

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

That democracy— government of the people, by the people, for the people<sup>1</sup>— is an unambiguous moral good is taken for granted in modern Western societies, yet for much of its history democracy has been treated with deep suspicion.<sup>2</sup> The prevailing aristocracies of medieval and early modern Europe viewed it as a lower form of government, one which failed to properly address the assumption that the people were in fact incapable of ruling themselves.<sup>3</sup> Even as democratic ideals began to take hold in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States during the nineteenth century, the meaning of “by the people” was much more restrictive in its use of the word ‘people’ than would be accepted today. Universal suffrage was not properly established in Britain, for example, until 1928.<sup>4</sup> Where a limited form of democracy had appeared before that— a singular flourishing in classical Athens— one of western philosophy's founding fathers had constructed an argument against it so powerful that it remains relevant today, whilst establishing the justification for the suspicion in the intervening centuries.

In the *Republic*, Plato makes the case against democracy. His argument can be formalised as thus:<sup>5</sup>

- [P1] Ruling is a skill
- [P2] It is rational to leave the execution of skills to experts
- [P3] Ruling in a democracy is executed by the people
- [P4] The people are not experts in ruling
- [5] Therefore democracy is irrational

Clearly, Plato's argument is valid in form— its conclusion logically follows from its premises. If ruling is a skill that the people do not possess, then allowing them to rule is irrational. Any defence of democracy as a rational form of government, then, must demonstrate that one or more of Plato's premises are false.

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<sup>1</sup> Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy* 2nd ed., Macmillan (1976) p87

<sup>2</sup> Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 4th ed., OUP (2023) p68

<sup>3</sup> MacKenzie, *Politics: Key Concepts in Philosophy*, Continuum (2009) p102

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *British Politics: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP (2003) p25

<sup>5</sup> Wolff, ‘Are we good enough for democracy?’, *Think*, Vol 1 Issue 2 (2002) p29-34

[P2] is perhaps the least vulnerable in this sense. A common analogy used to demonstrate that it is rational to leave the execution of a skill to an expert is that of someone suffering a medical ailment.<sup>6</sup> Imagine a man who is suffering from pain in his right leg. His best course of action would be to make an appointment with a medical professional to seek their expert advice on the best course of treatment. Diagnosis and treatment of medical ailments, after all, are skills. Doctors must train for many years before qualifying as such, and must continue to meet high standards in order to continue practising. Therefore, whilst not absolutely guaranteeing the best outcome, consulting a doctor increases the probability of achieving the best one. Plato's suggestion here is that democracy is akin to the man instead standing in his local town square, showing his leg to passers-by and asking them how they think it should be treated, before going with the majority opinion— whether that is amputation or crystal healing. It goes without saying that here the execution of skill is better left to experts. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine an example where the exercise of a skill is better off left to the unskilled. [P2] it seems, is sound.

The question of whether governance is indeed a skill in the same way as medical care can be addressed when considering [P1]. Here Plato argues that ruling *is* a distinctive skill, in the same way that carrying out medical care is. This certainly seems compelling. Just as being a good doctor requires intricate knowledge of the latest treatments and knowledge of the human body, so good governance involves intricate knowledge of current affairs and the workings of political institutions.<sup>7</sup> One way of dismissing this premise would be to assert that the analogy with other skills is misleading, and that the gap between the skilled and unskilled in rulers is minimal compared to the gap in skill between doctors and non-doctors. But perhaps a sharper objection along these lines can be addressed with [P3].

To continue the medical analogy, it is clear that asking a crowd how to treat an injured leg is foolish. However, asking the crowd *who* an injured leg should be treated by might provide an altogether more rational result. The particular question that the man asks the crowd, then, has ramifications for the success of his outcome, and this is analogous to the type of democracy under consideration in Plato's argument. [P3] states that in a democracy *the people rule*, but this can be interpreted in at least two distinct ways: the people vote on individual laws and decisions themselves, or the people choose representatives to vote on those laws and decisions on their behalf. With the former, direct, style

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<sup>6</sup> Wolff, p72

<sup>7</sup> Wolff, p73

of democracy, the power of [P1] is obvious, however with the latter it is somewhat diminished. Certainly in modern democracies, representational democracy is near universal.<sup>8</sup> This means the relevant rendering of [P1] should become ‘choosing rulers is a skill’ and [P4] should become ‘the people are not expert at choosing rulers’. The overall argument of course, remains valid, but it becomes easier to reject two of its premises as the high bar of the people needing to be skilled day-to-day rulers themselves is removed— they need only be skilled in choosing their rulers. The injured leg analogy doesn’t have the same impact if the man is merely asking everyone who he should best consult, rather than consulting everyone himself.

This brings us to the final premise— that the people are not expert rulers. If we place the argument in the context of representative democracy, it is possible to imagine, as in the case of the injured leg, that people can at least be expert *choosers* of rulers, but [P4] has another weakness. Unlike premises [P1] and [P2] (and in a certain way [P3]), [P4] is not fixed. Whilst debate can be had over whether people *are* expert rulers (or even expert choosers) or not, it does not entail the claim that the people can *never* be expert rulers. The eighteenth century Genevan philosopher Rousseau, whilst not addressing Plato directly, suggested the same— although it must be said he was sceptical of whether this could be achieved in practice.<sup>9</sup>

What we are left with then, is a somewhat split picture. Plato’s argument in historical context concerns a direct form of democracy,<sup>10</sup> and in this reading it is certainly harder to answer. The vast majority of the people are not specialised in governance, and to train everyone to be so would be a difficult and inefficient undertaking. However, if we place his argument into a modern context of representative democracy, it loses some of its strength in regards to [P1] and [P4], even if it doesn’t unravel completely. Elsewhere, in light of the success of Plato’s argument, some have argued that other forms of government give no guarantee of better outcomes, but this angle does nothing to answer the actual argument, nor does it have anything inspiring or positive to say about democracy in particular. But perhaps democrats have a final counter-argument; one that lies outside of the premises. Plato’s argument against democracy relies on the conclusion that it is *irrational*. It could however, be argued there is a higher purpose to democracy, beyond reason.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Raphael, p88

<sup>9</sup> Wolff, p83-84

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Political Theory in Retrospect*, Edward Elgar Printing (1991) p9

<sup>11</sup> Wolff, p81

Philosophers tend to value reason above all else, even (and especially!) when it goes against human nature and instinct, but to ignore what it means to be human is to perhaps miss the point of democratic politics. Perhaps the highest moral good, beyond improved outcomes in economic matters, public health and so on, is that, as human beings living in a state, individuals are given a stake in the outcome. Citizens of any state necessarily exchange some freedom for security, but democracy can be valued as a mechanism of handing some freedom (however limited) back to the individual. Democracies therefore might find support even if Plato's argument cannot be answered "rationally", or where other forms of government are producing "better" outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

Whether modern democracy can survive in future centuries in competition with powerful, efficient non-democratic regimes likely depends on how expert the electorates of democratic societies (direct, representative or otherwise) are able to become. If [P4] of Plato's argument is overturned, its conclusion no longer follows, and democracy (in theory at least) can become as powerful and efficient as any other system, whilst benefitting from the strong morale of a highly engaged citizenry. Unusually for a philosophical argument, perhaps Plato's argument against democracy can thus best be defeated *in practice*, rather than within the academic confines of formal logic.

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<sup>12</sup> Raphael, p83

## References

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