understood either as pleasure or as what people want. So knowledge of what is good for society just is knowledge of what people want (or what gives them pleasure). A utilitarian would argue that, in Plato’s simile of beast, politicians are right to think that their study of what pleases the people is a study of what is good for society. If there isn’t a distinction between what is good and what pleases people, Plato’s arguments against democracy don’t work.

There are two responses to this objection. First, it is only as strong as the claim that utilitarianism is right, and there are many objections to utilitarianism. Second, even if it is true that what is good is what makes people happy, this doesn’t mean we should give people what they think they want. People often don’t know what makes them happy, and they tend to care more about short-term happiness. If people get it wrong about what will make them happy in the long-term, we shouldn’t ask them about what is good for society. Democracy will still not produce a good society. We need rulers who know about true, long-term happiness – this is the knowledge of the good that is necessary.

**Is politics only about the common good?**

Even if Plato is right about there being a distinction between what is good and what people want, we can argue that there are other values that (only) a democracy embodies, values that would be lost in Plato’s ideal republic. In other words, there are some good things a democracy has that other types of society do not.

First, we may object to Plato saying that the only freedom in a democracy is getting what you want. There is also the freedom of ‘self-rule’. While Plato might be right that it is valuable to choose what is good, John Stuart Mill argues that it is valuable simply to be able to live as you choose. Autonomy is essential, he argues, to human well-being, and a life in which someone else makes all the decisions for you is not a good life (*On Liberty*). In politics, this means that the people should have a say in the decisions about how to live. Being told how to live by those who know best – even if they do know best! – is not as good as being able to make the decisions oneself. Democracy is collective autonomy.

Second, Mill also argues that having this responsibility will make for better citizens, people whose rational and moral senses are developed. Plato is interested in a just society, one in which everyone respects the law and fulfils their own role. But he doesn’t say how the people should be educated so that they are happy to do this; he only talks about the education of the guardians. Mill argues that democracy is the best way to create citizens who understand and care about what is right.

Third, Mill argues that democracy expresses a sense of collective identity, of ‘being in it together’ (*On Representative Government*). This is good in itself. Human beings are social animals, as Plato recognises. It is part of a good human life to be able to identify with the society in which one lives, it is bad if one feels alienated. Again, Plato implies that everyone will feel part of the just society, happy to play their role. Mill argues that this is much more likely if everyone has a say in how society is run. Otherwise, they won’t feel that they, as individuals, are expressing themselves. Plato isn’t concerned with self-expression, only with what is good. We can argue that identifying with society through self-expression is a good thing, and only a democracy can have it.
If Plato is right, why think that democracy is going to be good rule? People are so often incompetent and irrational. In general elections, the way people vote is swayed by all sorts of irrational or personal desires and prejudices; thinking hard about what might be good for everyone is very rare, despite the fact that there is information available. How many people even bother to read party manifestos, let alone research the possible impact of different policies? Politicians – rulers – need many skills, knowledge, and insightful judgment; they need to understand economics, psychology, and motivation; they need intelligence, an enormous capacity for work, a good memory, attention to detail, and excellent people skills. (Many of these skills Plato has argued are the natural talents of the true philosopher.) We won’t get the best politicians by letting incompetent and irrational people to vote. We’ll get people who are willing to give the people what they want. But people don’t know much about what is good for society as a whole. And people care most – perhaps only – about getting the things they want for themselves. So if politicians give people what they want, they won’t be governing by what is best for the state. Plato argues that only philosophy gives us true and proper knowledge of what is good. It is philosophers, then, who ought to rule. Legitimacy is determined by what is good and just, and not by consent. Since people don’t know what is good for them, consent can only tell us what they want, not what is good. Choice, freedom, consent in the absence of knowing what is truly good is not valuable. What is valuable is to choose what is good. And to choose what is good, we first need to know what the true good is. Philosophers-rulers will organize society so that it is truly good.

**ASSESSING PLATO’S ARGUMENT**

Winston Churchill said that ‘Democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time’. So even if there is some truth in what Plato says, he might not be right to reject democracy. It is worth noting that Plato argues in favour of democracy in his more practical political work, *The Statesman*. There he says that democracy is resistant to the tyranny that could come about if rulers become corrupt.

**Are philosopher rulers a good idea?**

First, does studying philosophy provide you with the other qualities, especially virtue, that a good ruler needs? Given that even Plato is worried that philosophers will be corrupted, avoiding tyranny is a good reason to adopt democracy. Second, does knowledge of the Form of the Good really give you the practical knowledge you need to make good political decisions? Even if democracy is, as Plato claims, rule by ignorance, this is not a powerful criticism unless it is possible for there to be rule by knowledge.

**Knowledge of the good**

We may take this point further, and question whether there is such a thing as knowledge of the Good. In saying that there is, Plato argues that there is moral truth. But there are many philosophical arguments against this claim. If there is no moral truth, there is no knowledge of what is good. But then democracy is not rule by ignorance: ignorance requires there to be some knowledge that the person doesn’t have; but if there is no knowledge of what is good, no one can be said to be ignorant of it.

