
Philosopher-Kings and Academic Advisers: Learning from *The Republic*

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Abstract: This paper engages with two deeply philosophical questions about academic advising: who should academic advisers be and what should be their aims? *The Republic* of Plato offers both substantive insights towards answering these questions and a novel form with which to explore them: the dialogue. The paper that follows is written as a dialogue, a discussion between the author, Plato, and a fictional interlocutor named Carla. After considering and discarding other possible arguments, the discussants eventually come to the conclusion that advisers should be like the philosophers of *The Republic*. The implications of this are many, including the notion that advisers should be involved in the process of curriculum development and revision. Beyond grappling with these substantive issues, the author utilizes the unconventional format of a dialogue to show how advisers could engage in philosophical thinking about academic advising.

Keywords: academic advising, Plato, dialogues

Written c. 380 BC, *The Republic* is a work laden with political theory, educational philosophy, metaphysics, and a number of frameworks and metaphors for human understanding, including the well-known allegory of “the cave.” The work as a whole is concerned with the creation of a new city and, along with it, a new society that is fundamentally just. For Plato, these things are deeply linked—the city and the citizen are in many ways the same, and the just city can arise only from a right ordering of the soul of the citizen. Divided into three classes, Plato’s polis consists of a ruling class of philosopher Guardians—duty-bound to rule only by virtue of their wisdom, rather than from their numbers or their power—along with a class of Auxiliaries, those most suited to guard and defend the city, and a third, unnamed class of artisans and workers. To create the right kind of citizen for the ideal city,

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referred to as Kallipolis (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 206, 527c¹, see also, p. 465 note 13), Plato discusses the structure and sequence of the city's educational curriculum, including its logic and intended outcomes, which have been developed based on philosophical argument and reasoning. Many of the demands of Plato's society are shocking to modern temperaments, including calls for censorship of history and the arts, blatant (but in Plato's eyes, noble) deception, and communal living and childrearing. And yet, there are sentiments that resonate with many moderns, including the idea of "one man, one art" (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 47, 370b)—that individuals have skills and talents that make them suited to a particular kind of work—which undergirds many theories of advising, particularly career advising (e.g., Holland code). What follows here is a dialogue, the rhetorical form of *The Republic*, exploring how this work of philosophy could influence the field of academic advising.

As I prepared to leave for this year's conference of academic advisers, my mind began to wander. What would it be like if I were able to discuss the world of advising with Plato, in the context of his ideal city, Kallipolis? I would have many questions for him and I imagine the dialogue could be quite fruitful. I couldn't help but daydream, seeing myself in a room, sitting comfortably with Plato and Carla, a friend and veteran adviser. Plato, on one end, embodied the ideas and logic of his tract, *The Republic*; Carla, on the other, represented a modern authority on academic advisers. Between the two of them, I sat, deep in thought.

I began to think out loud, addressing both Plato and Carla, "If Kallipolis is to come into being, what you have shown, Plato, regarding the education and rearing of children is an essential foundation. For this reason, I am compelled to ask, who are the academic advisers? Who will guide children as they learn music and gymnastic, as they seek out the art for which they are most suited? How will these individuals serve to explain the purpose of the curriculum, how and why it is ordered in a particular way, what you seek to accomplish with it? I hope that we can discuss these questions in turn and see what the right ordering of Kallipolis would demand, and how this comports with our modern challenges in determining what students are meant to do."

"Yes, these questions are essential to understand. We must work through them and determine what solution is most fine," Plato agreed. Carla nodded her assent and we began to discuss these questions in earnest. From here, we began to dialogue.

WHO ARE THE ADVISERS?

¹ Stephanus numbers are the traditional references for texts authored by Plato. I include both page numbers from Bloom's translation of *The Republic* and Stephanus numbers for ease of reference.

“So,” I said, “we must consider: who are the advisers who will guide the students in their studies? One option would be that the teachers themselves, particularly the philosophers, could guide the students. This would allow those who have devised the curriculum of music and gymnastic (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 54, 376e) to guide its implementation, alongside their work to teach students the ways of their art. Since the philosophers are the ones who have devised the plan for Kallipolis, would this not be the best way?”

Plato replied, “Perhaps. We must be clear on what these duties entail and who would be most suited for them. What is it that advisers in your age do?”

I answered, “Nearly everything. But in the context of your noble city, advisers would firstly be the ones to guide students in the logic of the curriculum.”

