

The Philosopher-King and Democracy: A Platonic Political Doctrine¹

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In their dialogue concerning the nature and benefits of justice, Socrates and his interlocutors endeavor to establish a model for the most just city. In their discussion, they develop a new form of government which requires our analysis. Many commentators, in their interpretations of the *Republic* and other dialogues, have leveled a serious charge against Plato, alleging that he was an enemy of democracy and supported the notion of rulers with absolute power. Some have gone so far as to claim that Plato betrayed the political and philosophical ideals of Socrates. However, while Plato did have serious and accurate points of criticism against Athenian democracy, he still considered the general form of democracy the best practical model for a government. Believing such, he worked both in Athens and elsewhere to reform democracy, not replace it, as is evident in his *Seventh Epistle*. The philosopher-king must then be understood to be someone different from a king in the traditional sense. Instead of being a benevolent monarch, Plato presents him as someone who rules with the consent of those he governs.

In order to support the interpretation of Plato as a democrat, this paper will primarily focus on Plato's *Seventh Epistle* and the *Republic*, and will offer a few remarks regarding the *Apology*. From the *Seventh Epistle*, I shall argue that the dialogues cannot be interpreted as a precise declaration of Plato's political or philosophical beliefs. Consequently, the portrait of Plato in this letter as seen through his political actions in Syracuse with Dionysius II and Dion is critical in developing a Platonic political doctrine. When examined,

the letter does not appear to indicate that Plato intended to establish a government in Syracuse precisely akin to the one described in the *Republic*. Furthermore, I shall reinterpret the philosopher-king as a democrat and describe how the government discussed in the *Republic* represents a modification of Athenian democracy rather than a departure from it.

Before proceeding to this examination, it is necessary to clarify the definition of democracy and to discuss some of the different versions of it. A democratic state is first and foremost one that recognizes that all of its citizens inherently and equally possess political power. A government then derives its power and right to rule from the citizenry. A democratic state consequently recognizes a certain degree of freedom for each individual, a degree that is greater than it would be under any other form of government.² These three characteristics are the criteria by which this work will judge a government to be democratic or a person to be a democrat by his or her support for such a system of government. States, however, can vary in the degree in which they are democratic. For example, Athens, disregarding its small percentage of citizens among the larger population, was more democratic than the United States, in that citizens in Athens voted directly on many issues requiring decision, while citizens in the United States elect representatives to vote on many similar issues for them. Both are democracies, but Athens is closer to a pure democracy while the United States represents a limited or representative democracy. It is important, as this examination of Plato's political beliefs proceeds, to be mindful of these distinctions, lest one apply a comment about one form of democracy to the other or to democracy as a whole.

Plato's Expressed Opposition to Democracy

In order to understand Plato as a proponent of democracy, albeit a revised form of Athenian democracy, it is necessary to examine some of the passages where he appears the least democratic. We shall here examine the digression of constitutions in the *Republic* and the failure to acquit Socrates in the *Apology*. While there are others, these examples are two of the more prevalent passages, and they provide sufficient opportunity to mention many of the arguments against a democratic interpretation of Plato. However, as we shall see, the criticisms waylaid upon democracy here do not by necessity apply to all democratic forms of government or democratic persons. Instead, these condemnations specifically relate to the failings of democracy in Athens at the time.

In Book 8 of the *Republic*, Plato discusses various constitutions from the perspective of his interlocutors. He presents a paradigm for oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Plato focuses his attention on the tyrant, who apparently thinks a tyrant to be in a state of nature. It is that those who are tyrants therefore act in a different manner due to a different nature. That democratic constitutions under an oligarchy and a democracy of these two forms are the common citizenry and merchants who are the common citizenry of a democratic city.³ Plato significantly favors the oligarchic type of democracy over the uneducated lower class. He led some scholars to believe that some of his failings, particularly his oligarchic state such as the Spartan model for the city of Plato.

The second and third indications of Plato's conviction and death of Socrates, such as the commentators, such as the condemned democracy, who killed Socrates in the *Apology*. Plato denounced the tyrant as unjust. He further denounced the uneducated and ignorant to depart completely from the state, assuming them to be tyrants. To be raised regarding the majority of people.

