

Plato's Revenge

1. The Philosopher-King

One of the most striking images in Western political thought has been the account, in Plato's *Republic*, of a good society as being one in which there is rule by Guardians whose role is legitimated because of their possession of knowledge rather than mere opinion. Plato himself was able to make this kind of view look plausible by a variety of means.

First, he offered a striking account of knowledge. His view can be understood intuitively in terms of our understanding of geometry. Imagine that you were living at the time of Plato (429?–347 B.C.E). If you were interested, someone might have shown you a result in geometry such as Pythagoras's theorem. They might at that time have done this by way of drawing a triangle in the sand, using a stick. But the theorem, itself, would not be true of the diagram that they drew. The diagram would only be a rough approximation to the exact truth which we come to know about, by way of the instrument of the diagram. The diagram is a means through which, on a Platonic view, truth was claimed to be about abstract objects, which were only imperfectly exemplified in the world. It is also quite plausible that some people have the ability to handle such things, while others don't.ⁱ Platonists could argue that there may be a similar transition, through dialectical argument – like those Socratic dialogues of Plato's that lead somewhere – to the grasping of essential truths about all kinds of other things. If there were such truths not just about physics, but also about social affairs, it might seem plausible that those who could grasp them should rule, rather than the rest of us whose 'knowledge' is limited to mere opinion. Today, a similar argument might be offered about, say, such matters as econometrics and climate science, to say nothing of knowledge about a certain virus! It might be claimed, by those attracted to this aspect of Plato's approach, that what is needed in these – and other – areas, is that decisions regarding public policy should be in the hands of those who know about these things, not 'public opinion'. Experts, today, would typically not champion Plato's theory of knowledge. But they would stress that they have knowledge – albeit of a fallible character – that the rest of us do not possess, and which we often have difficulty understanding.

Second, there was an issue concerning democracy. If, today, we defend a democratic approach to politics, we are likely to highlight different aspects of it.ⁱⁱ First, there is the most basic of ideas, which

such writers as Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper have stressed, that people should be able to change their governments by voting, rather than having to engage in violent revolt against them. Governments should also be accountable for their conduct to a democratically-elected assembly. Next, there is the idea that public policy should be controlled by way of a process involving deliberation, in which ideas about the character of the problems that face us, theories, and ideas about public policy are put forward, and criticisms of them are offered – something that is of crucial importance because of human fallibility. With this may be contrasted the idea that public policy should simply reflect the preferences of citizens. In those cases where there is little content to the issue in question beyond preferences, there may be no serious issue here. For example, some countries have a national bird – as I understand it, Croatia's is a nightingale. Scotland, where I live, does not have one, although there was a campaign to adopt the golden eagle. But Scotland certainly does not have a national dog or cat. Suppose that it was suggested that we should have one. The choice of this would seem to me something that could safely be left simply to the preferences of citizens. But as soon as we move to issues where claims may be true or false, correct or incorrect, or matters on which serious issues of human well-being depend, then it is understandable that critics of democracy might raise questions about the idea that what we should do should simply be determined by popular preferences.

It is, here, also worth bearing in mind that when Plato himself was critical of democracy, he was not criticizing a system characterised by representation, deliberation, and in which there was an effective system of checks and balances operating to control those who were exercising power. Democracy, as it was understood in his time,ⁱⁱⁱ had really worrying features – of just the kind that critics of 'populism' are concerned about today. It is interesting that this seems to have been a persistent feature within the classical world, and beyond. Ramsay MacMullen, in his *Voting About God in Early Church Councils*,^{iv} has argued that the same kind of populist process was even at work in the background of the Church Councils. Indeed, he has suggested that it played a key role in the decision-making that went to determine important decisions concerning the creed of the Christian Church!

All this is not to say that Plato's political views are unproblematic. Karl Popper, in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, makes a number of telling criticisms of them. One striking point here relates to the problem of in whose interests power is exercised. Popper here takes up an issue that was raised by a man who was apparently a distant relative of his, Josef Popper-Lynkeus. Lynkeus noted the view of rulers who talked about societies as being like organisms, in which each should play their appropriate

part. He suggested that the workers should have responded by saying that the analogy is fair enough. But that it is they – rather than the rulers – who should get to play the role of the stomach! It is also worth reminding ourselves of the argument made by James Mill – John Stuart Mill's father – that a key merit of democracy was that it linked the interests of rulers to the interests of those over whom they ruled.^v

