

# The Concept of Philosopher King: A Double-Edged Sword in Political Context

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## Abstract

Plato's concept of the philosopher king in political leadership was the focal point of this article. The study analysed the inherent risks and positive aspects of this concept, delving into its implications in modern governance. Through deductive and critical review analytic methods, the motives behind the philosopher king concept were explored, drawing insights from various documents, including Plato's works. The analysis highlighted the importance of wisdom and leadership skills in addressing political instability and social issues caused by ineffective leadership. However, concerns were raised regarding representation, potential authoritarianism, and limitations on adaptability and innovation in governance. Additionally, the article emphasized the need to consider education for all in a society where matters of the state concerned everyone, challenging the notion of a single wise ruler. Particularly relevant to African politics, the study emphasized the significance of democratic institutions and accountability. By critically evaluating the philosopher king concept, this article aimed to foster inclusive and effective governance models both globally and in Africa. Furthermore, it is a matter of fact that political instability in many societies is the outcome of poor leadership which lacks the wisdom and skills of leadership. All social problems are the results of poor leadership in political matters as politics is naturally inherent to man which the article addressed. This means that man is a social animal in which politics works as a means to keep people together for the good of all. The article articulated the crosscutting issues whereby currently societies experience the heavy burden of having poor leadership which fails to settle disputes rather than creating them, and failure to work for the good of all the subordinates rather than the individual benefits of the few people. Politics in our current society needs wise and educated leaders

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rather than educated ones.

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## Introduction

The concept of an ideal being, particularly the philosopher king, has been a subject of philosophical discourse for centuries. Plato's hierarchy of beings provides a framework to understand different levels of existence, with humans occupying varying positions based on their qualities and attributes (Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII).<sup>2</sup> At the highest level of this hierarchy, the philosopher kings are regarded as the most knowledgeable and integrated beings capable of leading others with wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

In the political context, the concept of the philosopher king carries both positive and negative implications.<sup>4</sup> On one hand, it serves as a safeguard against the pitfalls of majority rule, which often involves the ignorance of the common people. By entrusting power to those who possess profound wisdom and understanding, the philosopher king concept aims to mitigate the risks associated with uninformed decision-making. On the other hand, there is the inherent danger of the philosopher king succumbing to personal agendas and creating dictatorial regimes that undermine the interests and freedoms of the populace.

## Statement of the Problem

Scholars have extensively debated the concept of the philosopher king and its impact on political governance. Salkever<sup>5</sup> advocates for the philosopher king as a means to achieve political stability and justice, while Scott<sup>6</sup> criticizes it for its potential to pave the way for tyranny. Building upon these scholarly discussions, this article aims to explore the multifaceted nature of the philosopher king concept, particularly in the realm of politics.

By exploring both the positive and negative aspects of the philosopher king, this article seeks to illuminate the complexities and potential dangers associated with its implementation. It emphasizes the delicate balance between the pursuit of knowledge and the preservation of democratic principles. Understanding the dual nature of the philosopher king is crucial in comprehending the intricate relationship between intellectual authority and political power. Through a critical examination of this concept, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the philosopher king and its implications for political governance. By shedding light on the intricacies involved, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and considerations inherent in the pursuit of an ideal ruler within Plato's philosophical framework.

## Objectives

### General Objectives

The general objective of this study is to analyse the concept of Philosopher King as a double-edged sword in the political context

### Specific Objectives

- i) Examine aspects of philosopher king
- ii) To explore negative aspects of philosopher king
- iii) To examine implication of philosopher king on political governance

## Methodology

The study utilized deductive and critical review analytic methods to investigate Plato's concept of the philosopher king in political leadership. The deductive approach established a logical framework, guiding the exploration of specific research questions. The critical review

<sup>2</sup> R.A BARKER, "The nature of leadership," 469.

<sup>3</sup> PLATO, *The Republic*, Book X, 596b.

<sup>4</sup> B. S. FEINBERG, "Creativity and the political community," 471.

<sup>5</sup> S.G. SALKEVER, *Finding the mean*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> D. SCOTT, "Plato's critique of the democratic character," 19.

analyzed various documents, including Plato's works, scholarly articles, and relevant literature, to extract key insights. This systematic methodology enabled the researchers to synthesize relevant findings and ensure reliability and validity. The successful outcomes highlight the effectiveness of the deductive and critical review analytic methods in providing a comprehensive understanding of the philosopher king concept and its implications for modern governance.

