

Plato on Democracy

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Plato is often acknowledged as the first philosophical critic of democracy and his *Republic* is regularly taken as a paradigm of an anti-democratic work. While it is true that Plato objected to much about the democracy of his own time, Plato's political theorizing also reveals an interest in improving democratic institutions. This chapter explores three themes in Plato's thinking about democracy: firstly, Plato's insistence that rulers should be knowledgeable and his claim that most people are politically incompetent (§1); secondly, Plato's criticisms of oratory and the corrupting effects of public rhetoric (§2); thirdly, Plato's use of democratic institutions in the *Laws* (§3). Once we appreciate these different evaluations of democratic practices, we can see that Plato was not simply 'anti-democratic' or 'pro-democratic' but thought some democratic practices should be abandoned, some reformed, and some adopted.

It is worth noting that there are many ways to understand Plato's engagement with democracy, as it is not clear how to move from difficult, distinct, literary dialogues in which the author never speaks to a determination of Plato's own political position or to a verdict about what Plato was trying to achieve by writing these texts. Moreover, democracies have various institutional, cultural, and ideological aspects, and scholars disagree about how best to characterize these aspects and weight their importance.

Readers can get a sense of the complexities by considering some particularly influential interpretative debates. One issue concerns the role of Plato's biography, especially his response

to the death of Socrates,¹ and his purported trips to Sicily;² but the actual details of Plato's life are unclear at best,³ and much hangs on the Platonic authorship of the *Seventh Letter*—a now dubious attribution⁴—and how Plato's views may have changed (if at all) when he came to write the *Laws*.⁵ Another issue concerns whether Plato seriously endorsed the political proposals of the *Republic*. Karl Popper's critique of Plato as a proto-totalitarian was hugely influential but prompted a wave of scholarly replies.⁶ Literary approaches adopted by Leo Strauss and his followers read Plato as an anti-totalitarian, taking the impossibility of the political proposals to be central to understanding the text.⁷ Drawing on an ancient interpretative tradition, Julia Annas argued that the *Republic* should be read primarily as an ethical rather than a political text, as the main question is about individual (not political) justice.⁸ More recent approaches by political theorists have emphasized Plato's subtle "entanglements" with democracy, and explore how Plato's writings engage with various aspects of democratic discourse, practice, and ideology.⁹

¹ C. Rowe, 'Killing Socrates: Plato's Later Thoughts on Democracy', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 121 (2001), 63–76.

² G. Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2006); S. Monoson, 'Dionysius I and Sicilian theatrical traditions in Plato's *Republic*: representing continuities between democracy and tyranny' in K. Bosher (ed.), *Theater Outside Athens* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 156–174.

³ A. Riginos, *Platonica: the anecdotes concerning the life and writings of Plato* (Leiden, 1976).

⁴ M. Burnyeat and M. Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* (Oxford University Press, 2015); T. Irwin, "The Inside Story of the Seventh Platonic Letter: A Sceptical Introduction", *Rhizai*, 6/2 (2009), 127–160.

⁵ See J. Annas 'What are Plato's Middle Dialogues in the Middle of?' and C. Kahn 'On Platonic Chronology', both in J. Annas and C. Rowe, *New Perspectives on Plato: Modern and Ancient* (Center for Hellenic Studies, 2003).

⁶ K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton University Press, 1945). An even-handed assessment is L. Brown 'How totalitarian is Plato's Republic?' in Erik Nis Ostenfeld (ed.), *Essays on Plato's Republic*, (Aarhus University Press 1998), 13–27.

⁷ L. Strauss, *The City and Man* (University of Chicago Press, 1964); see A. Bloom's interpretative essay in his translation of Plato's *Republic* (Basic Books, 1968), and M. Lane, 'Plato, Popper, Strauss, and Utopianism: Open Secrets?', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 16/2 (1999), 119–142.

⁸ J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford University Press, 1981); *Platonic Ethics: Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 2000); 'Politics in Plato's *Republic*: His and Ours', *Apeiron* 33/4 (2000), 303–326. Her recent *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2017) emphasizes continuities between the *Republic* and *Laws*.

⁹ Contributions include D. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); S. Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* (Princeton University Press, 2000); A. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); J. Thakkar, *Plato as Critical Theorist* (Harvard University Press, 2018). For a helpful summary, see L. Klein & D. Schillinger, 'Entangling Plato: A Guide through the *Political Theory* Archive', *Political Theory* (March 2021).

Many of these contributions rely on Plato's stylistic use of the dialogue form, irony, images, allusion, and other literary devices, but the function of such devices is especially open to interpretation.

My approach here focuses on what was taken to be paradigmatically democratic in Plato's historical context: institutionally, the appointment of officials by random lottery, mass participation in the assembly and juries, equal voting power, and public oratory; culturally, the centrality of freedom and equality as political values.¹⁰ Democracy is more than these things, but they are good places to start. Additionally, my goal is to elucidate the arguments in Plato's texts. While we should consider these arguments in light of their literary and dramatic contexts, to do this we must first get clear on what the arguments are. I hope the philosophical reasoning I reconstruct here will be a useful basis for those who wish to read Plato in more sophisticated ways.

1. Skilled Rulers, Ignorant Citizens, and Political Order

Plato's most famous critique of democracy is epistemic: rulers ought to be knowledgeable, and most people lack both the knowledge to rule and the ability to identify knowledgeable people. In the *Republic*, it is the philosopher-rulers of the guardian class who uniquely possess knowledge of the Forms, and it is because of this knowledge that they can rule well. On this basis, Plato is

¹⁰ See Aristotle, *Politics* IV.4, VI.2–5; E. Robinson, *The First Democracies: Early Popular Government outside Athens* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997), chapter one. For an excellent institutional approach to Plato, see M. Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton University Press, 2023). How to understand freedom is very controversial: the seminal historical work is K. Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); see F. Miller, 'Platonic Freedom', in ed. D. Schmitz and C.E. Pavel (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 143–59 for a recent contribution.

classified as an epistocrat.¹¹ Such a reading of Plato is often thought to entail a pernicious kind of elitism: not only do you need arcane knowledge of abstract subjects to rule, you actually have to be a philosopher; but because most people are not philosophers, most people should be barred from holding office and from voting.

