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Why Every Person Should Strive to Become a Philosopher-King

Samuel Cobbs

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Why Every Person Should Strive to Become a Philosopher- King

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors Studies in Philosophy

By

Samuel Cobbs

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Book 3 of *The Republic*, Plato describes his perfect city, the *kallipolis*, ruled by select people with training in the liberal arts. The education of these few, whom Plato calls philosopher kings, is then explored in detail. The proper education of these philosopher king lasts until fifty years of age, and consists of basic education in the sciences at an early age, physical and musical training, years spent in dialectical discussion, and ultimately becoming a philosopher and finding what Plato calls ‘The Good.’ Most of these subjects of Platonic education in the liberal arts also apply to what we today think of as a liberal arts education. In modern times, a liberal arts education means a broad education in knowledge and sciences of the world, such as education in Mathematics, Physics, and the humanities. Plato meant a liberal arts education to mean an education in all aspects of life such as music, physical training, and philosophy. When I refer to the liberal arts education throughout this paper, I will be meaning it in the second way.

While Plato believes that this complete liberal arts education should only be taken up by the most virtuous of society, I believe that this type of education is the basis on which humans should live their lives. In this thesis, I will explore the liberal arts education of the philosopher kings in Plato’s *Republic* and argue that each person should live in this way to lead to the greatest contentment. My thesis will follow the structure of the following argument:

1. If a certain way of living will lead to the greatest contentment from life, one should live in that way.
2. Following the liberal arts education of the Philosopher-Kings as described in Plato’s *Republic* will lead to the greatest contentment from life.
3. Therefore, I should follow the way of living of the Philosopher-Kings as described in Plato’s *Republic*.

I will begin this thesis by arguing for the first premise, first defining what I mean by ‘contentment’ and then arguing why this should be the main goal of one’s life. Then, I will lay out how Plato’s Philosopher-Kings are educated from birth by analyzing books 2, 3, 5, 6, & 7 of *The Republic* to fully understand the process of devoting one’s life to a liberal arts education and ultimately philosophy. I will explain why every human should pursue a holistic liberal arts education, the steps and parts that constitute a correct holistic education, and why this type of education and way of living will cause one to be content with life.

My ultimate goal in this thesis is to convince the reader that philosophic inquiry is the pathway to becoming content with life. To reach that level of philosophic understanding, one must dedicate their time to understanding the aspects of life, which is done optimally through a liberal arts education. Philosophy is the final education to achieve because it is the sole education that is useful for its own sake. The study of Mathematics is using one’s consciousness for the sake of understanding the geometry and calculations of the world around us. Musical training is using one’s consciousness for the sake of understanding sound and rhythm. Physical training is using one’s consciousness for the sake of understanding our natural and healthy ways of locomotion. Philosophy is the ultimate goal for contentment because it is using one’s consciousness for consciousness’ sake. To properly be able to practice the final philosophy, one must have enough experience and training in the workings of their own consciousness. A person would not expect to best the heavyweight boxing champion of the world without years of boxing experience and practice. The same should be said of using one’s consciousness. It cannot correctly handle the most difficult questions of life without years of training and experience. So, the consciousness should be trained in every aspect through holistic education before being able to properly philosophize and seek answers to the meaning of life.

II. ARGUMENT FOR FIRST PREMISE

If a certain way of living will lead to the greatest contentment from life, one should live in that way.

To begin the argument for the first premise, we must first say why striving for contentment is a worthwhile task. I will use a subjective theory of happiness to argue that whether one is already subjectively happy or not, contentment will lead one to a greater happiness, and thus should be the main goal of one's life.

