds it to be nothing of the sort. To begin with Socrates' address to his initial accusers, Socrates in fact seems to confirm the charges. In refuting the charge that he is knowledgeable of the things in the heavens and below the earth, he addresses his present accusers, or "the many" currently assembled,¹⁶ and challenges them to recall any point at

⁹ 24b.

¹⁰ 26a: "And if I corrupt involuntarily, the law is not that you [accusers] bring me in here for such involuntary wrongs, but that you take me aside in private to teach and admonish me. For it is clear that if I learn, I will at least stop doing what I do involuntarily. But you avoided associating with me and teaching me, and you were not willing to, but instead you brought me in here, where the law is to bring in those in need of punishment, not learning."

¹¹ 27d-e.

¹² 28b-c.

¹³ 31d-e.

¹⁴ 30e.

¹⁵ Socrates claims to be moved by a daimonic ("divine" or "demonic") voice that holds him back from certain things, but never urges him forward. It is this alleged *daimon* that prevents Socrates from engaging actively in politics. In the *Apology*, see: 31c-d. See also the characterization of *daimonia* as intermediaries between humans and gods, and the further description of the crucial philosophic passion, eros, as a daimonic entity in: *Symposium* 202e-203a. For an important and characteristic account of the prohibitive role of Socrates' *daimon*, see: *Phaedrus* 242b-242c; *Apology* 34b-35b.

¹⁶ 19d.

which they heard him talking about the nature of the heavens and the earth. The jury is composed of those concerned with the new charges; it is likely that many if not most are fairly young, as are the accusers Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon. This is significant, as Socrates returns to this same charge in addressing the new accusers and attributes the study of natural philosophy or science to Anaxagoras.¹⁷ As is indicated by his evident familiarity with Anaxagoras, Socrates has at least some familiarity with the natural philosophers and their pursuits, and so there may be cause to believe that Socrates, at least at a certain point in his life, had dedicated himself to these sorts of inquiries.¹⁸ Socrates' argument that none of his present accusers have ever heard him conversing about natural subjects could very well mean that they were simply too young to have heard him speak of these things.

As for the charge of impiety, Socrates' apparent deference to the Delphic oracle would seem to provide a basis on which to believe that Socrates was a pious man who upheld faith in the gods of the city. However, it becomes apparent that Socrates' interaction with the oracle consisted in the attempt to refute the oracle's statement. Having been told by Chaerephon that the oracle has deemed Socrates to be the wisest of men, Socrates openly admits to having set out to refute the oracle by means of questioning all those reputed

to be wise.¹⁹ Socrates does find that the oracle was in fact truthful: Socrates is wiser than other people insofar as he knows that he does not know. However, this does not make Socrates a "believer"; Socrates compels faith to be tested before the bar of reasoned investigation. To have its core spiritual tenets subjected to rigorous scrutiny directly threatens the grounds upon which the political community is built. We find that Socrates, while not admitting openly to atheism, does not decisively refute the charge, either. To test faith-based belief against reason is to directly and fundamentally contradict the premise of faith. This is not to say that adherents of reason (such as Socrates) cannot be open to the challenge of faith, though it does imply a fundamental conflict between reason and faith as such. One believes, or one does not; that Socrates leaves ambiguous the question of his belief does not strengthen his defence. For the Athenian assembly, as we see in the result of the trial, this is not good enough; as a political community, Athens demands loyalty, hence belief in its gods.

Relating to the charge that he makes the weaker argument the stronger, Socrates says only that he is not a clever speaker.²⁰ Socrates always says the same things,²¹ because he believes it is important to say things that are true. If one is speaking the truth, one will always say the same thing, as the truth qua truth cannot change. Unless clever speaking amounts to always speaking truthfully, Socrates is

¹⁷ 26d.

¹⁸ We receive a similar hint at: *Lovers* 132a-b. Here, Socrates is able to infer that two young boys are debating a point relating to the natural philosophy of either Anaxagoras or Oinopides by observing nothing more than their hand motions.

¹⁹ *Apology* 20b-c.

²⁰ 17b.

²¹ 17c.

not clever.²² Socrates never attempts explicitly to address this charge in detail, though in practice he proves to be quite clever in debate with Meletus, leading Meletus into vulnerable positions in which his accusations crumble under inconsistency.²³ The assembly is vexed by Socrates' clever and tricky speaking, as indicated by Socrates' frequent requests that they stop making a commotion in response to what he says.