While Plato emphasizes knowledge as a crucial component of the best kind of rule, knowledge gets situated within the larger concept of skill (*technē*). So we should get clear on what Plato means by ‘skill’, looking first to his historical context, and then to his development of the idea of political skill. With this framework in place, we will be in a better position to assess how Plato’s claims about political expertise target democratic practices, specifically the use of random lottery to appoint officials (which implies that anybody can do the job) but also the faith in the ability of the many to make good political judgements.

In Plato’s context, someone’s *technē* was their profession, their full-time job, their trade.¹² It is not surprising, then, that Plato’s main examples of skills are shoe-making, weaving, navigation, and medicine. These are not hobbies that one does on the side in one’s spare time (*parerga*); these are specialized activities that one has worked at for many years and about which one can speak authoritatively, often having first worked as an apprentice or with a teacher proficient in the trade before making it one’s own profession.¹³ The orator Isocrates emphasizes three key components to skill: nature, training, and knowledge.¹⁴ Nature is important because some people are better suited to certain skills than others—orators and opera singers need loud

¹¹ J. Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 14; D. Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 30, 206–8.

¹² E. Hulme, *Philosophia and Philotechnia: The Technē Theme in the Platonic Dialogues* (Dissertation: Princeton University 2019); *Philosophy Among Professionals: Plato on Technē* (forthcoming).

¹³ Hulme, *Philosophia and Philotechnia*, pp. 13, 58, citing Thucydides 1.142.9 and Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.6. See also J. Ober, ‘Wealthy Hellas’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140/2 (2010), pp. 271–273 for specialization of trades as an explanation for the success of the Greek economy.

¹⁴ *Against the Sophists*, 16–17; Hulme notes the features in medical treatises (*Philosophia and Philotechnia*, p. 59n77). See also Aristotle, *Politics* VII.13, VII.15 for this framework applied to virtue.

voices; tall basketball players are going to have fewer obstacles to success than short ones; pianists cannot play Rachmaninov without large hands. Training is important because natural talent can only take you so far, and at some point you have to put in the hours to get the requisite experience, know-how, and familiarity with the tools and subject-matter of the skill to become proficient. Knowledge is what makes the difference between someone who genuinely has a skill and someone who is a quack, or who is engaging in guesswork, or who cannot explain why their method is effective. This last feature is often captured by the idea of being able to provide a *logos*—a rational account of the subject matter—specifically with respect to the relevant causes and right explanations (*aitiai*), and the right procedure to follow.¹⁵

Plato is thus not doing anything new in the *Republic* when he establishes various principles about specialization and the division of labour in the establishment of a city. One person will not try to farm and make shoes and build houses, but rather each person will specialize in a particular skill;¹⁶ next, tasks are assigned on the basis of who has a nature best fitted for that task.¹⁷ With each person focusing on one skill, everyone will do a better job at their task, be less likely to spoil their product by missing the right moment to do the work, and in general the goods of the city will be more plentiful, of better quality, and more easily produced.¹⁸ The principle here is one person, one job.¹⁹ Plato emphasizes that people should practice a single trade, from childhood, and should work at it all their life.²⁰ While Plato was aware that people

¹⁵ E. Hulme [Kozey], ‘The Good-Directedness of Τέχνη and the Status of Rhetoric in the Platonic Dialogues’, *Apeiron* 52/3 (2019), pp. 226–227, 235–238; *Philosophia and Philotechnia*, pp. 61–64, citing *On the Sacred Disease* I.4 and similar evidence from ceramics and metalworking. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates is impressed by the knowledge of the craftspeople, but they overstep once they stop talking about their specialization (22a–e).

¹⁶ 369e3–370a4.

¹⁷ 370a7–b2.

¹⁸ 370b5–c6. S. Meyer, ‘Class Assignment and the Principle of Specialization in Plato’s *Republic*’, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 20/1 (2005), 229–263 with T. Brennan’s response.

¹⁹ A similar idea is in Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 1431, after a bad driver causes a chariot accident.

²⁰ 374b6–d6.

could adopt new professions, the realities of changing one's job made it expensive, inefficient, and risky, as you not only had to re-train (which took many years, during which you would not be producing quality goods) but also had to buy new tools and work out if you were any good at the new job.²¹ Ideally, then, one would find the craft for which one was suited and stick with it, developing one's skill over a lifetime. The *Republic* hypothesizes a society in which this job assignment could be done reliably.

Plato's application of the principle of specialization to the auxiliaries (the class of soldiers) is also unremarkable in the historical context. Athenians, who usually appointed public officials by random lottery, made an exception to elect generals, as generalship is a skill and requires expertise.²² Moreover, Plato was hardly alone in thinking that citizen-soldiers needed comprehensive military training and a quality of virtue greater than what the average craftsman had. Sparta's legendary military prowess was partly due to the fact that their training in warfare was more integrated into their way of life than it was in other Greek city-states. Plutarch reports that Spartan citizens were forbidden from practising the 'base' professions, i.e. manual trades, so that they could focus on their civic duties. In a memorable scene, Plutarch describes how the Spartan allies had complained that Sparta had not sent enough soldiers to aid in a conflict; in response, the leader Agesilaus had the Spartans sit apart from the allied troops, then asked all the potters to stand up, then the blacksmiths, then the carpenters and builders, and so forth. With most of the allied troops standing and all of the Spartans still sitting, Agesilaus said, "See, men, how many more soldiers we sent than you."²³ Being a soldier is a

²¹ E. Hulme [Kozey], 'Another Peri Technes Literature: Inquiries About One's Craft at Dodona', *Greece & Rome* 65/2 (2018), pp. 214–215.

²² M. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Democracy* (Blackwell, 1992), pp. 269–270; Aristotle, *Politics*, IV.14, VI.2.