Before we begin, we must define contentment. What I mean by contentment is happiness not based on pleasure. The term happiness encompasses both happiness related to pleasure and happiness not related to pleasure, with the latter being contentment. Happiness from pleasure can be measured directly and scientifically from dopamine release in the brain. Examples of this are happiness from things like pride, sex, and gluttony. Happiness separate from pleasure can be described as a sense of peacefulness, having total well-being of the body and mind, or understanding one's purpose. This contentment I mean is a way of saying the ultimate happiness of meaning, purpose, and peace. There are those who live a pleasurable life, which are people that have wealth, power, and such, and there are those who are content with life, who understand themselves and are at peace. Contentment can be viewed as lasting happiness or happiness with longevity, while happiness from pleasure is fleeting or momentary happiness. Understanding what I mean by contentment here is crucial to understanding this thesis. I will refer to contentment as purpose, lasting happiness, and happiness not based on pleasure throughout this paper, with all of these being synonymous based on the definition I have given above.

Now that the reader understands what is meant by contentment, we can now begin the task of arguing why one should desire it. Contentment should be the utmost goal of one's life because it

is the ideal version of what we desire most from the use of our free will. For the sake of this thesis, I will assume that humans have free will. So, since we know humans have free will, I will claim that humans always have chosen and always will choose to spend our time doing what appears good in some way, which primarily tends to be choosing actions that bring happiness.

The truth of the statement that humans choose to do what appears good with our free will can be seen through observation and self-reflection. The average rational person will spend most of their time performing actions that bring them happiness, or if they choose actions that don't bring happiness initially, they are to bring about a delayed but possibly greater happiness in the future. For example, one may spend their time watching entertaining TV, an action which brings happiness, or one may spend years suffering through college to bring a delayed but greater happiness of wealth in the future. Any actions humans take can be simplified, in the aforementioned way or similar, to the statement that we will always choose to do what appears good, whether that is bringing happiness to themselves or something else. On the day I am writing this, I spent my time writing this thesis, watching TV, playing chess, and eating. All these actions I chose to do because they appeared to be good for me in some way, whether they brought direct happiness from pleasure or simply kept me alive in the case of eating. If I were to look at any other day of my life, the actions would break down similarly into being good for me in some way, and it would be the same for the reader if they did so. The reader might raise the argument that people often choose actions that don't appear to be good in any way, such as murder or rape. To this I would say that these actions do appear to be good to the specific person, or I would say the actions make that person happy in their own subjective definitions of goodness and happiness.

Since we can now see that humans naturally choose to do what appears good with our free will, we now must show how contentment is what we ideally desire from the use of our free will.

While many people today choose to primarily spend their time pursuing happiness from pleasure, I believe that we originally chose to do what made us content. I will argue that the more free time humans created for themselves, the less we emphasized our original striving for contentment. Gradually, it became more and more bastardized into happiness from pleasure becoming the main goal of people's lives instead.

For one of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, life consisted mostly in spending their time finding food and water, fulfilling basic survival needs. The purpose of life for these hunter-gatherers was to survive, reproduce, and possibly think rationally or something similar that would be distinctive to humans. They understood this purpose, even if it was an unconscious understanding. So, since they understood their purpose and strove to fulfill it, they were striving for contentment by how I have defined it in this paper. The reason that this basic example of primal humans' free will is choosing what makes them content rather than happy is because it is separate from pleasure. Until we gained the ability to get food easily and people could consume more than needed to survive or consume purely for taste, the happiness from surviving was separate from that of pleasure, and was thus contentment.

After thousands of years of technological advancement, meeting our basic survival needs has become easy, causing us to have an abundance of free time for us to choose what to do with. Our basic human purpose of the hunter-gatherer days has become easier and easier as we have progressed. One can either believe that this excess of free time did not change our basic purpose, or one can believe that this free time gave us another purpose or purposes. Either way, this belief does not threaten my argument.

If the reader believes that an excess of free time did not change the basic purpose of the hunter-gatherers, then our main goal in life should still be striving for contentment as I have

explained in the previous paragraph. I will also put those who claim that there is no purpose to life in this category, as people that say this mean there is no purpose other than fulfilling the basic human purpose of the hunter-gatherers. Striving for contentment for people that believe this would be to understand the possibly simple purpose of hunter-gatherers and to find peace with the idea that this is one's only purpose.