Here, Carla jumped in, “Yes. Beyond the social support functions that advisers of today have come to play, they are largely envisioned to be guides that make clear the purpose of the curriculum and how it is to progress. Advisers would be the ones to explain to students why it is essential that music precede gymnastic (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 54, 376e), why it is important that their nature be determined and the art for which they are most suited be identified, and how to progress through the curriculum to serve as a citizen of Kallipolis.”

“In this case,” Plato said, “it seems that the philosophers of Kallipolis would be best suited. They would clearly have the greatest understanding of these things, as they have presumably gone through the most formative parts of this education and been judged as worthy of the role of philosopher. For this portion of life, from birth to discernment of one’s art, the philosopher should be adviser. Ultimately, this demand is reflected in our returning to the cave (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 219, 539e), helping to turn those in chains away from the shadows of what appears to be and reorient them towards what is and what could be. Is this not the purpose of education—to turn towards truth and away from ignorance? To pursue relentlessly wisdom and that which makes the soul most right? And those who find they are most suited to another kind of life, as an Auxiliary or an artisan, are better for knowing that there is wisdom out there to pursue, and those who pursue it do so in the most noble of ways. This also helps ensure the harmony of the city, as the need for philosopher-kings to rule is made manifest, and helps to avoid descent into the increasingly disordered and unjust forms of government (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 222, 544c-d). As education is intended to help ensure a most right ordering of the soul, it is also deeply concerned with virtue and the development of citizens who know their place and contribute thusly to the city as a whole. This all stems from advisers first, as they guide students in their studies, and the wisdom of philosophers seems best suited to be such a guide.”

Carla replied, “Yes, it’s clear that the philosophers of Kallipolis would have the greatest understanding of why things must be as they are. However, in our time, we have seen that those who create the curriculum are not always those who are most well-suited to explaining and guiding students through it. Initially, all advising in universities was completed by the faculty—they knew the curriculum intimately and served as a wise guide for students, helping them both inside and

outside the classroom. Faculty were academic, social, spiritual, and moral guides, serving in all these roles simultaneously (Thelin & Gasman, 2011). They were concerned with holistic development and the need to create citizens who are virtuous and just, as well as educated. However, this is not without its challenges. In the same way that philosophers wish to stay out of the cave (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 198, 519c-d), occupy their time with forms and ideas about that which truly is, rather than the technical details of the world before us, many faculty wished to spend their time educating about their subject and doing their own independent pursuit of wisdom, rather than explaining the virtues of other subjects to their students. The philosopher would not simply be explaining the need for philosophy, but also gymnastic, and other forms of music that contribute to a right ordering of the soul. For this to be done effectively, I believe the philosopher must gain an understanding of those subjects as well, to be able to explain them in more than a perfunctory way.”

Here, I chimed in, “We see this today. I have seen many faculty advisers who embrace the role of advising to guide students, but others reduce it simply to course scheduling and send students away with no understanding of the purpose of the curriculum. Further, the expectation that faculty be moral or spiritual guides has fallen away almost entirely. In some cases, faculty members will even deride other subjects outside of their expertise. Some mention of becoming well-rounded, or even virtuous, may happen, but we have found that expecting a faculty member in biology to extol the virtues of learning history or literature can be disappointing. Often, faculty members only engage in discernment of the nature of students when they are trying to guide them into advanced study in their particular discipline. When advising becomes largely checking boxes to ensure the plan of the curriculum is followed, it is largely a technical activity. Surely this is not the work of philosophers?”

Plato thought for a moment before responding. “This is a challenging puzzle. Consider this. In Kallipolis, the philosopher-kings might prefer to simply be philosophers, spending all their days pursuing wisdom and calling their attention to the ultimate forms that comprise our world. However, because their wisdom makes them most suited to it, they must serve a term as ruler, making decisions and focusing on the shadows rather than the forms, but deeply informed by them. Thus, ruling is a duty of philosophers, by virtue of their art and their wisdom—there is simply no one else more suited, more knowledgeable who could replace them. Philosophers must not be permitted to “go up that ascent...and not be willing to go down again...or share their labors and honors” (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 198, 519d). If this work of advising is a duty of philosophers, it seems as though it may be a begrudging one, like the term of rule in the city. Rather than something that is relished, it would be taken up as part of the price for the life of the philosopher, coupled with the knowledge that no one else could be more suited to explaining the value of wisdom and learning the right things to set one’s soul upright and aligned. Providing this guidance ensures that the city will be just and youth will be guided in their education. But there is certainly the concern that this kind of guidance and

explanation may go beyond the art of the philosopher and demand from them a skill for which they are not most suited. Why could not the guardians teach the virtue of war, philosophers teach the virtue of philosophy, musicians teach the virtue of music, and so on? Must a single person teach these things?”

