

«Daß Könige philosophieren, oder Philosophen Könige würden, ist nicht zu erwarten, aber auch nicht zu wünschen; weil der Besitz der Gewalt das freie Urteil der Vernunft unvermeidlich verdirbt. Daß aber Könige oder königliche (sich selbst nach Gleichheitsgesetzen beherrschende) Völker die Klasse der Philosophen nicht schwinden oder verstummen, sondern öffentlich sprechen lassen, ist beiden zu Beleuchtung ihres Geschäfts unentbehrlich und, weil diese Klasse ihrer Natur nach der Rottierung und Klubbenverbündung unfähig ist, wegen der Nachrede einer Propagande verdachtlos.»

Kant, Zum ewigen Frieden

«That kings should philosophize or philosophers become kings is not to be expected. Nor is it to be wished, since the possession of power inevitably corrupts the untrammelled judgement of reason. But kings or kinglike peoples which rule themselves under laws of equality should not suffer the class of philosophers to disappear or to be silent, but should let them speak openly. This is indispensable to the enlightenment of the business of government, and, since the class of philosophers is by nature incapable of plotting and lobbying, it is above suspicion of being made up of propagandists.»

Kant, For Perpetual Peace

Nomen est omen: the philosopher from "Königsberg" reflects about Plato's "philosopher-kings" - an ideal model of the state in which the philosophers should be on top of it.

I would like to share my own opinion about this thematic by trying to analyse Kant's thought.

That kings should philosophize or philosophers become kings is not to be expected.

Why? We do have plenty of examples in history where successful monarchs and rulers were educated by a philosopher. One of them was Alexander The Great who was able to unite many different nations, not at least because of his well-educated and wise decisions. Then we have Marc Aurelius, who was a great philosopher himself. He thought that the source of happiness is inside of ourselves and that it can be found by self-examination.

Even nowadays the majority of the monarchs, also if most of their power is only representative, get a humanist education. This is in my opinion because a critical view is only possible when some special background information is given. Philosophers dedicated nearly all their life to throw light on the questions of life (but not only) and we should be grateful to be allowed to use their tidied up thoughts in so little time by just reading them through and deciding what could be true for us. There's a big difference between this kind of knowledge and the comparatively poor knowledge we achieve by experience.

What I want to express is, that with all the different statements and reflections great thinkers have donated to us, we are so much more able to open our horizon and contemplate things from many different prospectives.

In short: Everyone sees the world with different eyes; so our decisions can become more complex by considering different points of view.

Knowledge is power– this is what Bacon wanted to let us know and I think that it's more than true. Knowing more than someone else is always an advantage. Of course the problem is how this “knowledge” is used than – for the good or the bad. (Fun fact: Bacon was banned from politics)

In this quotation Kant says not only that philosophers becoming kings is not to be expected, but also that it is not to be wished. He explains himself: ***the possession of power inevitably corrupts the untrammelled judgement of reason.***

There may be some truth in it. Unfortunately we human beings are influenced very easily. Power is like poison to us and it takes a lot of moral strength and virtue of character to stay on your own path and not to wander from the straight and narrow. But shouldn't this be one of the primary and main characteristics of a man that stands for so many? [This had been analysed often (in “Il principe” from Machiavelli for example, to name just one)]

With power so many opportunities and possibilities pop up and it's hard not using them egoistically. What has to be made clear first: Is it the ambition of men to strive against the altruistic good, anyway?

Schopenhauer's opinion is that men are wild and ferocious animals. We only know them tamed and civilized as they are now and get frightened when they show their true nature from time to time. When there are no rules or when anarchy breaks out people live the atrocity they always long for. When we think about this, then we could try to understand why the head of the state is not always acting ethically: he has no rules to follow. I now don't want to say that all people are “evil” but that our instinctual disposition (as explained by Freud) is our most persistent antagonist – that's just the way it is.

When the ruler is led by his moral or religion (and this should be used with care) instead, then it could of course be that his aim is to administer the state for its better. This implicates that it always depends on the way the power is used. His individual definition of success is what makes a king what he is. A ruler that invests in peaceful means as well as in education for his people, judges wisely, well-considered and following his ethics, is more likely to be the leader of a folk that follows the “sapere aude” (extolled by Horace and Kant himself) and is able to reach higher faculties in so many areas.

When the king is longing for power instead and is rude, I think he is no good for the people. Maybe he's a hero for the land when he conquers many other regions and defends his country successfully but it won't be a success on a humanitarian base. (and it's violence that really makes us equal to animals)

I guess, but this is always only my own opinion, that philosopher-kings would be more likely part of the first group of men and therefore better for humanity as they should always follow an exemplary conduct of life for their servile.

What I wanted to say in addition: When we would follow Kant's statement strictly, then a poor man would more likely be able to become a better philosopher than a mighty one? I don't think that it's necessary to live like Diogenes. For me it always depends on the person and its personal position and therefore I do not agree with Kant.

Proceeding reading the quote Kant says that thoughts and opinion of the philosophers should be heard and he admits that they are “ *indispensable to the enlightenment of the business of government* “. He is totally right here and maybe I should try to formulate a compromise: Philosophers should act in an advisory capacity (like Seneca) but the king himself should have at least a slightly philosophic education. I don't think that he would otherwise be open to listen to apply their consulting (like Nero).

We do have many examples of politically interested philosophers that tried to change it for the better and for me this is the proof that they should not be banned but are an enrichment in so many ways. For example: “Political discourses” (Hume), “Political theology” (Schmitt), “The politics” (Politika, Aristotle),...

Why is Kant thinking that philosophers are incapable of plotting and lobbying?

Are they do-gooders and not able to lead?

Do they waste too much time “thinking” and don't react fast enough?

Aren't they able to concentrate on the matter because they consider too many things?

Are they too theoretic because they were never really participating in politics?

Is this why Plato's “The Statesman (Politikos)” was never applied practically?

Let's think the other way round: Is Kant only afraid that Philosophy would loose its characteristics?

Would the noble discipline of Philosophy be in danger when used in combination with other abilities as an instrument of power? Would it not be in search of the good, the pure any more?

It's a fact that not too many people deal with Philosophy in their daily life. Additionally politicians (I don't know about kings hundreds of years ago, but would make an example for nowadays) tend to express things in very complicated ways when they don't want the people to understand exactly what they want to do and try to conceal something. So it could be that philosophy is “violated” with this not so praiseworthy purpose.

As a conclusion I'd like to say that, for me, Kant was on the right track but shouldn't have excluded kings as human beings able to practice philosophy while ruling a country and making important decisions.