Should Philosophers Rule the World?

Brian Carey 06/04/21
Dramatis personæ

Plato............................................. A Philosopher
Edmund Burke............................ A Politician
Henry Sidgwick............................ A Conspirator
Leo Varadkar.............................. A Sceptic
Hannah Pitkin............................. A Detective
The British Electorate.................. A Problem
Effective Government vs Legitimate Government

• 1. Effective governance requires special expertise.
• 2. Legitimate governance requires governance by the people.
• 3. The people are not experts.

So:

• 4. If we are ruled by experts, we lose legitimacy.
• 5. If we are ruled by the people, we won’t govern effectively.

• How can we balance these competing concerns to achieve a government that is both effective and legitimate?
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What is the relevant kind of expertise?

• Enter Plato....

• In *The Republic* (c. 375BC) Plato argued that “when a man is ill, whether he be rich or poor, to the physician he must go, and he who wants to be governed, to him who is able to govern.”

• Who is “able to govern”?

• The Philosophers!

• “Epistocracy” from “epistēmē”, [knowledge], and “kratos” [power]
“The Ship of State”

• Plato likens governing a state to captaining a ship.

• Just as captaining a ship requires certain skills, so too does running a state.

• Plato concludes that the kings must become philosophers, or the philosophers must become kings.
“The Ship of State”

• According to Plato, the Philosopher King should exhibit various important qualities, such as wisdom, honesty, intelligence, and “a naturally well-proportioned and gracious mind, which will move spontaneously towards the true being of everything.”

• “He whose desires are drawn towards knowledge in every form will be absorbed in the pleasures of the soul, and will hardly feel bodily pleasure --I mean, if he be a true philosopher and not a sham one.”
“The Ship of State”

• Plato has got some very specific (and very demanding) ideas about what this kind of “Philosopher King” should look like, but the general form of his argument is more interesting than Plato’s specific articulation of it.

• We don’t need to agree with Plato’s particular account of what qualities ideal rulers should have in order to agree with the basic idea behind the argument.
“The Ship of State”

• Various characters have been proposed as examples of Philosopher Kings, in history and fiction...
Long Live The Philosopher Kings?

• There are at least three significant problems with this approach, however:

• 1. Is governing a state really like captaining a ship?

• 2. What happens when the captains disagree?

• 3. Isn’t this all pretty fashy?
Effective Government vs Legitimate Government

1. Good governance requires special expertise.
2. The people are not experts.
3. If we are ruled by experts, we lose legitimacy.
4. If we are ruled by the people, we do a really bad job.

How can we balance these competing concerns to achieve a government that is both effective and legitimate?
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The Will of the People...?

- People are generally ill-informed about politics, to put it mildly....

“Ninety-seven years ago, people lost their lives in that park over there. Constant Markievicz gave up his life to enable us to eradicate suppression, taxation, eviction, criminality.”
Respondents were asked to identify Iran on the map

Each dot represents a respondent's guess. Each green dot represents correct placement.

Poll conducted Jan. 4-5, 2020, among 1,995 registered voters with a margin of error of +/- 2%.
Public Overestimates Share Of Budget Going To Foreign Aid

Just your best guess, what percentage of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid?

- 0-1%: 4%
- 2-5%: 12%
- 6-10%: 13%
- 11-20%: 15%
- 21-30%: 14%
- 31-40%: 7%
- 41-50%: 8%
- 51% or more: 12%
- Don't know/Refused: 17%

Average answer = 28% of the federal budget is spent on foreign aid

SOURCE: Kaiser Family Foundation 2013 Survey of Americans on the U.S. Role in Global Health (conducted August 6-20, 2013)
• Enter Leo Varadkar...

• Even when the people are well-informed, they don’t necessarily act in good faith...at least according to our politicians...

Varadkar: Referendums are not "very democratic"

He’s not a fan.

TRANSPORT MINISTER LEO
Varadkar has said that he does not believe that referendums are “very democratic”.

Speaking to RTÉ Radio on Sunday about a proposed new treaty being discussed at a European Council meeting today, Varadkar said that referendums are “by and large” never what they are supposed to be about.

Responding to a poll in yesterday’s Sunday Business Post which showed that 72 per cent of Irish people believe a vote is necessary if the treaty is to be adopted in Ireland, the Minister said that he is “not a referendum fan”.

“I would be concerned that it would turn into a referendum on extraneous issues such as septic tanks, bondholders, banking crisis or decisions being made by the Government, such as cutbacks.”
“Tião started to become popular in the 1980s for his temperament, regarded as constant "bad mood" and having the habit of throwing mud and feces on the visitors of the zoo, especially politicians such as Marcello Alencar.”
Now what?