If the reader believes that the excess of free time gave us multiple purposes, then I will argue that one would not truly believe in a purpose if they do not make it the main goal of their life to fulfill it. The aim to fulfill these purposes is what I would consider striving for contentment. So, if the reader agrees that there are multiple purposes to life that were created by an excess of free time, they agree that it should be the main goal of one's life to be striving for this contentment.

I am not trying to make an argument for any certain purpose. Instead, I am trying to show the reader that for any belief of purpose they previously held, they should want to make it the main goal of their lives to understand that purpose and become at peace with it.

For those that are not yet convinced of the fact that contentment is ideally what we desire from the use of our free will, I will make the argument that contentment will subjectively bring one a greater happiness and thus should be desired as the primary goal of one's life. Since we naturally choose to spend our time on things that appear to be good with our free will, then we should choose to do certain actions if we knew that they brought us a greater happiness. Thus, if we can show that contentment can bring us a greater happiness, we will have shown why we should desire contentment.

The reason contentment will bring us a greater happiness than happiness from pleasure is because of its lasting nature. Consider two mothers caring for their children, with one mother erratic

in her love for the child and another mother steady in her love. With the first mother, there would be greater highs of love where she pampered and gave all attention to her child. Yet there would also be periods of sub-optimal love or even possibly bad periods of yelling at or beating the child. For the second mother, her love and care will not reach the heights of the first mother, but the love will be steady. The other problem with the first type of mother is that once the child sees the height of how loving and caring the mother can be, everything else will seem bad and sub-optimal. In the same way, if one spends too much time chasing thrills through happiness from pleasure, they will keep getting higher and higher, and all other happiness will feel sub-optimal compared to the extreme highs. While pursuit of these highs can sometimes be a good thing, one can see how quickly it could get out of hand. We know that happiness from pleasure cannot be lasting in the same way as contentment because we can measure it by dopamine release in the brain, which we know cannot be completely constant or lasting.

Therefore, since one can now see that contentment is a greater happiness than happiness from pleasure, and since we naturally choose actions that appear good to us in some way, we can see that we should desire to primarily chase contentment since it appears better to us than happiness from pleasure.

A large problem of human free will is the dissonance of our actions with our goals and thoughts. While so many people believe that there is a higher purpose to life or something greater to strive for, they still choose actions that lead to momentary happiness from pleasure instead of actions that would follow their purpose or bring them closer to it. This dissonance is what I sought to fix in this thesis, and it can be solved through the liberal arts way of living as I will enumerate in the next section.

If I have now convinced the reader that one should be striving for contentment, then they would now agree with the first premise of my argument. Namely, if a certain way of living will lead to the greatest contentment from life, one should live in that way.

III. ARGUMENT FOR SECOND PREMISE

Following the liberal arts education of the Philosopher-Kings as described in Plato's Republic will lead to the greatest contentment from life.

Now that striving for contentment has been shown to be a worthwhile task, the next question someone would ask is how to obtain this contentment or what actions are there to do that would lead to contentment. This is where Plato and his idea of a liberal arts education comes into play. The main argument I will be making to convince the reader that Plato's liberal arts education is the best way to lead to contentment in life is the idea that one cannot even pretend to be at peace with themselves if they do not understand any aspects of themselves.

If the reader were trying to understand a biological human cell, they would learn what the membrane of the cell is and what it does, and what the nucleus is, and what the mitochondrion is and what it does. They would attempt to understand each part and see how they work together to become the cell itself. Should it not be the same if one were trying to understand their purpose? One should work to fully understand all parts and aspects of the human life and consciousness before taking a look at the whole. Why then do we attempt to answer the most important and largest questions of life first when observing the human condition?

The answer is obviously because humans hate to not have a goal that they are working towards. We desperately want a defined goal or purpose. Many people become depressed if they start to believe that life has no purpose because they feel like they have nothing to work towards. This is a problem because to understand purpose requires work to understand aspects of life, but humans don't like working without a goal in sight. The way to solve this is by seeing that our end goal of living in a liberal arts way is contentment. Since we have already argued that one's main goal

in life should be striving for contentment, the reader can see that if the Philosopher-King way of living truly leads to contentment, then one should follow that way of life.