²³ Plutarch, *Life of Agesilaus*, 26.5; see also Herodotus 2.167, Plutarch, *Comparison of Lycurgus and Numa*, 2.3. and Xenophon, *Constitution of the Spartans*, 2.7–8, 4.7, 8.3, 9.1, 11–13 for how Spartan education contributed to military prowess; Isocrates claims that these specialization practices were adopted from the Egyptians (*Busiris*

profession, and you cannot have two professions at once. Thus, that Plato has those in the auxiliary class have a different way of life than those in the producer class is a reasonable application of the idea that professionals need to spend their time honing their craft and developing the abilities their job demands.

The Socratic contribution to this thinking about skill is reported by Xenophon: Socrates noticed that the Athenians exempted politics from their general model of expertise and specialization.²⁴ Plato also has Socrates make this point in the *Protagoras*, and Protagoras suggests in response that politics is a skill that everybody has, like being able to speak one's native language.²⁵ But the *Republic* rejects this move: ruling and holding office should be considered specialized skills. Just like architecture or navigation or medicine, politics is a job for which one must train over the course of a life, and it is not true that anybody can do it well. Being a statesman, then, is a profession, and it is a profession for which philosophers will turn out to be uniquely suited.²⁶

But 'philosophers' (literally, lovers of wisdom) is a technical term in the *Republic* and philosophers are characterized along the three dimensions of skill: nature, training, and knowledge. First, a philosopher's nature is marked by a love of learning in all its varieties, but they particularly love learning unchanging truths;²⁷ philosophers are without falsehood and hate it;²⁸ they are moderate and are in no way money-lovers;²⁹ they are not slavish, petty, cowardly,

11.17–18); see N. Humble, 'Sparta in Plato and Xenophon', in G. Danzig, D. Johnson & D. Morrison (eds), *Plato and Xenophon: Comparative Studies* (Brill, 2018), pp. 556–557.

²⁴ *Memorabilia* 4.2.6.

²⁵ 320c8–328d2.

²⁶ M. Lane, "'Emplois pour philosophes": l'art politique et l'Étranger dans le *Politique* à la lumière de Socrate et du philosophe dans le *Théétète*', *Les Études philosophiques* 3 (2005), 325–45.

²⁷ 485a10–b3.

²⁸ 485c3–4.

²⁹ 485e3–5.

or attached to life, but rather seek to understand divine things and have no fear of death;³⁰ they are orderly, reliable, and do not boast;³¹ from youth, they have been just and gentle, rather than harsh, savage, and unsociable;³² they are quick to learn and have an excellent memory;³³ they are musical, graceful, drawn to due measure, and easily grasp the form of things;³⁴ they are persistent and enjoy hard work.³⁵ Many of these traits are explicit goals of education introduced earlier in the *Republic*;³⁶ thus these characteristics are not necessarily innate but are rather well directed and well cultivated natural tendencies. Importantly, the philosophical nature includes both ethical and intellectual elements—philosophers have the best dispositions for learning difficult material quickly and for becoming good people. They will both know and love justice.

The philosopher's training is a lifelong enterprise. When young, they will play mathematical games.³⁷ Along with the auxiliaries, they will have around 18 years of 'musical' education—exposure to and engagement in ethically valuable poetry, drama, narrative, and music proper—then around two years of 'gymnastic' education, which includes physical exercise, military training, and dieting.³⁸ From the ages of 20 to 30, the philosophers begin their formal training in mathematics, systematizing the lessons they had learned during their earlier games;³⁹ from 30 to 35, they begin their training in dialectic and argument;⁴⁰ from 35 to 50, the philosophers gain experience in the practical matters of the city, holding public office in both

³⁰ 486a4–b4.

³¹ 486b6–8.

³² 486b10–12.

³³ 486c3–d2.

³⁴ 486d4–11.

³⁵ 535c1–4; *Theaetetus* 143e4–144b6.

³⁶ 410a7–412a7.

³⁷ 536d4–e3. M. Jenkins, 'Early Education in Plato's *Republic*', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23/5 (2015), 843–863.

³⁸ 537b1–5. R. Kamtekar, 'Plato on Education and Art' in G. Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook to Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 336–359.

³⁹ 537b7–c3.

⁴⁰ 539a8–e3.

military and civic capacities, and get tested on their ability to perform their roles effectively and virtuously in the face of trials and temptations.⁴¹ Finally, at 50, assuming they have passed their previous tests in both politics and science, these people begin the final dialectical ascent to the Forms, and should they reach the Form of the Good and understand it, they are then ordered to rule in the city.⁴²

The result of this training is knowledge. Famously, philosophers know the Form of the Good, but also Forms of the Beautiful and the Just. The point here is straightforward but important: if you are trying to make a city just, you need to know what justice is. For Plato, acquiring this knowledge requires moving through increasingly difficult and abstract branches of learning, from arithmetic and geometry to idealized models of harmony and astronomy.⁴³ But we should not underemphasize the various kinds of know-how that the philosophers learn during their 15 years of practical training in warfare and politics. Plato's philosophers are not pure mathematicians dragged from ivory towers into unfamiliar senate-chambers; they have demonstrable records of competency and success in less important offices before taking up the mantle of kingly rule.

Plato thus sets a demanding standard for expertise in ruling, and the stakes are especially high given the concentration of power in Kallipolis—the city of the *Republic*. It follows that basically everyone will count as incompetent and ignorant by this standard (in the sense of unskilled in the relevant domain). But most people are not skilled at most things and, as Plato bluntly puts it in the *Statesman*, in a city of a thousand people you would be lucky if you found a

⁴¹ 539e3–540a4.

⁴² 540a4–c2.

⁴³ 522b7–531d3. M. Burnyeat, 'Plato on Why Mathematics is Good for the Soul', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 103 (2000), 1–81.

hundred or even fifty experts of checkers let alone experts of politics.⁴⁴ Now the criticism of democratic appointment by lottery becomes clear: picking people at random is deeply unlikely to result in skilled people holding office, especially in the absence of a system of education that trains people in that skill.