Popper also raised other problems about Plato's work. Plato, Popper pointed out, championed a form of eugenics, in which the rulers would control who should mate with whom. Popper also notes that in his *Laws*, Plato seems to suggest that people should not be able to act without supervision.^{vi} There are also ideas about imprisonment and subsequently execution for impiety, under which Plato's beloved teacher Socrates might have suffered a similar fate to what happened to him in democratic Athens.^{vii}

There are however those, like Leo Strauss, who have argued that Plato did not in fact advocate ideas of the kind that I have sketched, and to which Popper took exception. Rather, Plato was being ironical, and was criticizing these views.^{viii} Be that as it may, ideas like those in Plato, taken quite literally, have had a considerable influence through history. Sir Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) set out an idealized picture of a land in which there was rule by benevolent possessors of scientific knowledge, the pursuit of which Bacon wished to encourage. Some of those who followed Henri de Saint-Simon after the French Revolution favoured the idea that the possessors of scientific knowledge should be in charge of society.^{ix} (These ideas, in Saint-Simon and also in Auguste Comte, had an important influence on the young John Stuart Mill.^x) Ideas rather similar to these were also to be found among some of the 'Fabian' socialists in Britain, notably the novelist H. G. Wells, for example in his *A Modern Utopia* (1905). It has also been suggested that Iran's Ruhollah Khomeini, in his ideas about Islamic government (which influenced the formation of the current Iranian constitution)^{xi} in which guardianship is exercised over society by specialists in Islamic scholarship, is in certain ways influenced by Plato.^{xii}

Plato's political ideas have many interesting features – not least is his awareness of, and radical ideas to try to resolve, problems of political corruption and nepotism. These ideas of Plato's, however, have tended not to be quite as appealing to those who present themselves as benevolent rulers who possess knowledge not available to ordinary citizens.^{xiii}

2. Knowledge and Liberty

At the heart of Plato's approach, there is an epistemological argument. It is that the possession of knowledge, rather than just opinion, is what gives authority to his rulers.^{xiv} It seems to me that it is this which some liberals have criticized effectively. There are two aspects to their argument here.

The first may be found in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, and also in Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*.^{xv} I will draw on themes from each of them. Both Mill and Popper stress that we should seek truth, but that our knowledge is fallible. Further, they suggest that the best way of approaching the truth is by means of critical discussion. Popper, in the case of science, argued that such discussion should be understood in terms of openness to empirical criticism. But he also argued that, more generally, non-scientific theories can be appraised by means of inter-subjective argument, by reference to the problems that they are setting out to resolve.

Popper also stressed the way in which even our best theoretical ideas may be fallible. He illustrated this by discussing the example of Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727). Newton's impressive ideas about how we might understand – in the scope of a single theory – mechanical problems on Earth and the motions of the planets, received impressive confirmations. Indeed, the poet, Alexander Pope (1688-1744), was led to write: 'Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in night. God said: "Let Newton be!", and all was light.' During the Nineteenth century, continued confirmations led some people to wonder if Newton's ideas might in some way be necessarily true. But in the early Twentieth Century, Albert Einstein put forward an alternative theory which challenged Newton's, and which could make sense of observations which were in conflict with Newton's ideas. This led Popper to a picture of knowledge in which even our best and best-confirmed ideas are fallible, and might stand in need of correction in the future.

From all this, there follows an argument for freedom of opinion and of speech for the sake of the quest for truth. Popper also argued for the idea of the 'rational unity of mankind'. In Popper's interpretation of this, reason is to be understood particularly in terms of our being able to offer criticisms (which, obviously, may or may not be good ones). He developed also the theme that while we may not all have the ability to develop useful ideas about how public policy (or other) problems might be solved, any of us might have knowledge which could be pertinent to the critical appraisal of such things.

All this seems to strike a blow against the Platonic model of an elite who should decide everything, because of their secure possession of knowledge. What is more, as Mill argued in his *The Subjection of Women*, this issue may also point towards the importance of human autonomy, more generally. For, as Mill argued, if women are dependent on their husbands, it is not clear that they will have the kind of autonomy needed to be able to develop and to voice criticisms of currently accepted ideas. All this points to the way in which these epistemological considerations suggest not just the significance not just of freedom of speech, but also to wider kinds of human freedom.^{xvi}

Let me now turn to a second strand of liberal argument against Plato. This is the idea – to which I alluded in an earlier piece – that key information needed for the well-being of society is scattered right across society, and cannot readily be brought together in any form of centralized decision-making. This involves such things as our preferences as consumers – including those for products which we have not yet encountered^{xvii} – and how they trade off against other alternatives that might be open to us. Also important are the kinds of situationally-based knowledge that we – and often only we – have, because of our particular circumstances in life and life experiences. Important also are all kinds of ‘tacit’ knowledge. In this latter category, Hayek is concerned with such things as the hunches that entrepreneurs might have about a new idea that might work out, and also the kind of practical know-how that someone might have about how to appraise a horse, or a second-hand car, or, indeed, whether or not a particular issue of *Ideje* is likely to be worth reading.

