

Philosopher-Kings in the Kingdom of Ends:
Why Democracy Needs a Philosophically Informed Citizenry

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I. Introduction

I would like to begin with a bit of a riddle: How do you turn a democracy into a tyranny?

The answer, as those familiar with Plato's *Republic* will know, is: Do nothing. It will become a tyranny all by itself.

Plato spends a good part of the *Republic* developing his argument for this, and yet the gist of that argument might be found in the word 'democracy' itself. 'Democracy' is derived from two Greek words: 'demos,' which means 'people,' and 'kratos,' which means 'power,' and might be defined as 'power of the people.' This corresponds with Abraham Lincoln's famous designation of democracy as 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people' – which he hoped would not perish from the earth.

But what exactly are we to understand by the word 'people'? I can illustrate the problematic character of this word through the title of a book I was assigned to read many years ago when studying for my Bar Mitzvah. The book was entitled, *When the Jewish People Was Young*. Even as a twelve year old the title struck me as grammatically odd. Shouldn't it be: *When the Jewish People Were Young*? No, because the word 'people,' generally a plural, was here functioning as a singular. The phrase 'The Jewish People' was not intended to refer to a multitude of Jewish individuals, but rather to a singular entity *made up* of those individuals.

May we say the same about 'democracy'? When we define democracy as 'power of the people' are we using the word 'people' in the singular or the plural sense? Do we mean a

collection of separate individuals or do we mean some singular entity *made up* of those individuals?

It's not altogether clear. Indeed, it turns out that however we answer this question we run into problems. If by 'people' we mean a multitude of individuals, then what can it mean to say that power is vested in the hands of the 'people'? Which people? Surely a collection of individuals, each pursuing his or her own separate ends, cannot be expected to achieve unanimity in all, or even very many, matters of importance. If, on the other hand, we mean by 'people' a singular entity made up of those individuals, then how are we to understand the relationship between those individuals and that singular entity? Do the individuals owe the entity allegiance? Must they put aside their private interests for its sake? And what, anyway, is this entity? Does it have its own status as a thing unto itself? Or is it merely, in the words of Jeremy Bentham, a 'fictitious body'? If the latter, what rightful claim can a mere 'fictitious body' make upon the very real individuals who, presumably, compose it?

We can further examine this problem by considering the phrase, lifted from the *Declaration of Independence*, 'government by consent of the governed.' 'Consent of the governed,' Thomas Jefferson tells us, is the principle upon which the *just* powers of government rest. But what if all the governed will not consent to the same directives of government? On what basis should conflicts of interest be decided? The simple, but clearly wrong, answer is 'majority rule.' The principle of majority rule, applied to the antebellum South, for instance, would have justified slavery. Jefferson's own answer, as we know, was 'natural rights.' Government exists to protect our natural rights. But what are natural rights? *Where* are natural rights? And how can a citizenry who cannot see, touch, taste, smell, or hear these natural rights be expected to govern their lives in accordance with them?

Various theorists of liberal democracy will have their various answers to these questions. It is not my purpose to explore these answers, but to touch upon an issue fundamental to all of them. In order for any of these answers to be effective citizens must be able to recognize a species of truth – moral truth – that is, so to speak, trans-individual. They must be able to apprehend, intellectually, moral imperatives that derive their legitimacy from something more universal than the individuality of individual interest. Indeed, the specific problem Plato saw in democracy is that, through its emphasis on the supremacy of the individual, it tends to undermine the capacity for recognition of such universal moral truths.

How, then, does a democracy turn into a tyranny? It's the epistemology, stupid!

II. Philosopher-Kings

Let's consider Plato's critique of democracy more closely. Plato writes: "In a city under a democracy you would hear that [freedom] is the finest thing it has, and that for this reason it is the only regime worth living in for anyone who is by nature free."¹

A society dedicated to individual freedom would seem the diametric opposite of one under the oppression of a tyranny. But here we encounter a paradox. For the ideal of individual freedom, where such is understood as the liberty to exercise one's will without restraint, is the ideal of the tyrant as well. Indeed, we might define the tyrannic character as, precisely, one unwilling to submit to any higher principle than the unrestrained exercise of his or her own private will. Thus, ironically and paradoxically, democracy – at least where individual freedom is heralded as its highest good – shares the same ideal as tyranny. What Plato saw is that a society that presents to its citizens no higher ideal than the freedom to satisfy private interest will, by that fact, become a society of aspiring tyrants, competing each with the other for dominance.

