

## Book Six – “The Philosopher King – The Man Who Steers The Ship”

July 18, 2006

It is part of the nature of man to desire to live with other people. Humans desire to live in community together. A community is when two or more people gather with a common cause or purpose. When there is a group, there is a diversity of opinions and ideas. Everyone has his or her own idea of how something should be accomplished. This is why groups need leaders.

Just like a boat needs to be steered, a group needs a leader with the wisdom to know the direction to take things. For Socrates, being a philosopher and a lover of truth is the highest role in life and is what is most needed in a leader. Socrates states that the leader of the city should be the philosopher king. The question is what would the philosopher king look like. What would he value? In book six of Plato's Republic, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus continue to discuss who the philosopher king will be and how they will find him.

The first thing they try to understand is what the nature of the philosopher king might be. They know he needs to be a lover of truth; constantly asking questions and desiring to know the right path. Socrates says, “let's agree that they are always in love with that learning which discloses to them something of the being that is always and does not wander about, driven by generation and decay.”

Being that the philosopher king would be a lover of truth and wisdom, he would not desire to please his appetite for the vices of sex, food, and property. Indulgence would cause him to lose his sense of focus. He might start living for himself and not the city. Socrates says that he would “forsake those pleasures that come through the body – if he isn't counterfeit but a true philosopher.

Wisdom is not just being able to recognize fruitless pursuits like overly indulging in vice, it is being able to learn from the past. The philosopher king is someone who will remember what has happened from the past, instead of choosing to be brought down by it. He will use the knowledge of the past to better guide the city in the best direction. Socrates says, “Let us never then admit a forgetful soul into the ranks of those that are adequately philosophic; in our search let us rather demand a soul with a memory.” Socrates later says when using the analogy of the pilot of the ship, “They don't know that for the true pilot it is necessary to pay careful attention to year, seasons, heaven, stars, winds, and everything that's property to the art, if he is really going to be skilled at ruling a ship.”

As stated earlier, the philosopher king must love to learn because he loves truth. He must place a high importance on education so that he can grow in virtue. Socrates says, “Well, then, I suppose that if the nature we set down for the philosopher chances on a suitable course of learning, it will necessarily grow and come to every kind of virtue.” The knowledge that he receives from his education will be a base for his understanding of life.

With society being the way they are, it would be very hard to find the philosopher king. There are not that many people out there that would fit the qualifications. There is no guarantee that when someone finds a suitable philosopher to be king that he would want to do it.

For a city or a community to thrive and not just get by, they need a great leader. Socrates' city needed the philosopher king. It would be someone who loved wisdom, sought the truth, had a solid understanding of history, and an education that gave him a solid base of knowledge. The leader...the philosopher king would have the foresight to “steer the ship” in the right direction.

**CRITO**

ΚΡΙΤΩΝ

**PLATO**

ΠΛΑΤΩΝ

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Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

- 43a Socrates (So): Why have you come at this hour, Crito? Or isn't it still early?  
 Crito (Cr): It certainly is.  
 So: About what time is it?  
 Cr: Just before dawn.  
 So: I'm surprised that the prison guard was willing to admit you.  
 Cr: He is used to me by now, Socrates, since I visit here so often. And besides, I have done him a good turn.  
 So: Did you get here just now or a while ago?  
 Cr: Quite a while ago.
- b So: So how come you didn't you wake me up immediately, but sat by in silence?  
 Cr: By Zeus, no, Socrates. I wish I myself were not so sleepless and sorrowful, and so I have been marveling at you, when I see how peacefully you've been sleeping. I deliberately didn't wake you so that you would pass the time as peacefully as possible. Even before now I have often thought you fortunate on account of your demeanor towards your entire life, and even more so in your present misfortune, how easily and calmly you bear it.  
 So: It's because it would be out of tune, Crito, to be angry at my age if I must finally die.
- c Cr: And yet others of your age, Socrates, have been caught up in such misfortunes, but their age does not prevent any of them from being angry at his fate.  
 So: That's true. But why did you come so early?  
 Cr: Carrying troubling news, Socrates, though not for you, as it appears, but deeply troubling for me and all of your friends, and I, it seems, am among the most heavily burdened.  
 So: What is it? Has the ship arrived from Delos,\* upon whose arrival
- d I must die?  
 Cr: No, it hasn't arrived, but it looks like it will arrive today, based on what some people who have come from Sounion\* report, who left it there. It's clear from this that it will arrive today, and you will have to end your life tomorrow, Socrates.  
 So: May it be for the best, Crito. If this pleases the gods, so be it. However, I don't think it will come today.
- 44a Cr: Where do you get your evidence for this?  
 So: I will tell you. I must be put to death sometime the day after the ship arrives?  
 Cr: That's what the authorities in these matters say, at least.  
 So: In that case, I don't think it will arrive this coming day, but the next. My evidence is something I saw in a dream a little while ago during the night. It's likely that you chose a very good time not to wake me.  
 Cr: Well, what was the dream?  
 So: A woman appeared, coming towards me, fine and good-looking, wearing white clothing. She called to me and said, "Socrates, you shall arrive in fertile Phthia on the third day."\*
- b Cr: What a strange dream, Socrates.  
 So: But obvious, at least as it appears to me, Crito.