**What is the good?**

Plato’s criticism of democracy is that it gives people what they want, but not what is good. But according to utilitarianism, what is good is what makes people happy,
not naturally gifted nor love truth, who will be corrupt because they do not have the natural character to be virtuous. [Margin: How does society lead to the corruption of philosophers?]

If there are any true philosophers left in such a political state, they will be very few, and only remain true philosophers through some sort of miracle. And seeing the situation, ‘they will live quietly and keep to themselves’ (496d).

**THE SIMILE OF THE BEAST**

Plato’s simile of the ship not only provides an account of the status of philosophers. It also accuses democracy of being a form of government which is disordered and harmful: the crew turn the voyage into a ‘drunken pleasure-cruise’. Democracy is rule by ignorance, because politicians have no knowledge of what is good for the state as a whole; and rule by ignorance will be bad for everyone. Later in the Republic, Plato also argues that democracy is based on freedom of a particular kind – the freedom to do what you want. But if you don’t know what is good for you, then this kind of freedom is actually harmful (555b-558c). Politicians who just do what they want harm the whole state.

Plato illustrates both these points, about ignorance and the difference between what we like and what is good for us, in his simile of the beast. He compares people in a democracy to a powerful beast, and rulers in a democracy to the animal’s tamer. The rulers govern by giving people what they want, and pretend that this is a science, something to be taught and studied by politicians. But it completely misses the question of what is good. The tamer (politicians) ‘would not really know which of the creature’s tastes and desires was admirable or shameful, good or bad, right or wrong; he would simply use the terms on the basis of its reactions, calling what pleased it good, what annoyed it bad’ (494b-c).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>The simile of the beast</th>
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<td>The large and powerful animal</td>
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<td>The animal’s tamer</td>
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<td>Knowledge of the animal’s moods and desires</td>
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**PLATO’S ARGUMENT AGAINST DEMOCRACY**

In his two similes, and his arguments about why philosophers should be rulers, Plato makes a number of assumptions about the nature of politics.

First, he assumes that politics should be an attempt to bring about the common good. For example, a ship has a purpose for its journey. This purpose, and so what is good for the ship, is independent of the desires of the crew. Again, what an animal wants does not tell us whether what it wants is good. Likewise, what is good for the state as a whole is not determined by what people want.

Second, Plato thinks there can be knowledge about what this common good is and how to bring it about – the true navigator must study the art of navigation. Likewise, rulers need to have knowledge of the Good in order to rule well.
Plato on democracy

THE PRESENT STATUS OF PHILOSOPHERS

Plato is very aware that his suggestion that philosophers become rulers will not be taken seriously by most people. Adeimantus objects that most people who study philosophy too much are ‘very odd birds, not to say thoroughly vicious’, and that even the best of them become completely useless to society (487d). This, then, is their present status – and it does not recommend making them rulers! Plato responds to the charge of uselessness by the simile of the ship, and then tackles the issue of corruption in philosophers. His argument is that the present status of philosophers says a lot about society, but little about true philosophers.

The simile of the ship

The simile of the ship (488a-489a) is intended to describe politics in a democracy. Politicians each seek to gain power, and they admire those able to help them do so. They do not know, and are not concerned with, what is good for the state – which is what politics should be about. They even argue that such knowledge is impossible. A philosopher, who spends time acquiring this knowledge, will be little help with how to influence other politicians. Unless his expertise is recognized, he will appear to be completely useless. But this is not because there is anything wrong with philosophers, but because politicians fail to make use of them. If philosophers seem useless, this is the fault of politicians, not philosophers.

| The ship | The state (under a democracy) |
| The captain | The current ruler |
| The crew | Politicians |
| The art of navigation | The art of politics (what is good for a state) |
| The true navigator | The philosopher |

Are philosophers vicious?

What about Adeimantus’s objection that philosophers are vicious (not virtuous)? Plato’s response is again to blame the situation, and not a training in philosophy. Plato argues that the natural qualities of the philosopher, in the wrong situation, become a source of corruption. Someone who is gifted will be sought after by other people, who will try to influence him. He will be ‘swamped by the flood of popular praise and blame, and carried away with the stream till he finds himself agreeing with popular ideas of what is admirable or disgraceful’ (492c). His training in philosophy, to seek the truth, will not be strong enough to withstand the constant pressure to do what people want. In fact, rather that sticking with philosophy, being gifted, he will become a leader (494b) and, winning popular praise, will become full of pride.

So, Plato argues, people with the ability to become true philosophers are corrupted by bad society, and end up agreeing with popular opinion. They may abandon philosophy to become politicians, and the corruption of their character will go further. In this situation, who actually practices philosophy? ‘Second-rate interlopers’, says Plato, people who are