

Are the Rulers of *Rep. 7* Philosophers?

There is something profoundly disturbing about the philosopher-rulers of *Rep. 7*¹: they are unwilling to rule. Indeed, no fewer than seven times does this book of the *Republic* emphasize their reluctance to govern (517c; 519c,d; 520a,b,d; 540b), and no fewer than eight, the need for the founders of Callipolis to compel them (519c-d,e; 520a,e; 521b; 539e; 540a-b,b). These men (and women) simply do not wish to “mind the affairs of human beings” (517c); they “despise” political activity (521b); ruling is “drudgery” in their eyes—not something “noble” (540a-b). Although nurtured and educated in philosophy by the city, these philosophers are not inclined by their nature to return the favor by providing the city with their superior leadership; Socrates must devise an argument to persuade them that they are duty-bound to rule (520a-d). While his companion Glaucon is sure that these “just” men will respond favorably to his argument (520e), Socrates himself is skeptical; he recognizes the need to persuade “and compel them besides” (520a). Yet, it is on philosophers that Socrates pins his highest hopes: it is they alone who can “save our cities from all ills, public and private” (473d; 474b-c; 487e; 499b; 500e; 501e; 502d; 506a-b; 536b).

There are other things that are troubling about Book 7’s philosophers. First, they seem to defy the one-class, one-job principle of justice insofar as they are a hybrid of philosopher and warrior (521d; 525b; 543a). Second, in the allegory of the Cave, the prisoners who are led out—the counterparts of our philosophers—have to be dragged violently (*biāi*) against their will (515e-516a): no inner longing for truth or wisdom propels them; it is not until they are actually in the “light” that that is where they are eager to be (517c-d). Indeed, they start out enamored of eating and other such pleasures—their ties to the material world are “like leaden weights” (519b). Their very sharp-sightedness inclines them to evil (518e-519a); for them to do good, they must be forcibly turned to the realm of the intellect. Even when they reach the pinnacle of their journey and are to take their turn governing the city, they must be compelled to order not only the city and other men but themselves as well, using the Good as their pattern (540a-b).

I shall argue that the philosophers Socrates describes in Book 7 are markedly different from those portrayed earlier in the *Republic*, and will suggest that Book 7’s philosophers do not represent Plato’s ideal.

¹ The philosopher-ruler whose education is described in Book 7 is actually introduced toward the end of Book 6, at 502d, where, “starting from the beginning,” Socrates recalls and revives the guardians of Book 3 and includes their features in the composition of the new philosophical type.

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I prefer to do a 40-minute plenary session but will gladly accept a 20-minute parallel session.