So, let us examine the liberal arts education of these Philosopher-Kings, beginning with education in music and gymnastics. Poetry and stories are included in the category of music, with “the matter and the manner of speech”¹ being the first education a child receives. Plato first educates his Philosopher-Kings in tales and stories, telling them only stories in which gods and heroes are fully good and with good qualities in order to shape the children into good and courageous people. The next education is in diction, which is the telling of stories and narration. Plato also states here that the children should only be narrating heroes and imitating those with good qualities in plays. This is the same idea as in the telling of stories to children, as he says that the stories children hear and the heroes they imitate shape them into the type of people they want to become. The next thing they are educated in is song, which is composed of words, tune, and rhythm. In similar fashion, Plato bans all music types except those that instill temperance and bravery, as well as banning all musical instruments that include all the harmonies.

After being trained in music, the Philosopher-Kings are educated in gymnastics, which includes a simple training regimen and proper diet to promote health in their bodies. Plato makes an interesting observation soon after his discussion of physical training that explains his desire to have the Philosopher-Kings be widely educated, “I have observed, he said, that the devotees of unmitigated gymnastics turn out more brutal than they should be and those of music softer than is good for them.”² This observation explains the necessity of a liberal arts way of living well, too much time spent in one area of life leads to imbalances.

¹ Plato, “Republic: III,” in Plato: Collected Dialogues, ed. Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 637.

² Plato, “Republic: III,” 655.

The next area of study is in knowledge of the world, such as calculations, geometry, and astronomy, which is then followed by the study of dialectics and argumentation. Finally, they must spend years applying all that they have learned to “hold commands in war and the other offices suitable to youth, so that they may not fall short of the other type in experience either.”³ Thus, the education of the Philosopher-Kings is done and they can now “turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all,”⁴ meaning that they are now able to distinguish the form of the Good and use this knowledge to properly rule the citizens of the city.

Now that we have examined the education of Plato’s Philosopher-Kings, we will next try to extrapolate how we can apply this ancient liberal arts education to the modern day. Plato’s category of music can be seen today as the study of sound, rhythm, speech, and art. Examples of studying this would include learning an instrument, learning musical verse and rhythm, viewing examples of storytelling such as movies, plays, or paintings, reading literature, or writing one’s own works. The study of gymnastics is obviously physical training and diet, training to understand and strengthen how the human body naturally moves. This would include learning anatomy and natural ways of movement for the human body, some type of physical exercise such as running or strength training, proper nutrition and diet to keep the body and brain fully functioning, and other things along these lines. The study of knowledge of the world is usually where the term “liberal arts education” applies in our society today, an all-encompassing education in the sciences of the world such as mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology, and chemistry. Examples of this type of education are found in most schools and colleges in the US, where there are classes to take in all subjects exploring sciences, psychology, history, business, and politics. The study of becoming a rational arguer and critical thinker, as well as having social interaction, is dialectical study in the modern day. Studying

³ Plato, “Republic: VII,” 771.

⁴ Plato, “Republic: VII,” 771.

logic, socially interacting, practicing argumentation, and of course philosophy are examples of dialectical study in action.

The final and most vague aspect of the education is in applying what we have learned into the real world and becoming experienced through this. I will argue that this can be construed in the modern day as giving and charity because of how Plato refers to this period in *The Republic*, “For after that you will have to send them down into the cave again.”⁵ He sends the Philosopher-Kings back into the real world after their full education to lead and teach others by using all they have learned. In the same way, I see giving of one’s time of some sort as an applicable extension of the meaning of this section of education, as most of us will likely never have the chance to command in war or hold high offices of political power.