The Philosopher in the Political Community

Socrates' "failure" to acquit himself illustrates something fundamental about politics and philosophy, the two ways of life presented against one another in the trial of Socrates. The ends of these two ways of living are opposed to one another as the *Apology* illustrates: the philosopher subordinates all else to his inquiry after truth, while the city cannot afford to allow anything to supersede it and its foundational opinions. The political community is ruled by laws that are based upon the opinions of their originators, and opinions are that which philosophy seeks to replace with knowledge of truth. Socrates refuses to give up his search for truth, and the city, perceiving the real threat Socrates' way

of life poses, cannot tolerate him.²⁴ The blending of the two in the form of the philosopher king as shown in the *Republic* then becomes a most disturbing paradox. How is a philosopher, a lover of truth, to take up the task of ruling?

The ostensible answer is to be found in Book Five of Plato's *Republic*, which presents three waves of paradox. The first two are the equality of the sexes and the communism of children and women.²⁵ The third is the rule of philosophers, without which "there is no rest from ills for the cities ... nor ... for human kind."²⁶ It is this third and final paradox that Socrates fears will "drown [him] in laughter and ill repute."²⁷ The philosopher king is such a laughable paradox for a number of reasons, the first of which arises from the nature of the perfectly rational city the philosopher is to rule. The first two waves of paradox rely upon the suppression and even eradication of eros, or passionate desire. Pertaining to the basic sexual manifestation of eros, this city in speech implicitly depends upon men and women being equal in their abilities to suppress the urges (both attraction to the beautiful and repulsion from the ugly) of their bodies. If this demand is reasonable, then we as human beings

²² 17b.

²³ It is important that Meletus is the representative of the poets. It is Meletus in particular whom the philosopher engages and bests in single combat, which would suggest that there is a special rivalry between philosophy and poetry with respect to the relation of each to the political community.

²⁴ This conflict is identical with the city's demand for piety and Socrates' inability to oblige said demand.

²⁵ And communism it is; stripped of its relatively recent Marxian overtones, communism as a political arrangement refers to nothing more nor less than the sharing in common of things, as opposed to private ownership. This is a notion that far pre-dates Marx.

²⁶ *Republic* 473d.

²⁷ 472c.

must be able to turn our baser erotic longings on and off at will – on when it is time to procreate, and off when it is time to work, in order that sexual urges will only arise when called for by the marriage lottery. The communal nude exercises, for example, cannot be allowed to risk the arousal of sexual attraction, a proposal that cannot fail to strike even the most prudish reader as hopelessly unrealistic. This, when combined with the image of the old and impotent exercising naked with the young and virile, is what makes this proposal so ridiculous.²⁸

The communism that requires the abolition of the family necessarily requires the leveling of sexual attraction and preference, the root of later attachment. Such suppression is necessary in order to prevent the formation of the close ties between individuals that prolonged sexual contact and the formation of the family unit entail. This suppression is carried out most radically in the rigged marriage lottery and the communal raising of children that are meant to ensure the eradication of jealousy, indeed, the eradication of the idea of “one’s own.”²⁹ This measure is involved in the abolition

of eros in its higher forms insofar as eros, being desire, desires that a thing be one’s own.³⁰ It is the awareness that one lacks something needful; hence it is the desire to obtain it. The philosopher is an erotic being in the highest sense in desiring to obtain wisdom; despite his claim to know nothing in the *Apology*, Socrates himself admits that he is in fact knowledgeable about one thing, namely erotic love.³¹ Between the suppression of eros and the necessity that as a king he devote his time not to truth-seeking but to rule (the imposition of and persuasion to opinion), the philosopher would seem to cease to be a philosopher once he becomes a king. Once philosophers rule as kings, there will never again be philosophers.

Indeed, Socrates’ self-professed knowledge of eros and his paradoxical explication of the philosopher king both compel us to acknowledge the elephant, or rather the philosopher in the room. That it is Socrates who describes philosophy as the true erotic longing and Socrates who suggests that philosophers rule as kings forces careful readers to look to Socrates himself as the philosopher who would rule,³²

²⁸ 452a-c.

