

The Cambridge Companion to
SOCRATES

Edited by

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14 Socrates' Political Philosophy

I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians – so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries – to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best.

Socrates¹

Especially in the modern age, Socrates is sanctified as a defender of free speech, honest and relentless inquiry, and the love of truth. Other philosophers too have shared these commitments. But Socrates stood up for them at the cost of his own life. In enacting his commitments as he did, Socrates became more than a theorist: in some sense, he was also an actor on the political stage.

In light of the enormous difficulties inherent in the effort to locate either the philosophy of the historical Socrates, or a Socratic philosophy about whose content the major ancient authors on Socrates agree, in this chapter I will confine myself principally to the Platonic "Socrates."² When referring to "Socrates," I mean the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. I have taken note of several interesting and relevant points of contact with other portrayals of Socrates where doing so is useful to my

I am grateful to Jeffrey Henderson, David Konstan, Marina McCoy, Don Morrison, Josh Ober, and Jay Samons for discussion of this chapter.

- 1 From Plato's *Gorgias* 521d6–9. All of my quotations from Plato's works are from translations contained in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997. For the Greek text of the *Republic*, I have used the edition of J. Burnet. For the Greek text of the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, I have used the revised *Platonis Opera*, Vol. I, eds. E. A. Duke et al.
- 2 For a critique of the view that the *Apology* is even "a historically reliable source for the reconstruction of Socrates' character and opinions" see Morrison 2000 (the quotation is from p. 236, emphasis added). Nobody any longer defends the view that even Plato's *Apology* seeks merely to report what the historical Socrates said at his trial; the dialogue is the product of Plato's literary and philosophical genius.

discussion. While confining myself mainly to the Platonic Socrates, I shall, unless otherwise noted, suspend judgment about the relation between Plato and Socrates. The Socratic views I elicit from several Platonic dialogues may or may not represent Plato's own views; an entirely different, and certainly much more detailed, discussion of the dialogues would be required to establish the point either way. I shall also range across several dialogues in which Socrates takes active part; this approach is not confined by the early/middle/late interpretive schema.³ Dialogues such as the *Statesman*, which are obviously of relevance to political philosophy, will receive little attention here, for Socrates barely participates in the discussion.⁴ And the *Laws*, in which Socrates makes no appearance, will also not be discussed here.

In one sense, all of the Platonic dialogues in which Socrates participates are relevant to assessing his character as an actor in the polis, as well as some aspect or other of his political philosophy. No chapter-length treatment of both issues could hope to take into account every one of those twenty-two dialogues.⁵ I shall therefore pick and choose relevant passages from the dialogues that scholars would most readily grant as basic to understanding the political philosophy of Plato's Socrates – in particular the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*.

Socrates is portrayed by Plato – and especially in his defense speech, Socrates portrays himself – as active in his polis. In Section 1 of this chapter, I will discuss this “dramatic” portrayal and self-portrayal. While Socrates was not a “statesman” in any ordinary sense, he suggests in the passage from the *Gorgias* that heads this chapter that he alone undertakes to be the true statesman of his time (a genuine leader who holds no office, in effect). Socrates also contrasts an ideal community

- 3 For critical assessment of that schema, see the papers collected in Annas and Rowe 2002, in particular Annas's paper (Annas 2002, “What are Plato's ‘Middle’ Dialogues in the Middle Of?”) and my “Comments on Kahn” (Griswold 2002; this is a commentary on Charles Kahn's “On Platonic Chronology,” included in the same volume). On the general issue of the organization of the Platonic corpus, see Griswold 1999(a) and also the follow-up exchange between Kahn and Griswold cited there.
- 4 My views on the *Statesman* may be found in Griswold 1989. Along the same general lines, see Miller 1980.
- 5 The Platonic dialogues in which Socrates actively participates are the *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Cratylus*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Parmenides*, *Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, and *Timaeus*. He appears and speaks in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. The authorship of the *Hippias Major*, *Clitophon*, and *Alcibiades I*, is disputed; Socrates is active in all three. The *Critias* is a fragment.

with extant communities, and especially in Section 2, I shall examine briefly some relevant passages from the *Republic*.

A common theme at both levels – that of Socrates' interactions with others and that of his political philosophy – concerns the relation of the philosopher to the polis, of philosophy to politics (taking the latter term in the broadest sense).⁶ This theme will therefore be central in what follows.