• Representative democracy could be interpreted as one possible solution to this problem...

• Instead of Philosopher Kings, we are ruled by more realistic representatives – fellow citizens who have some degree of expertise and who are willing and able to spend the time and effort needed to make complicated political decisions.

• These representatives are accountable to the people, at least once every few years...
Problem solved?

• This seems to secure legitimate government – power ultimately resides with the people, while also ensuring that we are able to be governed by (relative) experts – our political representatives.

• But (there’s always a ‘but’):

• **How** should these representatives represent us?
Now what?

• Enter Edmund Burke....

• Edmund Burke is credited with introducing a distinction between two models of political representation:

  • **Delegates** seek to directly implement the will of those who elected them.

  • **Trustees** seek to use their own best judgment to choose policies they believe to be in the best interests of those who elected them.
Delegates vs Trustees

“Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own.

But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

(Burke’s speech to the electors of Bristol, 1774)
Delegates vs Trustees

• We might worry that representatives who act as delegates are redundant – what is the point of electing representatives to implement decisions that their constituents have already made?

• But we might also worry that trustees are anti-democratic. How should we feel in cases where a representative pursues a policy opposed by those who voted for them?
Delegates vs Trustees

• Regardless of whether we prefer the delegate or trustee model, it seems clear that most politicians don’t present themselves to us as either.

• This makes it difficult to predict how our representatives will act.

• But politicians aren’t the only ones sending mixed signals....
“Brexit means Brexit”
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“Brexit means Brexit”
Brexit means Brexit

EU REFERENDUM VOTE BY AGE GROUPS

Turnout 72.2%

England, Scotland & Wales

Scotland
Overall result
Leave 38%
Remain 62%

Wales
Overall result
Leave 52.5%
Remain 47.5%

England
Overall result
Leave 53.4%
Remain 46.6%
Brexit means Brexit

Figure 1: Issues voters highlighted as motives behind EU referendum voting

The biggest issues are economic rather than immigration related.

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls

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Overall result
- Leave 38%
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“Brexit means Brexit”

UK general election 2017
- Conservative
- Labour
- SNP
- Liberal Democrat
- DUP
- Sinn Fein
- Plaid Cymru
- Green
- Independent
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Figure 1: Issues voters highlighted as motives behind EU referendum voting

- The biggest issues are economic rather than immigration related

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls

EU Referendum Voting Intention

- Leave 45%
- Remain 55%

Survation polled 2,040 respondents aged 18+ living in the UK, 8th - 11th August 2019.

Scotland
- Overall result
  - Leave 38%
  - Remain 62%

England
- Overall result
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  - Remain 46.6%
Brexit means Brexit

Figure 1: Issues voters highlighted as motives behind EU referendum voting

The biggest issues are economic rather than immigration related.

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls

Figure 2: EU Referendum Voting Intention

Satisfaction poll 2,040 respondents aged 18+ living in the UK, 8th - 11th August 2016.

EU Referendum Voting Intention

Age group

18-24 25-49 50-64

55% 44% 45%

Leave 55% Remain 45%

UK general election 2017

Conservative Labour SNP Liberal Democrat DUP Sinn Fein Plaid Cymru Green

Overall result

Scotland

England

Overall result

38% Leave 62% Remain

52.5% Leave 47.5% Remain

Leaves 53.4% Remain 46.6%
Brexit means Brexit

UK general election 2017

General Election 2019:
how the UK voted
(after 602 of 650 seats)

Scotland
Overall result

England
Overall result

EU Referendum Voting Intention

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls

Figure 1: Issues voters highlighted as motives behind EU referendum voting

The biggest issues are economic rather than immigration-related.
Brexit means Brexit

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The biggest issues are economic rather than immigration related.

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls

EU Referendum Voting Intention

Sunset poll 2,040 respondents aged 18+ living in the UK, 8th - 11th August 2016.

Turnout

When you finally decided how you would vote?

Longer than a year ago

Since the beginning of the year

39%

13%

18%

5%

I have always known how I would vote

Turnout

Northern Ireland 18 / 18 Constituencies

LEAVE 349,442

REMAIN 440,707

44% 56%

UK general election 2017

Conservative

Labour

SNP

Liberal Democrat

DUP

Sinn Fein

Plaid Cymru

Green

Independent

Speaker

Overall result

England

Overall result

Leave 53.4%

Remain 46.6%

Scotland

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Leave 38%

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General Election 2019: how the UK voted

(after 602 of 650 seats)
Brexit means Brexit
Back to the drawing board?