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In Book 8 of the *Republic*, Socrates describes the digression of constitutions from the kallipolis, the theoretical city that Socrates and his interlocutors have been constructing throughout the dialogue that serves as the paradigm for justice, with the philosopher-king through timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally to tyranny. With pointed criticism, he focuses his attention on the democrat and democracy (560a-561e).³ Plato apparently thinks so little of democracy that he only considers a city ruled by a tyrant to be in a worse state (560a-564a).⁴ His main criticism of democracy is that those who are in power are governed by unnecessary appetites and therefore act phlegmatically. The ruling class in this state acts in such a manner due to a lack of education. At this point, it is advantageous to recall that democratic cities in ancient Greece had a ruling class just as did a city under an oligarchy. Class warfare was highly prevalent at the time, and each of these two forms of government favored a specific class. The landowners and merchants were the ruling class over the proletariat in an oligarchy, while the common citizens ruled by virtue of their numbers over the wealthy in a democratic city.⁵ Whichever class controlled the government instituted laws significantly favoring itself and to the detriment of the other class.⁶ This is the type of democracy that Plato condemns in Book 8, one of rule by the uneducated lower class, not one of equal rule by all. These sentiments have led some scholars to view Plato as strongly opposing democracy for its many failings, particularly class warfare and uneducated rulers, and supporting an oligarchic state such as Sparta, even to the point of drawing upon the Spartan model for the kallipolis.⁷

The second and third speeches in the *Apology* serve as another poignant indication of Plato's criticism of democracy. There is no doubt that the conviction and death of Socrates dramatically affected Plato. Many commentators, such as R.H.S. Crossman, have concluded that Plato condemned democracy for the failure of the jury to acquit Socrates. Since they killed Socrates instead of recognizing his importance and worth to the city, Plato denounced the system of government that would allow such a breach of justice. He furthermore criticized the people that composed this society as uneducated and incapable of learning. This last point of rebuke, which appears to depart completely from Socrates' practice of openly questioning anyone, assuming them to be capable of learning and knowing virtue, causes questions to be raised regarding the validity of the conclusion that Plato condemned the majority of people as being incapable of learning enough to rule wisely. This

work takes the position that Plato considered the failure at Socrates' trial to be that of Athenian democracy, not the people in it. Thus, the primary arguments against democracy are that it incites class warfare and is controlled by an uneducated populace who are unable to rule justly due to their ignorance. Some scholars have interpreted these arguments as signs of Plato's opposition to democracy. Nevertheless, as will be discussed below, these points of criticism, while valid, are not inherent in all appearances of democracy. Thus, Plato presents a criticism, but not outright dismissal, of democracy.

The Seventh Epistle

Plato's *Seventh Epistle* represents a significant means for interpreting Plato's political thought, for in it he speaks without his usual mouthpiece of Socrates, assuming, as I do here, that it is authentic.⁸ The great majority of scholars understand this letter to be Plato's account of his own life, his political involvement, and one of his final statements on philosophy.⁹ In many ways the letter represents Plato's defense of his own life and political actions,¹⁰ in a similar fashion as the *Apology* for Socrates. Plato wrote the letter to advise the companions of Dion and to explain his involvement with Dionysius II, the tyrant of Syracuse.¹¹ The final and most important aspect of this letter for interpreting Plato's political doctrine is that here he speaks with his own unmasked voice, which remains veiled in the dialogues.

When interpreting Plato's dialogues, especially the *Republic*, it is common to assume that the views expressed are those of the author. However, as Sara Monoson indicates, this is erroneous for two reasons. First, such an interpretation ignores the mouthpiece of Socrates as distancing Plato from the opinions expressed in the text and disregards the fact that the dialogues function didactically.¹² Second, this manner of interpretation ignores an essential passage in the *Seventh Epistle* that provides a key to revealing the meaning of the dialogues.¹³ Immediately prior to this point in the letter, Plato mentions a book that Dionysius had written and was claiming to be his own thoughts rather than Plato's teachings. Plato regards the fact that Dionysius would write his political views as demonstrating that he does not understand the nature of philosophic inquiry. He states at 341b-c,

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ὧν ἐγὼ σπουδάζω. εἴτ' ἐμοῦ ἀκηκοότες εἴτ' ἄλλων εἶθ' ὡς εὐρόντες αὐτοί· τούτους οὐκ ἔστιν κατὰ γε τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν περὶ τοῦ πράγματος ἐπαίνειν οὐδεν. οὐκ οὖν ἐμόν γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἔστιν σύγγραμμα οὐδὲ μήποτε γένηται· ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα, ἀλλ' ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης περὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτὸ καὶ τοῦ συζῆν ἐξαίφνης.