Eventually, those most skilled at the arts of grasping and manipulation will come to lord it over everyone else, and the society that most exalted freedom will become the one that is most enslaved.

What might the defender of democracy say to such a charge? What she would have to say, I believe, is something like this: As a matter of fact, individual freedom is *not* the ideal on which a true democracy is founded. Rather, it is founded on the ideal of *respect* for individual freedom, one's own and others. It is just such respect that the tyrant lacks, and, hence, a sharp distinction can indeed be drawn between the democratic and tyrannic ideals. Democracy demands that individuals curtail the unbridled exercise of their own individual freedom where such exercise would impinge upon the rightful freedom of others.

But this distinction, between the ideal of freedom and the ideal of *respect* for freedom, is a subtle and challenging one. In particular, it is not so easy to say whence the ideal of *respect* for freedom derives its compelling force. It is easy enough to understand why we value our own freedom, as this is a direct implication of our desire to satisfy our appetites, but this says nothing as to why we should value the freedom of others. We cannot derive the value of *respect* for the freedom of others from the value of our own freedom. On the contrary, as we have seen, where the value of our own freedom is heralded as supreme we get something far more like tyranny than democracy.

Indeed, we can take this a step farther. Not only does the value of our own freedom not imply the value of respect for freedom, but the two stand in decided opposition to one another, at least where we understand freedom as the freedom to satisfy appetite. Appetite, by its very nature, is self-referential; it is a demand for its own satisfaction. Respect for the freedom of others, on the other hand, demands a transcendence of strictly self-referential concern. Where within us can we

find the capacity for such self-transcendence? As Plato makes clear, certainly not in our appetitive nature. It is only in our *rational* capacity to rise above the self-referential appetites and passions, says Plato, that we can hope to achieve the self-transcendence necessary to the establishment of a just society.

It is in this context that we can begin to understand Plato's call for a 'Philosopher-King.' "Unless," writes Plato, "political power and philosophy coincide in the same place. . . there [will be] no rest from ills of the city. . . nor I think for human kind."²

Plato was aware of how outlandish this proposal sounded even as he wrote it, and much attention has been paid to the despotic potential of Plato's political vision, but Plato's basic point remains compelling: society must be governed by those who are able to rise above the intensive self-centeredness of their emotive, appetitive, and egoistic impulses so as to be able to concern themselves, wisely and dispassionately, with the common good. The only human faculty capable of such self-transcendence is reason, hence only the philosopher, dedicated to the cultivation of reason, is suited for governance.

Of course, to make sense of this we must recall that Plato's conception of truth, and hence of the rational faculty that apprehends it, is axiological – that is, it is value-oriented. By the cultivation of reason (*logismos*) Plato does not mean the cultivation of mere technical acuity, but of that capacity within us that is able to apprehend the *logos*, i.e., the good order, of things. What we might call Plato's 'faith' is that those able to see this good order will see, as well, that their own private good is best realized through service to it. It is just such seeing that philosophy, as a project, pursues. It is only the philosopher, then – the *true* philosopher – who will have the intellect, character, and (therefore) motivation to rule justly and wisely.

Plato makes it clear in the *Republic* that his aim is to sketch out the *form* of the ideal polis, not to present a practical political program. Thus criticisms of the *Republic* that complain that its system will not work in practice (e.g., that the philosopher-kings will likely become corrupt, etc.) miss the point. When Plato says that a just society depends upon the coincidence of political power and philosophy he is not proposing a particular political system but making an observation about the nature of governance as such. Government, in principle, must concern itself with the common good. Those who govern, thus, must have both the capacity and motivation to pursue this good disinterestedly. As a formal truth, this will be true of every particular political system.

What, then, are the implications of this for democracy? The answer seems plain: In order for ‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’ to avoid degeneration into tyranny, the people themselves must have something of the character of Platonic philosophers. In other words, in order for democracy to succeed it must cultivate ‘philosopher-citizens,’ whose political commitments will be to something beyond the satisfaction of private, appetitive, interests.