I replied, “We have seen that experts in each discipline are quite effective at teaching the value of their own field. That is not in question. But knowing that music and philosophy and guardianship are all valuable does not mean that students will learn how these things work together to build an education that leaves them well-rounded, or as you might say, contributes to a right ordering of their soul. Today, academic advisers are intended to teach students about the logic of the whole curriculum (Lowenstein, 2000), which is more than the sum of its disparate parts. For this reason, simply looking at the parts in isolation may cause us to leave something out—we must consider the whole of the thing, that is, the education in its entirety. This is why it may be that advising is a different art altogether, and thus philosophers would not be the ones most suited to that work.”

“Perhaps,” Plato said. “Then it seems to me that this kind of sense-making is a question for philosophy—what should education be, and how does it contribute to a virtuous life? Communicating the answer to that question is an essential skill for philosophers, be it through a written treatise or a one-on-one discussion with a pupil. As you have said, in your age, the advisers become multifaceted, attempting to complete the work of many different people, with different skills and talents. But are there not counselors for counseling the emotions of students? Are there not bursars for attending to the finances and accounts of students? While you may assign those duties to your advisers, this ultimately burdens them with the work of others. By maintaining a strict adherence to the notion of “one man, one art” (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 47, 370b), you could ensure that each is their own expert, undiluted in their knowledge and skill of their particular specialty. In this way, teachers could be expected to communicate the utility and importance of their respective art rather than just technical skills.”

I replied, “Surely they do! Good teachers must certainly teach more than the mere technical skills, but the importance and impact of their subject. However, to leave the teaching of the logic of the curriculum exclusively to each individual teacher of an art or discipline would make for a very disordered school, with students jumping from teacher to teacher with every question about why their learning is structured in such a way. And, this does not address the question of guidance, of who would ensure that the curriculum is implemented as the philosophers have decreed and watch over students as they move forward in their studies to the point where their nature can be judged (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 94, 415b-c). This division of the labor of schooling with no central point of connection and coordination leaves open the possibility that students will never be able to make sense of the curriculum as a whole. I have seen this today, with students amassing skills from their education but no sense of what it means to be educated, or of how the parts contribute to the whole. Such disjointed education may lead to an equally disjointed soul, could it not?”

“Quite right,” Plato assented. “To leave this work to a single class of people is truly best. Without doing so, it is likely that each teacher will extol their subject as best and most important, rather than seeing it in balance with other arts. This limited view gives a false sense of mastery over the world—it is only the philosopher who has worked tirelessly to look beyond shadows to seek the perfect forms of Truth. I cannot support the notion that these skills of guidance are somehow new, or different, or particular in some way, separate from the art of philosophy. Philosophers have created the curriculum and know its meaning and purpose, the virtue of each of the subjects and the organization of the curriculum thereof. The ordering of subjects and their relative necessity was determined through logic and argumentation, based upon the precepts of good philosophy. Philosophers then seem to be the correct choice, the only choice—truly, they understand the virtue of each of these subjects and how they serve to shape the soul. This turning toward the right things and away from the wrong (Plato, 380 BC/2016, p. 197, 419b-d) is the purpose of education.”

I paused a moment. “I must admit, it is an uncomfortable understanding we have come to. It does seem that philosophers are those most suited to be advisers in Kallipolis. Their wisdom, training, and role, despite the foibles that may come with concerning themselves with the technicalities of guiding students in their education, seem most suited to that work. In this system of higher education where we seek more than just disciplinary expertise, helping to guide students to become educated, to become virtuous is a practice of wisdom. The philosopher as *philosophos*, “lover of wisdom” (Liddell & Scott, 1940) seeks truth beyond what is immediately apparent, looking for the forms of truth, rather than simply appearances or shadows. As a professional adviser, not a philosopher or a faculty member, this is hard for me to admit. But with what we have discussed, the need for that larger view of the purpose of education, the desire for advisers to act as more than bookkeepers, means that viewing advising as a technical skill would be incorrect.”

