

Would COVID-19 vaccination be mandatory in the Republic of Plato?

Christos Tsagkaris, Anna Loudovikou, Dimitrios V. Moysidis, Andreas S. Papazoglou, Konstantinos Kalachanis

Abstract—The Republic of Plato is a philosophical treatise describing the ideal city–state, a self-sufficient civil entity in the world of Ideas (Forms) that enables both individuals and the society to thrive. Elements of the Republic can be traced back in modern policymaking. Plato’s ethical and political philosophy consists of a standpoint of reflection towards contemporary challenges, one of whom is admittedly COVID-19 vaccination. Few countries have made vaccination obligatory for the whole of the population, while many countries consider making vaccination mandatory for particular high-risk groups and front line workers. In response to the growing debate on the necessity and the ethical integrity of mandatory vaccination against COVID-19, this paper discusses the matter in the context of Plato’s Republic and provides relevant recommendations.

Keywords—COVID-19, Vaccines, Plato, the Republic, Philosophy

I. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Plato (428-348 BC) is one of the world’s most influential treatises in ethical philosophy and political theory. The Republic describes the ideal city which, lies in the realm of Ideas, by means of a dialogue between the philosopher Socrates and a number of renowned Athenians. Moreover, the Republic should not be considered as a political system but rather as *a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself its citizen* [1]. Therefore man contemplates this pattern in order to improve his and his community’s living conditions as much as possible. Justice, defined as willingness to obey laws for the sake of the civil coexistence of individuals and social groups, constitutes the fundament of the ideal city – state. Although this ideal city never came to existence, Plato’s political philosophy has influenced modern policymaking and still serves as a standpoint for reflection on contemporary ethical and sociopolitical challenges and controversy [2].

Mandatory COVID-19 vaccination has fueled intense debate over public health and human rights. To date two countries have made COVID-19 vaccination mandatory at population level and at least ten countries are issuing similar mandates for high - risk population groups including healthcare workers, security bodies and educators. Those who support these policies stress public health protection and those who oppose set

Christos Tsagkaris is with Faculty of Medicine, University of Crete, Heraklion, Greece. e-mail: chriss20x@gmail.com (Corresponding author)

Anna Loudovikou is with School of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Andreas S. Papazoglou and Dimitrios V. Moysidis are with Faculty of Medicine, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Konstantinos Kalachanis, New York College, Athens, Greece.

the right of informed consent as a red line, shifting the debate towards the limits between individual and public interest [3,4]. Although Plato’s Republic does not contain a definitive answer to the question, it can provide modern researchers and societies with further insights to consider.

Arguments in favor and against mandatory COVID-19 vaccination in the Republic

The governance model and the structure of the society in Plato’s Republic would make vaccination mandatory. The population would be divided in three classes, artisans, auxiliaries, and philosopher-kings. Although each of the classes possesses distinct skills and makes substantial contributions to the collective wellbeing of the city, philosopher-kings rule, because they prevail in sciences [5]. There is no doubt over their ethical and evidence-based decision making; therefore, the population would accept the vaccines they would approve.

The platonic concept of justice would weigh in favor of this as well. The citizens would abide by laws for the sake of the civil coexistence of individuals and social groups [6]. This is explained by the the structure of the human soul that corresponds to the structure of the State. The philosophers-kings have developed the rational part of the soul, which makes them eligible to take over the governance of the city. The auxiliaries are characterized by the *spiritive part* protect the city from external enemies, while the artisans thanks to the predominance of the appetitive part of the soul, are responsible for the production of goods. Just as justice prevails in the soul, it contributes to each part of it performing a specific task, respectively, and at a social level, justice creates the conditions for the harmonious coexistence of all parts of society. Each person is therefore essentially a microcosm of society, in which the quality of his soul is reflected [7]. Both man and the State are therefore not separate entities, but are governed by an inseparable unity, as is the case with the parts of a body. Therefore, the happiness of the citizens and consequently the harmonious relations between the social classes should not be the result of violent coercion or good testimony from outside, but should come from the inner mental harmony of the people that will be reflected in the State. In other words, vaccination denial or hesitancy towards reason and science, the locomotives of this inner harmony, would fuel conflict between classes and undermine coexistence posing the very existence of the Republic at risk. Similarly, frontline workers denying COVID-19 vaccines would fail to protect their patients and accomplish their societal role. Mandatory vaccination would be accepted as a necessary means to safeguard both the citizens and the state.

Nonetheless, vaccination might not need to become manda-

tory in the Republic. All the citizens would be trained to prioritize the common good over their own sake. Beyond moral principles, they would understand that a standstill caused by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 would eventually set themselves, their family and business at peril. For the same reasons, they would consider a personal calamity inflicted by the potential side effects less harmful [5, 6]. In the Platonic Republic particular attention was paid to the education of the auxiliaries from whom the philosopher-kings were appointed (Plato, *Republica*, 414 b, 1-5). Mandatory courses for the auxiliaries were music, myths and gymnastic [7]. Beyond them there were scientific courses such as arithmetics and astronomy that cause man to think beyond his senses, so as to decide on the quality of an object [8]. Therefore rational thought is a virtue to be possessed by the auxiliaries and consequently the kings of the state. Even today, therefore, these kings would choose scientific knowledge to deal with a complex scientific subject such as the COVID-19 pandemic and these auxiliaries would be able to resonate with this choice.

