

*Can the multitude be philosophic? – Myth, Reason, and
Politics*

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In his *Republic*, Plato argues that self-rulership cannot be widespread enough in a populace due to structural failures of education. This means that rulership by the few with the use of manipulative mythological devices is inevitable. That is, if a populace cannot rule themselves through the use of their reason, then they will be ruled by others through the use of myth, at best, and at worst, violence. Even given this rather grim conclusion, if we closely examine what Plato has to say about politics, we can see that there is no natural impossibility for generalized rule by the many. That is, there is no aristocracy of birth, but there is an aristocracy of the educated. As I will show below, we can develop a more democratic politics out of Plato if we consider the possibility of a democratic education. Before I do that, I will briefly consider Rawls' comments on the education of citizens for democracy. This will allow for a clearer consideration of the democratic potential of Plato's political philosophy in his *Republic*.

Rawls on Education

John Rawls did not discuss education in detail in his lifelong pursuit of what is the most desirable conception of justice for a democratic people. Nevertheless, his comments on the democratic education of children are illuminating. Below is a section on the importance of education in developing an understanding of one's freedom of conscience:

“...children's education [should] include such things as knowledge of their constitutional and civic rights, so that, for example, they know that liberty of conscience exists in their society and that apostasy is not a legal crime, all this to ensure that their continued religious membership when they come of age is not

based simply on ignorance of their basic rights or fear of punishment for offenses that are only considered offenses within their religious sect.” (Rawls 2001, 156)

Freedom of conscience is the liberty of being free to seek out, choose, and change one’s mind regarding what you hold as the good (Rawls 2001, 21). In order for such a liberty to exist, there must be protections for people to speak, write, and assemble. In short, the freedom of conscience, in order for it to be valuable for persons, needs to be supported by other liberties.

I would be surprised if anyone found these notions to be controversial. Still, I present them to consider an interesting theoretical result of a society that has these protected liberties. A society that protects its participants to seek out conceptions of the good freely makes the orchestration of a mythological system of political control difficult to maintain. As Rawls noted:

“In any case, one way for a society to try to overcome ideological consciousness is to affirm the institutions of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience; for rational inquiry and considered reflection tend over time, if anything does, to expose illusions and delusions.” (Rawls 2001, 122)

The liberties of speech and conscience make critical analysis of ideas possible. This counter-mythological effect of these liberties becomes pervasive once a population is educated in a critical appraisal of their rights and liberties. This appears to be one of the conceptual results of Rawls’ argument.

As an aside, we should be critical of Rawls’ comment in two ways. I mention this given many of our contemporary concerns about practical judgment. First, his account can be insufficient. That is, even an effective education may not dispel the hold mythological and poorly founded notions have on members of a society. Second, it is good to remember that Rawls is providing a theoretical conjecture. He is not pointing to an instance of a society where education has been effective in countering myth. This outcome, as of yet, may have never been achieved.

Plato on the Impossibility of Deliberative Democracy

Now I’ll shift to considering the issue of effective deliberation in Plato. In the sixth book of the *Republic*, Plato examines politics and philosophy in actual cities. He is considering why it is currently impossible for philosophers to rule cities. In a more exact sense, it is not that he is considering why philosophers cannot rule cities. Rather, Plato is considering why philosophy does not rule cities. This is to ask why does reason, good reasons, not lead us in our politics.

Instead, politics is driven by self-interest, habit, fear, and the delusions of myth. In short, Plato argues that unreason rules us and our politics.

In order to show that Plato is interested in showing that philosophy, or reason, cannot rule a city I'll begin with his identification of the many's deliberative shortcoming. Socrates is speaking with Adeimantus:

“Can a multitude accept or believe that the fair itself, rather than the many fair things, or that anything itself, *is*, rather than the many particular things?” “Not in the least,” he said. “Then it's impossible,” I said, “that the multitude be philosophic.” “Yes, it is impossible.” (494a)

One can take this as a statement of natural elitism. But this is incorrect. As we shall see, Plato is not saying that the many cannot distinguish between what appears and what is actual or the distinction between instances and an ideal according to some kind of natural defect. Rather, the many are incapable of making reasoned judgements due to an improper education (Socrates is still speaking with Adeimantus):

“...it's no wonder that the many are not persuaded by these [philosophic] speeches. For they never saw any existing thing that matches the present speech. Far rather they have seen such phrases purposely 'balanced' with one another, not falling together spontaneously as they are now. But as for a man who to the limit of the possible is perfectly 'likened' to and 'balanced' with virtue, in deed and speech, and holds power in a city fit for him, they have never seen one or more. Or do you suppose so? “No, I don't at all.” (498e)

The many are not used to listening to reasoned discussion, balanced speeches. Because of this, they cannot judge honest attempts at reasoned persuasion. If this is the case, then philosophers cannot rule because philosophy does not rule people's judgements. As noted, there are no models of reasoned, and morally objective, persons and speeches that people can learn from. In short, there is no way for people to learn what is a deliberative democracy and how to become deliberative citizens. Instead, people have become used to ideas and arguments falling together with no normative ordering of ideals for evaluation (the balance of virtue). In the absence of such knowledge of ideas and a rigorous normative ordering of them, there can be no balanced objective appraisal of policies. Instead, discourse is cacophonous and capricious; as Plato put it,

“like drunken revelers, abusing one another and indulging in a taste for quarreling, and who always make their arguments about persons [*ad hominem*].” (500b)

A Hopeful Reading

My reading of Plato's *Republic* on this point is hopeful about the possibility of deliberative democracy. It is in tension with Plato's own use of myth to control the best city in his ideal model and his criticisms of democracy in the *Republic*. What is interesting to consider here is that philosophers will not rule in the traditional ways of myth and manipulation (490b). If philosophers did rule in the traditional way, then they would not rule as philosophers. Rather, philosophers rule through the use of reasoned argument, which means that reason rules a city instead of a person. If this is the case, then people can only be ruled by philosophers if they can and wish to listen to reasoned persuasion. Ultimately, if this is true, then people follow their judgements and not a ruler *per se*.

Returning to Rawls on education, this hope is more plausible in our modern age. It is the hope that citizens can acquire a notion of politics which is civil. That is, a politics bounded by a publicly known set of reasonable norms. Such political reasonability is the casting off of the unreasonable considerations of a political paradise. This is the only way that desirable social cooperation is possible.

Final Comment

It is the sincere hope of political philosophers that good reasons will guide our social institutions. Plato and Rawls thought that this was possible. They were hopeful that persons have the capacity to become more than what they are currently. But if this is not possible, then I fear I share the same concern that Rawls shared with Kant: if we cannot live reasonably, then "human beings are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask, with Kant, whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on this earth" (Rawls 1999, 128).

Works Cited

Plato. *Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 1968.

Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples*. Harvard, 1999.

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