

Philosophy Taster: The Simile of the Ship

The Story

“Imagine a ship being sailed by a captain. The captain is the biggest and strongest person on the boat BUT is very short sighted, slightly deaf and knows very little about sailing. He is also fond of a drink! The crew realise this and try to persuade the captain to let them take the wheel. They argue and compete with each other, sometimes bribing the captain with strong drink for a turn at steering. They ignore an intelligent crew member who talks about navigation and says that you can learn where to sail by studying the stars and maps. Surely this is just nonsense?”

The Characters

The Captain = the people

The Crew = politicians

The Navigator = the expert, the philosopher

The Ship = society itself

Key Messages

- The rejection of the philosopher is the fault of society not the philosopher.
- The politicians/sophists are interested in persuading the crowd, they know nothing about what is actually good for society
- The true philosopher is the navigator knowing what is good but being ignored

Q: What do you think? Does this story show Plato to be right about the failures of democracy?

Four Weaknesses of the analogy

- It is unclear that politics and philosophy can be compared to navigation; there may be different and equally valid answers to a problem. Even the aim is not clear. In navigation the aim is to get the ship and the passengers safely to their destination. In politics what is society’s aim? How do we get there?
- Plato is quite unfair to suggest that the ordinary person is like our stupid captain. Ordinary educated people can be politically informed.
- Also Plato is criticising the democracy of his day. It could be argued that modern representative democracy is less susceptible to the ‘pandering to the masses’ that he detests.
- Later in the Republic, Plato concedes that democracy could be appealing as both liberty and equality are valued. These are values that Plato does not seem to prize. His Republic is totalitarian with its plans for selective breeding, the abolition of the family, the ‘noble lie’ about the metals and its banning of art.

Could he have a point???

- Democracy empowers voters whether they are knowledgeable or not. He is right to say that voters may be misled by skilful speakers
- He is also correct that politicians have to take into account what is popular and may end up going for the lowest common denominator.
- Plato thinks that society corrupts potential Philosophers and turns them into Sophists