

Plato and nietzsche on authority essay



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Nietzsche and Plato have many similarities in their discussion of political philosophy. Both dislike and hold contempt for democracy, and both favour a meritocratically chosen elite holding authority. There are even many similarities between the characteristics that they require in the group. However, there are differences too.

Nietzsche doesn't outline a strict theory of authority, as Plato does. His governmental 'system', although it hardly is, could be interpreted, and has been, in many different ways. And, although both of them think that they have justified their authority, there have been several discussions on to whether they are, and in what society they would be relevant. These discussions are perhaps at the core of finding the key differences and usable elements of their philosophies.

The notion of authority can be discussed in two main senses. For one, it can be used to discuss a person or group's right to rule. The other is when you talk of someone being an authority on a topic. Both of these involve the subordination of personal judgement to that of another and most political theorists would consider this subordination to be binding.

One of the main problems is if you should surrender your own personal judgement independent of the content of the authority's ideas - both Nietzsche and Plato would say that one should, as their leaders are both an authority on a topic and have the right to rule. When authority comes from knowledge, it doesn't necessarily mean that the authority has power, for example as in a teacher trying to control a class at a school. However, in

politics, an effective authority must be allied to power. If the authority is recognised, then it is de facto authority.

If it is justified, then it is de jure authority, and most de facto authorities claim that they are both de facto and de jure. Plato and Nietzsche both argue for a de facto authority (sensibly - who wants to impose an authority that is ignored?) and they both outline what they believe to be justification for this authority. This justification is at the centre of much of political philosophy, as it is important to discover if the justification works. Authority differs, therefore, from justified power, as justified power in itself does not involve subordination of judgement - if they're not recognised, then they cannot require that people follow their rule.

Legitimacy is also an issue. In a democratic state, electoral fraud would lead to a leader being illegitimate: there is also no guaranteed way to prevent electoral fraud. However, as Nietzsche and Plato are both anti-democracy, illegitimacy this way would obviously be an issue. However, if either of their desired leaders were to 'seize power' (either by force or just accidentally falling into power), there would be definite issues with people who didn't believe their justification. In this case, their authority could be considered illegitimate.

Plato, especially in Republic, gives epistemology and metaphysics substantial roles in political philosophy. In Plato's ideally just city, philosophers would gain power, or, at the very least, rulers would have to engage 'sincerely and adequately' in philosophy. Plato also suggests a rigorous training program for his philosopher-kings - they must have their

emotions properly trained. Would this lack of emotion make for a good authority? Many would say that you cannot be emotional about your leadership because then your judgement would be swayed by too many subjective factors.

However, the thought of a leader without emotion is particularly daunting – how would they know what would affect the population, and more importantly how? Emotions are an important part of human life, and a great leader would have to understand (and this would usually be best understood by feeling the emotions oneself) human life to be effective. Plato argues that this would come from knowledge of the Forms, the perfect example of something – there is one for every notion that exists on earth. The Form of tables, the Form of emotions, or even the Form of drinks are all said to exist. The meticulous training includes imparting knowledge about these forms and prepares the mind for this abstract thought by rigorously training the rulers in mathematics.

The philosopher's knowledge of the Forms would include knowledge of the Form of Good, which is the 'keystone of the system', and therefore is essential for order. If one takes the Forms to be a true (or even just realistic) idea then it is sensible for a leader to understand what the true notion of good is. If one knows 'good' then one can use this mould to create a 'good system', which is surely more reliable than basing it on subjective ideas. The Forms are like a religion, which makes Plato's system almost a theocracy (unlike the authority of Nietzsche) – and this has been implemented as a political system before.

In the past, however, people have become dissatisfied with the religion that they are 'forced' to agree with. Atheism is becoming more and more accepted than before, as many new scientific discoveries render God less and less plausible, and as Nietzsche would put it, less useful as a concept. All this taken into account means that knowledge of the Forms probably wouldn't be useful for an authority (especially in a modern era), but it is not necessarily a bad idea for an authority figure to be well versed in philosophy. Philosophy introduces abstract thought (like Plato suggested) and calls for knowledge in logic.

Abstract thought is useful when trying to find theories that fit with the real world - where would physics and chemistry be without abstract thought concerning the atom? Another key question on the subject of religion was raised by Nietzsche. Is there anything that can be taken from religion, even if one wasn't to be imposing religion onto a state, as Plato does? Nietzsche believes that, although religion in itself is too dogmatic and God is useless as a concept, the passion behind religion is admirable, and would be one of the key characteristics of his 'new philosophers'. Nietzsche's 'new philosopher', as opposed to the more traditional concept of Plato, would be more like a contemporary artist than a contemporary philosopher. They would not even necessarily be searching for the truth.

These 'new philosophers' are the Übermensch - and coupled with this 'think outside the box' attitude, they have a strong Will to Power, which makes them the perfect leader. They crave solitude, when independence is not necessary or normally preferred, which Nietzsche says is an example of exercising the will to power over oneself - he also calls it a 'privilege of the

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strong'. Plato agrees, and says that the ' philosopher follows truth alone'. These new philosopher ' overmen' don't follow the rules that are currently put in place by Christianity and ' slave morality' like ' self-sacrifice for one's neighbour' and ' self-denial'. Similarly to Plato's philosopher kings, these Ubermensch/new philosophers are uncommitted to anyone or anything, and they are not afraid to break the boundaries currently put in place by political authorities.

Of course, these philosophers that are in power must be significantly different from those that we call ' philosophers' today. Nietzsche says that ' every great philosophy so far has been just the personal confession of its author' - meaning that philosophy is subjective and just based and what you want to believe and think. Here, social class, education, religion, parents and friends all play a part in what you write down as your philosophy. As previously mentioned, Nietzsche wants to use people who are free thinkers, someone that yearns to be ' set free from the crowd'.