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself, - no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or by their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future; for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship.¹⁴

This passage reveals Plato's theory of knowledge much more succinctly than stated elsewhere, namely that knowledge achieved through continued philosophical inquiry by the individual cannot be transmitted to another through written words.¹⁵ The point that is so significant, however, is that he claims never to have written down any of his own beliefs on such matters. This statement creates a great difficulty in construing Plato's political doctrine from the dialogues themselves, for he reminds the reader that they were not intended to communicate his philosophical insights as such.

Since the dialogues can therefore no longer be regarded as a clear expression of Plato's political beliefs, Plato's account of his own political actions is the greatest means to decipher his politics. Later in this paper, I shall offer a reinterpretation of the *Republic*, which is necessary because of the quote and is based on the *Seventh Epistle*. As the letter does not primarily focus upon expounding philosophical tenets, we shall examine Plato's actions and advice in order to develop his political doctrines and make a defense against the charges which suggest that Plato opposed democracy. In this letter, Plato interacts with three individuals or groups in Syracuse. He discusses his failed attempts at teaching the tyrant Dionysius. He also relates his dealings with Dion, who was his pupil and a close relative to Dionysius. Finally, Plato advises the followers of Dion, who apparently was very recently

assassinated.¹⁶ The philosopher-king, as he is traditionally understood, is strikingly absent from Plato's teachings to, actions with, and advice to each group. Plato never worked to convert Dionysius into a philosopher-king, never attempted to establish the kallipolis with Dion, and never advised Dion's followers to install a philosopher as the ruler of Syracuse. In spite of this fact, the philosopher-king, viewed as an educator, is not altogether removed from the *Seventh Epistle*, but his presence is discussed later in the text.

Let us then examine Plato's motivation for instructing Dionysius and what he appears to have taught him. Plato's relationship with Dionysius begins with the latter's invitation, at the behest of Dion, for Plato to journey to Syracuse in order to instruct Dionysius in philosophic matters (327d). From this passage, it is unclear what Plato's intentions were with regards to Dionysius on this trip. Dion clearly desires to convert Syracuse into the kallipolis from the *Republic*, with a new, philosophic Dionysius as its ruler. Yet, Plato quickly distances himself from these intentions. He states that his greatest concern was that he not appear to be merely a theorist; instead, he wanted to be known as one who was willing to test his theories in a practical environment (328c). At 329b, he states:

τῆς φιλοσόφου ἀνέγκλητον μοίρας παρέσχον,
ἐπονείδιστου γενομένης ἂν. εἴ τι καταμαλθακισθεῖς καὶ
ἀποδειλιῶν αἰσχύνῃς μετέσχον κακῆς.

[I] left no ground of complaint to the cause of philosophy,
which would have suffered reproach if I had turned
weakling and had by refusing to play a man's part brought
disgrace upon myself.¹⁷

He does not want to disgrace himself or philosophy by refusing to go to Syracuse. These statements provide Plato's motivation, but speak little as to his intentions. The most revealing passage comes at 330b, where he states that Dionysius was "enamored with the philosophic life," which appears to be something far less than the life of a true philosopher-king. Thus, Plato evidently never intended to establish the utopian environment of the *Republic*.¹⁸ This conclusion is further supported by Plato's reporting of Dionysius' failure to follow his advice (335c): μὴ δουλοῦσθαι Σικελίαν ὑπὸ ἀνθρώποις δεσπόταις, μηδὲ ἄλλην πόλιν, ὃ γε ἐμὸς λόγος, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ νόμοις: ("Let not Sicily nor any city anywhere be subject to human masters – such is my doctrine – but to laws.") (334c).