Recommendations

Although the Republic is an ideal state beyond applied human politics, modern policymakers and societies can retrieve a number of lessons from this hypothetical city–state.

Knowledgeable leadership can make a difference: Plato would appoint only philosophers – scientists as leaders. So far, leaders with a scientific background have performed better in the management of the pandemic. Many leaders lacking this background have been prone to defying the instructions of experts [9, 10]. Although allocating governmental positions to scientists would not be compatible with modern constitutions, empowering them in decision–making can make a difference.

Social accountability needs to become a common ground: Plato assumes that the citizens of *Republica* would prioritize common over individual interest. Although contemporary leaders have repeatedly invoked social accountability, citizens nurtured exclusively with individual values fail to grasp the repercussions of public crises at the individual level [11]. Therefore, social accountability and civil coexistence should be emphasized in the long term.

Realistic expectations can help reach a consensus: Over-optimistic promises of unconditional exemption from restrictions and personal protective measures have recently backfired against COVID-19 vaccination efforts [12]. On the contrary, the Republic, a dialogue curated by a philosopher famous for admitting his ignorance when necessary, promotes a collective informed concern, with citizens accepting vaccination following careful consideration of the risk and benefits at population and individual level.

Ethics and Philosophy can become part of the solution: The Republic serves as a reminder of good practices focusing on social cohesion, social accountability and responsible governance. Philosophical models such as Kallipolis have been authored as a critical response to political, social and ethical flaws in times of crisis. Revisiting them can provide insights and enrich constructive dialogue between stakeholders and the public [13].

II. CONCLUSION

Revisiting philosophy cannot provide definite technical solutions. However, it can contribute to resolving controversy over mandatory or non-mandatory vaccination on widely accepted ethical grounds and promote civilized dialogue in times of tension and division.

Acknowledgments: none

Competing interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Citation: Tsagkaris C, Loudovikou A, Moysidis DV, Papazoglou AS, Kalachanis K. Would COVID-19 vaccination be mandatory in the Republic of Plato?. *Hist Philos Med.* 2022;4(1):1. doi: 10.53388/HPM20220101001.

Executive editor: Na Liu.

Submitted: 26 August 2021, **Accepted:** 2 September 2021,

Online: 2 September 2021.

© 2021 By Authors. Published by TMR Publishing Group Limited. This is an open access article under the CC-BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Plato and E. J. Burnet, "Platonis opera," vol. 4. bClarendon Press, 1968.
- [2] Plato's Ethics and Politics in The Republic, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017 Sep 12, Accessed on July 24 2021, Available from: . <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics-politics/>
- [3] J. Savulescu, A. Giubilini, and M. Danchin, "Global Ethical Considerations Regarding Mandatory Vaccination in Children," *J Pediatr*, vol. 231, pp. 10–16, 2021.
- [4] C. Stokel-Walker, "Covid-19: The countries that have mandatory vaccination for health workers," *BMJ*, vol. 373, 2021.
- [5] W. J. Korab-Karpowicz. Plato: Political Philosophy, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy; A peer reviewed source, 2021, Accessed on July 24 2021, Available from: <https://iep.utm.edu/platopol/>
- [6] D. R. Bhandari. Plato's Concept Of Justice: An Analysis, Paideia [Παιδεία] | Ancient Philosophy, 2021, Accessed on July 24, 2021, Available from: <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciBhan.htm>
- [7] "Platonis opera," P. Alcibiades and ed. J. Burnet, Eds., vol. 2. Clarendon Press, 1901.
- [8] K Kalachanis, "The training of guards in Plato's Res Publica Socrates," *International Scientific Review of ancient greek philosophy*, vol. 4, pp. 69–73, 2018.
- [9] D. J. Campo, Let science lead: We need more leaders with science backgrounds, The HILL, 2020 May, Accessed on July 24 2021, Available from: <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/497533-let-science-lead-we-need-more-leaders-with-science-backgrounds>
- [10] M. Nicola, C. Sohrabi, G. Mathew, et al, "Health policy and leadership models during the COVID-19 pandemic: A review," *Int J Surg*, vol. 81, pp. 122–129, 2020.
- [11] D. E. Bloom, D. Cadarette, and M. Ferranna, "The Societal Value of Vaccination in the Age of COVID-19," *Am J Public Health*, vol. 111, no. 6, pp. 1049–1054, 2021
- [12] B. Trogen and L. A. Pirofski, "Understanding vaccine hesitancy in COVID-19," *Med (N Y)*, vol. 2, no. 5, pp. 498–501, 2021.
- [13] V. A. Entwistle and A. Cribb, "Philosophy, health services and research: the importance of keeping conversations open," *Health Expect*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 178–81, 2011.