The shepherd king and his flock: paradoxes of leadership and care in classical Greek philosophy

> We bore in mind that, for example, cowherds are the rulers (*archontes*) of their cattle, that grooms are the rulers of horses, and that all those who are called herdsmen might reasonably be considered to be rulers of the animals they manage (*epistatōsi*). (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 1.1.2)

When Xenophon, the fourth-century BCE Athenian soldier and writer, and once one of Socrates' students, tried to explain the nature of leadership, in his extended case study and biography of Cyrus the Great, king of Persia in the sixth century BCE and founder of its empire, his *Cyropaedia*, he turned to a familiar image, that of the king or leader as shepherd.[1] For Xenophon, Cyrus provided a model of how to lead and inspire troops, and how, after the campaign was over, to set up a stable government in the conquered territory. Xenophon explores what qualities enabled Cyrus to rule more successfully than others. But when he invokes the image of the king as shepherd, Xenophon opens a set of questions about the consequences of the unequal and asymmetric relationship between leaders and those they lead, as well as emphasising the centrality of care to ideas of what constituted good leadership. Like other thinkers of his time, the image of the ruler as shepherd enables a debate on the paradoxes of leadership and care (Brock 2013: 43-52).

Among the questions were: does being led somehow dehumanise the led, or deprive them of agency? Does it imply a duty of care for the leader? Is this duty different when leading creatures of the same type (other humans) or different (animals)? What qualities in the ruler, such as intelligence and knowledge, might persuade subjects to obey him? Or could all humans be treated as if they were of the same status as the leader, dissolving the hierarchy implied by the power relationship of shepherding? Because a principal goal of ancient politics was to secure a happy or 'flourishing' existence (Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, or living well), individuals' surrender of political agency could be seen to create obligations for the ruler to whom they had assigned their claim to political participation. The image of the shepherd king provided a means of exploring this problem from the perspectives of both rulers and ruled.

[1] Wayne Ambler's edition of the *Cyropaedia* offers an up-to-date translation and a glossary of Greek philosophical terminology used by Xenophon: Ambler 2001.

Xenophon's introduction focuses on the ruler himself and avoids direct confrontation with the paradox set up by the analogy between ruling humans and shepherding animals. But his language shows the presence of that hierarchy: cowherds are 'rulers' (*archontes*, the word used in democratic Athens and elsewhere to describe the magistrates who administered civic government) and 'manage' (*epistatōsi*, more literally 'are set over') their flocks. Xenophon wants to demonstrate the special qualities of Cyrus, which led his subjects to surrender their political agency and the self-directed pursuit of their own well-being to him. Unlike the care of animals, Xenophon observed, ruling humans is difficult: 'it is easier to rule over any and all other creatures than to rule over men' (*Cyr*. 1.1.3). For Xenophon, Cyrus maintained his rule because his subjects were willing to obey him, and this came down to his intelligent style of leadership.

The possibility of the notionally equal citizens of a Greek polis surrendering to similar rule is much explored by Greek thinkers: Plato, in the *Republic*, envisages philosopher-kings with unparalleled knowledge or wisdom, while Aristotle imagines citizens making a conscious decision to put themselves in the hands of an absolute ruler, the *pambasileus* ('total king'), because of his outstanding excellence.[2] Despite the democratic context of Athens, questions of individual leadership dominated the discussions of Athens' political thinkers in the mid-fourth century BCE. During this period Athens gave greater individual responsibility to some of its magistrates, created new financial management roles, and also saw the rise elsewhere of strong monarchs, such as Philip II of Macedon, whose ability to command his forces without engaging in collective decision-making processes appeared to offer him a competitive advantage over the Athenians, with their endless debates and tendency to prosecute their unsuccessful generals.

This paradox of leadership and care was fundamental to ancient literature and thought, appearing in the literatures of the Ancient Near East from its earliest beginnings. It is connected to ideas in which the care of human rulers for their subjects mirrored the care of gods – or God – for the cosmos as a whole. Michel Foucault observed that:

> The association between God and King is easily made, since both assume the same role: the flock they watch over is the same; the shepherd-king is entrusted with the great divine shepherd's creatures. (Foucault 1981: 228)

[2] Plato *Republic* books 5-7; Aristotle *Politics* 3.14-17 (1285b20-1288a32).