More subtle implications about the collective judgements of the many and appointment by election emerge in the Ship of State analogy from *Republic*, Book VI. The Ship of State aims to show why philosophers are thought to be useless in actual cities.⁴⁵ In the analogy, the shipowner is the biggest and strongest person on the ship, but he is “hard of hearing, a bit short-sighted, and his knowledge of seafaring is equally deficient”;⁴⁶ the shipowner is surrounded by quarrelling sailors, each of whom thinks that they deserve to steer the ship even though they are not skilled in navigation and deny that such a skill can be taught. The sailors try to persuade and drug the shipowner into accepting them as captain, calling this ability the true art of navigation, and they think that anybody is useless if they’re not helpful in manipulating the shipowner. Because the sailors don’t see the value in knowing about the weather, the winds, or the stars, they call anybody engaged in studying such practices a good-for-nothing stargazer.⁴⁷ The shipowner represents the many (the people as a collective, the *demos*), the sailors represent those who rule in the city at present (the orators and politicians), and the captain represents the philosophers.⁴⁸ Thus the many do not understand what political skill consists in nor appreciate those who genuinely practice that skill, and they get led astray by the persuasive speech and

⁴⁴ 292e6–293a1.

⁴⁵ 487d3–e3.

⁴⁶ 488a8– b2.

⁴⁷ 488b2–489a2.

⁴⁸ 489c3–6.

coercive tricks of politicians. Simply put, the many lack the ability to make good political judgments and to reliably identify those who can.

Note, though, that this argument is not a targeted critique of democracy; rather, its implications are for any mode of political appointment that is not determined on the basis of skill. In fact, the Ship of State is later alluded to in the discussion of oligarchy, when Socrates criticizes the oligarchy for instituting a property restriction on eligibility for office, which would exclude skilled poor people.⁴⁹ Moreover, most Greek oligarchies comprised of a ruling class of about 10–20% of the population, with extreme oligarchies having hundreds of rulers and more moderate oligarchies having a few thousand rulers; thus the swipe in the *Statesman* about not being able to find even 50 checkers experts hits oligarchic constitutions nearly as hard as democratic ones, as in both cases the ignorant would outvote the skilled.⁵⁰

There is a more targeted critique of democracy introduced in *Republic VIII*, but it is best understood as a criticism of democracy's lack of order.⁵¹ Order is a central political value for Plato, and Kallipolis is rigidly structured on the basis of its class system and principle of specialization. Plato's *Statesman* gives us further clues as to how a skilled statesman brings about order in the city and what order amounts to. The statesman has knowledge of how the parts of the city should work together: shepherds may be experts in how to care for sheep, but the statesman knows whether the wool needs to be used for making clothes or sails, or the sheep slaughtered for mutton.⁵² A crucial part of statesmanship is knowledge of the *kairos* or right moment: generals may know how to fight wars and win battles, but they lack knowledge of

⁴⁹ 551c1–4.

⁵⁰ M. Simonton, *Classical Greek Oligarchy* (Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 52n219.

⁵¹ M. Johnstone, 'Anarchic Souls: Plato's Depiction of the Democratic Man', *Phronesis* 58 (2013), 139–159; M. Lane, 'Antianarchia: interpreting political thought in Plato', *Plato Journal* 16 (2016), 59–74.

⁵² 308d1–e2.

whether a war is worth fighting, or whether now is the time for violence or diplomacy.⁵³ The skill of politics involves knowing how the city's parts fit together and when they each ought to be activated. Additionally, the statesman arranges marriages to ensure that the citizens have the best natures, and arranges education so that cities may be unified in their beliefs and values.⁵⁴ The Platonic statesman thus looks at the city as a whole, seeks to bring about its unity, and judges correctly what is good for all.

The democratic constitution described in *Republic VIII* is, by contrast, disorderly insofar as it prioritizes freedom, understood as giving everyone the “license to do what he wants” and to “arrange his own life in whatever manner pleases him”.⁵⁵ It is also disorderly insofar as it treats all people as complete equals, with no distinctions made on the basis of merit, skill, or worth.⁵⁶ This has important consequences for how the democracy runs: ruling is granted to whomever wants it, as those who are capable of ruling do not have to rule and those who want to can, even if they are incompetent;⁵⁷ structured education falls apart and the benefits of consistent years of habituation never accrue;⁵⁸ people make no distinctions between the various kinds of pleasures and desires, acting on the basis of whatever desires come along and calling all pleasures equal.⁵⁹ In this democracy, nobody seems to be thinking about anything other than their personal desires, and the government lacks any mechanism for considering what is best for the city as a whole; it is thus not a unity, but a haphazard mess. Most importantly, the democracy in *Republic VIII* is seriously unstable insofar it is the breeding-ground for tyranny. By overvaluing freedom and destroying systematic ethical education, the constitution allows a space for someone controlled

⁵³ M. Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139–145.

⁵⁴ 308e4–310b5.

⁵⁵ 557b4–10.

⁵⁶ 558c1–4.

⁵⁷ 557e1–558a2.

⁵⁸ 558a10–b7.

⁵⁹ 561b3–c4.

by the worst motives to arise and seize power.⁶⁰ The foundation of this democracy—that everyone should be free to do what they desire—thus risks destroying the city entirely, and sows the seeds of the worst kind of subjugation.

2. Democracy, oratory, and the conflict between the pleasant and the good

Plato's second major critique concerns the prominence of oratory and the dynamics of public rhetorical contest in democracies. The core of this critique is that orators do not have knowledge of the subject matters about which they speak, and so rather than guiding the audience to what is true and beneficial for the polis, they instead pander to their listeners by appealing to what most find pleasant. Thus the system passes laws and decrees and makes judicial judgements because the proposals are pleasant and not because the proposals are good. Given the prominence of oratory in the democratic institutions of Athens, particularly in the assembly and courts, we can see this critique as attacking central pillars of democratic practice.

