

**CLASSICAL GREECE  
(4TH-5TH CENTURIES  
BCE): PLATO: THE  
REPUBLIC'S  
PHILOSOPHER KINGS**



# CLASSICAL GREECE (4TH-5TH CENTURIES BCE): PLATO: THE REPUBLIC'S PHILOSOPHER KINGS

## Description

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, including a full text analysis of book 6 of Plato's Republic, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the concept of rule by "philosopher kings" and how Plato / Socrates developed and defended the idea of philosophers leading society. Using this knowledge, students will then discuss and debate the notion of whether modern governments in the western world should look to philosophers as their leaders.

## Subjects

World History  
Philosophy

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Plato's Academy Ruins, Athens
- National Academy, Athens
- Athens Agora

## Essential Questions

- Who was Plato? What is his life story?
- What was Plato's relationship to Socrates?
- Where does Plato fit into the story of Ancient Greek Philosophy?
- What is the story of the "Philosopher Kings" from Plato's famous book, *The Republic*?
- How did one become a "philosopher" with enough wisdom to rule? Could or did anyone fit Plato's definition?

## Academic Summary

### Excerpts from – Plato: The Republic, Book 6

(conversation between Socrates and Glaucon)

Inasmuch as philosophers only are able to grasp the eternal and unchangeable, and those who wander in the region of the many and variable are not philosophers, I must ask you which of the two classes should be the rulers of our State ...

And are not those who are verily and indeed wanting in the knowledge of the true being of each thing, and who have in their souls no clear pattern, and are unable as with a painter's eye to look at the absolute truth and to that original to repair, and having perfect vision of the other world to order the laws about beauty, goodness, justice in this, if not already ordered, and to guard and preserve the order of them--are not such persons, I ask, simply blind?

Truly, he replied, they are much in that condition.

And shall they be our guardians when there are others who, besides being their equals in experience and falling short of them in no particular of virtue, also know the very truth of each thing?

There can be no reason, he said, for rejecting those who have this greatest of all great qualities; they must always have the first place unless they fail in some other respect. Suppose, then, I said, that we determine how far they can unite this and the other excellences.

By all means.

In the first place, as we began by observing, the nature of the philosopher has to be ascertained. We must come to an understanding about him, and, when we have done so, then, if I am not mistaken, we shall also acknowledge that such a union of qualities is possible, and that those in whom they are united, and those only, should be rulers in the State.

What do you mean?

Let us suppose that philosophical minds always love knowledge of a sort which shows them the eternal nature not varying from generation and corruption.

Agreed.

And further, I said, let us agree that they are lovers of all true being; there is no part whether greater or less, or more or less honorable, which they are willing to renounce; as we said before of the lover and the man of ambition.

True.

And if they are to be what we were describing, is there not another quality which they should also possess?

What quality?

Truthfulness: they will never intentionally receive into their minds falsehood, which is their detestation, and they will love the truth.

Yes, that may be safely affirmed of them.

"May be." my friend, I replied, is not the word; say rather, "must be affirmed:" for he whose nature is amorous of anything cannot help loving all that belongs or is akin to the object of his affections.

Right, he said.

And is there anything more akin to wisdom than truth?

How can there be?

Can the same nature be a lover of wisdom and a lover of falsehood?

Never.

The true lover of learning then must from his earliest youth, as far as in him lies, desire all truth?

Assuredly.

But then again, as we know by experience, he whose desires are strong in one direction will have them weaker in others; they will be like a stream which has been drawn off into another channel.

True.

He whose desires are drawn toward 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.

That is most certain.

Such a one is sure to be temperate and the reverse of covetous; for the motives which make another man desirous of having and spending, have no place in his character.

Very true.

Another criterion of the philosophical nature has also to be considered.

What is that?

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.

Most true, he replied.

Then how can he who has magnificence of mind and is the spectator of all time and all existence, think much of human life?

He cannot.

Or can such a one account death fearful?

No, indeed.

Then the cowardly and mean nature has no part in true philosophy?

Certainly not.

Or again: can he who is harmoniously constituted, who is not covetous or mean, or a boaster, or a coward--can he, I say, ever be unjust or hard in his dealings?

Impossible.