Plato agrees when Adeimantus says that ' people who study philosophy too long become weird, roguish creatures, useless to society' - philosophers aren't currently as useful to politics as they should be, according to both theories of authority. There are other examples of when a more metaphysical concept has been implemented by an authority. Religious people often hold God (rather than the Forms or the free thinkers of Nietzsche) as the ultimate authority, and although we have discussed briefly the problems with making this the law of a state (as in theocracy), this religious politics may not be a bad idea. For example, if those with authority look to God for advice on political matters, it gives them a chance to think

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about and 'receive information' (either from God, or simply thinking it through in prayer, or even through the morals in religious scripture - this needn't be a discussion of religious philosophy) about what may be the better decision. Obviously, if we take the Forms to be incorrect (as most people do), then God would be the ultimate good, which means that those that 'understand God' would have to hold the power, rather than philosophers.

Of course, there has to be a line drawn between looking to God (or another spiritual being) for advice and forcing views on other people. Plato would argue that the people don't know what is good for them, and so should trust whatever the authority says, but this isn't a realistic idea for people of today, who have fought for free speech for centuries. Nietzsche would both agree and disagree with this. He would agree in that the *Übermensch* are the only ones that can be truly rulers, and that the vast majority of people don't know what's good for them. However, he wouldn't necessarily say that this was a bad thing, as if slaves are happy being slaves, then they have less of the Will to Power and therefore do (in a sense) know what's good for themselves personally.

Of course, even if we convert Plato's theory on Authority to be based around any religious ideals then it is still an argument against democracy in that if an Authority must have something to be a 'good' ruler, there is no point in asking the untrained masses to vote for a 'good' ruler. They wouldn't, presumably, be able to understand the Forms, or God, sufficiently enough to choose an Authority (or even understand that there could be an Authority) that would do the job to Plato's standards. Another Plato's philosopher kings

rely on their knowledge of the Forms to provide their moral code, which is then implemented upon the Republic. The Form of the Good provides the perfect moral code upon which to base the real (material) moral code. This is one of the main reasons why Plato requires his rulers to have philosophical knowledge - they need to know the moral code upon which to base their own. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believes that everything is subjective, based on experience and opinion of the individual.

This means that his philosopher supermen don't need to implement a moral code; their only morals are the will to power. Even if this seems like a good idea within the context of Plato's Republic, this Authority wouldn't make sense in today's politics. For example, there are many various types of religion, and within those religions, thousands of sub-sets. This means that, even without using the Forms, that this theocracy idea couldn't be imposed without some force (the implications of which will be discussed later).

Secondly, using one type of morality based on dogmatic principles wouldn't hold sway for a similar reason - there would be complaints (or even uprisings) about the lack of freedoms this gives. These are practical reasons for the change not to take place. However, there are implications even if this were to be used in an ideal society (where all good ideas based upon an interchangeable ultimate value would be easily implemented with consequences). It's not ideal, from many viewpoints, to force everyone to hold the same viewpoint (although Plato would argue that there is only one true viewpoint) and Nietzsche's subjectivism would agree. Human nature would be indulged in an ideal world, if happiness was the ultimate value, and this calls for freedom to be a central concept of any Authority. Freedom to

vote, to those in the UK, seems to be a basic human right with few restrictions.

This means that democracy would seem to be part of an ideal society in pursuit of happiness. There are good reasons for this - we all have subjective opinions (as Nietzsche rightly said) and these need to be reflected in the way we are governed by an authority. For example, in most other situations, we would consult someone who we believe to be an 'authority' on a subject. If we are ill, we talk to a doctor. If we want to dine out, we will consult a restaurant critic.

Therefore, it seems sensible to leave governmental decisions to those with political knowledge. However, the teaching of medicine is universally taught in a similar (if not identical) way - there is little room for a subjective opinion. The more subjective something is, the less we can trust it. The restaurant critic, for example, will sway our views either way, but it probably won't be the final judgment. The reason it will still sway us is that there is still 'good' and 'bad' food.

Politics, however, is different. Everything in politics is completely dependant on moral views, upbringing, teaching, the media and even the way your brain works. We cannot trust teachers of politics to be completely impartial when teaching the political theories. Teachers of religious studies are usually biased towards Christianity in this country, and politics teachers would probably be the same.

People wouldn't be happy with simply 'going along with' what the politicians say - that's why people have died for democracy. Everyone has different

views, and democracy is the best way to incorporate all (or most) of these when creating a government. There is, however, a problem with the amount of democracy to allow. The current system in the United Kingdom is for people to vote in a representative that they trust to make similar decisions to those that they would choose. Of course, the representative cannot be trusted to have exactly the same views, and therefore, should the vote be more open? If people were allowed to vote on any topic that interests them, what would happen? The government may be forced to ban petrol cars.

The main question is, is it really democratic once elected? The system in the UK is not fully democratic. Plato would argue that the only way for a government to make truly 'right' decisions (and therefore decisions that the public would have to agree with - there's nothing to disagree with if something is 'right') is for them to know 'good' - be trained in abstract thought and philosophy. So democracy, to be worthwhile, perhaps needs to be more democratic, or Plato and Nietzsche have the right idea. Jeremy Bentham famously associated utilitarianism with democracy - he believed that one vote per person would lead to 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. This is because human nature naturally tends to lead us towards pleasure, as opposed to pain.

And, because everyone has this same desire towards pleasure, democracy would effectively allow all of us to vote for pleasure, so to speak. This seems like a more feasible idea than relying on someone who, although in theory 'doesn't have personal interests', probably would be biased. Humans do tend to avoid pain, so an open vote would lead us away from pain.