### Significance of the study

This study holds significance for academicians, political forums, and government leaders. It provides valuable insights into Plato's concept of the philosopher king and its implications for leadership. Academicians can use this research as a foundation for further studies, while political forums and government leaders can gain a deeper understanding of effective governance and decision-making. The findings and discussions contribute to evaluating leadership qualities and informing leadership practices for the benefit of society.

### Literature review

#### The concept of Philosopher-King

The concept of the philosopher king, as suggested by Plato in his theory of the ideal state, has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Plato envisions in his work, *The Republic* the philosopher king as a ruler who attains their position through talent and merit, achieved after a rigorous period of training and discipline in various aspects of life, including work, leadership, and formal study.<sup>8</sup> The philosopher king is described as someone liberated from the slavery of sensory desires, whose life is shaped by true knowledge and guided by understanding the world of ideas.<sup>9</sup> Their life becomes their philosophy, and they rule their inner city in a state of peace. According to Plato, only the philosopher king is truly fit to govern others.

The concept of the philosopher king aligns with the importance of qualified leadership and continuous learning in modern politics, while critics argue that it can lead to elitism and exclusion.<sup>10</sup> Technocratic governance models, where experts are appointed based on their knowledge, serve as concrete examples. However, such models may undermine democratic representation. The subjective nature of true knowledge and the need for diverse perspectives pose challenges. Balancing qualified leadership with democratic principles, inclusive decision-making, and diverse perspectives is crucial in contemporary politics.

Plato asserts that until philosophers become kings or until kings possess the spirit and power of philosophy, cities will never be free from their inherent evils.<sup>11</sup> This ideal ruler, in order to build the inner city, must pursue true virtue and wisdom.<sup>12</sup> Their conduct should not be based on personal opinions but modelled on the transcendent form of virtue, the idea of the ideal human being. In his *Meditation*, Marcus Aurelius supports this by arguing that the virtuous ruler must have attributes of self-discipline, wisdom, justice, and the pursuit of the common good.<sup>13</sup> The implication here is that the rational part of the ruler's soul should dominate over the less noble elements within them. In Plato's view, the philosopher king represents the

<sup>7</sup> J. Neu, "Plato's Analogy of State and Individual," 238.

<sup>8</sup> M. Schofield, *Plato: political philosophy*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> C. Rohmann, *A world of ideas: A dictionary of important theories, concepts, beliefs, and thinkers*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> S.E STUMPH, *Socrates to Sartre*, 70

<sup>11</sup> PLATO, *Republic Bk V*, 133

<sup>12</sup> S.E STUMPH, *Socrates to Sartre*, 70

<sup>13</sup> M. AURELIUS, - al. *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, 76.

supreme and completely rational ruler of a utopian state, as proposed in *The Republic*.<sup>14</sup> Basically, Plato's concept has strengths in its emphasis on the connection between philosophy and governance. By placing philosophers in positions of political power, Plato contends that those with a deep understanding of truth and justice are best suited to rule. This idea has parallels in the works of other philosophers, including Confucius,<sup>15</sup> Locke,<sup>16</sup> and Mill,<sup>17</sup> who also advocated for philosopher-king ideals.

The principles of being a ruler, as outlined by Plato, include guarding against excessive poverty or wealth within the state, limiting the state to a size consistent with unity and self-sufficiency, maintaining the rule of justice, and ensuring that every citizen fulfils their specific function.<sup>18</sup> Plato emphasizes that the interpretation and application of these principles should be carried out not by all members of society, but by those who possess the competence, virtue, and philosophical temperament required.<sup>19</sup> The rulers are expected to sacrifice their own interests and desires for private property and instead embrace common property.<sup>20</sup> Plato draws a comparison between the role of the philosopher king and that of a ship's captain, highlighting the importance of expertise and education in holding authority over the ideal state. The rulers, both men and women, should be selected from those who exhibit the necessary aptitude, and the ruling class should share spouses, children, and property, thereby forming a brotherhood.<sup>21</sup> According to Plato, philosophers should be kings or kings should be philosophers, as the combination of political power and intellectual wisdom is crucial for the ideal state to achieve justice.<sup>22</sup> While the detailed realization of this ideal may be unlikely in existing city-states, vesting power in even one philosopher king would be a step toward approaching the partial establishment of the ideal.

