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The Philosopher-Ruler: From Theory to Action

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Plato's theory of the Form of the Good is regarded as the foundation of Plato's ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, obtaining knowledge of the Form of the Good is the peak of the Philosopher-King's education: knowledge of the Form of the Good is the source of knowledge of the goodness of all other things. During the philosophers' training to become kings, they must turn away from the visible world and contemplate only Forms themselves "moving on through Forms to Forms, and ending in Forms" (511c).[1] It is suggested that this knowledge is what makes the philosopher a Philosopher-King, for those who come to know the Good "must use it as their model and put the city, its citizens, and themselves in order" (540a9-b1).

The notion that knowledge of the good leads to good action is consistent with the "intellectualist thesis" of the so-called Socratic dialogues that suggests that personal virtue is an intellectual condition. Doing evil is simply a result of lacking knowledge of the good (*Protagoras* 352a8-358d4). Once we know the definition of a virtue, there is nothing else we need to know to apply it (*Euthyphro* 6d9-e6); in other words, to know the good is to do the good.

In this paper, I will argue for a view that departs radically from the long-held assumption that "to know the good is to do the good." On the view I shall defend, the role of the Form of the Good is greatly demoted: I argue that Plato thinks that knowledge of the Form of the Good is in fact *insufficient* for the Philosopher-King to rule. Instead, I attribute to Plato a view that might seem quite un-Platonic: I claim that Plato thinks that knowledge of the Forms must be complemented with a type of "practical wisdom."[2] Knowledge of the Forms provides the Philosopher-King with knowledge of ideal *ends*, but such knowledge is insufficient because it does not provide him/her with the "know-how" to judge the best possible *actions* to achieve those ends. I define "know-how" or "practical wisdom" as the ability to discern information about a *particular* circumstance and the capacity to choose the best *actions* that will bring about ideal ends for that circumstance. It may seem misguided to suppose that the Philosopher-King uses practical wisdom, given that the focus of practical wisdom is the sensible world, and that the Philosopher-King is trained to turn away from the sensible world and instead contemplate only Forms themselves,

"moving through Forms and ending in Forms" (511c). I contend that the Philosopher-King can be plausibly understood as engaging in both activities if we interpret the nature of the Philosopher-King as a type of craftsman; specifically, the type of craftsman that is described in the *Phaedrus*.

The standard interpretation among contemporary scholars is consistent with the notion that gaining knowledge of the Form of the Good is the pivotal event that makes a philosopher into Philosopher-King, one who is able to create and maintain justice in the Kallipolis. For example, Richard Kraut (1997, p. 209) says, "Such a person is in the best possible position to make wise political decisions; having understood the Forms, she can see more clearly than others what needs to be done in particular circumstances." Christopher Rowe (2007, p. 133) suggests that it is knowledge of the Form of the Good that enables the Philosopher-King to "unerringly make correct choices." I argue, however, that knowledge of the Form of the Good is insufficient for the philosopher to rule—it is impossible for such knowledge to help the philosopher "see more clearly than others what needs to be done in particular circumstances" (Kraut, 1997, p. 209) or to "unerringly make correct choices" (Rowe, 2007, p.133). Consider any scenario in which a Philosopher-King must prescribe the action that is best. Knowledge of the Form Justice or the Form of the Good is not sufficient for giving him an answer in a particular dilemma. The Form Justice, like all other Forms, is an eternal entity ontologically distinct from the sensible world. It is not a set of answers to all of the possible questions about how to manifest justice in particular circumstances in the sensible world. In the *Republic*, Socrates explains to Cephalus (331c1-d3) that there cannot exist a list of actions that are universally and necessarily just, because *any* act can on occasion be unjust. For example, the act of returning weapons borrowed from a friend may appear to be an example of a just act. But suppose the friend has gone mad since the time you borrowed the weapons. In this circumstance, it is not just to return the weapons to him, since he is likely to use those weapons for harm. This example illustrates that it is impossible to have a list of actions that are necessarily just in all circumstances. Plato makes this point in the *Statesman* (293e-296a), when he explains that a king cannot rule effectively by blindly following a set of universal laws; he must know how different laws apply to different circumstances in the sensible world.

Neither is it the case that the Form of the Good a list of all possible good actions that can take place in the sensible world. Such a list is impossible to have, because an action that is good in one circumstance may be not good in another circumstance. Nor is it the case that the Form of the Good provides a matrix of all possible actions along with all possible sen-

sible world circumstances. There is simply no textual evidence to support this interpretation of the Forms. Knowledge of the Form of the Good may provide the Philosopher-King with a model of good order—a "model" for "put[ting] the city, its citizens, and themselves in order" (540a9-b1)—but this merely offers a model of ideal *ends*. The Forms do not provide the Philosopher-King with knowledge of how to achieve those ends given particular circumstances. Clearly, then, knowledge of the Forms do not give him the ability to "unerringly make correct choices" (Rowe, 2007, p. 133), nor the ability to "see more clearly than others what needs to be done in particular circumstances" (Kraut, 1997, p. 209).

