

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**POLITICAL  
PHILOSOPHY**

THIRD EDITION

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a system of proportional representation, where the number of representatives is proportional to the total votes cast, as used in elections to the European Parliament, or a system of 'first-past-the-post' in each constituency, as in the United Kingdom. Such debates are, of course, of enormous importance, and the choice of system will have far-reaching consequences. For example, it is often said that Hitler was able to come to power only because Germany had a system of proportional representation. But from a more philosophical point of view, the pressing tasks are to be clear about what democracy is supposed to be, and why it might be thought valuable. As a first attempt to deal with these tasks we will look at one of the most powerful anti-democratic arguments: that of Plato, in the *Republic*, commonly thought to have been written between 380 and 360 BCE. By looking at this sceptical assault on the value of democracy we will begin to see whether it is worthy of the praise it so often receives.

## **Plato against democracy**

Suppose the following to be the state of affairs on board a ship or ships. The captain is larger and stronger than any of the crew, but a bit deaf and short-sighted, and similarly limited in seamanship. The crew are all quarrelling with each other about how to navigate the ship, each thinking he ought to be at the helm; they have never learned the art of navigation and cannot say that anyone ever taught it them, or that they spent any time studying it; indeed they say it can't be taught and are ready to murder anyone who says it can. They spend all their time milling round the captain and doing all they can to get him to give them the helm. If one faction is more successful than another, their rivals may kill them and throw them overboard, lay out the honest captain with drugs or drink or in some other way, take control of the ship, help themselves to what's on board, and turn the voyage into the sort of drunken pleasure-cruise that you would expect. Finally, they reserve their admiration for the man who knows how to lend a hand in controlling the captain by force or fraud; they praise his seamanship and navigation and knowledge of the sea and condemn everyone else as useless. They have no idea that the true navigator must study the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds and all the other subjects appropriate to his profession if he is to be really

fit to control a ship; and they think it's quite impossible to acquire the professional skill needed for such control (whether or not they want it exercised) and that there's no such thing as an art of navigation. With all this going on aboard aren't the sailors on any such ship bound to regard the true navigator as a word-spinner and a star-gazer, of no use to them at all?

Plato, *The Republic*, ed. H. P. D. Lee ([380–360 BCE], Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 282, 488a–d

Plato's opposition to democracy exploits another apparent tension within democratic theory. Just as 'monarchy' means 'rule by the monarch', 'democracy' means 'rule by the *demos*'. But what is the *demos*? In classical Greek it can be understood both as 'the people', and as 'the mob'. On the latter understanding, then, democracy is mob rule: the rule of the rabble, the vulgar, the unwashed, the unfit.

But this insult to democracy is a mere preliminary to Plato's main anti-democratic arguments. His basic weapon is the so-called 'craft analogy'. The point is very simple. If you were ill, and wanted advice on your health, you would go to an expert—the doctor. In other words, you would want to consult someone who had been specially trained to do the job. The last thing you would do is assemble a crowd, and ask them to vote on the correct remedy.

The health of the state is a matter of no less importance than the health of any given individual. Making political decisions—decisions in the interests of the state—requires judgement and skill. It should, Plato urges, be left to the experts. If the people are allowed to decide, they will be swayed by those who speak loudest and with most conviction—the Sophists—and so, like the deaf and short-sighted captain on the ship, will be swayed by the false reasoning of ambitious politicians. Meanwhile, those who are truly skilled in the art of navigation will be ignored. Just as a ship so navigated will lose its way and founder, so too, Plato argues, will the ship of state.

But where are expert rulers to be found? Here Plato's answer is simple, and, to many of his likely readers, initially rather flattering. The just society is impossible unless the kings become philosophers, or the philosophers become kings. Philosophical training, Plato argues, is a necessary qualification to rule. By the idea of becoming a philosopher, Plato does not mean merely spending a few years reading and thinking

about philosophy. He has a plan for an entire life of education for the 'guardians', involving in its early years not only skills of literacy, but also musical, mathematical, military, and physical education. Philosophy is not studied at all until the age of 30. Five years of philosophy are then followed by fifteen years' military service, and those who have come through this with honour are then allowed to turn permanently to philosophy: a repose interrupted only by taking one's turn in the 'weary business of politics'.

It would take us too far out of our way to consider these and other aspects of Plato's *Republic* in much detail. In particular, we cannot go into the nature and content of the knowledge Plato intends his guardians to come to possess. But let us remember the craft analogy. Ruling, like medicine, navigation, or even farming, is a skill. A special training is necessary, and not everyone is naturally capable even of acquiring the skill. Just as medicine should be left to the experts, and a medical training only given to those most suited, so should ruling, and a training to rule. Any other arrangement will lead to worse results, and consulting the populace will lead to disaster.

On the face of it, Plato's argument against democracy seems devastating. If ruling is a skill, and a skill that can only be attained by the few, then democracy seems plainly absurd or irrational. The defender of democracy must find a response to the craft analogy. But does it have a weakness?

### **Problems with guardianship**

The first thing to be said is that Plato's own system is a form of dictatorship, and just as there are general arguments that can be used to oppose any system of democracy, there are also general arguments which can be used against dictatorship. Even if we concede to Plato that in educating the guardians he is bringing into existence a class of expert rulers, it certainly does not follow that we should concede to them the power to run our lives.

The point is not that we should never defer to experts, but that giving unchecked powers to experts is to invite catastrophe. You may choose to take a doctor's advice, or consult an architect, but who would be happy if 'doctor's orders' had the force of law, or if architects allocated houses