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If Plato considered anyone a potential candidate as a philosopher-king in Syracuse, it was Dion, not Dionysius. Plato was genuinely impressed by Dion's acceptance of his teachings and the philosophic life, stating that Dion responded better to his instruction than any young man Plato had yet met (327a). Nevertheless, Dion represents a failed example of a philosopher-king, in that he had the potential but failed to establish himself as such in the proper manner. As previously mentioned, Plato did not work in Syracuse with Dion for the purpose of establishing Dionysius as a philosopher-king. Plato clearly never intended to supplant Dionysius with Dion so that Dion, as the new ruler, could become the philosopher-king. Plato mentions numerous times throughout the letter that these were the rumors in the city and that they were entirely baseless. If anything, Plato sought to establish a "mixed" constitution, consisting of monarchial, aristocratic, and democratic elements.¹⁹

However, according to Plato (328a), Dion desired to place political ruling power in the hands of a philosopher. It became apparent that Dionysius would not fulfill this aspiration when he cast Dion into exile and held Plato essentially under house arrest. In response, after another unsuccessful trip to Syracuse by Plato, Dion made a military attack upon the city, which surprisingly succeeded despite being a much smaller force. It can be concluded that Dion was so determined to place a monarch in Syracuse who was also a philosopher that he was willing to resort to violence to do so. This recourse to violence provides us with the first reason that Dion represents a failed philosopher-king. Neither the philosopher-king in the *Republic* nor Socrates in the *Apology* employs violence, nor advocated it, as an appropriate means to establish the kallipolis. Plato clearly conceived of education of the citizenry as the only method for a philosopher-king to establish the most just city. That is not to say that Dion was not completely oblivious to the need for education. Plato implies that Dion attempted to educate the city in the same way that Plato did with Dionysius, but failed to convince the city of his good intentions (333b). Dion's failure to effectively educate the city is his second failing as a philosopher-king. Because he failed in his endeavors to educate, he was assassinated. Plato deeply laments Dion's death, for he believes that Dion would have been a fine and just ruler in the city if had he lived.

Plato reminds Dion's followers that they are the third attempt to reform the city towards justice and away from tyranny (336c). Plato was not able to

reform Dionysius' tyrannical soul or the tyranny of the city. In the Followers, he has another opportunity to restructure the city into a more just form of governance. He does not explicitly state what political advice he presented to Dionysius, but writes this letter to elucidate his political advice to the Followers. Thus, the manner in which Plato relates to and advises them is invaluable in determining Plato's views on government. Never does Plato call upon the Followers to find a philosopher and appoint him as king of Syracuse. Instead, he stresses the importance of justice (335b), the need to develop and unite the city with laws (332c), the need for many intelligent men throughout Greece to advise the city (330d and 337b), and the requirement for equality under the law. Those that would accuse Plato of maintaining an antidemocratic program attribute support for a tyrannical government to him. Yet, these points of counsel that he provides are not typically present within a tyrannical state, but rather a more democratic one. His stress upon the rule of law and equity for all citizens under the law especially underscores this point.

Before proceeding on to the *Republic*, it is helpful to examine Plato's statements in the *Seventh Epistle* concerning his political life in Athens and the role of the Academy in Athenian politics provided in this letter. Plato states that when he was young he had a desire to participate in the politics of Athens (324c). Unfortunately, two events led him to become disillusioned: the great injustice of the 30 tyrants (324d) and the unjust death of Socrates at the hands of the Athenian jury (325b-c).²⁰ He therefore did not take part in a typical political life, but his work undoubtedly had a political influence in Athens and elsewhere. Statesmen, tyrants, democrats, aristocrats, and orators alike attended Plato's Academy, which undoubtedly was in part a place for training in statecraft.²¹ By founding the Academy and allowing anyone admittance as a student, regardless of status or politics, Plato in many ways legitimized Socrates and his actions in Athens. Plato transferred the open questioning and exchange of ideas from the condemnation Socrates received, as evidenced by his conviction, to a more widespread acceptance by incorporating people of influence. It is vital to remember here that the Academy was not a place for political and philosophical indoctrination, but provided an atmosphere of *συνουσία* (conversation), which Socrates held to be so important for education.²² This function of the Academy corresponds to Plato's theory of knowledge, which supports the notion that knowledge cannot be passed by a teacher on to a student, but rather must be discovered

by each student. The dialogues are generally seen as a basis for the development of Plato's doctrine. The Academy as a place that they might have seen, nothing from the *Seventh Letter*, or the notion that Plato thought that such a man