Plato also delineates the qualities that a man must acquire to become a philosopher king. The philosopher king must possess both the authority of a ruler and the intellectual and moral powers of a philosopher.<sup>23</sup> One should embody the spirit and power of philosophy and the convergence of political greatness and wisdom should be inherent in them.<sup>24</sup> Philosopher king alone can perceive the essence of all time and existence, seeing beyond superficialities and illusions to discern the truth of things. The philosopher kings should excel in every action of their lives and in every branch of knowledge, ultimately seeking the universal light that illuminates all things and represents absolute good.<sup>25</sup> According to Plato, philosophers should make philosophy their primary pursuit but also engage in politics and ruling when their turn comes, considering it a matter of duty rather than heroic action.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Plato emphasizes the role and lifestyle arguing that the philosopher king must serve society rather than expecting society to serve them.<sup>27</sup> They are mandated to work for

<sup>14</sup> P. ANGELS, *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, 227

<sup>15</sup> CONFUCIUS. *Analects*, 234.

<sup>16</sup> J. LOCKE, *Two Treatises of Government*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> J. S. MILL, *Utilitarianism*, 76.

<sup>18</sup> S.E STUMPH, *Socrates to Sartre*, 70

<sup>19</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 473.

<sup>20</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 474.

<sup>21</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 475.

<sup>22</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 476.

<sup>23</sup> R.K. SPRAGUE, *Plato's Philosopher-King*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> R.K. SPRAGUE, *Plato's Philosopher-King*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> T.C. BRICKHOUSE, *Plato's Philosopher-King*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> R.K. SPRAGUE, *Plato's Philosopher-King*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 479.

the interest and well-being of society.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Plato suggests that the ruler or philosopher king should not have families or possess private property. They should only possess a few personal necessities, avoiding even the touch of silver or gold. Their meals should be simple, taken at a common table, and they should live in communal dwellings reminiscent of barracks, creating a sense of unity and shared responsibility. By having nothing of their own, the rulers can dedicate their time and efforts to the public interest rather than being distracted by personal pursuits. This sacrifice is seen as essential for rulers to fulfil their duties and work for the common good. Conversely, if rulers were allowed personal possessions, they may be tempted to prioritize their own interests over the welfare of the society they are meant to govern.

While the practical application of Plato's political concepts, particularly in African countries with their varied political, social, and economic landscapes, may encounter challenges due to their unique complexities and historical contexts, an essential facet that resonates with Plato's notion pertains to leaders' devotion to serving the interest and well-being of society. In certain African countries, corruption and the misuse of power have persisted as formidable obstacles. To effectively tackle these issues, leaders must exhibit selflessness in their commitment to the citizenry, prioritizing societal development and welfare. This necessitates their firm resistance against the allure of personal gain, directing their efforts toward the attainment of the common good, aligning with Plato's counsel.

In terms of family and private property, African leaders often have families and personal possessions. However, the key point to draw from Plato's idea is the need for leaders to avoid prioritizing personal interests over the welfare of the society.<sup>29</sup> African leaders should be held accountable for their actions and decisions, ensuring that their personal pursuits do not impede their ability to effectively govern and address the challenges facing their nations.

### **The Educational Pathway to Unearth and Nurture the Philosopher King**

In preparing and nurturing a philosopher king, Plato emphasizes the significance of education as the sole means of identifying and preparing an ideal and wise ruler. Education, in Plato's view, is not about simply imparting knowledge to the soul but about directing the soul's attention towards the right objects. He believes that true education should be a voluntary and playful process, as free individuals learn best when not compelled.<sup>30</sup>

Plato proposes a comprehensive system of education where all children, regardless of social status, are raised together by the state from 0 to 18 years old. This egalitarian approach ensures that every child receives the same education, irrespective of their background or origin.<sup>31</sup>

The educational journey continues from ages 18 to 20, focusing on physical formation and intellectual and physical development. Students undergo a general test, and those who pass proceed to study arithmetic and geometry for ten years. This mathematical foundation serves as a preparation for philosophical dialectics, aiming to shift their focus from the sensible world of beliefs to the intelligible world of knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

While all children have the potential to become philosopher kings within this system, they are later selected based on their qualities and capacities. Some are chosen for labour, some for guardianship, and only a select few are deemed fit to be rulers. This process is designed to

<sup>28</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 479.

<sup>29</sup> PLATO, *Republic* Bk v, 480.