Cr: Too obvious, perhaps. But, my supernatural Socrates, even now listen to me and be saved. I think that if you die it won't just be *one* misfortune. Apart from being separated from the kind of friend the like of which I will never find again, many people, moreover, who do not know me and you well will think that I could have saved you if I were willing to spend the money, but that I didn't care to. And wouldn't this indeed be the most shameful reputation, that I would seem to value money above friends? For the many will not believe that it was you yourself who refused to leave here, even though we were urging you to.

So: But why should we, blessed Crito, care so much about the opinion of the many? The best people, who are more deserving of our attention, will believe that the matter was handled in just the way it was.

Cr: But surely you see, Socrates, that we must pay attention to the opinion of the many, too. The present circumstances make it clear that the many can inflict not just the least of evils but practically the greatest, when one has been slandered amongst them.

So: If they were of any use, Crito, the many would be able to do the greatest evils, and so they would also be able to do the greatest goods, and that would be fine. But as it is they can do neither, since they cannot make a man either wise or foolish, but they do just whatever occurs to them.

Cr: Well, let's leave that there. But tell me this, Socrates. You're not worried, are you, about me and your other friends, how, if you were to leave here, the informers would make trouble for us, about how we stole you away from here, and we would be compelled either to give up all our property or a good deal of money, or suffer some other punishment at their hands? If you have any such fear, let it go, because it is our obligation to run this risk in saving you and even greater ones if necessary. So trust me and do not refuse.

So: I certainly am worried about these things, Crito, and lots of others too.

Cr: Well don't fear them. Indeed, some people only need to be given a little silver and they're willing to rescue you and get you out of here. And on top of that, don't you see how cheap those informers are and that we wouldn't need to spend a lot of money on them? My money is at your disposal, and is, I think, sufficient. Furthermore, even if, because of some concern for me, you think you shouldn't spend my money, there are these visitors here who are prepared to spend theirs. One of them has brought enough silver for this very purpose, Simmias of Thebes, and Kebes too is willing, and very many others. So, as I say, don't give up on saving yourself because you are uneasy about these things.

And don't let what you said in the court get to you, that you wouldn't know what to do with yourself as an exile. In many places, wherever you go, they would welcome you. And if you want to go to Thessaly, I have some friends there who will think highly of you and provide you with safety, so that no one in Thessaly will harass you.

What's more, Socrates, what you are doing doesn't seem right to me, giving yourself up when you could have been saved, ready to have happen to you what your enemies would urge—and did urge—in their wish to destroy you.

d In addition, I think you are betraying your sons, whom you could raise and educate, by going away and abandoning them, and, as far as you are concerned, they can experience whatever happens to come their way, when it's likely that as orphans they'll get the usual treatment of orphans. One should either not have children or endure the hardship of raising and educating them, but it looks to me as though you are taking the laziest path, whereas you must choose the path a good and brave man would choose, especially when you keep saying that you care about virtue your whole life long.

e So I am ashamed both on your behalf and on behalf of us your friends, that this whole affair surrounding you will be thought to have happened due to some cowardice on our part: the hearing of the charge in court, that it came to trial when it need not have, and the legal contest itself, how it was carried on, and, as the absurd part of the affair, that by some badness and cowardice on our part we will be thought to have let  
46a this final act get away from us, we who did not save you, nor you save yourself, when it was possible and we could have done so if we were of the slightest use. So see, Socrates, whether this is both evil and shameful, for you and for us as well. Think over—or rather, there's no longer time for thinking but only for deciding—this one consideration, because everything must be done this coming night; if we hang around any longer it will be impossible and we'll no longer be able to. So in every way, Socrates, believe me and do not refuse.

b So: My dear Crito, your eagerness would be worth a lot if it were in pursuit of something righteous, but the more it is not, the more difficult it is to deal with. We must therefore examine whether we should do this or not, because as always, and not just now for the first time, I am the sort of person who is persuaded in my soul by nothing other than the argument which seems best to me upon reflection. At present I am not able to  
c abandon the arguments I previously made, now that this misfortune has befallen me, but they appear about the same to me, and I defer to and honor the ones I did previously. If we have nothing better than them to offer under the present circumstances, rest assured that I will not agree with you, not if, even more so than at present, the power of the multitude were to spook us as though we were children, imposing chains and deaths and monetary fines upon us.