• Maybe this search for public legitimacy is doomed to failure?

• What if transparency isn’t necessarily what matters, provided that we have the appearance of transparency?

• A stable and productive society doesn’t necessarily require that the people know who is making the decisions and why, only that they believe that they do...

• Enter Henry Sidgwick...
Philosopher Kings?
Some philosophers (such as Henry Sidgwick) suggested that government could be run according to one set of principles, but that the truth of this fact should be kept hidden from the majority of people.

“Thus, on Utilitarian principles, it may be right to do and privately recommend, under certain circumstances, what it would not be right to advocate openly; it may be right to teach openly to one set of persons what it would be wrong to teach to others; it may be conceivably right to do, if it can be done with comparative secrecy, what it would be wrong to do in the face of the world.”
Philosopher Kings - Enlightened Utilitarians?

• “Thus the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this; that the opinion that secrecy may render an action right which would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret; and similarly it seems expedient that the doctrine that esoteric morality is expedient should itself be kept esoteric. Or if this concealment be difficult to maintain, it may be desirable that Common Sense should repudiate the doctrines which it is expedient to confine to an enlightened few.

• And thus a Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, in so far as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands.” (The Methods of Ethics – 1874)
Philosopher Kings - Enlightened Utilitarians?

- This approach to governance was dubbed “Government House” utilitarianism by Bernard Williams, who criticized its colonial origins and divisive nature:

- “For Sidgwick, as for many others in the past, the distinction [between theory and practice] determined two classes of people, one of them a class of theorists who could responsibly handle the utilitarian justification of nonutilitarian dispositions, the other a class who unreflectively deployed those dispositions.”
  
  *(Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, 1985)*

Bernard Williams (1929 - 2003)
Now what?

- If we can’t solve this tension between effectiveness and legitimacy, we will need to make **trade-offs** between the two.

- We will have to settle for less than perfect governance in order to ensure that ultimate authority is retained by the people.

- We will have to transfer some of our power to representatives in order to ensure that our government can act effectively and efficiently.

- But what should the link between the people and their representatives look like?
• Enter Hanna Pitkin...

• Pitkin distinguishes between four kinds of representation:
  • (i) Formal
  • (ii) Symbolic
  • (iii) Descriptive
  • (iv) Substantive

• **Note:** These categories are distinct from the Burkean question of whether representatives should act as delegates and trustees.
Four kinds of representation...

• (i) **Formal representation** refers to the legal mechanisms through which a representative gains and retains power.

• Formal representation concerns questions of **authorization** (how does the rep. gain power) and **accountability** (do the people have the power to punish representatives who are not responsive to their wishes?)
Four kinds of representation...

- (ii) **Symbolic representation** refers to the extent to which a representative “stands for” those they represent.

- Do the people believe in their representative? What kind of feelings does the rep. evoke in those they represent?
Four kinds of representation...

- (iii) **Descriptive representation** refers to the extent to which a representative “looks like” those they represent.

- Does the rep. share significant experiences with those they represent?
Four kinds of representation...

• (iv) **Substantive representation** refers to the extent to which a representative actually advances the interests of those they represent.

• (But this can be ambiguous – what if the people are mistaken about what is in their best interests? What if the experts disagree?)
Four kinds of representation...

• Representation as a practice includes all of these dimensions, but some may be more important than others.

• In any particular case, people may enjoy good representation in one or more form, while also experiencing deficient representation in others.

• Pitkin’s categories can help us examine representation in a more nuanced way.
So...should philosophers rule the world?

• If our goal is to strike a balance between effective governance and legitimacy, then what matters most isn’t necessarily who rules the world, but how they rule it.

• We can use concepts like the Burkean distinction between delegates and trustees and Pitkin’s modes of representation to analyse the nature of the link between the people and their representatives.

• Deciding which forms of representation are valuable and why will allow us to develop measures by which to judge the quality of our political systems.
So...should philosophers rule the world?

- This suggests that whatever system we have must be **transparent** and **revisable**, at the very least.

- We need transparency so that we can figure out how we are being represented.

- We need revisability so that we can change our political institutions (including getting rid of bad representatives) as our views about representation change.
So...should philosophers rule the world?

- If we had a political system that was transparent and revisable, where political leaders were committed to explaining their reasoning and held accountable for their actions...then maybe even a philosopher would make a decent politician. Or maybe we would just make things even worse:

- “Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves--that we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see.”

George Berkeley
(1865-1753)
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