

## Plato's Political Philosophy of Justice - 'Crito' and 'The Republic'

In *Crito*, a private dialogue between Socrates and his close friend Crito is detailed by Plato. Socrates, shortly before his execution, is visited by Crito in an attempt to appeal to him to make an easy escape from prison (43a). Socrates staunchly refuses, not wanting to break the law of the state, despite the fact that it has wrongly sentenced him death (46b). Though he makes a strong case for the universal rule of law, he seems ultimately unable to reconcile the injustice that it has clearly caused him. Plato also portrays him as pulling a complete reversal on his notoriously contrarian view of proper citizenship.

The crux of this argument is that one should never do wrong (47a). For the Ancient Greeks, to do injustice was specifically to harm another person. This may not seem like the most well-developed system of morality, but it makes decent sense and is simply a reduction of Socrates' broader claim that one can never knowingly do wrong. He adds to his case that doing wrong is harmful to one's own soul through the accumulation of guilt and that if made public can bring great shame and public humiliation, direct reasons one should set out not to do wrong (47d). Socrates also notes that in retaliating against a previous wrongdoing one is just as wrong as if they had committed the retaliatory act in the first place (49c). He's suggesting that if you harm another person, no matter what the circumstances are, you should be held reasonably accountable for such an injustice. He seems to be condemning vigilantism most notably with this idea, in that it is wrong for private citizens to attempt to enact justice themselves. The wrongful administration of justice is also inherently performing an injustice. In making this claim he seems to be taking an early jab at the notion that he should solve the problem of his wrongful imprisonment with an equally wrongful escape.

Socrates then suggests that it is always wrong to break a contract that one has consented to (52e). Honesty seems like a pretty easy virtue to get behind, and in breaking a contract one is knowingly turning that commitment into a lie. Breaking contracts with others repeatedly helps foster a culture of mistrust in which nobody can be certain that their contracts with one another will be abided by, and thus everyone ends up losing out in the end. Socrates makes a careful distinction that it is only a just contract which one must stand by. For, as Crito notes, it is wrong to allow oneself to knowingly be wronged by another, and thus in following through on an unjust contract one is either wrongfully performing or receiving an injustice (45c). This is important in that for the contract with the state to be just, all of its laws must also be just as well. Being forced to follow even one unjust law would be to either perform or receive an injustice, and in either case one is doing wrong. He makes it clear that the law of Athens is representative of the people of Athens, and so by breaking the law one is indirectly making an attack on the law and the people (50b).

Socrates then sets out to prove that he has indeed, like all citizens of Athens,

opted into a just contract with the state (which he feels compelled not to break by an escape from prison) (50e) . He notes that the state had his parents married and gives it a creepy amount of credit for his very conception (50d). This list of ways in which the state has previously provided for him is extended to include his childhood upbringing, education, and a share in its accumulated wealth (50e). Moreover it is the customs, traditions, and culture of the state of Athens that the system of law works to protect that have shaped him as a person, seemingly for the better. From his jail cell he proclaims a lasting love for Athens that is unmatched by most other Athenians, having rarely left the state even given ample opportunity (52B). It would have been very easy for him to leave Athens and become a citizen of another state if he did not agree with its laws. As a prominent figure in Athenian society he has ample say in the political process and likely votes and participates in government in various other ways, basically having a hand in whatever justice it then decides to impose. He also claims that the state has a sort of paternal relationship with its citizens, in that by having provided for them it deserves a sort of respect from them even in the face of potential collateral injustice (50e). For Socrates, at least according to his belief in Crito, to do an injustice to the rule of law would make for far worse consequences in the afterlife (54c). Better to suffer a comparatively minor injustice in the physical world. Lastly, government can only have any order over society if all of its laws are followed equally (50b). It is not up to Socrates, Crito, or any other single citizen of Athens to arbitrarily pick and choose which laws are to be followed, even if a life is at stake. To break the law of Athens is to work towards its destruction, which Socrates would be more upset to have happen than his own death. If one is to accept then that the contract they have with the state is just, then it must be the case that it is wrong to break this contract.