d What's the most reasonable way we can examine this matter? If we first resume this argument that you give about reputations, whether it was correct on each occasion when we said that one must pay attention to the opinions of some people and not to others'? Was this the correct thing to say before I had to die, whereas now it has become obvious that it was mentioned instead for the sake of argument and was actually just playing around and hot air?

e I am determined to examine this together with you, Crito, whether it appears different when I consider it in this condition, or the same, and whether we should ignore it or be persuaded by it. It is always put like this, I think, by people who think there is something in it, like I put it just now: that it is necessary to pay serious attention to some of the opinions that men hold and not to others. By the gods, Crito, doesn't this seem

47a correct to you? Because you, as far as any human can tell, are in no danger of being executed tomorrow and the present misfortune should not lead you astray. Have a look, then. Is it fair enough to say that one should not value every human opinion but only some and not others? And not the opinions of everyone but of some and not others? What do you say? Isn't this right?

Cr: Yes, that's right.

So: Shouldn't we value the good opinions, and not the worthless ones?

Cr: Yes.

So: Aren't the good ones the opinions of the wise, while the worthless ones come from the ignorant?

Cr: Of course.

b So: So then, what did we say, again, about cases such as this: should a man in training, who takes it seriously, pay any heed to the praise and blame and opinion of everyone, or only to one person, the one who is a doctor or a trainer?

Cr: Only to the one.

So: So he should fear the criticisms and welcome the praises of that one person, and not those of the many?

Cr: Clearly.

So: He must practice and exercise, and eat and drink, in the way that seems best to that one person, the trainer and expert, more than to all the others together.

Cr: That's right.

c So: Well then. If he disobeys this one man and dishonors his opinion and his praises and instead honors those of the many who know nothing about it, won't he suffer some harm?

Cr: How could he not?

So: What is this harm, and what does it tend to do, and in what part of the disobedient person?

Cr: It's clear that it's in the body, since this is what it destroys.

d So: Well said. Isn't it the same with the others, not go to over them all but in particular justice and injustice and shameful and fine things and good and bad, which is what our current discussion is about, whether we must follow the opinion of the many and fear it or instead the opinion of the one person, if there is someone who has knowledge, whom we must defer to and fear more than all the others together? If we do not heed his opinion we will corrupt and harm that part of us which becomes better with justice and is destroyed by injustice. Or don't you think so?

Cr: I do indeed, Socrates.

e So: Tell me, if we destroy that part of us which is improved by what is wholesome and corrupted by what is sickening because we do not obey the opinion of the person who knows, is life worth living when that part is ruined? This is the body, I suppose. Or not?

Cr: Yes.

So: Then is life worth living with a wretched and corrupt body?

Cr: Not at all.

So: And is life worth living after the part of us which injustice

injures and justice benefits has been corrupted? Or do you think this is unimportant in comparison with the body, this part of us, whatever it is, that injustice and justice affect?

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Cr: Not at all.

So: But more valuable?

Cr: Much more.

So: So, best of men, we must not pay much heed to what the many will say to us, but to what the one who knows about just and unjust things will say, to that one person, and to the truth itself. So you were wrong, at the beginning, to bring this up, that we must heed the opinion of the many concerning just things and noble things and good things and their opposites. "But in spite of that," someone might declare, "the many can put us to death."

b

Cr: That too is obvious, for someone might say so, Socrates. You're right.

So: But, you wonderful fellow, it seems to me that the following statement, too, which we have been over before, still remains the same as it did previously. So examine again whether or not it still holds true for you, that it's not living that should be our priority, but living well.

Cr: Why, of course it's still true.

So: And that this is living well and finely and justly, does that remain true or not?

Cr: It remains true.

c

So: Therefore, based on what you've agreed, we must examine the following, whether it is just or unjust for me to try to leave here, when I was not acquitted by the Athenians. And if it seems just let's try it, and if not, let's abandon it. As for the points you make about spending money and reputation and the upbringing of children, Crito, I suspect that these are really questions belonging to people who would casually put someone to death and resurrect him, if they could, without any thought—to the members of the multitude.

d

As for us, since the argument requires it, I suppose we should examine precisely what we just mentioned, whether we will act justly, we who lead as well as we who are led, by giving money and thanks to those who will get me out of here, or whether we will in fact act unjustly by doing all of this. If we think that we're acting unjustly by doing these things, I don't think we should take into consideration whether we will die if we hold our ground and keep our peace, or anything else we will suffer, rather than whether we're acting unjustly.

