

## **Can Plato's argument against democracy be answered?**

By Dominic Windram

In this essay, I will evaluate each premise of Plato's argument against democracy:

1. Ruling is a skill
2. It is rational to leave the exercise of skills to experts
3. In a democracy the people rule
4. The people are not experts
5. Conclusion, that democracy is consequently irrational.

I will consider each of these respectively and provide counter-arguments.

The word 'democracy' has its origins in the Greek language. It combines two shorter words: 'demos' meaning whole citizenry living within a particular city-state, and 'kratos' meaning power or rule. Thus, it refers to people/citizens possessing the power to rule. Plato didn't approve of Athenian democracy precisely because it was participatory. Furthermore, he believed that rationality is a particularly restricted skill that only a small number of people possess. According to Plato, most people are merely guided by emotion and impulse:

He equated the (demos) with the lowest, emotional, unthinking part of man's three level soul. The city should be run by the 'guardians', the 'philosopher - kings', who have perfected the highest, rational level of the soul. (Taplin, 1989, p.207)

From Plato's perspective, democracy was unbalanced, unstable and gave rise to the worst aspects of human nature. Key to understanding Plato's conception of the democrat is the emphasis he places on desires rather than reason, "The democrat, is someone who has desires for many different things: parties, exercise, money, victory and discovery. But he just 'goes for' these different things; they capture his fancy, nothing more; he pursues them all merely because he happens to enjoy them, and not because he independently considers them to be worthwhile." (Scott, 2000, p.26).

In stark contrast, Plato believed in committed, yet detached, experts because democracy seldom produces such characters. Rather, it elects popular politicians who are effective in manipulating popular opinion.

With regard to the first premise against democracy, Plato argues that ruling is a distinctive skill by deploying a pertinent analogy, "... the true navigator must study the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds and other professional subjects, if he is really fit to control a ship;" (Plato, 1955, p.250)

Clearly, ruling is a skilful business. Nevertheless, the craft analogy seems rather

limited in that Plato assumes political questions can be settled by experts in a similar way to crafts like navigation and medicine. Moreover, Plato's notion of the philosopher-king is perhaps unrealistic, and elitist, in that critical questions about political objectives are “best settled by general discussion and agreement, not by a relatively small group of experts.” (Sharples, 1994, p.51)

Plato's second premise is that it is rational to leave ruling to the experts. To support his argument, Plato uses another relevant analogy, the doctor as an 'expert': “...the true and natural order is for the sick man, whether rich or poor, to wait on the doctor, and for those in want of guidance to wait on him who can give it if he's really any use, and not for him to wait on them.” (Plato, 1955, p.250)

In response to this 'paternalistic' advice, when one consults a doctor, whilst one acknowledges that he/she is an expert, the choice of whether to follow their advice is up to the individual (can seek second opinion, ignore advice). Indeed, it could be foolhardy to simply accept the opinion of experts without asking relevant questions about one's illness. 'Experts' in a particular discipline may all receive a similar training, yet often disagree on the interpretation and application of that training. Do experts always 'prescribe' the best course of action? “The point is not that we should never defer to experts, but that giving unchecked powers to experts is to invite catastrophe.” (Wolff, 2016, p.68). Advice from a doctor or consultation with an architect could, and probably should, be sought:

... but who would be happy if 'doctor's orders' had the force of law, or if architects allocated houses to people? However, good these people are at their jobs, why should we trust them to make decisions on our behalf? (Wolff, 2016, pp.68-69).

Aristotle believed, contrary to Plato's rigidly structured society, that the more pluralistic, self-sufficient city is one which possesses “all the required parts [engaged in] the necessary activities efficiently and properly.” (Mayhew, 1997, p.51). Among other things, the rulers must know about the business affairs and interests of the non-rulers. Clearly, the rulers in Plato's Republic cannot know these things.

Aristotle also contends that Plato's Guardians wouldn't be able to run things effectively, “without the help of the knowledge, opinions, and experience of the non-rulers.” (Mayhew, 1997, p.52)

With regard to the third premise, that in a democracy people rule, it is important to recognise that Plato's critique of 'democracy' is a critique of *Athenian* democracy, which was participatory for its citizens. Some believe that this radical concept of democracy provides people with “the means to participate in some meaningful way in the management of their own affairs.” (Chomsky, 2002, p.9)

On the other hand, in modern, representative democracies, citizens don't vote for anything nor anyone other than those who govern them, the occasional referenda notwithstanding. Access to participation is limited in such a way that all the fevered populism and crude prejudices that exist in the greater society are placed under some restraint. Furthermore, our elected leaders cannot act alone, but must often work amongst themselves and compromise with one another. They cannot be moved solely by whatever whim possesses them. Moreover, they have the opportunity to rationally reflect upon potential policy options before deciding on any particular course of action.