Such a reading is central to the image's appearance in Hebrew texts such as the Book of Psalms: Psalm 23 evokes it to represent divine care for humans as an act of shepherding.

The shepherd-king image appears in other Near Eastern cultures; the Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh*, originating in the fourth millennium BCE, informs the Greek use of the idea of the shepherd king (Haubold 2015). Gilgamesh is identified as 'shepherd of Uruk the sheepfold', but his behaviour at the start of his story seems to fall short of a divine ideal, displaying arrogance towards his people, in contrast with his shepherding role (*Gilgamesh* I.86-87). The gods hear his people's complaints, and Gilgamesh endures chastening adventures until he returns home to rule in a more considerate fashion.

Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces in the Trojan War, also has lessons to learn about the importance of care. Homer's *Iliad*, the epic poem which is the foundational work of ancient Greek culture, dating in its written form to the seventh century BCE, opens with Agamemnon facing a crisis that challenges his reputation as 'shepherd of the people' (*Iliad* 1.263, and repeatedly thereafter).[3] Although Agamemnon has kept together a complex Greek coalition through nine years of battle, his greed in taking back a captive woman distributed to Achilles disrupts the stable order of his forces, provokes the gods, and threatens the campaign. The tension between Agamemnon's desire to fulfil his own desires, and his societal function ensuring the maintenance of order and satisfaction of the gods, is opened up, with the recurrent epithet reminding us of his role. While Xenophon's Cyrus listens to his troops and rewards their efforts, and also protects captive women from sexual aggressors, Agamemnon acts autocratically in pursuing his own desires even when a plague makes the gods' displeasure clear.

But the leader's duty of care is not absent from the Homeric world. Odysseus exemplifies a different style of leadership, in which risk-taking and trickery is balanced by care and concern. Odysseus risks his men's lives by lingering in the cave of the Cyclops (himself a shepherd) but uses his cunning to extricate the survivors. Some episodes begin with lapses in his concern, as at the final stage of their journey; Odysseus relaxes with home in sight and falls asleep, at which point his men ransack his belongings for secret treasure. They open a bag which turns out to contain all the winds, sending them far away from home again. In failing to share information with his men, Odysseus had created a risk that became critical when his attention failed: does the shepherding image imply a distrust in the ruled? His men,

[3] Variants of 'shepherd of the people' occur 56 times in Homer: Haubold 2000: 197.

in turn, demonstrated that they needed a watchful leader to take care of them, perhaps one whose intelligence, like that of Odysseus, was marked through acts of cunning. The idea of leaders having a special status, differentiating them from those they led and linked to special responsibilities for them, was foundational in the epic poems revered by the Greeks, but episodes such as these show that it provided opportunities for analysis and debate of the qualities of both leaders and those they led.

The return of the shepherd king

While the idea of the shepherd-king clearly had a place in the aristocratic societies of the distant past featured in Homer's epic poems, Michel Foucault argued that the egalitarianism of historical Greek cities made it less relevant to their citizens (Foucault 1981: 5). Foucault claimed that these citizens regarded themselves as conceptual and practical equals, and that the sharply differentiated hierarchy of the shepherd-king model should have no purchase for them. But Foucault fails to explain its continuing presence in Greek literature, which suggests that even democratic citizens (or perhaps critics of the difficulties of democratic practice) found it useful.

The egalitarian setting of the Greek city-state sharpened the paradox of the traditional image, because it revealed what was at stake in treating a ruler as the equivalent of a shepherd, particularly the implications of loss of autonomy and self-direction, valued aspects of citizenship, were citizens to submit to such a ruler. One could object that even in the democratic Greek city, most residents did not participate in decision-making; with women, children, the enslaved, and immigrant workers excluded from participation in political deliberation, every citizen male effectively exercised the power of the shepherd-king over his own household. When it came to deciding his own interests, however, would he choose to submit himself to the rule of a shepherd-king rather than participate in decision-making for himself?