In this dialogue Socrates makes a fairly strong case for total obedience to the rule of law. However this being such a broad statement it is of course not without its faults. Socrates has always been known for his civil disobedience and public outbursts, so this sudden swing in the opposite direction is odd. Is it really true that all forms of law-breaking are with the intent or outcome of the destruction of the state? Many of the greatest reformers throughout time, most notably members of the civil rights movement, were incessant law-breakers. To say that these people, who Socrates almost certainly would have thoroughly enjoyed for their agitation, were performing injustices merely by breaking the law is far too absolute of a statement to make. It would seem more appropriate to say that though the rule of law should often be followed; there is at the very least rare cases wherein a sufficiently wise person such as Socrates should feel the need to circumvent its ruling. If Socrates really should not break the law, but seek to change it, why then was he not able to do this if the law found him guilty unjustly?

Secondly, when Crito makes the powerful remark that by allowing the state to wrong him that Socrates is also doing wrong, Socrates refutes him with a simple appeal to authority – it is not his place to contradict the verdict of the state.

It seems that throughout the dialogue Crito and Socrates are almost speaking past one another. Crito is arguing from the perspective that you should help your friends and hinder your enemies. To submit to the unjust accusations is to submit to his enemies, which by Crito's considerations is wrong. However, Socrates has something else in mind: that one's only obligation should be to follow the rule of law entirely. This is after he condemns the vast majority of people, who the state represents, as being unwise and thereby unfit to adequately administer justice. How can he reconcile even a perfect system of law if it cannot function properly in the hands of the people, the very thing it is supposed to be working for?

I do not feel there is a more promising way to argue for the idea that breaking the law is always immoral. The argument that Socrates forms in this dialogue is a very interesting thought experiment into total obedience to the rule of law, but it does not seem like one that even he believes entirely. Reform is often stimulated through courageous and patriotic acts of civil disobedience. There seems to be an inherent contradiction in the argument that he is not being wronged by the system of law, but by the people administering it – and yet this is a system of law that is allowing people to improperly impose justice on him. It would take supporting an incredibly totalitarian system of government to reconcile this view.

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In Books V and VI of *The Republic*, Plato discusses the concept of the forms and the philosopher-kings' right to rule. Plato's theory of forms is related to his allegory of the cave, which illustrates his views on the nature of knowledge and reality. He uses this theory to explain both that only philosophers have knowledge and that only philosopher-kings are fit to rule. Conversely, I will make the case that the idea of the philosopher-king is too complex for any person to embody, and that even if one was to exist, their presence would largely be impossible to distinguish both by and from the apparently ignorant masses in comparison. Though a person characterized by what Plato described as a philosopher-king may in fact be the most fit to rule, such a conception has never been realized either through its inconceivability or lack of discretion by their peers. Therefore, in their sheer inexistence, philosopher kings can't possibly be the only people on earth fit to rule.

Plato explains that the perspective of the world dominated by our ordinary senses is largely illusory and made up of belief rather than knowledge. Through the allegory of the cave he distinguishes between philosophers, who may move and think freely about in reality, and the common man, chained by ignorance, doomed to live a false life experienced through the figures of the liberated shadowed on the wall in the depths of a cave. Because their entire world is made up of the figures depicted on the cave wall, they are conditioned to believe that this is what constitutes all of reality. In the same way, only the philosopher is able to understand the forms, because the common man is experiencing reality as if they themselves are staring at the cave wall. In order to properly con-

sider Plato's views on knowledge one must make a distinction between it and malformed beliefs. In this environment, only faulty or unfounded belief may be acquired, being that it will never completely embody the true form through which its shadow was cast.

For Plato, the primary goal of a moral society is for political power and philosophy to coincide. Philosophy to him constitutes a love for true knowledge in the same way that a wine connoisseur loves good wine. This passion for learning brings about the knowledge of fundamental truths, or forms, that are veiled to the common person. These truths lie in the difference between conceptual precision and its flawed instantiation in reality. Whereas an abstract notion such as beauty is thought to be without blemish, some will be quick to point out the apparent faults in even the most highly regarded of beautiful people on earth. This argument is founded on an analogy to dreaming, wherein one is mistaken in believing something to be real when it is only an illusion, in the same way that people are often mistaken in believing something to be truly beautiful when it is not. Thus it is only the philosopher who can appreciate true knowledge, though many may dispute this claim in the midst of their delusion.