This implies that pedagogy, indeed a value-oriented pedagogy, is crucial to the health of democracy. But here again we run into a problem. Almost everyone will agree, in a general and vague way, that education is a good thing, but many will balk, in the name of democracy itself, at any deliberate cultivation of values. Values, we like to suppose, are a private affair. Everyone in a democracy has a right to pursue what values she will, as long as she does not interfere with the right of others to do the same, thus a democratic government has no business inculcating a specific set of values. The paradox, of course, is that this assertion is itself the expression of a political value that must enjoy general currency in order for democracy to function. It is not the case, then, that democracy entails the right of everyone to ‘pursue what values she will,’ but

rather those values consistent with the ideals of democracy itself, ideals which, as we have seen, entail a transcendence of strictly self-interested concerns.

This, then, leads us to the question: What values must inform a democratic citizenry if they are to avoid descent into tyranny, and how might such values be instilled? To try to answer these questions we will look briefly at Kant's conception of the ideal democratic society he calls 'The Kingdom of Ends.'

III. The Kingdom of Ends

The ideals of democracy do not have obvious roots in human nature, despite Thomas Jefferson's celebrated pronouncement that they are 'self-evident.' What is most evident, as perhaps Thomas Hobbes most famously pointed out, are the ideals of tyranny. Each of us wants what we want and would be happy to have the rest of the world conform to our wants. Because of this, democracy has something of a deceptive appeal. Monarchy and other forms of autocracy make it clear, however despotically, that the individual has responsibilities to something beyond her own private will. Democracy's emphasis upon the sovereignty of the individual, and the sanctity of individual freedom, can leave the impression that the democratic citizen has no such self-transcendent responsibilities. But this is a misimpression. The democratic form demands that each citizen affirm a responsibility to respect what Kant calls the 'dignity' of every other, and recognize that this responsibility supersedes commitment to strictly individual interest.

Kant calls the ideal society organized along such lines the 'Kingdom of Ends.'³ In the Kantian Kingdom of Ends each member is, at once, the *end* for whom the society exists, the *sovereign* who issues the law of respect for each member as end, and the *subject* who dutifully abides by this law. We can immediately see that a society of tyrants, or of those disposed to tyranny,

cannot constitute a Kingdom of Ends, for in the Kingdom of Ends each must respect the freedom and dignity of each.

Thus, a Kingdom of Ends can only exist where each member *willingly affirms* the principle that respect for the person of the other must override the demands of private self-interest. Although Kant manages to equate adherence to this principle with the ideal of individual freedom, the ‘freedom’ of which Kant speaks is at a far remove from what is currently understood by that word in popular culture. Kantian freedom is the freedom to do – not whatever one wants – but whatever is right. It is a freedom, thus, fully coincident with what to many might seem a ‘heteronomous’ morality – that is, a morality imposed from without. That Kant, nevertheless, is able to speak of such morality as ‘autonomy’ and ‘freedom’ is due to his idealized conception of the rational person, who *willingly* affirms a greater duty to ‘right’ than to appetitive gratification, and who, thus, recognizes the acknowledgment of such duty to be the highest expression of her *own* free will.

If we now compare Plato’s take on democracy with Kant’s, we find that their differences lie, not so much in their basic conception of societal justice, as in their different estimations of the democratic citizen. For Plato, democracy, as a form, is inherently unstable, for its valorization of individual freedom yields a society in which everyone aspires to tyranny. For Kant, the democratic form implies a society in which each citizen recognizes, as the highest expression of his or her *own* freedom, respect for the freedom and dignity of every other. At the heart of their disagreement is a different estimation of the moral and intellectual potential of the average citizen. For Plato, only a moral and intellectual elite – the philosopher-kings – can be expected to rise above the demands of appetitive inclination to willingly prefer societal justice to appetitive

gratification. Kant, on the other hand, envisions, at least potentially, an entire society of such people; an entire society, so to speak, of philosopher-kings.