There was one context, military service, in which Athenian citizens did submit willingly to expert leadership. As examples from Homer's Agamemnon to Xenophon's Cyrus suggest, military leadership was one area in which caring oversight (*epimeleia*) in the context of command was expected. The context of war was significant; war was always seen as an occasion for decisive and skilled individual leadership, in which a general's experience and knowledge granted him an authoritative status, ability to decide when to act, and what to do. Such situations required obedience from citizen soldiers. But even so, during the period

Xenophon documents in his history and writes, the Athenians as citizens frequently prosecuted the military leaders they had previously elected for their battlefield performance, particularly when there had been heavy losses.

Plato and Xenophon used the shepherd-king image to refresh this debate, making a new case for strong leadership which might result in civic stability and the flourishing of the citizens, and often harking back to Homeric examples. While we already saw Xenophon use the image in the context of Persian monarchy, he also uses it in the texts in which he imagined the philosopher Socrates in discussion with a range of Athenians. Xenophon draws on his own military experience in his historical and philosophical writing; his depiction of Socrates reveals much about conventional discussions of leadership in fourth-century Athens. His personal experiences of military action and leadership, as well as of philosophical education and debate, inform a series of dialogues in which Socrates and a series of Athenians discuss how to be an effective general and political leader. The brief opening discussion (*Memorabilia* 3.2) invokes Agamemnon to frame the debate in terms of the shepherd king:

> Once [Socrates] happened to meet someone who had been chosen to be a general. 'For what reason,' he said, 'do you think that Homer addresses Agamemnon as 'shepherd of the people'? Is it because the shepherd should take care (*epimeleisthai*) that the sheep are safe and have the things they need, and that the purpose for which they are reared comes about, and a general too should take care that his soldiers are safe and have the things they need, and that the purpose for which they serve in the army comes about? And they serve in the army, so that when they win, they can be happier (*eudaimonesteroi*). (*Memorabilia* 3.2.1)

Some of the difficulties of the image emerge from this passage. The emphasis on the choice or election (the Greeks use the same word for both) of general or ruler does not transfer to both sides of the analogy. In democratic Athens, citizen-soldiers were led on campaign by leaders they had chosen, in pursuit of the goals decided in the city's democratic assembly. But this does not apply when sheep rather than humans are the objects of the leader's care; sheep do not elect their shepherds, or give them orders. The work of those being led is not the same. Sheep 'are reared (*trephontai*)', a true passive verb, while soldiers 'serve in the army (*strateuontai*)'; although the Greek verb endings are identical, and imply a parallel, the second verb is not a true passive, but indicates the soldiers taking an action which affects them personally. Even in this short passage, the difference between the sheep and soldiers is evident. While the soldiers can decide and communicate their goals, and choose a leader to

help them achieve them, the sheep do not choose, and the shepherd must assume that the sheep will be content with what he feels will cause them to flourish.

However, the image works better from the perspective of leadership. Socrates goes on to argue that a king is ‘chosen (*haireitai*) not to take care of himself well, but so that those who chose (*helomenoi*) him might do well through him’ (3.2.3); generals have similar responsibilities, to achieve the goals of those who have appointed them. The language of care runs through the whole conversation; the Greek concept *epimeleia* includes ideas of oversight, concern and caring.

In the end, Xenophon has Socrates conclude, the real concern of the leader is ‘making those he leads flourish (*eudaimonas*)’ (3.2.4). picking up the claim from the start of the passage that this is the aim of those who appoint the general. The benefit of the activity of leading, in this example, accrues to the led. In a democracy, this might be realised through the identity of leader and led; an Athenian general is also a citizen and benefits as a citizen from his military successes. But the shepherd-king image also intimates a distinction between leaders and led. This was most plainly characterised by Plato as a distinction in the quality of knowledge possessed and used by each group; philosopher-kings can use knowledge not available to those they rule, who only have access to shadowy and unstable opinion. The Greeks also thought that some kings (especially those of far-away places) claimed a special connection to the divine, whether through a special relationship with the gods, or actually being of divine status themselves.

