

## *The Republic*: Plato's Case Against Political Idealism

The political proposals in Plato's *Republic* have long unnerved readers. Most commentators take what Socrates says as the earnest expression of Plato's desired reforms. Some then take him to task for advocating an elitist Utopia (Popper 1971, Ober 1998, Bobonich 2002), while others attempt to understand the proposals on their own terms and explain, if not defend, the theory motivating them. (Reeve 1988, Schofield 2006, Mason 2010). But both sides tell the same story: Plato argues that the philosopher, as the one who has knowledge of the Forms, is the only person fit and even obliged to rule. In this paper I argue that the text of the *Republic* itself undermines this surface reading. Its apparent argument for a philosophical autocracy is superseded by repeated suggestions that the idea of a philosopher-statesman is an oxymoron.

The dialogue as a whole is framed with arguments against the philosopher engaging in politics. In Book I in contrast to Thrasymachus' vulgar assumption that any wise person will attain political power in order to pass laws that are in his own best interest, Socrates asserts, "If there were ever a city of good men, there would probably be as much competition *not* to rule as there is among us to rule" (347d). By Book X of the *Republic* we might expect a reader to be persuaded of the necessity for the rule of philosophers, but in Er's vision of the afterlife we are told that Odysseus "rejected ambition" and chose "the life of a private citizen who minded his own business" (620c). Far from encouraging a philosopher's political ambitions, this scene dissuades such activity.

The most memorable lines of the *Republic* seem to present a glaring counter-example to my reading. Socrates claims that unless a philosopher rules as king or a king genuinely takes up philosophy, the world will see no end of trouble (473d). However, we are given no reason to think that the condition of this statement could ever be fulfilled. In making this proposal,

Socrates notes that he will be drowned in laughter – a not so subtle hint that the idea is unlikely to come to fruition. It could turn out that a philosopher engaged in ruling over others is no longer a philosopher. Indeed, in the *Gorgias* Socrates, flaunting his avoidance of public life, claims he is the only true statesman (521d). If we are going to understand the philosopher as ruling in any sense it is not through what we would call ‘political’ rule.

Beyond the text of the *Republic*, there are numerous historical reasons to think that Plato did not see political activity as compatible with philosophical pursuits. The life and death of his teacher Socrates could not have given him much faith in the political process. And the abysmal failure of his kinsman Critias’ horrific reign with the Thirty could only have tempered or terminated whatever aristocratic idealism Plato had. His contemporary Isocrates had a practical, ‘philosophical’ program and explicitly advocated participation in Athenian political life (Morgan 2004). We cannot, however, say the same for Plato.

I end the paper by suggesting that Plato uses Homer as a model of how philosophy can influence and benefit the state without resorting to running it. In Book X Socrates revisits the arguments for heavily censoring and even banishing Homer from Kallipolis. For all his depiction of warfare and leadership, Homer himself never led an army or ruled a city. The unwary reader may conclude, along with the interlocutor, that with no political accomplishments Homer pales in comparison to men like Solon or Lycurgus (599d-e). And yet in Plato’s time there was no more influential educator than Homer. It should be possible for a philosopher or his texts to have just as much cultural impact as Homer’s poems *without* getting in the business of soliciting votes and/or political reform. Indeed Plato and his texts provides a perfect example of this exact phenomenon. This was the example he set for his students to aspire to, not the fantasy of a philosopher-king.

## Works Cited

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