

## BRINGING PHILOSOPHY TO LIFE

### #23: Philosophers and Kings

I began this series a year ago on the day designated as a federal holiday for celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr., and his contributions to world culture. That connection continues to be especially meaningful as we enter a year when a series of political elections throughout the globe are likely to determine the future of democracy as a form of government, especially in the United States. In the current campaigns for the U. S. presidency and the Congress, the Democratic party has explicitly identified the very existence of democracy as a primary issue that is at stake. They claim that the leaders of the Republican party embrace an authoritarian model of governance that resembles Hitler's Germany, Vladimir Putin's Russia, and Viktor Orbán's Hungary. This general topic has already appeared in this series more than once during the past year, and it is sure to recur between now and the November elections.

The ancient Athenian philosopher Plato famously treated the philosophical principles that underlie this political dispute about the role of authoritarian leaders such as kings. In Book 6 of *The Republic*, his character Socrates said:

Until philosophers rule in the republic or kings and rulers seriously and successfully pursue wisdom—unless political power and the love of wisdom unite and those people who follow only one of them are categorically excluded—neither republics nor the entire human race will ever be free from corruption. Until that happens, the republic we have been creating will never come to life and see the light of day (*Plato's Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, revised by Albert A. Anderson, Agora Publications, 2001, Greek page 473, Kindle Edition).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Karl Popper, in a book called *The Open Society and its Enemies* (published by Routledge in 1945), develops an interpretation of Plato's *Republic* in which he claims that Plato was advocating a form of tyranny led by a “philosopher king.” Popper

separates Plato from Socrates, identifying Socrates as a an egalitarian and presenting Plato as a totalitarian who resembles Hitler and Stalin. Popper says:

I have tried to show that Socrates' intellectualism was fundamentally equalitarian and individualistic, and that the element of authoritarianism which it involved was reduced to a minimum by Socrates' intellectual modesty and his scientific attitude. The intellectualism of Plato is very different from this. The Platonic "Socrates" of the Republic is the embodiment of an unmitigated authoritarianism (Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Chapter 7, Section 4).

Plato's educational aim, according to Popper, is indoctrination—the molding of minds and of souls that are utterly incapable of doing anything at all independently. Popper says that Plato envisioned a wise philosopher king who would create a utopia, contrasting him with Socrates who had stressed that he was not wise, that he was not in the possession of truth, and that he was a searcher, an inquirer, a lover of truth, not one who has the truth. This, he explained, is expressed by the word "philosopher," which means a "lover of wisdom." Popper says that "Plato has something very different in mind when he uses the term "philosopher." Plato's philosopher is not a devoted seeker for wisdom, but its proud possessor. He is a learned man, a sage (Karl Popper, Chapter 8, Section 3).

I follow the American philosopher Joseph N. Uemura in arriving at the opposite conclusion about how to interpret Plato's *Republic*. In an essay called *Plato's Republic: An Antidote to Any Future Utopia*, Uemura contends that rather than taking such words from Plato's characters separately and literally, it is necessary to interpret the overall dialectic that emerges over the course of all ten books of *Plato's Republic* (see Joseph N. Uemura, *Reflections on the Mind of Plato: Six Dialogues*, Agora Publications, 2004). Plato's dialectic, as Uemura interprets it, fosters freedom rather than authority. In the words of another character, the Athenian Stranger, from Plato's *Sophist*, "dialectic is the science of free people" (my translation). In that essay, Uemura provides a convincing case that in *The Republic* Plato presents **and then soundly refutes** authoritarianism,

preparing the way for an enlightened version of democracy. Marxist and Fascist utopias attempt to eliminate freedom of thought, the exact opposite of the kind of Socratic inquiry found in Plato's dialogues. Socrates was executed by the Athenians in an attempt to silence him. Thanks to Plato's dialogues, Socrates has been speaking to every new generation for almost 2500 years.

I would add to Uemura's argument against Popper the fact that the character Socrates who appears in *Plato's Republic* is not the historical Socrates that Popper tries to separate from Plato but the "lover of wisdom" who does not pretend to know what he does not know. There is no character named "Plato" in that dialogue or any of the others, so to understand what Plato wrote and had performed by actors in his Academy we have to interpret the overall work, not cherry pick statements from individual characters. All the passages Popper cites to build his view of Socrates, the egalitarian, come from Plato's dialogues, not from some external source presenting the Socratic way of thinking. The only historical source we have concerning Socrates comes from Xenophon: *The Memorabilia: Recollections of Socrates* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1177/1177-h/1177-h.htm>). That account of Socrates, a moralist who preaches rather than inquires, has little resemblance to the view Popper favors. It is also a long way from Plato, whose dialogues were not created to tell us **what** to think but to show us **how** to think.