Cr: I think you put that well, Socrates. See what we should do, then.

e

So: Let's look together, my good man, and if at any point you have an objection to what I am saying, make it and I will persuade you; if not, you blessed man, finally quit saying the same thing over and over, that I have to get out of here against the will of the Athenians. I think it is most important to act with your consent and not against your will. See, then, that the starting point of the inquiry is laid down to your satisfaction and try to answer the questions in the way you think best.

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Cr: I shall certainly try.

So: Do we say that we should never willingly act unjustly, or that



b we should in some instances and not in others? Or is acting unjustly never good or noble, as we often agreed on previous occasions? Or have all our previous agreements been overturned in these last few days, and did we fail to notice long ago, Crito, that at our age we ourselves are no different from children when we have serious discussions with one another? Or above all isn't it the same as was said to us then? Whether the many agree or not, and whether we must additionally suffer harsher things than these or gentler, nevertheless acting unjustly is evil and shameful in every way for the person who does it. Do we say this or not?

Cr: We do.

So: And so one must never act unjustly.

Cr: By no means.

So: And so one should not repay an injustice with an injustice, as the many think, since one should never act unjustly.

c Cr: It appears not.

So: What next? Should one cause harm, Crito, or not?

Cr: Presumably not, Socrates.

So: And then? Is returning a harm for a harm just, as the many say, or not just?

Cr: Not at all.

So: Because harming a man in any way is no different from doing an injustice.

Cr: That's true.

d So: One must neither repay an injustice nor cause harm to any man, no matter what one suffers because of him. And see to it, Crito, that in agreeing with this you are not agreeing contrary to what you believe, because I know that few people believe it and would continue to believe it. And there is no common ground between those who hold this and those who don't, but when they see each other's positions they are bound to despise one other. So think carefully about whether you yourself agree and believe it and let us begin thinking from here, that it is never right to act unjustly or to return an injustice or to retaliate when one has suffered some harm by repaying the harm. Do you reject or accept this starting principle?  
e For it still seems good to me now, as it did long ago, but if it looked some other way to you, speak up and educate me. If you're sticking to what we said before, listen to what comes next.

Cr: I do stick to it, and I accept it. Go ahead.

So: Here in turn is the next point. Or rather, I'll ask you: when someone has made an agreement with someone else, and it is just, must he keep to it or betray it?

Cr: He must keep to it.

50a So: Observe what follows from this. By leaving here without persuading the city are we doing someone a harm, and those whom we should least of all harm, or not? And are we keeping to the just agreements we made, or not?

Cr: I'm unable to answer what you're asking, Socrates; I don't know.

So: Well, look at it this way. If the laws and the community of the city came to us when we were about to run away from here, or whatever it should be called, and standing over us were to ask, "Tell me, Socrates,

b what are you intending to do? By attempting this deed, aren't you planning to do nothing other than destroy us, the laws, and the civic community, as much as you can? Or does it seem possible to you that any city where the verdicts reached have no force but are made powerless and corrupted by private citizens could continue to exist and not be in ruins?"

c What will we say, Crito, to these questions and others like them? Because there's a lot more a person could say, especially an orator, on behalf of this law we're destroying, which establishes the verdicts that have been decided as sovereign. Or will we say to them "The city treated us unjustly and did not decide the case properly"? Will we say this or something like it?

Cr: By Zeus, that's what we'll say, Socrates.

d So: What if the laws then said, "Socrates, did we agree on this, we and you, to honor the decisions that the city makes?" And if we were surprised to hear them say this, perhaps they would say, "Socrates, don't be surprised at what we're saying but answer, since you are used to participating in questioning and answering. Come then, what reason can you give us and the city for trying to destroy us? Did we not, to begin with, give birth to you? And wasn't it through us that your father married your mother and conceived you? So show those of us, the laws concerning marriages, what fault you find that keeps them from being good?" "I find no fault with them," I would say.

e "What about the laws concerning the upbringing and education of children, by which you too were raised? Or didn't those of us, the laws established on this matter, give good instructions when they directed your father to educate you in the arts and gymnastics?" "They did," I would say.