IMPACT ON MODERN ADVISERS

Here Carla became concerned. “Now this seems a place where our paths must diverge. It is all well and good that the philosophers in Kallipolis should be the advisers of students. Perhaps that is reasonable, if the city is small enough that the children can be seen and guided through their education by the few philosophers who exist there. But in our modern age, it is unlikely that we can go back to our faculty, those who live the life of the mind, as our advisors. Many of our larger colleges and universities have tens of thousands of students. We also rely on part-time labor for instruction—to expect these adjunct faculty members to also be advisers becomes absurd when we hear that many of them must teach at two or more institutions to survive (Wade, 2013). These are not the philosophers of Kallipolis.”

“Yes,” I chimed in. “We must be concerned now with what this means for advisers of today, many of whom are not faculty members or philosophers of any kind. And even our tenure-track faculty members often must be more concerned with the demands of research and teaching than devoting great time and energy to advising, which is seen as service to the institution. So what can we do with the notion we have set down here that lovers of wisdom and designers of the curriculum are best suited to advise students on that curriculum?”

Plato was quick to respond, “A challenging situation, but a clear path forward. We must make your advisers more like philosophers, seekers of truth and not mere artisans.”

I agreed. “Why yes! There has been a movement to professionalize advisers, but in some ways, it is simply imitation, rather than a transformation of what it means to be an adviser. Reading research has become, for some, just an item on a list of tasks. Thinking deeply on broad questions of meaning and substance is not yet common for all advisers. They are largely saddled with tasks, aims to fulfill without time to reflect on the aims themselves. This means that being professional or scholarly is not yet a key part of the art of advising, but perhaps this is the next move the field must make.”

“Such a move,” Carla replied, “would need to be multifaceted. Philosophers, as lovers of wisdom, clearly understand many different kinds of knowledge. Advisers must develop a knowledge of the world and the curriculum that spans the entire enterprise. Understanding deeply what happens in other areas that are expected of students will allow advisers to explain and guide students more effectively and allow students to discover that for which they are most suited. Many advisers who are specialized in a particular department or college already become experts on the areas they advise in. However, having this deep understanding of the whole of the disciplines would help advisers to see more clearly the need for knowledge in common that helps to order the self and provides tools like critical thinking and a broad worldview that promote the creation of virtuous, educated citizens.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. Continuing, I added, “In addition, this knowledge would help advisers to become more like philosophers in promoting a love of wisdom and of learning. Advisers must become scholarly in more fundamental ways, seeking to concern themselves with important questions about forms, rather than just their shadows. For example, advisers can and should question the logic of the curriculum and seek to involve themselves in its development. We see the value in having those who plan the curriculum and those who implement it and explain it be the same in Kallipolis. If we cannot solely rely on those who presently create curriculum to implement it in our world, we must have those who implement it be charged, to some degree, with its creation. This is not to encroach on the work of faculty—or philosophers—but instead to say that bringing these two groups together can only serve to make the process of education for college students more sound and meaningful. Modern advisers decry the role of adviser as so-called scheduling machine (see Matheson, Moorman, & Winburn, 1997), but this remains

a primary task of advisers. In this way, advisers have situated themselves within the third class, more like an artisan than a philosopher. This, I feel, is a mistake which limits their ability to pursue the aims we have set out for education and for advising itself. But by pursuing wisdom and understanding the whole of the curriculum, advisers can situate themselves more so in the world of the philosopher, with all the implications that arise from there.”

Plato nodded. “Agreed. The truest lovers of wisdom should be those who act as advisers, guiding students to discern their nature, their purpose. So there is also the question of nature. Are those who become advisers presently suited to this nature of your reimagined art? A shoemaker does not become a philosopher simply by thinking about the form of shoes, rather than just their making, though he may become more philosophical with that work. What of the advisers who seek only to do the daily work, like an artisan?”

“True,” I agreed, “perhaps a purely philosophical nature cannot be taught. But this is an ideal, an aim that, even in falling short, causes us to push beyond our present realities. Perhaps *Kallipolis* can lay claim to perfection, but the rest of us must strive and seek without the guarantee of achieving the ideal. By following through on an espoused desire to be more than glorified bookkeepers, advisers can learn from the wisdom of *The Republic* while also moving towards our shared goals of guiding students through their education and serving a legitimate and essential function in higher education. While students often can plan coursework to fulfill requirements with the aid of technology and policies, no student will deeply grasp the logic of the curriculum without sound, wisdom-loving guidance from advisers. This task must become paramount in the work of advisers.”

At this, I awoke from my daydream and set to record my thoughts. Perhaps the work of making advising a more contemplative and philosophical practice, rather than just a more professional one, will help to fulfill its espoused aims in higher education.

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