In Book 8 of *The Republic*, Plato's characters examine and reject a version of democracy, but that way of thinking about "majority rule" is a long way from the democratic form of government that was incorporated into the U.S. Constitution and its historical embodiment since the eighteenth century in dozens of countries throughout the world. The form of democracy rejected by Plato's characters is closer to what John Stuart Mill, in his book *On Liberty*, called the "tyranny of the majority" Mill says is "now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard" (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* [1859], Agora publications,

Chapter 4, 1.4, 2020.). Genuine democracy is nurtured by philosophy rather than the kind of rhetoric called “flattery and shameful rubbish” discussed in episode #22 of this series. Plato’s kind of rhetoric is best understood as a form of poetry that Aristotle called “Socratic dialogue,” an interpretation that is supported by Plato’s frequent use of allegory, analogy, and irony. For example, in Book 6 of *The Republic*, Adeimantus asks Socrates about how he would respond to the popular view of philosophy as “useless.” Socrates says that he thinks “the objection is justified.” Adeimantus is surprised by Socrates’ reply.

Adeimantus: But how can you say that corruption and evil in republics will never cease until philosophers rule and also admit that philosophers are useless?

Socrates: That question can only be answered indirectly by using an analogy.

Adeimantus: But of course, you are not in the habit of speaking indirectly and never use analogies!

Socrates: First you get me to take on an impossible proof and then you make fun of me! Now you are going to hear an analogy that will show the weakness of my imagination. The way society treats the best people is so atrocious that it is impossible to compare it with a single thing, so in order to defend them I must create an image out of many things, the way painters do when they combine goats and stags into one picture. Imagine a fleet of ships or even a single one with a captain who is taller and stronger than any of the crew but who is a bit deaf, nearsighted, and has knowledge of navigation comparable to his sight and hearing. The sailors are quarreling with each other about who should steer the ship. They all insist on taking the helm in spite of being unable to indicate when they learned how to navigate or name their teacher. They even claim that the art of navigation cannot be taught, and they are ready to cut to pieces anyone who says it can. They crowd around the captain and do everything possible to gain control of the helm. If they fail and others succeed, they kill them and throw them overboard. Then they disable the noble captain with drugs or strong drink and take command of the ship, consume the ship’s supplies by eating and drinking whatever they wish, and continue the voyage in the way you would expect from such a crew. The person who was most successful in helping them gain control of the ship, whether by persuasion or by force, they honor with titles such as “skillful navigator,” “pilot,” and “master mariner.” They denounce anyone who lacks such skill as being useless. They have no idea that a true pilot in order to qualify for commanding a ship must pay attention to the time of the year and the different seasons, the sky and the stars, the winds, and whatever else belongs to the art of navigation. The true pilot does not believe that there is an art related to grabbing control either by force or persuasion and thinks it is impossible to combine such a practice with the art of navigation. How would such sailors regard the

true pilot on such a ship? Would they not use terms such as “stargazer,” “useless idler,” and “babbling”?”

Adeimantus: They would use those terms and even worse ones (*Plato's Republic* (Greek page 488)).

Rather than promoting the kind of “philosopher king” that Popper describes, Plato’s dialogue shows why “the greatest and most severe attack on philosophy comes from the very people who pretend to practice it.” Socrates continues: “I’m talking about the ones the critic of philosophy had in mind in saying the majority of them are downright evil and the best of them are useless (*Plato's Republic*, Greek Page 489).” Who are the genuine philosophers? Socrates says: “It is natural for true lovers of knowledge to pursue reality, never being satisfied, diluted, or lose the passion for knowing until their passion for the love of wisdom has grasped every essence with a kindred power in their soul” (*Plato's Republic*, Greek page 490).