51a "Well, then. Since you have been born and brought up and educated, could you say that you were not our offspring and slave from the beginning, both you and your ancestors? And if this is so, do you suppose that justice between you and us is based on equality, and do you think that whatever we might try to do to you, it is just for you to do these things to us in return? Justice between you and your father, or your master if you happened to have one, was not based on equality, so that you could not do whatever you had suffered in return, neither speak back when crossed nor strike back when struck nor many other such things. Will you be allowed to do this to your homeland and the laws, so that, if we try to destroy you, thinking this to be just, you will then try to destroy us the laws and your homeland in return with as much power as you have and claim that you're acting justly in doing so, the man who truly cares about virtue?

b Are you so wise that it has slipped your mind that the homeland is deserving of more honor and reverence and worship than your mother and father and all of your other ancestors? And is held in higher esteem both by the gods and by men of good sense? And that when she is angry you should show her more respect and compliance and obedience than your father, and either convince her or do what she commands, and suffer without complaining if she orders you to suffer something? And that whether it is to be beaten or imprisoned, or to be wounded or killed if she leads you into war, you must do it? And that justice is like this, and that

c you must not be daunted or withdraw or abandon your position, but at war and in the courts and everywhere you must do what the city and the homeland orders, or convince her by appealing to what is naturally just? And that it is not holy to use force against one's mother or father, and it is so much worse to do so against one's homeland?" What will we say to this, Crito? That the laws speak the truth? Or not?

Cr: It looks so to me.

d So: "Consider, then, Socrates" the laws might say, "whether we speak the truth about the following: that it is not just for you to try to do to us what you're now attempting. For we gave birth to you, brought you up, educated you, and gave you and all the other citizens everything we could that's good, and yet even so we pronounce that we have given the power to any Athenian who wishes, when he has been admitted as an adult and sees the affairs of the city and us the laws and is not pleased with us, to take his possessions and leave for wherever he wants. And if any among you wants to live in a colony because we and the city do not satisfy him, or if he wants to go somewhere else and live as a foreigner, none of us laws stands in the way or forbids him from taking his possessions with him and leaving for wherever he wants.

e But whoever remains with us, having observed how we decide lawsuits and take care of other civic matters, we claim that this man by his action has now made an agreement with us to do what we command him to do, and we claim that anyone who does not obey is guilty three times over, because he disobeys us who gave birth to him, and who raised him, and because, despite agreeing to be subject to us, he does not obey us or persuade us if we are doing something improper, and although we give him an alternative and don't angrily press him to do what we order but instead we allow either of two possibilities, either to persuade us or to comply, he does neither of these.

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b We say that you especially will be liable to these charges, Socrates, if indeed you carry out your plans, and you not least of the Athenians but most of all." If, then, I would say, "How do you mean?", perhaps they would scold me justly, saying that I have made this agreement more than other Athenians. They might say, "Socrates, we have great evidence for this, that we and the city satisfy you. For you would never have lived here more than all of the other Athenians unless it seemed particularly good to you, and you never left the city for a festival, except once to Isthmos, but never to anywhere else, except on military duty, nor did you ever make another trip like other Athenians, nor did any urge seize you to get to know a different city or other laws, but we and our city were sufficient for you.

c So intently did you choose us and agree to be governed by us that, in particular, because the city was satisfactory to you, you had children in it. Moreover, at your trial you could have proposed exile, if you had wished, and what you're now trying to do to the city without her consent, you could have done then with her consent. At the time, you prided yourself on not being angry if you had to die, and you chose death, you said, in preference to exile. But now you neither feel shame in the face of those words nor have you any respect for us the laws. By trying to destroy

d us you are doing what the most despicable slave would do, trying to run away contrary to the contract and the agreement by which you agreed to be governed by us. So answer us first on the particular point of whether or not we speak the truth in claiming that you agreed to be governed by us in deed and not merely in words." What can we say to this, Crito? Mustn't we agree?

Cr: We must, Socrates.

e So: "Aren't you", they might say, "going against your contract and agreement with us ourselves, which you were not forced to agree to nor deceived about nor compelled to decide upon in a short time but over  
53a seventy years, in which time you could have gone away if we did not satisfy you and these agreements did not appear just to you. You did not prefer Lakedaimonia\* nor Crete, each of which you claim is well-governed, nor any other of the Hellenic cities or the foreign ones, but you left it less than the lame and the blind and the other disabled people. Evidently the city and also we the laws were so much more pleasing to you than to other Athenians, for is a city without laws satisfactory to anyone? Now then, won't you keep to your agreement? You will, if you are convinced by us, at any rate, Socrates; and at least you won't look ridiculous by leaving the city.

b "Just think about what good it would do you and your friends if you break it and do wrong in one of these ways. It's pretty clear that your friends will risk exile along with you and disenfranchisement from the city and confiscation of their property. And if you first go to one of the closest cities, to Thebes or to Megara—since both are well-governed—you would be an enemy, Socrates, of those governments, and all those who care about their cities will regard you suspiciously, thinking that you are a destroyer of the laws. And you will confirm the opinion of the judges in thinking  
c that they judged the case correctly, since whoever is a destroyer of the laws would certainly be considered in some way a destroyer of young and foolish men.