²⁹ It is clear that this sanction against jealousy via the lottery is carried out not for the sake of “free love” but for the shrewd political purpose of cultivating the most advantageous offspring. One does not get to sleep with just anyone nor for any great length of time, but only with select partners carefully chosen by the state, and only for as long as it takes to conceive a child. Sexual satisfaction is neither a primary nor even a relevant consideration in so far as the laws of this city in speech are concerned. See: 458cff.

³⁰ In ascending order, eros begins with love of a beautiful body and, as a result of education, progresses to love of beautiful bodies as such, to love of the arts, to, ultimately, the highest love of the beautiful in itself, according to the sketch by Diotima, Socrates’ educator in erotic matters. See: *Symposium* 210a-212a.

³¹ E.g.: *Symposium* 177d-e and 201d; *Theages* 128b.

³² *Republic* 499b-c. This attribution by Socrates of eros to philosophy as the core component of the love of wisdom constitutes one of the Platonic Socrates’ most striking and enduring propositions. Eros, being a

thereby throwing into stark relief the deeply problematic character of what is at stake. Desire or eros, especially in its highest manifestations, will have become debilitated and debased, as will have Socrates' way of life along with it should philosophers ever rule as kings. Socrates' *coup de grace* in demonstrating the inadequacy of this "solution" to the ills of politics is his quiet association of the philosopher king with the tyrant in the *Republic's* ninth book. Tyranny is the result of eros run amok,

one-way or non-reciprocal desire of what one lacks, is distinguished from philia (as in philo-sophia, a notion antedating Socrates' life), as a form of reciprocal love among equals. Socrates' characterization of philosophy as an erotic passion is consistent with his characterization (such as in the *Symposium*) of philosophy as the upward striving toward knowledge of that which is (the Good, the Beautiful), as well as with his characterization of himself as one who only knows that he knows nothing. Socrates lacks knowledge, and knowledge is what is most needful; hence, he has eros for it; it is an object of desire for him. As a result, we find that what Socrates means by "philosophy" is something quite different from what the pre-Socratics meant by "philosophy" and considerably more nuanced than what a conventional, academic philological analysis of the term would claim. Thus, in order to understand the Platonic dialogues, we must pay careful attention to the very distinct, unorthodox, and precise way in which Socrates conceives and uses the term "philosophy." For an interesting and concise discussion of one debate over the complex relationship between philia and eros in the dialogues, see "The Pohlenze – von Arnim Controversy about the *Lysis*" in: David Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 201-225.

thus we see that the tyrant and the philosopher share the same key ingredient.³³ The tyrant characterized by unmitigated and chaotic eros contrasts with the philosopher characterized by a well-ordered soul with its eros directed toward the highest ends.³⁴ We find that the philosopher king is no longer a philosopher precisely because he is no longer afforded the time or means to order his passions in the proper way. Ironically, the philosopher king is dangerously close to the tyrant.

The foregoing observation regarding Socrates' implicit critique of philosophic rule reinforces his conduct during both his trial and his night-long deliberation about justice. Both the *Apology* and the *Republic* highlight an element of forceful coercion involved in getting Socrates to speak. The *Republic* has Socrates accompanying Glaucon on a descent into a foreign Cave, as it were, the later decision to ascend out of which is juxtaposed against Polemarchus' compelling Socrates to descend yet once more in the immediate sequel.³⁵ Socrates must be forced by Polemarchus and his friends into this highly radical and quasi-conspiratorial inquiry into the just regime, climaxing with philosophic rule. Furthermore, Book Five, the pivotal book in which the three-part implementation of the philosopher king occurs, opens with Adeimantus

³³ *Republic* 574d-575a.

³⁴ The well-structured soul of the philosopher is ruled by reason (*logos*), with spiritedness (*thumos*) serving reason and governing appetite (*epithumia*). See the discussion of the tripartite soul in Book Four of the *Republic*.