But what exactly is Plato's concept of a 'form'? It is an unchanging, abstract concept, such as a color, a logical equality, or even a type of species on earth. Take for example the many cats in existence: the idea 'cat' is absolute and therefore doesn't rely on the life or death of any one mortal cat, even though all of them are being governed by the form of the cat. The notion of a cat will outlive all of the beings that we attribute it to, much as the forms will outlive any common beliefs about their true nature. In this way they can be seen as fundamental constraints of the universe, existing regardless of whether they ever come to be realized by people. Plato argues that the most important form, referred to as the form of the good, is responsible for bringing about the existence of every other form, just as the sun illuminates and thereby brings into existence everything in the illusory sensible realm. The form of the good also provides us with our intelligence and capacity for understanding. Therefore, an understanding of the true nature of the form of the good is the ultimate object of knowledge and decisive factor between philosophers and philosopher-kings.

Only a philosopher-king with such true knowledge will be able to make entirely accurate decisions about morality. It takes knowledge not only of the forms, but exact knowledge of the presiding form of the good, in order to come to such complete conclusions. By extension, everybody else, including ordinary philosophers, inevitably may only form simple opinions on topics of morality. Any of these beliefs that are true and happen to fall in line with accurate moral knowledge are only a product of statistical coincidence. It's certainly plausible that many people have a moderately tuned sense of morality based on their experiences in a world crafted in the image of the forms. However, without actual knowledge of the forms, this will always merely be an approximation. To Plato, it is the philosopher-king alone who ultimately may come to correct moral decisions, and because they are so focused on the truth, they can put

aside lesser desires such as power, money, honor, and pleasure. Shouldn't they then be justified in ruling the state?

Throughout all of this, Plato never seems to confront the problem that even complete omniscience doesn't guarantee moral action. Plato held a personal belief that all wrongdoing is caused by ignorance to the state of the facts. However, it's very easy for me to conceive of doing wrong knowing full well what the consequences of such an action entail. For example, losing on a bet where you know and understand the odds of the game seems like a situation in which you can fully realize the consequences of losing, but might choose to play anyway. Furthermore, it seems wrong to absolve all blame of the instigators behind recent financial scandals such as Enron as merely being ignorant of the facts, when they were very much aware and in control of their illegal actions. In this way, it appears that there is something more to being a good ruler than having knowledge of ruling. This might include courage, empathy, or even past experience itself, but no matter what it is, there is a disconnect between the simple knowledge of morality and actually performing moral actions.

Secondly, it seems unlikely that the ignorant masses would be able to come to a democratic consensus on the existence of philosopher-kings. They are supposed to present themselves because of their virtue? But the people who are supposed to witness this virtue have flawed senses of morality and may not be able to judge a philosopher-king accurately. Furthermore, in regards to the allegory of the cave, how can even the philosopher-king himself know that he is truly out of the cave and not just experiencing a higher order of the shadowy wall? It would be unfortunate if Plato was indeed calling for a sort of dictatorial takeover by a philosopher-king, even if he believed it was for the good of the people.

Though Plato's method may be unrealistic, its motivation is ultimately not found in implementation. It instead serves as the model for a perfectly moral state by which we may compare our current reality. Plato believed that a real philosopher held all of the following characteristics: "a good memory, quickness of learning, broadness of vision, elegance, and love of and affiliation to truth, morality, courage, and self-discipline" (487a). If nobody who exists fits the definition of a philosopher king perfectly, we may at least search for those who most approximate it. These characteristics are apparently a crudely formed guideline through which we may judge a person through our sensory experiences. However, to Plato it is seemingly more important that the person exemplify these traits, rather than that anybody attempt to recognize their significance, which seems contrary to their coming to power.

For Plato, politics is entirely an intellectual pursuit. But in my experience, politicians deal more in representing the views of their constituency than in exemplifying perfection. How else can one go about such a task, but to rely on the imperfect views of the public at large? It seems suspect that such a public be able to determine somebody who is a so-called philosopher-king, being imperfect in judgment themselves. Though the philosopher-king may exhibit every trait that Plato found to be essential to such a person, it may not be picked up on or

even just deliberately ignored in the name of personal gain. Ultimately, though the idea of the philosopher-king may be an inspiration to politicians, absolute knowledge and a dictatorial system of morality will remain both insufficient and unattainable for the ruling class. It is in pruning communal thought and the consensus of ideas rather than stubborn insistence of one's own beliefs where the modern politician is able to derive their power and authority.