d "Will you flee, then, from well-governed cities and from the most civilized people? Is it worth it to you to live like this? Will you associate with them, Socrates, and feel no shame when talking with them? What will you say, Socrates—what you said here, that virtue and justice are most valuable for humans and lawfulness and the laws? And you don't think the conduct of this Socrates will appear shameful? One should think so.

e "But will you leave these places and go to Crito's friends in Thessaly, since there is plenty of disorder and disobedience there? They might listen with pleasure to you, about how you amusingly ran away from prison wearing some costume or a peasant's vest or something else of the sort that runaways typically dress themselves in, altering your appearance. But still, will no one say that an old man, who probably only has a short time left in his life, was so greedy in his desire to live that he dared to violated the greatest laws? Perhaps not, if you do not annoy anyone. But if you do, Socrates, you will hear many dishonorable things about yourself. You will surely spend your life sucking up to everyone and being a slave. What else will you do but feast in Thessaly, as though you had traveled to Thessaly for dinner? And those speeches, the ones about

54a justice and the other virtues, where will they be?

"Is it for the sake of your children that you want to live, so that you can raise and educate them? What are you going to do, in that case? You'll raise and educate them by bringing them to Thessaly and making them outsiders, so that they will enjoy that benefit too? Or if not that, will they grow up better if they are raised and educated with you alive but away from them, because your friends will take care of them? Is it that if you go to Thessaly, they'll look after them, but if you go to Hades they won't? If those who claim to be your friends are any good, you must believe they will.

"So be convinced by we who brought you up, Socrates, and do not put children or life or anything else ahead of justice, so that when you go to Hades you will be able to provide all this as your defense to those who rule there. Since neither in this world, nor in the next when you arrive, will this action be thought better or more just or more pious for you and your friends to do. But as it is you leave us, if indeed you depart, having been done an injustice not by us, the laws, but by men. If you return the injustice, however, and repay the harm and flee in shame, having violated your agreement and contract with us and harmed those who least of all should be harmed, yourself, your friends, your homeland, and us, we will make life hard for you while you're alive, and then our brothers, the laws in Hades, will not receive you favorably, knowing that you also tried to destroy us as far as you were able. So do not be persuaded by Crito to do what he says instead of what we say."

Rest assured, my dear friend Crito, that this is what I seem to hear, just as the Korubantes\* seem to hear the pipes, and this sound, from these words, resonates within me and makes me unable to hear anything else. So be aware that, based on what I currently believe, at least, if you speak in opposition to this, you will speak in vain. Nevertheless, if you honestly think you can do something more, speak.

Cr: No, Socrates. I am unable to speak.

e So: Then let it be, Crito, and let us act in this way, since this is where the god leads us.

#### NOTES

A star (\*) in the text indicates a note.

43c *ship arrived from Delos.* Socrates has spent a month in prison since the trial because he could not be executed until a religious mission returned from the island of Delos, the mythical birth-place of Artemis and Apollo and where Theseus slayed the minotaur, before returning to Athens.

43d *Sounion.* The tip of Attica; a headland 200 feet above sea-level bearing a temple to Poseidon.

44b *you shall arrive in fertile Phthia on the third day. Iliad 9.363.* Achilles is threatening to leave Troy and return home.

52e *Lakedaimonia.* Sparta.

54d *Korubantes.* In the cult of Kubele, worshippers danced as though possessed.

# Politics - Aristotle

## Book III, Chapters 9–18

### Summary

Aristotle says that all constitutions are based on a notion of justice; this notion, however, varies between constitutions. Oligarchs, for instance, maintain that it is just to grant benefits in proportion to a person's wealth, while democrats claim that all who are equal in free birth should be granted an equal share in the wealth of the city. This difference in distribution results from differing notions about the end goal of the city. If the end goal of a city were property and wealth, then the wealthiest members would indeed contribute the most to the city, and thus they would deserve the greatest share of benefits.

Alternatively, if the end goal of the city were simply life or security, then all would be equal partners in this enterprise, and all would deserve an equal share of benefits. But associations based on wealth and security are not cities. The end goal of a city is life of good quality for its citizens, and thus benefits should be extended to those who do the most to contribute to this end by encouraging civil excellence, regardless of their birth or wealth.

Aristotle examines a number of problems regarding sovereignty. If the governing body is allowed to determine what is just, then democracies, oligarchies, and tyrannies would then be just. And though aristocracies and kingships may rule justly, these systems deprive the rest of the citizens of the honor of holding civic office. Likewise, laws cannot be allowed to determine automatically what is just, since they may be formulated unjustly.