Xenophon attempts to defuse the paradox inherent in the shepherd-king analogy with a surprising claim. In the opening of the *Cyropaedia*, he claims that the flocks have consented to being led, and to the shepherd benefiting from his care for them:

> For the herds go wherever their keeper directs them and graze in those places to which he leads them and keep out of those from which he excludes them. They allow their keeper, moreover, to enjoy, just as he will, the profits that accrue from them. And then again, we have never known of a herd conspiring against its keeper, either to refuse obedience to him or to deny him the privilege of enjoying the profits that accrue. (*Cyropaedia* 1.1.3)

Xenophon’s fullest illustration of the shepherd-king in action is given by the mature Cyrus, ruling a new empire, and claiming a position distinct from that of his subjects:

> ‘He said that the work of a good shepherd and a good king were about the same: for he said that a shepherd should make his flocks flourish while making use of them, if there is well-being (*eudaimonia*) for sheep, and the king in the same way should make cities and people flourish while making use of them (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.14)

The alignment of the interests of rulers and ruled offers a way to defuse the paradox even in a case where the difference between them is assumed. Given that rule in the collective interest was a standard Greek definition of good government, whether a monarchy or democracy, this alignment suggests that the implications of surrendering to an absolute ruler need not be troubling. But Xenophon hints at doubts; he suggests that we do not know what *eudaimonia* might be for sheep, or even if the concept is applicable to them.

The sophist and the shepherd

Not everyone in classical Athens agreed with Xenophon’s ideas about the ethics of leadership, or saw leaders as benevolent shepherds concerned with meeting the needs of their flocks rather than themselves. Another perspective, often associated with educators in rhetoric known as sophists, emphasised individual gain, the satisfaction of ambition in competition with others and the pursuit of personal interest, narrowly defined. Such views are demonstrated in the ‘Melian dialogue’, an episode from Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War in which the historian imagines the people of Melos seeking mercy and justice from the Athenians. , after the latter had defeated them, but are rebuffed with the claim that by necessity ‘wherever anyone is stronger, they rule’ (Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5.105.2).

In his *Republic*, Plato introduces a character, Thrasymachus, based on a historical sophist and orator of that name, who expresses these views in argument with Socrates. He represents a ‘realist’ position in which the ethics of care, so central to the model of the shepherd king established by Xenophon, are dismissed as an irrelevance; his shepherd is a *homo economicus*, motivated only by the profit to be made from his use of the sheep. The welfare of the ruled becomes an instrument to the pursuit of the leader’s own ends, not an end in itself.

Plato’s critical analysis makes the strengths and limitations of the shepherd king model, which we saw Xenophon avoiding in the *Memorabilia*, explicit. In the course of a long argument in which both parties resort to some dubious sophistic moves, Thrasymachus and Socrates debate the attitude of the leader to those he leads (at this point in the *Republic*, the

ruler is envisaged as a male, conventionally enough for the ancient world, although Socrates' later depiction of an ideal society imagines both male and female leaders operating as equals). Thrasymachus asserts the sophistic view that 'justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger' (*Republic* 1.338c), a view that clearly points back to Thucydides' Athenians. In this view, the powerful – whether they are many, as in a democracy, or few, or even a single monarch – rule in their own interest.

Earlier Greek thinkers had established a typology of regimes, organised by the number of rulers: one, few, or many (Herodotus 3.80-82). But this was refined (there is some debate as to when this happened, but the distinction was well-established by Plato's time) into a dual typology. In this revised model, each form of rule had a 'good' form, in which the rulers ruled in the interests of all citizens and the common good of the community, and a 'bad' form, in which the rulers ruled only in their own interest. The contrast between the idea of the good king, ruling for the benefit of the citizens, and the bad tyrant, extracting the resources of a society for personal benefit, typifies this opposition. In this typology, democracy was a problem case, because if all citizens ruled in their collective interest, the distinction collapses.[4] But the development of this typology provides another angle on the problems of the shepherd king analogy; can the shepherd king be said to be ruling in his own interest, or that of the herd he protects? If the former, as Thrasymachus suggests, that rules out any ethics of care beyond any extent to which the welfare of the ruled is congruent with the interests of the ruler. But Socrates (and Xenophon) disagree.