With this in mind, Mill argues that, subject to certain conditions, the people are sufficiently expert to fulfil their role in a representative democracy, “The people elect representatives who then both make laws and put them into practice. This is the idea of representative democracy...” (Wolff, 2016, p.94). Mill was idealistic about this form of democracy. Moreover, he believed that it would raise people's level of education etc. Henceforth, it appears that if education is expanded from one class to the masses, then democracy is a worthwhile endeavour: “... it is only education in the widest sense, not of a class as Plato advocated, but of the people as a whole which can change democracy from a peril to a promise.” (Garvie, 1937, p.429)

In terms of the fourth premise, one can read Rousseau in such a way as to reject it, by arguing that the people together are, indeed, experts, or at least can be made to be so under the right conditions. Indeed, Rousseau suggests that, although ruling requires a special training or education, “he denies that it ought to be a special training given only to the few.” (Wolff, 2016, p.78)

Condorcet's argument that the people, sufficiently educated on political matters, as a whole, need only be right, say, 51% of the time, is relevant here. If individuals are focused on the common good, “rather than out of particular interests” (Wolff, 2016, p.75), they can perhaps be considered experts, integral to a functioning democracy.

Based on his premises, Plato concludes that democracy is irrational, as it places power in the hands of the uninformed, common citizenry. He argues instead in favour of an unelected elite whose rule is justified because they alone are rational agents, in possession of political expertise. Plato argues that, “the *correct* judgements should be reached, and that knowledge should prevail. Thus, in the ideal state of the *Republic*, where the Philosopher Rulers *by definition* know best, there is simply no point in consulting anyone else.” (Sharples, 1994, p.52)

Clearly, Plato's deep-seated disregard for democracy was due to his unhappy experience of popular government in Athens. Nevertheless, every form of government has its defects; but perhaps democracy has the least defects, since

“Government of the people for the people by the people’ as a definition of democracy is an ideal, but has never been an actuality; and yet it is an ideal as none of the other forms of government is.” (Garvie, 1937, p.428)

To conclude, it appears that Plato's argument against democracy can be answered in several ways: in the form of modern representative democracy, where the people decide who rule; by widening opportunities for education across the population; and by discovering experts amongst the people. Plato's dictatorial vision for society is anathema to modern-day sensibilities. With this in mind, it is perhaps worth noting that in *The Republic* Plato completely betrays his far more progressive-minded teacher, Socrates, “the eternal spirit of reflection, criticism and potentially of opposition to the state itself.” (Blackburn, 2006). Socrates is still regarded as a seminal influence on free thought and speech. Alas, in Plato's *Republic* he is revealed, “as the spokesman for a repressive, authoritarian, static, hierarchical society in which everything... is regulated by the political classes, who deliberately use lies for the purpose.” (Blackburn, 2006)

### **Bibliography**

Blackburn, S. (2006) Voices of reason, *The Guardian*, [online], 5 August. Available from: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/05/shopping.plato>> [accessed: 20 June 2021].

Chomsky, N. (2002) *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. 2nd ed. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Garvie, A.E. (1937) Reflections on Plato's “Republic”. *Philosophy*, [online], 12 (48), pp.424-431. Available from: <[www.jstor.org/stable/3746053](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3746053)> [accessed 28 June 2021].

Mayhew, R. (1997) *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Republic*. Lanham Md: Rowman and Littlefield.

Plato. (1955) *The Republic*. Translated by H.D.P. Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Original work published 380-360 B.C.E.).

Scott, D. (2000) Plato's Critique of the Democratic Character. *Phronesis*, [online], 45 (1), pp. 19-37. Available from: <[www.jstor.org/stable/4182634](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4182634)> [accessed 23 June 2021].

Sharples, R. W. (1994) Plato on Democracy and Expertise. *Greece & Rome*, [online], 41 (1), pp. 49-56. Available from: <[www.jstor.org/stable/643132](http://www.jstor.org/stable/643132)> [accessed 25 June 2021].

Taplin, O. (1989) *Greek Fire*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Wolff, J. (2016) *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.