Then you will soon observe whether a man is just and gentle, or rude and unsociable; these are the signs which distinguish even in youth the philosophical nature from the unphilosophical.

True.  
 There is another point which should be remarked.  
 What point?  
 Whether he has or has not a pleasure in learning; for no one will love that which gives him pain, and in which after much toil he makes little progress.  
 Certainly not.  
 And again, if he is forgetful and retains nothing of what he learns, will he not be an empty vessel?  
 That is certain.  
 Laboring in vain, he must end in hating himself and his fruitless occupation?  
 Yes.  
 Then a soul which forgets cannot be ranked among genuine philosophic natures; we must insist that the philosopher should have a good memory?  
 Certainly.  
 And once more, the inharmonious and unseemly nature can only tend to disproportion?  
 Undoubtedly.  
 And do you consider truth to be akin to proportion or to disproportion?  
 To proportion.  
 Then, besides other qualities, we must try to find a naturally well-proportioned and gracious mind, which will move spontaneously toward the true being of everything.  
 And to men like him, I said, when perfected by years and education, and to these only you will entrust the State.

The previous passage comes from Book VI of Plato's most famous literary work, The Republic. It is one of the most studied passages from all of Plato's writings. The story itself is fairly straight forward, although archaic language can make it hard for some modern readers to follow. In The Republic, one of the longest pieces of literature from Ancient Greece, Plato dissects a number of different governmental systems trying to find the "true form", one that would govern a perfect society. Like most of his works, Plato's Republic was written as a series of conversations between Socrates and different characters. In these dialogues, the master (Socrates – Plato's teacher and mentor) uses images and stories to prove that most human beings possess little wisdom themselves, that society overall was corrupt, and that humanity needed a teacher/philosopher (such as Socrates) to show them the way to truth through the "light" of knowledge and understanding.

In this specific dialogue, Socrates (Plato's main character) is speaking with Glaucon, (who in real life happened to be Plato's older brother) about the characteristics of what constitutes an effective leader. After debating different human characteristics, the two men finally agree that that, at least in theory, the best leaders needed both knowledge and wisdom, the very attributes inherent in a philosopher. Socrates then logically suggests that philosophers should assume the mantle of leadership, not for themselves, but instead for the good of the people as a whole. Over the last 2000 years, this idea has come to be known as rule by "philosopher kings".

Plato lived during a turbulent time in Ancient Greece. Over the course of his adulthood, he witnessed the collapse of democracy in Athens, the rule by a tyrannical and violent oligarchy (led by members of Plato's own family), ultimately followed by the reestablishment of a democratic society that in 399 BC tried, convicted and executed his friend and mentor, Socrates, for corrupting the youth and heresy.

Plato was a student of Socrates, although not in the modern sense of the word. According to traditions written later about Socrates by his students (including Plato), Socrates was an old stonemason who one day put down his tools and proceeded to spend the remainder of his life wandering the streets of Athens questioning people and trying to gather knowledge and wisdom. Unfortunately, in a somewhat eerie parallel to Jesus of Nazareth, no writings attributed to Socrates survived to the modern age. Historians today aren't even sure that Socrates was literate. Everything we know about the great Athenian philosopher, his "wisdom", his travels, and his place in Athenian society, comes from later sources written by his disciples.

Along the way, the master (as Plato called Socrates) acquired a following of men hungry for his knowledge. According to multiple sources, Plato was a poet and a writer before he joined Socrates. After Socrates was executed, Plato went on to write and publish stories about his mentor. He later founded the "Academy", western civilization's first organized school, where he and others taught everything from philosophy and literature to science and mathematics.

Through the investigation of selected primary and secondary sources, including a full text analysis of Book 6 of Plato's Republic, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the concept of rule by "philosopher kings" and how Plato / Socrates developed and defended the idea of philosophers leading society. Using this knowledge, students will then discuss and debate the notion of whether modern governments in the western world should look to philosophers as their leaders.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the concept of rule by "philosopher kings" as defined by Plato through his book, The Republic.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Plato and Socrates developed and defended the idea of philosophers leading society in the ideal state.
3. Students will analyze, discuss and be able to explain their positions on whether modern governments in the western world should look to philosophers for positions of leadership.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What characteristics would you like to see in a leader? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Plato and Philosopher Kings (20 min)
- Video – AP Republic 6 (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Plato and The Republic, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework before class.
- Suggestion: Advanced/AP students should focus on primary sources.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on Plato's ideas in The Republic behind rule by "philosopher kings." (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ – Essay: Explain in detail the concept of rule by "philosopher kings" and how Plato / Socrates developed and defended the idea of philosophers leading society. Using this knowledge, students will then discuss and debate the notion of whether modern governments in the western world should look to philosophers as their leaders.

