

**Plato (429-347 BCE) believed that democracy was a very poor and unstable form of government. This is expressed very clearly in “the ship analogy”**

Imagine then a fleet or a ship in which there is a captain who is taller and stronger than any of the crew, but he is a little deaf and has a similar infirmity in sight, and his knowledge of navigation is not much better. The sailors are quarrelling with one another about the steering --every one is of opinion that he has a right to steer, though he has never learned the art of navigation and cannot tell who taught him or when he learned, and will further assert that it cannot be taught, and they are ready to cut in pieces any one who says the contrary. They throng about the captain, begging and praying him to commit the helm to them; and if at any time they do not prevail, but others are preferred to them, they kill the others or throw them overboard, and having first chained up the noble captain's senses with drink or some narcotic drug, they mutiny and take possession of the ship and make free with the stores; thus, eating and drinking, they proceed on their voyage in such a manner as might be expected of them. Him who is their partisan and cleverly aids them in their plot for getting the ship out of the captain's hands into their own whether by force or persuasion, they compliment with the name of sailor, pilot, able seaman, and abuse the other sort of man, whom they call a good-for-nothing; but that the true pilot must pay attention to the year and seasons and sky and stars and winds, and whatever else belongs to his art, if he intends to be really qualified for the command of a ship, and that he must and will be the steerer, whether other people like or not--the possibility of this union of authority with the steerer's art has never seriously entered into their thoughts or been made part of their calling. Now in vessels which are in a state of mutiny and by sailors who are mutineers, how will the true pilot be regarded? Will he not be called by them a prater, a star-gazer, a good-for-nothing?

Plato, *Republic Book VI*

Plato's message is simple. Democracy fails because people who have no skill in running a society are given power.

- The uneducated and uninformed vote for power hungry politicians, who are themselves unskilled to rule.
- Elections are won by the most popular candidate, and not by the best qualified.
- Politicians will use any means necessary to get the power they crave
- Society's interests are not served in this way.
- The person who is the most qualified (the philosopher) is ignored and ridiculed

### Plato's solution

Only those who are qualified should rule. These people are those with access to the truth (found in the realm of the forms)

These people are the "Philosopher Kings"

In order to become a Philosopher King, an individual must meet various strict criteria.

They will not be rewarded and they will perform the task out of a sense of duty.

## **How to become a Philosopher King**

- General education up to age 18
- Two years of intense physical training
- Ten years of rigorous mathematical training
- Five years of training in dialectic
- Fifteen year apprenticeship in managing the state

And when they are fifty years old, those who have lasted the whole course and are in every way best at everything, both in practice and in theory, must at last be led to the final goal, and must be compelled to lift up the mouth of their psyches towards that which provides light for everything, the good itself. And taking it as their model, they must put in good order both the polis and themselves for the remainder of their lives, taking turns with the others  
Republic (540a4-b1).

## **Possible objections to Plato's account**

### **What is to stop the Philosopher King from becoming corrupt?**

Plato's responses:

- a) The Philosopher Kings will not be allowed to own private property. Any "extras" will be easily spotted by everybody
- b) The Philosopher Kings would not be tempted by desire for material things as their souls are constantly looking to the realm of the forms. They *know* the absolute good.

### **Why would anybody become a Philosopher King if there is no reward for this task?**

Plato's response: People would do this task out of duty. (*perhaps the lack of reward will deter the worst candidates?*)

### **Is expert knowledge possible?**

Plato's response: Yes, it is to be found in the realm of the forms.

### **What's wrong with a chaotic ship?**

Plato was extremely wary of chaos and instability (think of the peaceful and permanent realm of the forms versus the messy material world)

### **Perhaps democracy has an intrinsic value, regardless of the consequences?**

Plato would disagree!