Hayek argued for the importance of the freedom of individuals to make judgements – in their different situations, and on the basis of the preferences and ideas to which I have just referred. They would do so in the light of the system of prices generated within markets. This would mean that they would be guided in their choices by such things as other people’s demand for resources, as expressed through those prices. While, on the other hand, it would be by way of other people’s reactions – as expressed through their demand, and the prices that they were willing to give for things – that entrepreneurs could discover whether, in fact, their various conjectures were or were not correct. The fact that people are able to express their own preferences would itself make an impact on other people’s judgements, by virtue of the effect that it had on prices. This would mean that in a limited manner, their knowledge and judgements could feed into the decision-making of society as a whole. And this would take place in a

manner that Platonic Guardians were not aware of, and – as Hayek argued – were not in a position to replicate, once they understood how all this was taking place.

The issues from Mill and Popper, and also those from Hayek, tie in considerations about knowledge and its utilization for the benefit of society with a case for both democracy and individual freedom. This can, thus, be counterposed to the way in which Plato invoked issues about knowledge in a manner which points towards the rule of an elite. Indeed, it is striking that Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* stressed the way in which, in the kind of society in which he was living, which was liberal and in a limited sense democratic, one had some of the ‘organic’ features of the kind of society that Plato favoured. But Hegel argued that, in his society, people’s occupations were chosen. What Hegel called ‘subjective freedom’ played an important role,^{xviii} whereas in Plato, occupations were simply chosen for people by the Guardians.

3. Plato’s Revenge

But why, then, did I call this essay ‘Plato’s Revenge’? The reason is this. Today we tend to accept the arguments about the importance of freedom of opinion and about democracy which have been developed against Plato. In addition, Hayek and those who have followed him have made a powerful case for the role of markets in large-scale societies. However, we also face some problems; problems of a kind which, if he could have observed us, might have led Plato to smile.

First, we recognise the fallibility of experts. But at the same time, if we reflect on our current situation, there are problems, in democratic societies, about the utilization of fallible expert knowledge. And this is something really important. Mill and Popper both argued for the view that ideas should be open to criticism. In this context, it is important that people should be free to raise misgivings that they might have about currently accepted views. But while, in this sense, everyone is entitled to an opinion, this does not mean that everyone’s opinion is equally correct. What we need, is a situation in which people are free to raise problems about existing ideas, but where what they are saying can itself be critically evaluated and assessed. We further need, where we have to take collective decisions, to have institutions within which what at any time are our best ideas, can be acted on. Clearly, even our best ideas may not be correct, or even if they are, actions taken on the basis of them may have unintended consequences which are problematic. We need, on the face of it, democratic systems within which

learning can take place, and currently accepted ideas can be objected to – and improved upon. But within these systems, we also need a willingness, on the part of all citizens, to defer to judgements informed by the current state of the debate. And this may mean that we may all have to give way to judgements which we cannot easily understand.

Second, today we have a resurgence of populism; we also typically participate in, and are influenced by, 'social media'. We have political leaders who appeal simply to the prejudices of their followers. In some striking cases they sometimes show no interest in whether or not what they say is true. They are also not harmed politically when it is shown that they have been saying things which are not true. Rather than taking responsibility for what they have asserted, and facing criticism when it is offered, they claim – typically without evidence – that those who raise problems about their ideas are simply purveying 'fake news'.

Social media poses another huge problem. Attention has often been drawn to the way in which they have served to circulate all kinds of ideas which are not true – and to the fact that various state and non-state actors have used them, successfully, to circulate material which is simply propaganda, with no real factual basis. What seems to me more insidious, however, is the way in which social media is structured round the intersection between our preferences and the wishes of advertisers. Karl Popper argued just how important it was that we should expose our ideas to discussion and evidence that might show that they are incorrect and need improvement. Social media tends to be structured to seek out – across all of our electronic activity – just what our views, preferences and prejudices are, and then to re-enforce them. It typically aims at keeping us for the longest time possible on pages on which there is advertising. It gives us information about the world which is pre-selected to fit the perspectives which we favour, or to confirm us in the prejudice that those who take opposing views are reprehensible. In a recent survey in the UK, 35% of people used Facebook as a news source, with Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram being used between them by 43%.^{xix} To be sure, the existence of the internet, and within it services such as Google News, can give one access to a wide range of material. On-line subscriptions to a range of newspapers and magazines, national and international, can make it possible for someone who cares to do so to get a good picture of things, and to expose their prejudices to criticism. But it is not clear how many people take advantage of this, while the opportunities for learning which this furnishes, seem not to feed well into decision-taking in contemporary democracies.