We must be careful, however, to distinguish Plato's criticisms of how oratory was practised from a critique of oratory as such. The *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Statesman* all make clear that there could be a place for those skilled in persuasion in a good polis. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates says that there are two parts of oratory: one is aimed at flattery, the other focuses on trying to make citizens as good as possible and strives to say what is best; but neither Socrates nor Callicles have actually seen the second kind of oratory practiced.⁶¹ Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, oratory is the art of persuasion—skill in leading the soul through words—but it is

⁶⁰ 562a7–564a8.

⁶¹ 502d10–503b9; 504d1–e5.

done well when the speaker is persuading somebody of something the speaker actually knows.⁶² Knowledgeable speakers speak the truth with proper philosophical order and use persuasion to produce true convictions in the audience.⁶³ Finally, in the *Statesman*, the labours of knowing and persuading are divided, such that orators persuade at the direction of knowledgeable statesman,⁶⁴ the statesman knows what the citizens need to be persuaded of and when they should be persuaded, but the orators know how to persuade. Orators, then, can be good and beneficial for the city when they either know themselves what they are talking about or are directed by somebody who does. Plato's issues with oratory therefore concern how oratory was in fact practiced, not with just any use of persuasive speech in the public sphere.

The critique of oratory as it is practiced comes in two parts: Plato first criticizes its goal, taking it to be a form of flattery or pandering; then he shows how making orators subject to the judgement of the many causes orators to take on whatever beliefs and values most people hold. Oratory generates a self-perpetuating cycle whereby orators win their contests by telling the audience what they want to hear and in turn produce stronger convictions in more people of what most people already believe. Given that people tend to be appetitive, overvaluing bodily pleasures and money, this process is fundamentally degenerative rather than beneficial.

We can see this dynamic in Socrates' refutation of Polus in the *Gorgias* through Socrates' distinction between a genuine skill (*technē*) and a knack (*empeiria*).⁶⁵ Politics, legislation, medicine, and gymnastics are skills that provide care, either for the body or for the soul, and aim for what is best in their domains, employing knowledge of that domain.⁶⁶ By contrast, oratory,

⁶² 261a7–8.

⁶³ 260d4–e7.

⁶⁴ 303a10–304a2; 304c7–e1.

⁶⁵ 462b3–c7.

⁶⁶ 464b2–c5.

sophistry, pastry baking, and cosmetics are knacks that pretend to provide care for body or soul, masquerading as authorities in the same domains as genuine skills;⁶⁷ importantly, knacks aim at gratification and pleasure.⁶⁸ Socrates then says that if the doctor and the pastry baker had to compete “in front of children, or in front of men just as foolish as children” to determine who has genuine expertise about what is good for the body, the doctor would lose.⁶⁹ The implication is that orators claim to know what is good for the city and its people, but in fact just pander to the desires of the audience, and even if genuinely wise people are present, they get outvoted. Like children deciding whether to have ice cream for breakfast, popular assemblies vote for the most pleasant policies rather than the policies that are objectively best or most beneficial for the city as a whole. Famous Athenian politicians are said to have satisfied the citizens’ appetites but made none of them better people. This is not the skill of politics, but elaborate popular flattery.⁷⁰

A crucial assumption in Socrates’ refutation of Polus is that there is a distinction between what is genuinely good for people and what is pleasant to them.⁷¹ If pleasure and goodness are different goals, and oratory aims at pleasing the populace while true politics aims at goodness, oratory will be harmful in cases where pleasure is opposed to the good. Hence Socrates’ next interlocutor in the *Gorgias*, Callicles, attempts to identify the good with pleasure: in aiming for what is pleasant to people, orators also aim at what is good for people. Put simply, Callicles’ response is that it is not bad when politicians give people what they want—it is their job. A major question in the *Gorgias*, then, is whether giving people what they want is equivalent to acting in their best interest, as most people think that what is good for them just is what they find

⁶⁷ 464c5–465c7.

⁶⁸ 462c7.

⁶⁹ 464d5–e2.

⁷⁰ 517b5–c1; *Republic* 426b8–d5.

⁷¹ 513d3–4.

pleasant. Plato's bigger political point here is that decision by popular vote is only going to be beneficial if people are not systematically mistaken about what is good for them—but most people wrongly think hedonism is true, so most people will not vote in their own best interest.

Socrates attributes Callicles' hedonism to his love of the people, and suggests that orators have to become like the many and internalize their beliefs in order to succeed.⁷² This provides the second prong of the Platonic critique of oratory as it is practised: not only does oratory pander to the pleasures of the many, public rhetorical contests corrupt the character of those who participate in it. In other words, oratory fails to aim at goodness and instils false beliefs about goodness in its practitioners.

Socrates illustrates this by saying that both he and Callicles are doubly in love: Socrates is in love with Alcibiades and philosophy, whereas Callicles is in love with a young man named Demos and the Athenian *demos* (people). Convenient punning aside, neither Socrates nor Callicles is able to contradict their beloved, and so they say whatever their beloved wants to hear.⁷³ But while philosophy always likes and asks for the same thing, the *demos* is fickle, approving of one thing at one time and another thing at another time. So Socrates always says the same thing, but Callicles shifts back and forth in his speeches, depending on how the *demos* responds and what he thinks they want.⁷⁴ Callicles' inability to be persuaded by Socrates is also attributed to Callicles' love for the *demos*, which prevents him from changing his mind about the issues in their discussion.⁷⁵

⁷² R. Kamtekar, 'The Profession of Friendship: Callicles, Democratic Politics, and Rhetorical Education in the *Gorgias*', *Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2005), 319–339; J.C. Shaw, *Plato's Anti-Hedonism in the Protagoras* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), chapter 5.

⁷³ 481d5–482a4.

⁷⁴ 482a5–482c3. Plato's invocation of Alcibiades might remind us of Alcibiades' dual love of Socrates and the people—a conflict central to his speech in the *Symposium*, and one that the people win; see J. Wilburn, 'The Problem of Alcibiades: Plato on Moral Education and the Many', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 49 (2015), 1–36.

⁷⁵ 513c7–8.