While Plato prescribes rules in addition to the education for the Philosopher-Kings, such as banning all stories with non-virtuous heroes and not allowing them to have money or relationships, we will not since the goal of our education is different from that of Plato’s. Plato is attempting to create perfectly good, virtuous, and just people to rule over a city, which is why he bans the study of anything that could possibly shape a person to be non-virtuous. The rules he prescribes in addition to the education are meant to create a virtuous person that would be able to properly lead a city to a higher collective well-being. Since we are just trying to reach individual contentment instead of this, I argue that it does not matter for our goal. We are trying to educate ourselves in each of Plato’s aspects of life, and thus any education, whether virtuous or not, would fulfill this.

In an ideal world of education from birth, Plato’s order of education would work, but since that is out of the question there does not need to be an order to this way of living. Someone wanting

⁵ Plato, “Republic: VII,” 771.

to follow this way of living would just spend time in all the aspects, with the caveat of saving philosophy and finally trying to understand one's purpose until last.

All of the Philosopher-Kings' listed studies are included in the liberal arts education because they are each an aspect of human life. These specific areas of study are useful to follow for two reasons: they promote well-being in every aspect, and they grow the abilities of the conscious mind. The education prescribed above fulfills all needs of the human condition: physical, mental, social, musical, creativity and imagination in philosophic inquiry, and a spiritual aspect involved in trying to find purpose and reach contentment. Yet not only does living in this way merely fulfill the needs, but it also leads to a greater well-being in all aspects as well. One that lives in this way is healthy physically, mentally, and unconsciously in their thoughts. The reason that total well-being will lead to greater contentment is because of the association of health and being at peace. If one has an unhealthy aspect of their lives, they will not be fully able to be at peace. The clearest example is to look at someone who is physically unhealthy, which causes them to be more prone to sickness and disease. Thus, much time and conscious thought will be wasted worrying about possible diseases or sickly states, or the sickly state will encompass the body and the person will be rendered useless for the period of sickness. On the contrary, if one is physically healthy, they have nothing in their control to worry about and will be better fit to fully become at peace. Another example of this can be seen if someone is not properly fulfilling the dialectical aspect of their education. Say someone is keeping the education of the other aspects fulfilled, but they are isolating themselves from social contact in doing so. This unhealthiness in the dialectical aspect would cause feelings of loneliness which can encompass the body with depression and render the person unable to then fulfill any of the aspects. If that person instead had a healthy dialectical aspect, there would not be such feelings and thus they would be better fit to fully become at peace. Similar instances of unhealthiness

inhibiting being at peace can be found in every aspect of the liberal arts education, which makes becoming healthy in every aspect incredibly important.

As well as promoting total well-being of the mind and body, the liberal arts way of living betters the ability of one's consciousness. The mind must be eased into philosophy since it does not have enough training at first in critical thinking to answer the most difficult questions. As a weightlifter would not be able to bench press a 200-pound barbell the first time they lifted, a philosopher would similarly not be able to answer the heaviest questions the first time they philosophized. A weightlifter would have to forget their pride and start at a basic weight, and with years or decades of correct training and consistency they would be able to bench press 200 pounds. Similarly, a beginning philosopher must forget his pride and begin at the basics, spending years or decades consistently training correctly to later be able to understand their purpose and reach contentment.

The way this analogy would look in practice is through practicing consciousness on the learning of the other aspects of life. In learning and practicing music and poetry, one practices the use of their consciousness by thinking about abstract concepts like music theory and meter to explain material sounds. In the learning of mathematics and other sciences of the world, one's consciousness is able to use immaterial concepts to define material things. Physical training teaches one's consciousness how to be fully in tune with the body. Dialectics is finally where one uses their own consciousness to explore only the immaterial. In the other cases, one applies abstract concepts to material things, but dialectics is where the consciousness must deal fully in abstract concepts. Thus, if one has spent years making all aspects healthy and has practiced consciousness on all levels, they are ready to understand their purpose and be at peace through philosophical thought.

At this point, the reader is likely to ask the question of how philosophic inquiry is the path to contentment. The answer to this lies in the argument for the first premise. We concluded that the way to reach contentment was to understand one's purpose and be at peace with it. Since Philosophy is the search for truth and fundamental knowledge, any conceptual thinking that is searching for fundamental knowledge is considered philosophy, and thus thinking about the abstract concept of purposes is philosophy. One cannot understand purpose without practicing philosophy. This is why practicing philosophical thought and bettering our critical thinking and conceptual skills is so important, because the average person practices philosophy already without calling it philosophy.