There is a contrast between the kind of picture of responsiveness to critical feedback from all citizens which informs Popper's *Open Society*, and the procedures of existing democracies. Not only is it not clear what channels there are for ordinary people's input, or for anyone's criticisms of existing procedures. But, as has been well-documented by work by political scientists on interest-groups and political lobbying, opinions voiced by important commercial and professional interest-groups play a key role in political decision-taking, and in ways that it is difficult for us to avoid.

A key problem that then faces us is: how, *within a democracy of the kind that we have currently*, can we structure our affairs so that there is both effective critical appraisal of our best ideas, with the results of this then having a proper role in the shaping of opinion and public policy? A further problem is this. Suppose that we could come up with better ways in which we might structure public discourse and decision-taking, *within a democracy of the kind that we have currently*, what could be done with such ideas? For behind Mill's and Popper's ideas about knowledge and learning, and the role of freedom of speech and freedom of opinion in this context, there are implicitly ideas about how all this needs to be structured if it is to be effective. Much the same issue can be raised about Hayek's ideas concerning knowledge, markets and information. Plato's revenge, it seems to me, might be expressed in the following form. Don't you perhaps need, he might suggest, the services of a philosopher-king to design and then set up and maintain improved institutions for you? But you, of course, will not accept anything of this kind. You are committed to, somehow, doing these things by means of your own democratic procedures.

I am certainly not suggesting that we should appoint a philosopher-king. Not only would the ideas of any such figure themselves be fallible. But it would surely be problematic to think of giving up our freedoms in this manner. However, we are, I think, left with the problem: what should we do in the face of all this? I hope to address this in a future piece.

ⁱ I have always found geometry almost impossible to deal with (as I have foreign languages, especially if they are not written in the Roman alphabet). However, for me everything would have been different if geometry had been taught, from the start, as Cartesian geometry, so that one was just dealing with algebra!

ⁱⁱ I will, here, discuss just some basic themes, and will not consider such issues as the representation of interests, including by means of lobbying. But I will say a little about lobbying, later.

ⁱⁱⁱ It also often included the idea of election by lot, which I will not discuss here. But compare Barbara Goodwin's *Justice by Lottery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and David Ramsay Steele's 'Why Stop at Term Limits', in his *The Mystery of Fascism* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2019, pp. 53-61.

^{iv} Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006).

^v Compare James Mill, *Essay on Government*, Section VII, e.g. in James Mill, *Political Writings* ed. Terence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

^{vi} Compare Plato's Laws, 942: 'nobody, male or female, should ever be left without control, nor should anyone, whether at work or in play, grow habituated in mind to acting alone and on his own initiative, but he should live always, both in war and peace, with his eyes fixed constantly on his commander and following his lead'.

^{vii} See Plato's *Laws*, 908a-909a.

^{viii} See for an interesting discussion, George Klosko, 'The "Straussian" interpretation of Plato's *Republic*', *History of Political Thought* 7, no. 2, 1986, pp. 275-93.

^{ix} See, for an interesting – but highly critical – account, Friedrich Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952).

^x For an excellent recent discussion, see Mill on Georgios Varouxakis, 'Democracy Revisited', in *A Companion to Mill*, ed. Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

^{xi} See his *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist*, available at: <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/12118>

^{xii} See for an assertion of this, Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 126. For a more nuanced argument, for a lead to which I would like to thank Ali Paya, see 'A comparison between Khumaini's *Government of the Jurist* and the *Commentary on Plato's Republic* of Ibn Rushd', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 7 (1), 1996, pp. 16-31.

^{xiii} Compare my 'Singapore: Plato's Other Republic?', in G. Moore (ed.) *The Open Society and its Enemies in East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 132-44.

^{xiv} One obvious problem is, of course, that ordinary people like us are not in a position to evaluate whether the rulers in fact have knowledge, rather than just opinion.

^{xv} London: Routledge, 1945 etc; Popper's more directly epistemological works such as his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959) and *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge, 1963) are also relevant here.

^{xvi} One might see some of the work of Jürgen Habermas as having explored this theme in an interesting manner.

^{xvii} The standard economists' account of this should not, however, be accepted uncritically. Barry Hindess's *Political Choice and Social Structure* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1989) seems to me to raise some important issues about it.

^{xviii} Compare Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, tr. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), §262 (Anhang).

^{xix} See <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-people-get-news-from-social-media>