## Extension

### On tour: Plato's Academy in Athens

While on tour, students can visit the ruins of Plato's Academy in the Acadimia Platonos area of Athens. Founded in 387 BCE by Plato in a grove of sacred olive trees dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom, the Academy was the first institution dedicated to teaching critical thinking and higher learning in Western Civilization. At the school, Plato and others taught such varied subjects such as philosophy, literature, science and mathematics. According to tradition, Aristotle, who would go on to be a great philosopher, teacher and school leader in his own right, studied at the Academy for over 20 years. The academy had a long, but broken history (starting up a number of times over the next 800 or so years) until being shut down permanently by Byzantine emperor Justinian I in 529 CE because he feared it was a threat to Christianity. Admission to the archaeological site is free.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/plato-republic-philosopherking.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/plato-republic-philosopherking.asp)  
Plato: The Republic – The Philosopher King (primary source) – from the Ancient History Sourcebook at Fordham University
- <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.7.vi.html>  
Plato: The Republic – Book VI (primary source) – from the Internet Classics Archive at MIT
- [www.e-ir.info/2013/04/17/should-philosophers-rule/](http://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/17/should-philosophers-rule/)  
Plato's Argument for Rule by Philosopher Kings (academic essay)
- <http://oyc.yale.edu/political-science/plsc-114/lecture-6#ch3>  
Lecture 6 – Philosophers and Kings: Plato, Republic (website). From Stephen B. Smith, Professor of Political Science at Yale University. Great site containing a video lecture on the topic from Dr. Smith's Introduction to Political Philosophy class at Yale. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students and teachers.
- [http://puffin.creighton.edu/eselk/intro-phil\\_on-line-course/plato\\_republic/plato\\_republic\\_pg9.htm](http://puffin.creighton.edu/eselk/intro-phil_on-line-course/plato_republic/plato_republic_pg9.htm)  
Philosopher Kings (website) – from Creighton University (NE)
- [www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/republic/section6.rhtml](http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/republic/section6.rhtml)  
Summary: Book VI (website) – great resource to help students understand what they're reading
- <https://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0BwkloFM5OQURZmFkYTU5NjMtMGUwMy00Nk1LWEzZmtODJhN2Y4ZDNjOTI&hl=en&authkey=CKSsYYM>  
Plato: The Philosopher King (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6F8vBgbhrk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6F8vBgbhrk)  
Plato the Philosopher King (video) – 15-minute video lecture on Plato's Republic, Book 6.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=63www\\_MFg7g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63www_MFg7g)  
AP, Republic 6 (video) – 15-minute video from Dr. Tim McGee, AP English and philosophy teacher at Worland High School (WY). Highly recommended for all classes, and especially AP/Advanced students.

### Background Information

- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato)  
Plato – Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platos\\_Republic](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platos_Republic)  
The Republic (Plato) – Wikipedia article
- [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher\\_king](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher_king)  
Philosopher King – Wikipedia article
- [www.passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/greece/country\\_profile](http://www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/greece/country_profile)  
On the Road: Greece – from Passports Educational Travel

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad)  
Ancient Greece – Homer's Iliad
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey)  
Ancient Greece – Homer's Odyssey
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization)  
Ancient Greece – Minoan Civilization on Crete
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Alexander the Great
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Sparta
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Athens
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Marathon 490 BCE
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Thermopylae: Leonidas and the 300
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Allegory of the Cave
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Euthyphro
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Philosopher Kings and the Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates)  
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Socrates: Father of Western Philosophy

## Key Terms

- Ancient Greece
- Philosopher
- Philosopher King
- Plato
- Republic
- Socrates
- Wisdom

