

Ideal characteristics of plato's guardians essay



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Ideal Characteristics of Plato's Guardians The characteristics of the ideal guardian is summarized in those words by Socrates in the second book of the Republic : "[H]e who is to be a really good and noble guardian of the State will require to unite in himself philosophy and spirit and swiftness and strength. . . ." Swiftness and strength is deemed necessary as the guardian is to be like a well-bred watchdog, who ought to be " quick to see, and swift to overtake the enemy when they see him, and strong too, if when they have caught him, they have to fight with him. The requirement of ' spirit' is then derived from this, because if he is to fight well he ought to be brave, and Socrates finds that he is not likely to be brave who has not spirit, and that " the presence of it makes the soul of any creature to be absolutely fearless. " Finally, it is also found that the guardian must be a philosopher, or a lover of wisdom. With only strength and spirit, the guardians, Socrates says, will likely be savage against each other, which is certainly undesirable. The guardians ought to be dangerous only to their enemies, but gentle to their friends.

Therefore, he must have that quality which enables him to " distinguish the face of a friend and of an enemy only by the criterion of knowing and not knowing. " This quality, Socrates says, is love for learning or wisdom, or philosophy. These characteristics are developed and nurtured by education. Socrates prescribes musical education for the soul, and gymnastics for the body. This musical education seems not to refer to ' music' in the modern sense; it includes tales, poetry, myth - what we would call ' arts', though this in turn would include things seemingly not included by Socrates.

Their education, or at least the education that Socrates specifies, is moral in nature, rather than intellectual. It involves the censoring of certain tales, and retaining only those that would promote the virtues required of a guardian. There is a censorship of certain harmonies that are too 'relaxed'. God must not be depicted as lying, committing injustice, etc. Heroes should not be seen lamenting or fearing death. In short, only virtues which are desirable shall be depicted in their tales, and none that are undesirable which children might imitate.

The gymnastic education that Socrates prescribes is not as complicated. He rather merely says that it would be sufficient for their purposes that those being reared to be guardians maintain a healthy diet and follow a simple exercise plan from youth. What is more emphasized by Socrates is that there should be balance in the study of both gymnastics and music, and that these studies should be properly harmonized. Those who neglect gymnastics will tend to be soft, but on the other hand, those who likewise neglect music will tend to savagery.

As Socrates says, "this ferocity only comes from spirit, which if rightly educated, would give courage, but, if too much intensified, is liable to become hard and brutal." He continues, "On the other hand the philosopher will have the quality of gentleness. And this also, when too much indulged, will turn to softness, but, if educated rightly will be gentle and moderate." Thus the traits that make a good guardian are developed and nurtured through a good balance of musical and gymnastic education. That portion in the second book is where the qualities are actually first enumerated.

The discussion will deviate a little in the third to the fifth books, and the subject will be brought up again in the sixth book. There Socrates will elaborate on what it means that the guardians should be 'philosophers', as he earlier prescribed, and thereby add to the required qualities: truthfulness, liberality, finds pleasure in learning, has a good memory, possessing a "naturally well-proportioned and gracious mind". To persons with such qualities, Socrates says, "to these only you will entrust the State."

These qualities he derives in the most part from the prior consideration that they should have a philosophic nature. Indeed in this part, he seems merely intent to determine what the qualities of true philosophers are, and not exactly those who are to be rulers, but of course we know that it is these philosophers whom Socrates finds suitable to be the rulers of their ideal state. Of those who have the quality of truthfulness Socrates says, "they will never intentionally receive into their mind falsehood, which is their detestation, and they will love the truth." And then of the liberal he says, "there should be no secret corner of illiberality; nothing can be more antagonistic than meanness to a soul which is ever longing after the whole of things both divine and human." Evidently, this he prescribes so that the guardians will not be hard in their dealings with the people. He adds the requirement of a good memory, so that the things that he has learned he would retain.

One who is forgetful will end up merely an "empty vessel", and as Socrates says, "labouring in vain, he must end in hating himself and his fruitless occupation." And the last quality of having a well-proportioned and gracious mind he requires so that the guardian would naturally "move spontaneously

towards the true being of everything". We may observe from these characteristics that Socrates prescribes what particular ends are deemed important: some for usefulness in war, some for good governance, mostly we may observe it is for the common good.

Some of the characteristics are actually prescribed precisely because they achieve such ends, but most are just what are ideally what Socrates found to be characteristics of the best of men. The whole scheme, I must admit, did sound strange to me as I read it, and imagine that it is the same with most others. It would be very strange to most people because it is vastly different from what is actually done in the real world.

In the context of the Philippines, the election of leaders is surely not based on who is the best or who is most fit to rule, not to mention they are not especially selected and trained from childhood to be the rulers when they grow older. In the Philippine constitution no strict requirements are mentioned regarding who shall be allowed to rule but that he or she " is a natural-born citizen of the Philippines, a registered voter, able to read and write, at least forty years of age on the day of the election, and a resident of the Philippines for at least ten years immediately preceding such election. Art. VII. Sec. 2)" In a charitable account of how this country selects its leaders, we could say it is rather based on the number and greatness of achievements, their educational backgrounds, and experience. But more meanly put, we might still accurately say that the leaders are selected according to popularity, name recall, endorsements from other people, etc. However, this really are necessary consequences of pricing the freedom of

the people to each have a voice, to select who it is who shall rule over them, which is definitely absent from the scheme in this ideal state.

But though the scheme and the process are near impossible to adapt into actual governments currently existing, and indeed perhaps we really wouldn't want to, the qualities themselves are reasonable and we may as well take them into consideration. Such qualities as truthfulness, liberality, etc. , we would easily accept as indeed desirable qualities in a ruler. But then again, these qualities are here proposed in a very transcendent and almost mystical sense.

For example, the quality of truthfulness that Socrates here prescribes seems more than just the typical honesty that we really do take into consideration when electing our leaders. It involves some idea of ' a love for truth', and that ' falsity shall be his detestation'. It would be rather strange if we select our leaders with such expressions in mind. Such is the strangeness of the scheme that Plato proposed in the Republic, regarding the election of rulers in the state. For him what is important is that the best shall rule, vastly unlike what we value: a government that is ' of the people, by the people, and for the people'.