The issue is that if Callicles is to win the love of the people, it is not enough just to imitate them or to please them—he has to become like them.⁷⁶ People most enjoy hearing speeches that reflect their own values and resent the opposite.⁷⁷ But orators who genuinely share the values of their audience are more likely to win the love of the people in the long run because they can speak sincerely, whereas orators whose values diverge from popular opinions will have to prevaricate and dissemble. Ideally, then, the person who wants to become a successful orator should train himself in the habits of the city from youth, liking and disliking the same things that they do.⁷⁸ Public oratory thus has an internal mechanism for weeding out people who might say things that the *demos* does not want to hear and for granting success to anybody who reliably gratifies them. Rather than being an arena where the truth emerges through rational argumentation, public speaking is a spectacle where victory is granted to the person who is most similar and most pleasing to the masses.

But if orators are subservient to the people, how do demagogues fit into Plato’s account? During the degeneration of democracy into tyranny in *Republic VIII*, the democratic city is described as having a culture in which teachers are afraid of and flatter their students, and the old imitate the young “for fear of appearing disagreeable and authoritarian”.⁷⁹ Moreover, in this city there is an especially fierce class of people without jobs who spend their time on public oratory, speaking in front of audiences who will not let speakers contradict their values. These orators are said to run the city.⁸⁰ This creates an environment in which somebody comes along who claims to be a champion of the people, gaining support because he does what the people want, banishing

⁷⁶ 513a1–b8.

⁷⁷ 513b8–c3.

⁷⁸ 510d6–8; *Republic* 493a6–d8.

⁷⁹ 563a5–b3.

⁸⁰ 564d7–e2. Cf. J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 167.

some people, killing others, cancelling debts, and redistributing land.⁸¹ Things spiral out of control when this leader consolidates power for himself and tyrannizes over the people. But note that the leader gains power by satisfying people's desires: the *demos* wanted those people banished and exiled, and the *demos* wanted their money and property—the leader encouraged them to fulfil these desires violently. We can thus see that demagogues are dangerous insofar as they encourage people to act on illicit desires that they might otherwise suppress, and this is a catalyst for violence and constitutional change.⁸² So while orators do not shape public opinion—quite the opposite—orators may nonetheless play an important role in fanning the flames and in turning public opinion into collective action.

How, then, does this account of oratory deepen Plato's critique of democratic practices? The problem from §1 was that politics requires skill, but most people lack that skill and so cannot reliably make good judgments; the problem here is that even if some people are genuinely skilled and knowledgeable, the collective judgments of the people are likely to be systematically bad, as oratory encourages convergence on what is pleasing to most rather than what is actually good for individuals and the polis as a whole. Insofar as democratic assemblies and courts relied on winning the popular vote through persuasive oratory, Plato's critique of the goals and methods of oratory as it was practised raises serious questions about the quality of those institutions.

3. Re-working democratic institutions: Plato's political theory in practice

⁸¹ 565e3–566a2.

⁸² See also R. Balot, 'Democracy and Political Philosophy: Influences, Tension, Rapprochement', in J. Arnason, K. Raaflaub, P. Wagner (eds) *The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2013), p. 186.

There are plenty of ways we might respond to these critiques of democracy, but Plato had his own reservations about the political ideals espoused in the *Republic* and *Statesman*. Most importantly, it may not be possible for a mortal human to rise to the heights of an incorruptible philosopher-ruler, and this risks making political proposals which depend on such wondrous people unfeasible.⁸³ But if there is no way for people to get the requisite level of expertise reliably such that skilled rulers could form a stable basis of government, we have to find a realistic way to approximate rule by the skilled. To see how Plato's critiques of democracy are consistent with a more positive evaluation of some of its aspects, we should turn to the *Laws*. In the *Laws*, an unnamed Athenian Visitor lays out the constitution for a new settlement in Crete called Magnesia. According to Aristotle, Plato's goal in the *Laws* was to make the ideals of the *Republic* practicable.⁸⁴ We must consider the *Laws*, then, if we want to see what Plato considers valuable about democracy in practice. Scholars have noted that Plato incorporates various democratic institutions into the constitution of Magnesia,⁸⁵ and Plato finds much to commend in the Athenian constitution (especially in its putatively Solonian form) while proposing novel ways to improve those institutions.⁸⁶

Why think that Plato finds anything valuable about democracy at all? The discussion of the goals of legislation in *Laws* III makes explicit that there is a place for some democratic ideals in Magnesia. The best constitution is said to come about through the mixing of what Plato calls the monarchical principle and the democratic principle, in order that the city may be wise, free, and friend to itself.⁸⁷ A plausible way of understanding what these principles amount to is in

⁸³ *Laws* 713c2–714b1, 875c3–d4.

⁸⁴ *Politics* II.6.

⁸⁵ G. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (Princeton University Press, 1960); A. Laks, *Beyond the Republic: An Essay on Plato's Laws* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

⁸⁶ Cf. D. Cammack, 'Plato and Athenian Justice', *History of Political Thought* 36/4 (2015), p. 612 for a more skeptical view. On the Solonian constitution, see T. Lockwood's chapter in this volume.

⁸⁷ 693d7–e1, 693e5–694a5, 698a5–b2, 756e8–757a1.

terms of self-rule and other-rule; the principle of monarchy is that somebody else should tell you what to think and do (such that an excess of monarchy leads to the slavery of the people ruled, thus producing extreme hierarchy), whereas the principle of democracy is that you should decide for yourself what to think and do (such that an excess of democracy leads to everybody deciding for themselves what is best and refusing to recognize authorities, thus producing extreme equality).⁸⁸ Framing the principles in this way makes clear why Magnesian education partly consists in learning how to rule and be ruled with justice,⁸⁹ as citizens need to learn both how to recognize and follow legitimate authorities, and how to be autonomous enough that they can run their own households and participate in the governance of the city.⁹⁰ In other words, free citizens should not just be told what to do all the time, but they also should not think so highly of their own views that they rely entirely on their own judgements about what is best.