Aristotle believes that a *politeia* can overcome many of these difficulties. While each individual person may not be particularly commendable, the populace as a whole is less susceptible to error and should share collectively in the judicial and deliberative offices of government. Aristotle answers the objection that government should be left to experts by saying that the collective populace is wiser than any individual expert, and more

importantly, a better judge as to whether the people are being governed well. Aristotle concludes nonetheless that well-constituted laws should ultimately be sovereign, and governing bodies should deal only with particular cases not covered by general laws. Aristotle asserts that justice is the end goal of politics, granting benefits in proportion to merit. Merit is determined by one's contribution to the functioning and well-being of the city, but it is not entirely clear how one can determine who contributes the most toward these ends: separate arguments can be made in favor of the wealthy, the nobly born, the good, and the masses. Aristotle argues on behalf of the masses but suggests that if there is a single individual far superior in all respects to everyone else, he should be made king.

Kingship ranges from being a military commander to being the absolute sovereign in every matter. Aristotle concerns himself particularly with the issues of this latter form, absolute monarchy. A king is more adaptable than laws to particular circumstances, but a single person cannot possibly deal with all the city's affairs. Further, a single individual is more susceptible than a larger body to corruption. Given the vital need for impartiality, Aristotle considers a larger body preferable to a king (even if the king were to subject himself to impartial laws) in the making of day-to-day decisions. Nonetheless, in those rare cases in which one individual clearly outstrips the rest, it may be just to grant that individual absolute kingship.

## **Analysis**

Aristotle's concept of distributive justice is based on a cold, practical assessment of an individual's value to society. Aristotle believes that since people make unequal contributions to society (and hence are unequal), it is only just to grant them unequal benefits. Modern notions of inherent equality, on the other hand, rebuff this attitude, focusing on the cooperative spirit of society at large. The [Declaration of Independence](#), for example, claims as a "self-evident" truth that "all men are created equal," expressing the belief that everyone deserves the same rights and opportunities.

Distributive justice raises two particular problems that Aristotle addresses in these chapters: first, who is to determine what is just, and second, who makes the most significant contribution to the well-being of the city? All political associations should aim at a kind of justice that will confer benefits according to merit, but this abstract formulation does not tell us how we can determine merit and who should be the last word concerning justice.

The question of sovereignty is a difficult one, as Aristotle acknowledges. No matter who has the last word on what is just, there is the possibility of corruption or unfairness. If we place justice in the hands of the governing body, then even a corrupt or self-interested governing body would be just by definition. In claiming all the wealth for themselves, the rulers of an oligarchy could defend themselves by saying that they are the governing body so their decision is just. And even if we say that the laws set down in the constitution determine justice, there remain two difficulties. First, our definition carries no guarantee that these laws are just: they may have been set down in the interests a self-interested minority. Second, laws can only deal with generalities, and there are many particular cases on which the law is not clear.

Aristotle's solution is to require, first of all, that the governing body include all citizens and that they govern in the common interest; and second, that the laws be well constituted and directed toward the general good. That is, he favors a constitutional government, or *politeia*, that is subject to a fair and sovereign set of laws. The law, claims Aristotle, should be the absolute sovereign, and the decisions of the government should only be made in those cases where the law is unclear. The government should not have the power to make decisions that go counter to the law. If the law is well constituted, this will ensure that, even if a corrupt government is in power, it cannot do too much damage. While the idea of the sovereignty of the law was not new in Aristotle's time, he was one of the main proponents of this idea in the Greek world, and it has been passed down to us largely thanks to him.

In Aristotle's opinion, then, a sovereign law should confer benefits according to each person's contribution to the city, and deliberative and judicial assemblies that are made up of all citizens should rule in cases where the law is ambiguous. However, the question remains how we should determine who makes the best contribution to the city.



If the goal of the city is to ensure the good life for its citizens, it is far from clear how we could fix an objective standard to determine who contributes most to this goal. Aristotle's solution is that, since all citizens take part in deliberative and judicial office, all citizens contribute equally. This solution is trumped in the case of outstanding individuals who clearly make a far more significant contribution than their peers. In Aristotle's opinion, it would be unjust to place such an individual on an equal level as his peers, since he is making an unequal contribution. Though Aristotle is reluctant to endorse kingship for a number of reasons, he ultimately concludes that in some cases it may be the best solution.

Aristotle is not concerned about depriving non-citizens of the opportunity to contribute to government because he does not believe that such contributions could possibly be valuable. According to him, all people are born of a nature that leads them either to lead or to follow. Only freeborn citizens are leaders, and only they would have access to the education and leisure that would make them politically savvy enough to be able to contribute to government. It is worth noting that the audience to whom Aristotle lectured consisted of just such freeborn citizens, whose leisure time allowed them to absorb Aristotle's teachings and reinforce the social hierarchy.