Unfortunately for Thrasymachus, his introduction of the ruler as an example enables Socrates to shift the argument to a consideration of the fallibility of craftspeople, using his principle of specialisation in which any craft only has a single aim and purpose – a doctor might misdiagnose their patients, and in the same way a ruler might issue a command which won't produce the desired result when their subjects obey it. Socrates uses the analogy of the doctor and the navigator to shift the question from the perspective of the ruler to the perspective of the craft itself, to argue that the craft seeks not what is advantageous to itself, but what is advantageous to its objects, the health of patients and the safe arrival of ships and passengers.[5] We can see in this argument the possibility of an ethics of care, in that the correct performance of a craft is necessarily beneficial to those on whom it acts, but Socrates

[4] Greek thinkers tended to assume that democracy resulted in a tyranny of the majority, with the poor ruling in their own interest and against the interest of the wealthy.
[5] Plato's argumentation in this passage has been much criticised; see Nawar 2018.

does not foreground it. What he does do is argue for the advantage of those who are ruled as the proper object of the ruler's attention:

> No one in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his subjects; the ones of whom he himself is the craftsman. It is to his subjects and what is advantageous and proper to them that he looks, and everything he says and does he says and does for them. (*Republic* 1.342e, translation Grube)

This is the point at which Thrasymachus introduces the shepherding analogy, as he suggests that Socrates has improperly failed to account for the self-interest of rulers. Thrasymachus has already expressed impatience with the ideas being put forward by Socrates, and has argued with him about the motivation of the rulers of cities.

> You think that shepherds and cowherds seek the good of their sheep and cattle, and fatten them and take care of them, looking to something other than their master's good and their own. Moreover, you believe that rulers in cities – true rulers, that is – think about their subjects differently than one does about sheep, and that night and day they think of something besides their own advantage. (*Republic* 1.343b, translation Grube)

Socrates' response is to use his principle of specialisation to restrict the scope of what constitutes shepherding to the care of sheep. First, he outlines Thrasymachus' position:

> You think that, insofar as he's a shepherd, he fattens sheep, not looking to what is best for the sheep but to a banquet, like a guest about to be entertained at a feast, or to a future sale, like a money-maker rather than a shepherd (*Republic* 1.345c)

Thrasymachus' error, he argues, is to assume that these functions are part of shepherding itself, but, for Socrates, shepherding is strictly the nurturing of sheep; selling them for profit is the province of an entirely different craft. This enables him to conclude that:

> Every kind of rule, insofar as it rules, doesn't seek anything other than what is best for the things it rules (*archomenōi*) and cares for (*therapeuomenōi*), and this is true both of public and private kinds of rule. (*Republic* 1.345e)

For Thrasymachus, the shepherd king analogy is useful, because his 'realist' model does not differentiate between the ruled or sheep. Rulers seek only to extract whatever profit they can

from those in their charge, regardless of kind. If they appear to be caring for them, as shepherds do when they fatten their flocks, it is simply that they are seeking to add value and maximise their future profits. Animal welfare is only a concern in that it supports the shepherd's goal of maximising his investment in the flock. For Socrates, on the other hand, the limitations of the analogy can be surmounted by an appeal to specialisation. The true work of the shepherd is in caring for the sheep; not just oversight, but nurture and care. Socrates' argument for this narrowed definition of the role has been much criticised, and Plato appears not to have been satisfied with it, returning to the theme again in later dialogues.

The absurdity of the humans' shepherd

In one of Plato's later works of political theory, the *Statesman*, Plato depicts his characters once more attempting to identify the elusive skill which makes one leader a good politician who is beneficial to the citizens and another not. The shepherding analogy enters again, firstly in a fantastically convoluted and complicated exercise in definition, and then in a powerful but grandiose myth. Both will show it to give an inadequate account of what is at stake when one human organises the lives of others.