As I interpret Plato’s position, the dialectical development in *The Republic* contrasts the kind of authoritarian government led by a tyrant with one that nurtures an educated populace capable of freely choosing what is just, good, holy, true, and beautiful. Those are the real philosophers, the lovers of wisdom. The people we need to fear and reject in the political process are “the worst sophists, the ones who indoctrinate all alike—whether young or old, male or female—and mold them into their own image through popular opinion.” When Adeimantus asks about how they do that, Socrates says:

[Socrates:] When they sit crowded together in a legislature, a law court, a theater, a military camp, or any other large gathering where they approve or disapprove of what is said or done with a loud uproar. They exaggerate their praise or blame by shouting and clapping, augmented by the echo from the rocks or the acoustics of any place where they are gathered. Will this not cause young people’s hearts to leap within them? How can even the best individual education withstand the flood of applause or condemnation and not be swept away by the current? Will this not instill in them the same opinions as the general public about what is good and what is bad, leading them to do what the crowd does and be like the others in every respect?

Adeimantus: Yes, Socrates, necessity will compel them.

Socrates: And there is an even greater necessity to be mentioned.

Adeimantus: What is that?

Socrates: The actions these new sophists use when their words fail to persuade. Are you familiar with the kind of public educators who levy fines, take away civil rights, and impose the death penalty?

Adeimantus: I know them all too well (*Plato's Republic*, Greek page 492).

Technology has changed, but anyone today who turns on a television set, listens to a radio, logs into the world wide web, or reads the print media can easily recognize how these “new sophists” have changed. In *The Republic*, the best form of education is given its proper name: **dialectic**.

Socrates says:

Socrates: Glaucon, I think we have come at last to the song that dialectic sings—a mental performance the power of sight can only imitate. In our allegory we imagined looking at real animals, the distant stars, and finally at the sun itself. In this way a person begins to use dialectic, seeking to discover reality by thinking—not by relying on sense perception—and by settling for nothing less than goodness itself. This journey leads to the limit of what we can think, just as leaving the cave led to the limit of what we can see.

Glaucon: That’s a good way to put it.

Socrates: Don’t we call this journey dialectic?

Glaucon: Yes, that’s what we call it (*Plato's Republic*, Greek page 532).

Now let’s return to philosophers and kings in today’s global quest for political leadership. Some of the political parties and the individuals who lead them really do prefer kings or another kind of tyrant, whether it is Vladimir Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China, or some MAGA Republican seeking to become POTUS. By contrast, Martin Luther King, Jr. did not want to be a king and, I think, spent most of his life as a philosopher. Although he graduated from Crozier

Theological Seminary and began his professional life as a Baptist minister, King's career became progressively ecumenical when he attended Boston University where he earned his Ph.D. by writing a dissertation under the direction of the chair of the philosophical department, Edgar S. Brightman. His ministry evolved to incorporate broad moral, political, and social principles that have been widely embraced not only by other religious people but also by many who seek wisdom using the dialectical method that is embodied in Plato's dialogues. King's special contribution comes from his quest for universal principles that are shared by all traditions that manifest not only the love of wisdom but the kind of activism that invites all human beings to participate in seeking the common good. King's short life provides a powerful example of how education can shape our worldview and transform our life. Like Socrates, King took philosophy into the places where people live and work, showing that education goes far beyond the ivory tower and pervades everything we think and do.

The political crisis of our time is not simply caused by the shortcomings of our political parties; it arises because education has been divided and fragmented, separating the skills and training that are needed for vocational and professional activity from the moral, political, and cultural values that are essential to living a good life. Ordinary people, the ones who constitute a democracy, are fully capable of making the kind of decisions needed to achieve the common good, but that requires a form of education that has been eclipsed by political and economic interests that undermine democracy. Rather than building a utopia, common sense urges us to live as citizens who seek and promote the common good. Liberal education can and should prepare every human being to think freely and independently. Rather than joining the group that Plato called the "new sophists" in the false hope for special power and privilege for our self, our party, or our tribe, every citizen can and should embrace and promote the universal principles that have been discussed

throughout this series. Democracy is not simply one political option among many. It is the only form of government that can be morally justified. Today, democracy is threatened not by the selfish aspirations of a few rich and powerful people but by our failure as human beings to demand and provide a liberal education for all, a kind of education that enables everyone to be a philosopher—a genuine lover of wisdom.

In recent weeks, we have seen the President of University of Pennsylvania, M. Elizabeth Magill, and the President of Harvard University, Claudine Gay, forced to resign for political reasons having little to do with the academic mission of universities. In the next episode of this series, #24, I will return to this issue of the philosophical implications of the relationship between politics and education and why this topic is central to the future not only of education but of the entire human species.