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If indeed Plato's political life and the *Seventh Epistle* in what way democracy is not primarily intended, would write the letter here attempt to do so. To support this claim, the relationship between the examination will be tyrannical in nature.

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ity. In the Followers, more just form of advice he presented to advise to the king and advises them is never. Never does Plato call the king as king of the city (335b), the need to educate many intelligent citizens (37b), and the king should accuse Plato of being a tyrannical ruler. The provisions provided are not more democratic ones. The king rules under the law.

to examine Plato's life in Athens and in this letter. Plato participate in the politics of the city. He became disillusioned: the death of Socrates. Socrates did not take part in a political influence in the city. Aristocrats, and orators were in part a place for educating anyone. Plato in many ways transferred the open education Socrates received, the acceptance by the king. Here that the king indoctrinate, but which Socrates held to the Academy corresponds to the notion that knowledge is to be discovered.

by each student for himself or herself with the guidance of a teacher. Plato's dialogues are generally understood to aid in this type of education by serving as a basis for the conversation and discovery and not as a clear presentation of Plato's doctrine.²³ Consequently, it is apparent that Plato did not use the Academy as a place to encourage individuals to seek to be monarchs of cities that they might rule with their philosophical insight. Therefore, as we have seen, nothing from Plato's life, either in Syracuse, as he discussed in the *Seventh Letter*, or in his political life in Athens with the Academy, supports the notion that Plato ever sought to establish a king over a city, supposing that such a man would be wise enough to rule justly.

Philosopher-King as a Democrat

If indeed Plato supported democracy and not philosophical tyranny, as his life and the *Seventh Epistle* appear to indicate, then it is necessary to examine in what way democracy is present in the *Republic*. While the dialogues were not primarily intended to convey Plato's beliefs, it seems unlikely that he would write the *Republic* with ideas so contrary to his own. Thus, I shall here attempt to demonstrate the democratic aspects of the philosopher-king. To support this case, I shall discuss the democratic nature of education and the relationship between the philosopher-kings and the citizens. This examination will reveal that the government proposed in the *Republic* is not tyrannical in nature, but rather more democratic in composition.

At this point, we must recall the means by which the philosopher-king will come into power in a city. Plato states that everyone above the age of ten must leave the city so that the philosopher-king can educate the children without the adults, who, possessing only opinion and not knowledge, will not then be able to corrupt the youth (541a). Therefore, education is one of the philosopher-king's primary responsibilities.²⁴ This system of education has at times been interpreted as propaganda produced to indoctrinate and convince an unwitting young populace that the philosophers should rule.²⁵ However, it is rather unrealistic to suppose that Plato would propose in the *Republic* a system of education so radically different from the one he organized and conducted in the Academy, which the historical Socrates continually advocated. As a result, it seems more logical to conclude that the educational program in the *Republic*, which was to be carried out by the philosopher-kings, consisted of open and free discussion, mirroring the systems of the Academy and Socrates.

The importance Plato places upon education, not only of the philosopher-kings, but also of the citizenry in general, is one of the most democratic elements within the *Republic*. John H. Hallowell states, "True freedom requires both knowledge of the Good and the will to choose the Good when known."²⁶ Socrates states many times throughout the *Republic* that people always choose what they believe to be good. Therefore, they must learn what is actually good so that they will choose rightly and thereby obtain true freedom. That Plato conceived of knowledge as producing freedom for individuals is not in question, since this sentiment is quite clear in the allegory of the Cave (514-517a). What we must determine is whether Plato believed knowledge to be available to the majority or only to a small few.