So has Plato abandoned the principle from the *Republic* that the skilled should rule?

There are no philosopher-rulers in the *Laws*, so skill is not manifested through a ruling philosophical elite.⁹¹ But there is still a source of rational ordering in the city that comes from the laws themselves, which embody the prescriptions of reason.⁹² Relying on the authority of law is explicitly said to be a second-best option given that the ideal of philosopher-rulers cannot be realized.⁹³ Magnesians act in accordance with reason, then, primarily by following the dictates of the laws and by diligently defending the constitution in their capacity as office-holders.⁹⁴ There is, however, a place for higher learning in Magnesia. Some citizens learn advanced topics in

⁸⁸ J. Reid, 'The Mixed Constitution in Plato's *Laws*', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 99/1 (2021), 1–18; S. Meyer, 'Civic Freedom in Plato's *Laws*', *Polis*, 38 (2021), 512–534.

⁸⁹ 643e6.

⁹⁰ J. Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond*, p. 37.

⁹¹ M. Schofield, *Saving the City* (Routledge, 1999), chapter 2.

⁹² 644d1–3.

⁹³ 875c3–d4.

⁹⁴ 715b5–d6.

mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy in the ‘Nocturnal Council’ (so called because its members meet just before dawn). But the mere presence of philosophy should not make us think there must be philosopher-rulers: the function of the Nocturnal Council is educative, not executive.⁹⁵ Citizens are given political authority because of their law-abidingness, not because of their superior intellectual performance. Higher education is one way of supplementing the work that some—notably, not all—office-holders already do, giving them an appreciation of the city’s laws that goes beyond mere habit.⁹⁶

There is therefore not the consistently high level of skill and knowledge in Magnesian citizens that there is in the philosopher-rulers of Kallipolis. But this does not mean that there is no place for progress towards skilled governance. In Magnesia, the citizens’ skill is citizenship itself: they are instructed to spend their time learning and practising how to preserve the order of the city, and are forbidden from practising other *technai*.⁹⁷ Citizens cultivate virtue through their participation in the city, running their family farms, holding public office, and engaging in politics via the institutions that require citizen participation, such as sitting on juries, voting for office-holders, or attending the assembly.⁹⁸ Thus every citizen’s skill in politics is cultivated over the course of their whole life and it is for them a full-time job, which is why they cannot occupy themselves with other trades or professions. Magnesia, then, fosters political competence through political activity, but never relies on there being people so outstanding in virtue and political skill that the city could be entrusted solely to their rule.

⁹⁵ J. Reid, ‘Changing the Laws of the *Laws*’, *Ancient Philosophy* 41/2, 432–436.

⁹⁶ 951a7–c5.

⁹⁷ 806d7–e2, 846d1–e2. S. Meyer, ‘The Moral Dangers of labour and commerce in Plato’s *Laws*’, in L. Brisson & S. Scolnicov, *Plato’s Laws: From Theory into Practice. Proceedings of the VI Symposium Platonicum* (Academia Verlag, 2003), 207–14.

⁹⁸ For a summary of the offices, see J. Reid, ‘The Offices of Magnesia’, *Polis* 37/3 (2020), 567–589.

The institutions of Magnesia thus reflect the idea that all citizens (including women) should participate in politics, but Plato implements this kind of equality of opportunity for citizens in tandem with the idea that some people are more skilled and more virtuous than others. Firstly, while the education system of Magnesia will be largely effective, some people will still turn out bad and others will need incentives to be law-abiding.⁹⁹ Because of this ethical reality, the *Laws* contains an extensive penal code and every office-holder must undergo a scrutiny (*dokimasia*) before holding office and an audit (*euthuna*) after their term is complete.¹⁰⁰ A failure to be law-abiding is grounds for preventing somebody from holding office. Similar mechanisms for accountability and for examining officials were present in ancient democracies and oligarchies alike, but these institutions are important ways the public exercises oversight of officials.¹⁰¹ In Magnesia, nobody is above the law, citizens hold each other accountable, and the presumption is that most citizens will participate in politics.¹⁰²

Another democratic feature of Magnesia is its relatively egalitarian levels of wealth. Equality is a central pillar of democratic ideology (exemplified by the use of lottery), and democratic attitudes towards wealth equality can be understood as a counterbalance to the disproportionate levels of power that the wealthy usually have. In oligarchies, levels of wealth directly determined your position in society, as people were barred from ruling or citizenship if they did not meet a particular property threshold. But in democracies, too, there was an ongoing concern that the wealthy were hostile to the poor and that the wealthy sought opportunities to use their money to consolidate power. In the *Laws*, Plato makes explicit that ideally everybody

⁹⁹ 853b6–854a3.

¹⁰⁰ 761e5–6.

¹⁰¹ E. Robinson, *The First Democracies: Early Popular Government outside Athens*, pp. 50, 63, 126; Balot, 'Democracy and Political Philosophy', p. 188; M. Landauer, 'Parrhesia and the Demos Tyrannos: Frank Speech, Flattery, and Accountability in Democratic Athens', *History of Political Thought* 33/2 (2012), pp. 194–200, and his *Dangerous Counsel: Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), chapter 6.

¹⁰² M. Landauer, 'Democratic Theory and the Athenian Public Sphere', *Polis* 33 (2016), pp. 31–51.

would have the same amount of property, but because people will inevitably arrive at the colony with different amounts of money, he institutes four property classes as a second-best solution to this problem.¹⁰³ Those in the first class, however, cannot be more than four times wealthier than those in the fourth class, and those in the fourth class cannot fall below a certain level of wealth, insofar as ownership of their family land is inalienable.¹⁰⁴ Importantly, with only minor exceptions, offices are not restricted on the basis of one's economic class. Wealth is no guide to character or competence in ruling, and the poorest citizens can become one of the thirty-seven Guardians of the Law, an Auditor, or the Officer of Education—i.e. any of the most important political positions in Magnesia. Plato thus acknowledges the inevitability of differential levels of wealth, while trying to sever the connection between wealth and power.