³⁵ 327c.

compelling Socrates to go through the radical reformation of sexual and family relations that paves the way for Socrates' most outrageous proposal.³⁶ This compulsion is in contradistinction to the majority of the thirty-five dialogues, which are generally initiated by Socrates. The *Apology* shares this trait of the *Republic* in that it has Socrates compelled by the Athenian public to give an account of himself to an audience unique in the dialogues which, aside from the *Apology*, only ever depict Socrates engaged in conversation with a small number of interlocutors in a private setting.³⁷ Socrates as the archetypal philosopher is not suited for the active public life precisely because: 1) he cannot engage the public in dialogue, as the *Apology* shows; and 2) political rule clashes in a profound way with his philosophic way of life to the detriment of both the philosopher and the community, as the *Republic* shows. That Socrates must be coerced into both addressing the public and introducing a positive, indeed visionary political proposition makes it only too evident that philosophy has, to put it mildly, a rocky relationship with both public political discourse and prescriptive political doctrine.

³⁶ 449c.

³⁷ It would be most difficult to argue that Socrates' appearance in court to stand trial for his life is not the result of an element of compulsion. That this situation also involves a large audience of strangers rather than a few interlocutors in an intimate setting is hardly a coincidence. Nor is it coincidental that Polemarchus cites his party's superiority in numbers (and their unwillingness to be reasoned with) when demanding that Socrates return to the Piraeus without debate.

What, then, are we left with as a remedy to the ills of the city Socrates warned Glaucon of? In referring back to the *Apology* one final time, we find that Socrates does not once attempt to criticize the laws themselves; he only addresses the matter of his guilt. Thus he implicitly condones the laws. Socrates does not want to overturn the present Athenian modes and orders and replace them with his own rule, nor is he an advocate for any sort of proto-First Amendment right to free speech. If the *Republic* shows us in speech why philosophers should not rule, the *Apology* shows us in deed Socrates' refusal to undermine the current regime. His false defence implicitly concedes the validity of the Athenians' reasons for feeling threatened by his way of life. Moreover, though Athens is indeed sentencing him to death, Socrates does admit that he has managed to live seventy long years without having been brought to trial.³⁸ This regime allowed him to become a philosopher, and to live that life for decades. A political regime such as that of Athens (or other more-or-less similar regimes that may come to mind), not the rule of philosopher kings, conduces to the possibility of the way of life Socrates deems most choiceworthy for a human being. Regardless of the very real and very problematic tensions between politics and philosophy, the possibility of the one does not seem of necessity to preclude that of the other, though the forced union of the two in the rule of philosopher kings does not seem either possible or desirable.

Thus we are left not with a solution to the "philosophico-political" problem, but with the compelling suggestion that the problem is itself the

³⁸ *Apology* 17d.

key to identifying and thinking through the fundamental alternatives inherent in the human condition. There is, as indicated by Plato's account, an irreconcilable and irreducible tension between philosophy and politics, the life of the private pursuit of truth and the life of public action. That the two are either radically opposed or essentially harmonious is neither an intellectually satisfactory dichotomy nor a morally defensible union. By taking seriously Plato's decision to tackle the great questions of the best regime and the worthwhile way of life in the form of dialogues that leave us without clear-cut solutions (indeed, without anything remotely resembling a "Platonic doctrine"), we find that he ironically answers our questions with further questions; this is the key to deliberating about the problems of politics with the aim of shedding light on the best way to live. In returning to Plato and his Socrates, we present ourselves with a conception of politics and political science that allows us to take full advantage of liberal democracy's potential for addressing political problems liberally. That is, reading Plato shows us the value and possibility of the dialogical examination of ideas by citizens unconstrained by the contemporary dogma of our cave which holds that ideology and politics are coterminous. Such an atmosphere for dialogue allows for genuine political philosophy, which is emphatically not a dogmatic solution of all political problems but the identification of these permanent problems and the permanent alternatives that accompany them. The society that allows for this inquiry is a liberal democracy in the truest sense.

Conclusion

Plato's *Apology* presents an eye-opening supplement to the discussion of the rule of philosophers in the *Republic*. It illuminates evidence already present in the *Republic* to demonstrate that philosopher kings are not truly the silver bullet to the travails of political life that a superficial reading may suggest them to be. It is certain that, whatever Plato's thoughts are on the question of how we may best order the regime and live a fully human life, it is far more nuanced than the simplistic answer that philosophers ought to rule as kings. We, as citizens of liberal democracies living in a time in which genuine philosophic reflection on the good is being supplanted by the partisanship of ideology in both political debate and intellectual discourse, could do worse than to take seriously Plato's warnings against visionary expectations of politics and the ideological fervor they incite. Political philosophy is both possible and necessary.

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