The *Republic* is commonly understood to present Plato's disdain for the intellectual ability of the common man. This interpretation primarily stems from the allegory of the ship (488a-c) and from other passages that criticize groups of common people.²⁷ The allegory of the ship shall be dealt with below, but for that passage and others that are likewise critical of the congregated masses, is it sufficient to say that Plato blames not the individual, but the sophists and orators for the mistakes. He is critical of common people when they are joined together because of their susceptibility to the sophists and orators. Referring to the allegory of the Cave, which is commonly included with the allegory of the ship, Plato states:

Ὁ δὲ γε νῦν λόγος, ἦν δὲ ἐγὼ, σημαίνει ταύτην τὴν ἐνοῦσαν ἐκαστοῦ δύναμιν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ. ("But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone's soul.")²⁸

Plato, therefore, believed each person individually capable of learning. This statement is in accord with Socrates' practice, as he explains it in the *Apology*, of questioning anyone, believing that each person he spoke with was capable of being educated.²⁹

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that there is a separation between the philosopher-kings and the other members of the city. The philosopher-kings know the Good and are consequently able to rule. Everyone else, having been taught by the philosopher-kings, knows that for the philosopher-kings to rule is good for the city. Glaucon and the other interlocutors in the *Republic* represent the latter group. They do not know the Good itself, but, having been instructed by Socrates, agree that the philosopher-kings should rule. This assent, as we shall see, is an important form of political

empowerment, for political power. The Good itself, the philosopher-kings install those who

In the parable of the tyrant, the relationship between the philosopher-kings and the tyrant, on account, when he is in power, between the class of the philosopher-kings possesses significant power to serve the state government. Let us consider the relationship between the philosopher-kings and the tyrant. Socrates describes the tyrant as a sick person who needs the aid of a doctor to cure the evil for them, and the philosopher-kings are to rule the city. The first possess similar power to the traditional philosopher-kings to rule the city and the tyrant. They must know the Good to rule the city and the philosopher-kings must first educate the tyrant. Upon their own opinion, but not on the philosopher-kings'.

This parable describes the tyrant. In order to rule, the tyrant does not trust the philosopher-kings. He assumes the power of the philosopher-kings and rules the people. Thus, this

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empowerment, for it is the means by which the majority expresses its inherent political power. Through education that teaches of the Good, but not the Good itself, the people are empowered to act responsibly in political matters and bring freedom from all the evils that plague cities, which is to trust and install those who know the Good itself.

In the parable of the ship (488a-e), Plato presents the current, incorrect relationship between the philosopher-kings and the majority. From this account, when held in conjunction with the description of the separation between the classes, we can extrapolate that in many ways the majority possesses significant power in the state and empowers the philosopher-kings to serve the state by ruling, a model far removed from any tyrannical government. Let us then begin our examination of the political relationship between the philosopher-king and the rest of society. Here we again encounter the plaguing question of how a philosopher becomes a ruler for a city. Socrates describes why philosophers appear to be politically useless to the majority when they are in fact most valuable. He states that it would be inappropriate for the philosopher to beg for the citizens' permission to rule as the politicians do. Instead, the people should ask the philosopher to rule just as a sick person knocks on the door of a doctor to ask for help. The sick seek the aid of a doctor because they know that they are ill, that the illness is an evil for them, and that a doctor knows how to cure their diseases. If the citizens are to request the aid of the philosopher in ruling the city, they must first possess similar knowledge. The majority must know that neither they nor the traditional politicians, who have never learned the Good, can effectively rule the city and that rule by either group is not good for the city. Finally, they must know that the philosopher possesses the appropriate knowledge to rule the city and remove the evils. Since the masses have never asked the philosopher to rule, they clearly lack this knowledge. Hence, the philosopher must first educate the populace of his city if he is to become the philosopher-king. Upon their education, the citizens will have knowledge, and not solely opinion, but not to the extent of the philosopher-king.

This parable demonstrates the inherent democratic aspects of the kallipolis. In order to rule, the philosopher-king requires the assent of the people. A tyrant does not traditionally wait until he is asked to rule, but rather he assumes the power of the state. In the model from the *Republic*, the philosopher-king rules only at the request and with the consent of the people. Thus, this method represents the correct manner, according to Plato,