IV. Toward a Democratic Pedagogy

What all of this implies, again, is that pedagogy – the right kind of pedagogy – is *essential* to the democratic form as such. More so than other political forms, democracy demands that its citizens embody a specific, and identifiable, set of moral and intellectual virtues. It is, thus, the educational establishment – not the press – that should be regarded as the ‘fourth estate’ of democracy. Without an educated citizenry the press itself will but pander to the appetites and sentiments of the general populace, as we increasingly see.

But, of course, it is not enough to simply laud the value of education, as is often done, we must say what *kind* of education is required. We have already answered this question broadly: It must be an education that cultivates the intellectual and moral virtues, and, with respect to the latter, those moral virtues, specifically, that are integral to the democratic ideal – which, again, is not the ideal of individual freedom per se, but of *respect* for the freedom, and, hence, the *person*, of others. Democracy entails the belief that such respect – *not* the pursuit of appetitive gratification – is itself the highest expression of individual freedom.

To enact such a pedagogical program would require a major shift away from the ‘scientific’ and market-centered focus of our modern educational system; a shift, sad to say, in the opposite direction of that in which we have been trending for some time. The epistemology of modern science, by its very nature, is value-neutral, whereas the democratic form demands an intellectually sophisticated, value-informed, pedagogy. The market culture of consumer capitalism fills the ethical void created by the sciences with a continual stream of messages

equating happiness with individual self-gratification. The confluence of these two trends has led to a conception of education that sees its principle purpose to be the imparting of technical skills for success in the marketplace, a marketplace largely driven by appetitive pursuits. If Plato's analysis is at all sound, this does not bode well for the future of democracy.

What then is needed? Perhaps we can gain a general sense of this by recalling another passage from Plato's writings.

In the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates tell the famous story of his encounter with the Oracle at Delphi, whose designation of Socrates as the wisest man in Athens leads Socrates to interrogate the prominent citizens of Athens to see if he can find one wiser than he. After interrogating the artisans (i.e., workmen, technicians) of Athens, Socrates reports that, "they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom."⁴

By "high matters" Plato means the values that should govern private and public life. Our educational system has largely lost sight of what Plato speaks of here as 'high matters.' If the above analysis is sound, the democratic form will not long survive such pedagogical neglect.

What is required, beginning in the early years of high school, is an educational program that actively engages students in the dialectical practice of value inquiry, with the aim of imparting in them an understanding and appreciation of the central role of values in guiding the conduct of private and public life. This, in turn, might then serve as the foundation for an extensive examination of those values integral to the democratic form itself. Only in this way may we have

some hope of bringing the ‘high matters’ of which Plato speaks within the purview of the average citizen.

We thus arrive at a conclusion that will seem to some as outlandish as Plato’s seemed in his day: For democracy to survive and flourish we must make *philosophy*, specifically, a value-oriented philosophy, the heart of the public school curriculum. The challenge for those who would craft a pedagogical program in support of the democratic form, is to consider how we might do so.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, let us recall the ambiguity in the word ‘people’ with which we began. When we speak of democracy as ‘power of the people’ do we use the word ‘people’ in the plural or the singular sense? Our reflections indicate that the answer must be: *both*. Democracy, as a societal form, must be peopled by citizens who see concern for the dignity of the other, and for the good of society as a whole, as integral to their own private good, such that private and public interest coincide. Only in this way can we approach the Kantian Kingdom of Ends. This requires a degree of moral and intellectual sophistication among the citizens that can only be achieved through a robust program of value-oriented, broadly ‘philosophical,’ pedagogy. The morally realized citizen-kings of Kant’s Kingdom of Ends can become such only as they approximate to the intellectually realized philosopher-kings of Plato’s *Republic*. A philosophically informed, value-oriented, pedagogy, thus, is essential to the democratic form as such. In the absence of such a pedagogy – to recall Plato’s words – “there will be no rest from ills of the city, nor, I think, for human kind.”

¹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1968/1991), p. 240; 562b-c.

² *Ibid.*, p. 153; 473d.

³ For Kant's discussion of the Kingdom of Ends see, Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H.J. Patton (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), pp. 100-103.

⁴ Plato, *Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett in *Selected Dialogues of Plato: The Benjamin Jowett Translations*, editor Hayden Pellicia (Modern Library, 2001), p. 291; 22d-e.