## **Politics - Aristotle**

### **Book VI**

In addressing the question of the construction of democracies and oligarchies, Aristotle reminds us that even someone wholly committed to the principles of democracy would not want to construct a city based entirely on the principles of democracy. This would in effect be an extreme form of democracy, or demagoguery, which would undermine the very principles it was created to serve. Rather, a government must temper these principles and discover how best to apply them, given the particular make-up of the people over whom it rules.

Aristotle states that the underlying principle of all democracy is liberty, but the concept of liberty can be interpreted in two different ways. Under one interpretation, liberty means an even interchange between ruling and being ruled by all freeborn citizens. This implies the sovereignty of the majority and the equality of all before the law. Under the other interpretation, liberty means the freedom to do whatever one wants. In this system, ideally, one would not be ruled at all; if government became necessary, however, an even interchange between ruling and being ruled would arise. These conceptions of liberty (and by extension democracy) share the fundamental principle that all people are equal, regardless of wealth or merit.

Raising the question of how equality should be secured, Aristotle recommends a compromise between democracy and oligarchy, suggesting that sovereignty should be granted to whichever side has the greatest absolute amount of wealth. This is oligarchic in giving importance to wealth, but democratic in allowing the numbers of the poor to count.

Aristotle asserts that a population of farmers makes for the best kind of democracy: they must work hard and are well spread apart so they can't spend too much time in government. So, as long as they can select officers and are not robbed of their wealth, they are happier working their farms than they would be in public office. The wealthy hold all significant offices, but they are entirely accountable to the farmers.

The worst kind of population for a democracy is made up of mechanics, shopkeepers, and laborers. Because they are all crowded around the city center, they take a very active part in politics and tend to encourage mob rule and demagoguery.

Aristotle issues a reminder that the best democratic policy is not the most extreme but rather the one that will ensure the survival of the democracy. As a result, the populace should not be able to profit from confiscating the wealth of the rich, and payments to the poor should be in the form of block grants that allow them to buy land rather than simple handouts.

Aristotle states that oligarchy, like democracy, is most likely to thrive when it is practiced in moderation. While higher offices should be reserved for the wealthy, the poor should still be able to hold some of the lower offices. Furthermore, wealthy officers should be obliged to perform significant public service in order to hold office, thus earning the admiration and approval of the poor. Oligarchies fare best in cities with a strong cavalry or heavy infantry, whereas cities with many light infantrymen (poorer than heavy infantrymen) or naval forces tend toward democracy.

Aristotle closes by listing the different kinds of executive office. There are six offices dealing with day-to-day affairs that are indispensable to all cities, and there are four more important offices that require some expertise: military command; control of finance; preparation of business for the deliberative assembly; and directing of public worship.

## **Analysis**

The concept of ruling and being ruled is applicable not only on a political level but also on a personal, ethical level. A theme in the works of Aristotle and in those of eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant—and, indeed, in much of contemporary ethical theory—is that liberty, or freedom, is not a matter of being able to do what one pleases but instead a matter of obeying one's own will rather than some outside force. Aristotle states that a slave is not free by virtue of the fact that

he does what others tell him what to do with no freedom of choice in the matter. However, a barbarian who rapes and pillages as he pleases is similarly not free, by virtue of the fact that he does not rule himself but rather is controlled by passions that seize him. According to Aristotle, man is essentially rational, meaning that his faculty of reason is what is most truly his own. Thus, if man allows himself to be ruled only by his faculty of reason, then he is totally free. He simultaneously rules (his reason determines what he should do) and is ruled (he obeys the dictates of his reason).

Since Aristotle believes that the distinction between citizen and city is almost nonexistent, his application of the above concept of freedom to political matters is not surprising. It is worth recalling that Aristotle claims that man is essentially a political animal and that his rationality can find its fullest expression only when he participates in the life of the *polis*. Since freedom expresses itself as a matter of both ruling and being ruled and man needs to be rational, true freedom exists only within the confines of the *polis*. Citizens rule in that they have a say in how the city is governed and are ruled in that they remain loyal to the city and obey its laws. It might seem odd that Aristotle asks whether some consideration should be given to the rich just after he asserts that a democracy gives equal weight to all. The matter that concerns him is how to interpret "equal weight." Aristotle sees most cities fundamentally divided between a rich minority and a poor majority and believes that these two groups usually form opposing factions. If everyone were given equal voting power and equal eligibility for office, the poor majority, by virtue of their numbers, would have absolute control, rendering the rich minority very vulnerable. Absolute democracy in this sense may make each individual equally powerful, but it also renders one faction far more powerful than the other. Rather than give equal weight to each individual, Aristotle gives equal weight to each faction, so that the rich minority has approximately the same amount of power as the poor majority. This method creates a balance of power, which ensures that neither group can exploit the other.