Evidence that knowledge of the Form of the Good is insufficient comes in Book 8 of the *Republic,* where Socrates describes the process of arranging the proper breeding of people according to the eugenics program of the Kallipolis. Socrates says that the Philosopher-Kings must use rational calculation as well as sense-perception to ascertain proper breeding practices for the citizens of the Kallipolis (546b). Knowledge of the Forms is insufficient for this practice, because the Philosopher-King must be able to discern the nature of *particular* souls in order to match people correctly. Moreover, because sense-perception is involved, and sense-perception is fallible, it is inevitable that the Philosopher-Kings will sometimes miscalculate the birth number. Obviously, if the Philosopher-King will inevitably miscalculate the birth number, then there is at least one case in which he will have a *false* belief about which action is best – even though he has knowledge of the Form of the Good, the transcendent principle of all goodness. According to Plato, then, knowing the Form of the Good does not guarantee that one will have *knowledge* of what is best. If the Philosopher-King had knowledge of this sort, then he would be infallible.[3] But obviously, the *Republic* indicates that the Philosopher King *is* fallible when it comes to calculating the birth number. Plainly enough knowing the Form of the Good is not sufficient for knowing which actions are best.

One might conclude that this example shows that Plato has simply failed in his project of designing the ideal ruler because he neglects to bridge the gap between contemplation and action: his Philosopher-Kings have theoretical knowledge but no understanding of how to bring about best actions in the sensible world. I argue that the example demonstrates that Plato did indeed recognize that knowledge of the Forms is insufficient for ruling, and that the reason the Philosopher-Kings *sometimes* fail in calculating birth order is because their calculation involves sense-perception, which is fallible.

Passages in the *Republic* support my view that it is insufficient for the Philosopher-Kings to have merely the kind of knowledge they gain from

the Form of the Good, that is, knowledge of ideal *ends*. Plato does not explicitly distinguish between "theoretical knowledge" and what I have described as "practical wisdom," but the text shows that Plato believes that the Philosopher-Kings must engage in both. I have defined "practical wisdom" as the ability to discern information about a particular circumstance and the capacity to choose the best *actions* that will bring about ideal ends for that circumstance.

An indication that Plato recognizes that the kind of practical wisdom I have been describing is important for the Philosopher-King to develop is his comment to Glaucon that five years of philosophical training directed towards contemplation is not sufficient training for the philosophers to become king. After their philosophical training, the philosophers must return to the cave and spend fifteen years in military services and other political offices "so that they won't be inferior to the others in experience" (539e5). This is three times as many years as the philosophers spend doing dialectic.

Plato explains the importance of experience as a source for developing practical wisdom in the Myth of Er. In the underworld, the choice of which life to live in the next carnation is a choice left for the human to make. In preparation for this, a human must gain the "ability and knowledge to distinguish a good life from a bad one" (618a6-c4). It is striking to note that the person does not get this information by recollecting the Forms. Rather:

> He must calculate the effect of all the things we have mentioned just now... so as to know what the good and bad effects of beauty are when it is mixed with wealth or poverty and this and that state of the soul... On the basis of all that he will be able... to reason out which life is better and which worse and choose accordingly. (618c5-e1)

Notice that the human must calculate the good and bad effects of beauty and poverty as they are manifested in the sensible world. On the basis of this calculation of various combinations of circumstances in the sensible world, he can reason out which life is better and then choose accordingly. Note that one is not only required to examine the effects of beauty in the sensible world, one must also calculate the effects that arise when certain sensible-world circumstances are *mixed* with others. Knowledge of the Forms does not consist of knowledge of how things are manifested in the sensible world. Once again, the human must make use of practical wisdom by examining particular sensible world circumstances and their

combinations. This "calculation" and "reasoning out" of specific combinations of sensible arrangements requires what I have described as practical wisdom—reasoning about how to bring about the best sensible world ends possible given sensible world circumstances.

I have argued that the text supports my view that Plato recognizes that practical wisdom is necessary for a Philosopher-King to make correct decisions. What role, then, if any, does knowledge of the Forms play? I contend that according to Plato, the Philosopher-King must have a combination of both Formal knowledge and practical wisdom. Plato makes it clear in Book 9 that the Philosopher-King is superior to others in the Kallipolis because he gained his experience upon a foundation of *knowledge.* For example, it is said that the philosopher is superior to both the honor-lover and the profit-lover in seeking honor and profit because the philosopher has experienced these things "in the company of reason" (582d5). The philosopher gained Formal knowledge of these things first, and then acquired experience of them in the sensible world. Why is it relevant that the Philosopher-King obtained Formal knowledge prior to gaining experience?