The dialogue's main speakers, the Eleatic Visitor, a philosopher from Elea in southern Italy visiting Athens, and Young Socrates, a student Socrates chooses to take part in the discussion because of his shared name, attempt to produce a definition of the political leader or statesman by isolating the skills and features that distinguish being a statesman (*politikos*) from other endeavours. The first stage is to agree that it involves the care of living creatures, looked after in groups: farmers of horses and cattle are a better analogy than grooms taking care of individual horses (*Statesman* 261e). The next step is to differentiate the statesman from others who care for herds. Young Socrates suggests, using a word used for rearing children as well as livestock:

> I think there's a difference between the maintenance (*trophē*) of human beings and the maintenance of beasts (*Statesman* 262a, translation Waterfield)

The Eleatic Visitor grandly rejects this straightforward opposition of human and animal as objects of care, developing a fantastically complex framework within which the 'collective maintenance of human beings' (267e) does not differ from that of animals. Plato does not emphasise the implication of the typology, but this model provides a mechanism through which it might be possible to treat some humans as non-equals. He then turns to delivering a

myth in which this typology is realised, in a long-past age in which humans and animals received the same kind of care from the divine spirits who herded them: ‘a different divine spirit was assigned to every species and every flock, to act as its herdsman, so to speak. Each spirit had sole responsibility for supplying all the needs of the creatures in his charge.’ (271d)

While Plato’s description of the idyllic life of these early humans draws on other Greek depictions of a golden age – the spontaneous availability of sufficient food, the lack of need for clothes or bedding – this version is distinctive because it suggests a possibility that these humans lack opportunities available to humans living now in the Age of Zeus, the possibility of autonomous participation in the political and social life of the city.

Another vision of life under a shepherd-king is provided by Xenophon, in his description of the mature Cyrus’ rule over his empire, and particularly over his extensive royal household. The preparations for a royal hunting expedition provides an image of the organisation of society as a whole. Cyrus distinguishes between the participants; the nobles taking part must follow aristocratic conventions about refraining from eating while in the field, but the slaves accompanying them are looked after in the same way as the horses the nobles ride. When the animals are given a rest break and led to water or given food, so are the enslaved workers (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.44). In return, those taken care of address him as ‘father’. Cyrus’ slaves are managed in the same way as the flocks of Plato’s divine spirits; the hierarchy operates between groups of humans classified with different statuses.

From the perspective of the ruled, living under a shepherd-ruler might result in a less fulfilling life for a human flock, because the automatic satisfaction of their physical needs would reduce the opportunities for the exercise of distinctively human characteristics in the pursuit of human goals, the use of the capacity to reason, the exercise of agency, in activities such as the organisation of political communities. Plato’s model of the practice of the *politikos*, developed to replace the definition and the myth, avoids the cosmology and transposes the hierarchy to the practices and craft of the ruler rather than the ruler himself. His characters identify a distinctive and superior ‘political’ or ‘kingly knowledge’ (*Statesman* 292e) which supervises the practice of other crafts, ensuring that they combine in a productive way. Plato does not envisage many humans demonstrating the necessary qualities.

Conclusion

The image of the shepherd-king provided a fruitful space for the ancient Greeks in considering the ethical obligations of leaders to those they led, in political and military

contexts, and paradoxes arising from the conflict between the advantages of clear leadership and the loss of individual agency and autonomy in submitting to such rule. It enabled ancient theorists of leadership to conceptualise relationships between leaders and those they led, to consider how and why there might be a question of care in this relationship, and on what basis such power relations might be justified. While it originated in a context of rulers characterised by special access to the divine, the possession of skill and intelligence emerged as a prime justification for granting a ruler the status of a shepherd-king, enabling leaders to extricate the led from difficult military and political situations. Throughout Greek literature, Homer's contrasting models of leadership, represented by flawed characters such as Agamemnon and Odysseus, were used to illustrate the complex and often paradoxical ethics of care the model imposed on leaders.

Further reading

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