The other part to contentment is being at peace with the understanding of one's purpose. Can there be any more peace with a truth than if one arrived at it logically of their own accord? Take an example of someone being told for the first time that giant reptiles called dinosaurs existed on the Earth 65 million years ago. One would be reticent to accept this fact at first and rightly so. They would only be able to completely accept and be at peace with the fact if they were able to see the fossils themselves and run tests on the bones to see how old they were. Only once they have seen and understood it themselves are they able to fully be at peace with the fact. In the same way, it is impossible for anyone to completely be at peace in understanding their purpose if it has been told to them by someone else. This is way I have written a whole thesis on purpose and have not once tried to tell the reader what their purpose is, as it would fall on deaf ears unless they discovered it themselves.

If someone were convinced by this argument to take up this liberal arts way of living, they would split up their time into doing some type of action and learning in each of the aspects. They would choose actions in each from the examples I gave earlier in this thesis, or they would think up

their own that fall into line with the definitions of each aspect. For example, they might learn an instrument and music theory to fulfill the category of music, take up running and learn proper nutrition for the physical training aspect, take a class or read a book in Physics for the knowledge of the world aspect, study logic and become social for dialectics, and give their time by helping out friends in ways such as driving them to the airport for the giving and experience aspect. They would spend their time learning and practicing these things until they wanted to learn new things. How long one spends learning anything specific in one aspect does not matter as long as the aspect is being fulfilled and kept healthy. These examples are obviously not the only ways to keep each aspect healthy, and I'm sure the reader could think of their own ways to do this.

Once the person feels that they have practiced conscious thinking enough they can attempt to figure out their purpose through logical thought. If one fails and cannot figure it out, then they must go back to the liberal arts way of living and practice more philosophy and consciousness. I cannot give an exact point as to when the person should feel ready to think about their purpose since I don't know their mind, but they should wait until they feel fully healthy in all aspects and until they feel comfortable and experienced thinking heavily about abstract concepts.

When the person succeeds in thinking about their purpose and understanding it, and when the person feels at peace with the understanding of it, they have reached contentment. They will now go back to the liberal arts way of living and live out their days spending their time in that way, though now they are completely content.

After reading this, the reader might ask how I know that this above person will find a purpose at all. The answer is that there is always the most basic human purpose that we inherited from our ancestors in the hunter-gatherer days. If the person following the liberal arts way of living

attempts to think about their purpose many times and fails, then they will logically accept this basic purpose and be at peace with it.

To sum up the argument for the second premise, one cannot try to understand the most important question of one's purpose without educating and being healthy in all aspects of life. They must become healthy in all aspects because not being healthy in any aspect will not allow one to reach peace and contentment. The process of thinking about one's purpose is also an incredibly difficult task for one's consciousness, so practicing in the other aspects of life and practicing philosophy will help make one ready for the task.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, I should follow the way of living of the Philosopher-Kings as described in Plato's Republic

Therefore, since we have shown why one should be striving for contentment and we have shown a way of living that leads to contentment, we can accept the conclusion of our original argument that we should educate each aspect of our lives in the liberal arts fashion of Plato's Philosopher-Kings.

I hope the reader has seen through this paper how philosophy is the pathway to contentment. Contentment and purpose are abstract ideas, so any type of thinking about these subjects is philosophy. This is why bettering our philosophical skills is so important in life, and why we must spend time practicing consciousness through the other aspects of life.

My goal with this thesis was to provide a central definition of contentment to define a type of goal that most people already have in their lives, make the reader see how our typical actions do not lead us towards this goal, and provide a way of living that orders one's time with the most important life goal of contentment first. I hope the reader will agree that we have met this goal.

Now, if the reader has become convinced by the arguments in this thesis, I have explained how to put this way of living into practice in one's own life, and I hope the convinced reader will do so.

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