Plato also makes political innovations on the basis of another central democratic value: freedom. The citizens of Magnesia are free and it is not appropriate, we are told, for free citizens to be ordered and forced around like slaves; rather, free citizens should be persuaded to be obedient to the laws.¹⁰⁵ Subsequently, portions of the lawcode are preceded by persuasive preambles or 'preludes' that motivate the citizens to comply with what the law orders. This is an important way that Plato takes one aspect of freedom seriously as a normative political ideal, and even when he does endorse paternalistic uses of force, persuasion should be tried first.¹⁰⁶

Democratic institutions are also modified in various ways throughout the *Laws*. Random lottery is used to fill priesthoods (so that the relevant god might have a say in the process),¹⁰⁷ and

¹⁰³ 744b1–d1.

¹⁰⁴ 744d3–745a3.

¹⁰⁵ 720a2–e8.

¹⁰⁶ M. Lane, 'Persuasion et force dans la politique platonicienne', in A. Brancacci, D. El Murr & D. Taormina (eds) *Aglaiā: autour de Platon. Mélanges offerts à Monique Dixsaut* (Paris: Vrin, 2011), 133–66; F. Trivigno, 'Above the Law and Out for Justice', in P. Dimas, M. Lane, and S. Meyer (eds) *Plato's Statesman: A Philosophical Discussion* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 156–176.

¹⁰⁷ 759b7–c6.

positions on public juries (so that the people have a say in matters that affect them), but all other offices are filled through a process that combines stages of nomination and election, with lottery being used to determine the final selection once the candidates have been whittled down.¹⁰⁸ Insofar as lottery exemplifies the principle that anybody can do the job, whereas election implies that some skill is required, Plato's choices here are telling—there are not many civic duties that just anybody can perform well, but there are some. Though the use of lottery is said to be a compromise to democratic conceptions of equality,¹⁰⁹ it is interesting that Plato uses lottery so frequently in conjunction with other methods of appointment, as this inclusion would also have the effect of spreading office-holding to more citizens and make it such that the ability to win votes does not guarantee political power.¹¹⁰

Indeed, the lingering danger of public oratory has not left Plato's mind, as rhetoric is entirely banned in a judicial setting,¹¹¹ with defendants answering questions from professional judges rather than giving extended speeches; Plato thus replaces the Athenian adversarial model with a more inquisitorial model.¹¹² Despite its presence in the *Statesman*, there is no office of the orator in Magnesia, and the political duties of the assembly are curtailed to such a degree that there is effectively no place where a budding young orator would even be able to show off their skills. It is possible that Plato says so little about the council and assembly in the *Laws* because he simply assumed that they will do many of the same things that they did in Athens. But these political institutions underwent numerous significant changes during Athens' history, so Plato's readers would not have simply known which of these versions he had in mind. Therefore, given

¹⁰⁸ 768a1–7, 768b5.

¹⁰⁹ 757d5–758a2.

¹¹⁰ S. Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*, pp. 92, 102, 127, 158.

¹¹¹ 937d6–938a8.

¹¹² G. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City*, chapter 6.

that many of the duties that would otherwise be performed by the assembly are performed by the Guardians of the Law (notably, all legislative functions), the best explanation is that Plato intentionally left the assembly and council without much to talk about. Mass deliberation on important political issues has been largely replaced by the judgments of a small group of experienced and time-tested magistrates.

The *Laws*, then, demonstrates a nuanced attitude to democracy. On the one hand, Plato has no time for the idea that just anyone can rule and so he employs the lottery sparingly, favouring instead complex election mechanisms to better ensure that competent people hold office; similarly, there is no place for public oratory, and persuasion is relegated to the relatively sterile context of written prelates to parts of the lawcode. On the other hand, Plato does think it important that freedom be a part of his second-best constitution, explicitly making it a goal of legislation, trying first to persuade rather than using force to generate compliance, and cultivating the citizens' abilities to rule themselves and audit officials as well as encouraging deference to authority. Plato consistently thinks that wealth has little to do with political ability and he strives towards an egalitarian distribution of property to avoid wealth being a source of power. The *Laws* is a complex work from a sophisticated political theorist, but even a brief survey of some of its important features reveals that Plato sees democracy as something to be re-worked.

4. Conclusion

When we consider Plato's legacy, we should keep in mind both the anti-democratic arguments from the *Republic* and *Gorgias*, and the moderated use of democratic practices from the *Laws*.

Plato is a powerful critic of some central pillars of democratic thinking, and while we now have more sophisticated ways for assessing political expertise in rulers and citizens, it is not implausible to think that those who hold power over others should be demonstrably competent in character, experience, and knowledge. Similarly, while we have more advanced models for explaining voter behaviour and for assessing the impact of orators on public opinion, Plato rightly prompts us to think about the incentives orators have for saying what their audience wants to hear, and urges us to consider how cycles of confirmation can arise when orators dress up in more persuasive garb what their audience already thinks.

But Plato also made good headway in addressing his own objections and solving practical problems by framing a beneficial and workable constitution as a mixed constitution, where monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements are combined and moderated. Aristotle's discussion of what most cities should aim for in Book IV of the *Politics* shows a similar theory of constitutional blending, and while we know little of Stoic political philosophy in practice, we do know that they endorsed a version of the mixed constitution;¹¹³ most importantly, Cicero's development of the mixed constitution and his application of this framework to the Roman constitution relies on Platonic theorizing about politics.¹¹⁴ Contemporary theorists about democracy might be inspired, then, to see some of our own problems through a Platonic lens, where the fundamental issue is determining how to institute the ideals of skilled and virtuous governance in a community of free but fallible people.

Further Reading

D. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012)

¹¹³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VII.132.

¹¹⁴ *On the Republic* I.34, I.54, I.69–70, II.42–43, II.65.

- J. Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2017)
- C. Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast* (Oxford University Press, 2002)
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- A. Laks, *Beyond the Republic: An Essay on Plato's Laws* (Princeton University Press, 2022)
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