Interpreting the Philosopher-King of the *Republic* as the type of craftsman described in the *Phaedrus* bridges the apparent gap between the Philosopher-King's purely Formal knowledge and his practical wisdom, showing the Philosopher-King to be one who integrates both in order to rule. Here I turn to Plato's account of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* as a model of the kind of *technê* that combines knowledge with practical wisdom.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that the true *technê* of rhetoric requires both "intellectual understanding" (271d8 Waterfield translation) and practical wisdom. "Intellectual understanding" is characterized by the ability to describe the soul with "absolute precision," the ability to "classify" the kinds of speeches there are and the kinds of souls there are, and the ability to give an account of which speeches are appropriate for each type of soul (271a5-b5). This is required in order to have a good intellectual understanding of the various kinds of speeches and souls. But such understanding is insufficient:

> After that, [the rhetorician] must put his theory into practice and develop the ability to discern each kind clearly as it occurs in the actions of real life.... Then, and only then, will he finally have mastered the *technê* well and completely. (271d7-272a8, Nehamas and Woodruff translation)

Knowledge of different kinds of souls and kinds of speeches is insuffi-

cient; the rhetorician needs to learn through experience how to recognize particular kind of souls in the sensible world, and judge which kind of speech to apply to that particular soul in order to persuade it effectively. Likewise, theoretical knowledge of justice is insufficient for the Philosopher-King. He must be able to recognize that the person from whom he has borrowed weapons is now insane, and based on this information, he must be able to conclude that returning weapons is unjust in the particular circumstance at hand.

In the *Phaedrus*, rhetoricians who have intellectual understanding are the only true *technai.* Why is it important to have this intellectual understanding – why isn't practical wisdom based on simply experience of what speeches are most effective for particular types of souls just as good? The problem with the pseudo-craftsman is that, lacking *knowledge*, which is stable and unerring, he might wrongly apply a particular speech to a particular soul, thereby corrupting it. He errs because he lacks knowledge of good and bad, and thus he acts for the sake of what merely *appears* to be a good end, not what is actually a good end. In the case of the rhetorician, the true craftsman of rhetoric brings about goodness in the souls at which his speeches are aimed. The pseudo-craftsman of rhetoric is unable to determine what ends are good, and thus he is likely to bring about ends that are harmful to the soul. In the *Republic*, Socrates warns Glaucon against allowing pseudo-philosophers to rule for the same reason:

> It is just as if someone were learning the passions and appetites of a huge, strong beast that he is rearing – how to approach it and how to handle it... Having learned all this through associating and spending time with the beast, he calls this wisdom... and starts to teach it. Knowing nothing in reality about which of these convictions or appetites is fine or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, he just uses these terms in conformity with the great beast's beliefs. ... He has no other account to give of them, but calls everything he is compelled to do just and fine, never having seen how much the natures of necessity and goodness really differ.... (493a5-c5)
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> [These] men... are the ones that do the worst things to cities and individuals. (495b1).

Ruling, which involves making decisions about what is just and unjust, without *knowledge* of what justice is, is a pseudo-craft. The Philosopher-King must gain knowledge of the Form of the Good in order to correctly judge what is good and bad. He needs this knowledge of good and bad in

order to ensure that the ends for which he is acting are, in fact, good. In this way, it is crucial that the Philosopher-Kings use the Good "as their model and put the city, its citizens, and themselves in order" (540a9-b1).

The views I have attributed to Plato in this paper might seem quite un-Platonic. I have argued that the knowledge of the Form of the Good, which is the source of all goodness in the world, is *not sufficient* for knowledge of best actions in the sensible world. Instead, I have proposed that practical wisdom is necessary for proper discernment of best actions. This might seem to be an odd proposal, since Plato is traditionally interpreted as lacking any notion of practical wisdom. On my view, the Philosopher-King is a craftsman who uses practical wisdom to obtain information about a particular circumstance and to discern the best actions for achieving the best ends in that particular circumstance. His knowledge of the Form of the Good gives him an infallible account of what this ideal end must be. But his knowledge of the Form of the Good is insufficient for being able to judge what actions will bring about this ideal end.

If my arguments succeed, then the long-standing tendency to attribute to Plato the view that "to know the good is to do the good" is misguided. It is clearly not the case that the Philosopher King can "see more clearly than others what needs to be done in particular circumstances" (Kraut, 1997, p. 209) as a result of his knowledge of the Form of the Good. Knowledge of the Form of the Good does not even give the Philosopher-King the ability to "unerringly make correct choices" (Rowe, 2007, p. 133). The Philosopher King needs to develop practical wisdom in order to make choices about what needs to be done in particular circumstances. And his choice-making is not "unerring" by virtue of his knowledge of the Form of the Good. As the example of the Philosopher-King failing to choose the correct birth order demonstrates, the Philosopher-King will inevitably err, in spite of having knowledge of the Form of the Good, the transcendent principle of goodness that is the cornerstone of Plato's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

Notes

[1] All passages from the *Republic* are from C.D.C Reeve's translation.

[2] By "practical wisdom" I do not mean Aristotle's or any other philosopher's notion of practical wisdom. I define exactly what I mean by "practical wisdom" in the sentences that follow.

[3] According to *Republic* 477e, knowledge is infallible.

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