<sup>30</sup> J. JORDAN, *Western philosophy*, 111

<sup>31</sup> J. JORDAN, *Western philosophy*, 111

<sup>32</sup> J. JORDAN, *Western philosophy*, 111

orient them towards philosophical pursuits and acquaint them with mathematical forms as a foundation for engaging in philosophical dialectics.<sup>33</sup>

Those who excel in mathematics move on to study dialectics for five years, focusing on argumentation and logic to learn how to conduct arguments without contradiction.<sup>34</sup> Finally, those who succeed in dialectics undergo practical experience as public servants in subordinate positions for fifteen years, from ages 35 to 50. Those who demonstrate exceptional competence and distinction throughout their lives become the elite members of the state – qualified as philosopher kings or philosophers and rulers. They embody the culmination of the state’s educational system and are regarded as the most capable leaders.<sup>35</sup>

### Findings

In this section researchers addressed various findings speculated but relating to three objectives on the Philosopher King.

#### Positive Perspectives

This section examines the positive aspects of the philosopher king concept in political context, exploring how it can provide a mechanism for avoiding the dangers of majority rule and ensuring that wise and knowledgeable leaders are in charge.

The philosopher king concept offers several potential benefits when applied to governance.<sup>36</sup> One significant advantage is the avoidance of the pitfalls associated with majority rule. In a democratic system solely based on majority decisions, there is a risk of irrational or uninformed choices being made, which can lead to detrimental outcomes for society. The philosopher king, with their wisdom and knowledge, acts as a safeguard against such risks. Their rational and informed decision-making can help steer the state towards more favourable outcomes, guided by a deep understanding of the true nature of things.

Furthermore, the philosopher king’s commitment to pursuing knowledge and truth can contribute to effective and enlightened leadership. By dedicating their lives to philosophy and acquiring comprehensive knowledge, philosopher kings possess a unique perspective that transcends mere opinion and appearances. This allows them to make informed decisions that align with the greater good and long-term stability of the state. Their emphasis on virtue and wisdom serves as a guiding principle for governance, fostering justice and fairness in the application of laws and policies.

Additionally, the philosopher king’s detachment from personal interests and possessions reinforces their focus on serving the society. By eschewing private wealth and material possessions, they can devote their undivided attention to the welfare of the state and its citizens. This selflessness can help ensure that leaders prioritize the common good over personal gain, fostering an environment of trust and accountability.

#### Negative Perspectives

This section may explore the negative aspects of the philosopher king concept, including the potential dangers of creating dictatorships and the risks associated with giving too much power to a single individual.

Throughout history, the philosopher king concept has been associated with the potential danger of creating dictatorships.<sup>37</sup> This negative perspective is evident in instances where leaders with unchecked power, claiming to possess superior wisdom and knowledge, have

<sup>33</sup> J. JORDAN, *Western philosophy*, 112

<sup>34</sup> F. NOVOTNY, *The posthumous life of Plato*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> F. NOVOTNY, *The posthumous life of Plato*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> R. KRAUT, *Plato's Republic: critical essays*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> A. MALVIYA, “Khomeinis of Iran and the Idea of Philosopher King,” 3.

abused their authority and suppressed dissenting voices. A prominent example can be found in ancient Rome, where Julius Caesar's consolidation of power as a dictator ultimately led to the downfall of the Roman Republic and the establishment of imperial rule.<sup>38</sup>

One of the risks associated with the philosopher king concept is the concentration of too much power in the hands of a single individual. While the idea of a wise and knowledgeable ruler may be appealing, history has shown that even the most virtuous leaders can succumb to the temptations of authoritarianism. When power becomes centralized, it undermines checks and balances, erodes accountability, and increases the likelihood of abuse. Absolute power has the potential to corrupt even those initially driven by noble intentions.

Another negative aspect of the philosopher king concept is its tendency to overlook the importance of diverse perspectives and the participation of the broader society in decision-making. By placing sole authority in the hands of a single individual, there is a risk of excluding different voices, experiences, and expertise. This exclusionary approach can lead to a narrow-minded and biased governing style that fails to address the complex realities and diverse needs of the society at large.

Moreover, the philosopher king concept raises challenges regarding the transition of power from one ruler to the next. Questions arise as to who determines the successor and how they ensure that the next ruler possesses the same level of wisdom, virtue, and knowledge. The absence of clear mechanisms for succession can give rise to power struggles, instability, and potential conflicts, as seen in historical examples where the transfer of power resulted in wars and unrest.

Further, the emphasis on adhering to established truths and rejecting innovation within the philosopher king concept can hinder progress and societal development. Rulers who rigidly cling to their own philosophical views may resist change, impeding social, political, and economic advancements. This lack of adaptability and openness to new ideas can restrict societal growth and limit the ability to effectively address emerging challenges.

### **Implications for Political Governance**

This section examines the implications of the philosopher king concept for political governance, discussing how it could be applied in practice and considering its potential benefits and drawbacks. The philosopher king concept carries both historical examples and implications for political governance, both globally and in the African context.

On a global scale, if the philosopher king concept is applied effectively, it could have positive implications for political governance. Leaders with a deep understanding of philosophy, ethics, and knowledge can make informed decisions that prioritize the common good, promote social justice, and address long-term societal challenges. For instance, Marcus Aurelius, a historical figure known as a philosopher king, governed the Roman Empire with wisdom and fairness, emphasizing the well-being of his subjects.<sup>39</sup>

However, there is a potential negative implication of the philosopher king concept, which is the limitation of representation and diversity in governance. Relying solely on the wisdom and knowledge of a single leader may exclude the voices and perspectives of various groups within society. This can result in decisions that fail to adequately address the needs and interests of marginalized communities or minority groups. Historical examples have shown that rulers claiming intellectual superiority or philosophical insights can perpetuate inequalities and create power imbalances.

<sup>38</sup> R.A. BILLOWS, *Julius Caesar: The colossus of Rome*, 88.

<sup>39</sup> A. MARCUS, *Meditations*, 76.



Another implication is the challenge of identifying and training suitable rulers. Establishing a rigorous and specialized education system to nurture individuals with the qualities of wisdom, virtue, and philosophical understanding is subjective and prone to bias. Determining who is qualified to rule based on intellectual capacity can be contentious. Additionally, the training of philosopher kings requires significant time and resources, which may not be feasible in practical political contexts.

Concentrating power in the hands of a philosopher king also carries the risk of authoritarianism and the abuse of power. While the concept envisions wise and just rulers, there is no guarantee that individuals will always act in the best interests of the people. Without proper checks and balances, a philosopher king may become detached from the needs and aspirations of the broader society, leading to oppressive governance and the suppression of dissent. Historical examples, such as Caligula in ancient Rome, demonstrate how philosopher kings can turn dictatorial.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, the philosopher king concept may limit adaptability and innovation in governance. Strict adherence to established truths and philosophical doctrines can hinder the exploration of new ideas and approaches. Successful governance often requires flexibility, experimentation, and the incorporation of diverse perspectives, which may not align with the traditional framework of a philosopher king.

Applying the philosopher king concept to African politics also presents implications. Leaders with a deep understanding of philosophy, ethics, and knowledge can make informed decisions that prioritize the common good, social justice, and long-term societal development in Africa. This could lead to policies addressing specific challenges, such as poverty alleviation, healthcare improvement, or environmental sustainability. However, the risk of limited representation and exclusion of diverse voices in African countries must be considered. Diverse ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds necessitate inclusive governance that considers the perspectives and interests of marginalized communities and minority groups.

Identifying and training suitable leaders in African countries is a significant challenge. Implementing a comprehensive training program for philosopher kings would require substantial resources and reforms in educational infrastructure and curricula, which may be challenging given existing educational system limitations.

To prevent authoritarianism and the abuse of power, strong democratic institutions, separation of powers, and a culture of accountability are necessary in African political governance. The exploration of new ideas and approaches should also be encouraged, allowing for adaptability and innovation in addressing Africa's unique challenges.

### Conclusion

The concept of the philosopher king has been explored in this article, examining its implications for political governance. While it can have positive implications, such as informed decision-making and policies prioritizing the common good, there are potential drawbacks. One concern is the limitation of representation and diversity in governance, as relying on a single individual's wisdom and knowledge may exclude the voices of various groups, perpetuating inequalities. Identifying and training suitable rulers and addressing the risk of authoritarianism and abuse of power are also crucial. Additionally, the philosopher king concept may hinder adaptability and innovation in governance by emphasizing established truths and impeding the exploration of new ideas. Applying the concept to African

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<sup>40</sup> J.R. DUNKLE, "The rhetorical tyrant in Roman historiography: Sallust, Livy and Tacitus." 12.

politics has its own implications, including the risk of limited representation and the challenge of identifying and training suitable leaders. Strong democratic institutions and accountability are essential in this context. In conclusion, a critical evaluation of the philosopher king concept is necessary, considering its benefits and drawbacks globally and in Africa. Further research should refine and adapt the concept, addressing concerns related to representation, power concentration, adaptability, and innovation in governance to foster effective and inclusive governance models.

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