I. SOCRATES AS POLITICAL ACTOR

We often think of Socrates as philosophizing in the agora, as a “public philosopher” very much involved in the intellectual and cultural debates of the period. That Socrates had become an extremely well-known and controversial figure is clear from the fact that Aristophanes and other comic poets lampooned him, and that democratic Athens viewed him as enough of an irritant to warrant putting him to death. No other major intellectual was put to death by the Athenian polis in the fourth or fifth century.⁷

The picture of Socrates as philosophizing in the agora comes to us more from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (I.1.2) than from Plato (cf. Diogenes Laertius 2.21). We know the geographical boundaries of the agora, and it is safe to say that Plato rarely portrays Socrates as engaging in philosophical conversation in its open byways.⁸ To be sure, at *Apology* 17c Socrates refers to his customary conversations in the agora, and the implication of his descriptions of his interrogations of the poets (22b) and craftsmen (23a) is that there are quite a few bystanders present, presumably because the conversations were held in a public place (cf. *Apology* 21c3–7, d1–2). The *Euthyphro* takes place on the porch of a Court, also in the agora. And yet aside from the *Apology*, the other dialogues in which he appears take place in private homes, outside of the walls of the city, or in public places such as gymnasia, wrestling schools, or jail (if one may call such a place “public”). Further, by and large Plato does

6 The term “political” is potentially misleading in the context of Plato's philosophy, because the contrast with “social” – so natural for us – is never made by Plato. The modern distinction carries with it a set of presuppositions about the scope of “the political” that are arguably foreign to Plato. When referring to “politics” or “the political,” then, I shall, unless otherwise indicated, have in mind a sense broad enough to encompass what we would call the social.

7 On the question of the persecution of intellectuals in ancient Greece, see Dover 1976 and Wallace 1994. The full roster of targets of comedy can be found in Sommerstein 1996. See also *Protagoras* 316c5–317c5.

8 For a useful discussion of the Athenian agora, see Millett 1998.

not portray Socrates as picking up conversations with the "common man." His interlocutors tend to be young men of promise from noted families, sophists and rhetoricians, established public figures (including generals), philosophers (Zeno and the aged Parmenides), and figures positioned to exercise political influence (such as Charmides, Critias, and Alcibiades). Some are Athenian and some not. Plato's Socrates is unquestionably a public figure, then, but not quite in the sense often imagined.

Plato's Socrates is neither just the practically involved Xenophontic figure who wanders the agora, nor the apolitical Thales-like theoretician (compare Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates in the *Clouds*, and *Theaetetus* 173d-175e). His Socrates is a considerably more complex "political" figure and correspondingly more difficult to characterize concisely.

Socrates performed his civic duties, such as serving in the armed forces on military campaigns (see the start of the *Charmides*, *Apology* 28e, and *Symposium* 219e5-7 and context) and in required political office. Yet he was not a seeker of public office and civic responsibility. However much he contrasted a political "ideal" with the unsatisfactory reality of the historical polis, he did not otherwise agitate for the radical reformation of his polis by, say, proposing measures in the Assembly or organizing reform movements. We tend to think of him as a political radical, but it is important to remember that he did not refuse to fight in Athens' wars abroad; he was not a pacifist. Further, he never takes direct aim at them in the Platonic dialogues, asking an "applied political philosophy" question (such as, "is our country's expedition to Sicily just?" although he certainly provides a basis for launching a scathing philosophical critique of the pursuit of power and wealth, as well as of every extant political regime. He did not say, and certainly did not act as though it were the case, that it is the duty of a conscientious person to oppose publicly every immoral political act. For example, there is no record of Socrates' publicly having criticized Athens' decision to kill all adult Mytilenean males, even though a debate about the matter was held in 428/427 BCE, or of his publicly having opposed Athens' expedition to Sicily in 415 BCE. In the *Crito*, he explains (in an argument whose intentions and defensibility are much debated in the secondary literature) that he will not – that one ought not – break the law, for example by escaping from prison.⁹ He was not an "individualist" who trumpeted without qualification the rights of conscience over positive law, as we might put it today.

9 A sample of the debate will be found in Kraut 1984, ch. III.

Yet he was not a quietist, and he made it clear that he refused to carry out orders from the polis that he deemed illegal or immoral. He provides two examples. The one took place in the period of the democracy: as a member of the Council, Socrates alone voted against the cruel (and later much regretted) decision to condemn the ten generals who were unable (because of conditions at sea) to rescue the survivors of the battle of Arginusae in 406 BCE. Socrates deserves kudos for this risky and brave opposition. His other example is more ambiguous: when the oligarchy ordered him to help in the arrest of Leon of Salamis, in order to execute him unjustly, Socrates simply "went home" while four others obeyed the order. He rightly notes that he risked death in thus resisting (see *Apology* 32a4-e1). Yet he did not, as far as we know, make any attempt to save Leon or others who were similarly mistreated, or indeed either to leave the city (along with many anti-oligarchs) during this period or to actively take up arms against the oligarchy.

Socrates' statement that he is not a quietist ("I have deliberately not led a quiet life," *Apology* 36b5-6; cf. 38a1) is supported by his insistence that not even the threat of death would prevent him from philosophizing in his customary fashion, and that he is on a life long, god-given mission to improve the virtue of his fellows (*Apology* 29d7-30b4, 30d6-31a2).¹⁰ In the *Laches*, he is portrayed as leading two generals (Laches and Nicias) to reflect critically on their conceptions of virtue, and of courage in particular. In the *Symposium* and elsewhere, we learn that Socrates had also tried hard to turn Alcibiades, one of the key players in the catastrophic expedition to Sicily, from his love of fame and power to the love of wisdom and virtue. Dialogues such as these chime with Socrates' insistence in the *Apology* that he actively sought to induce his fellows -- including politically important people -- to reflect on their lives and thereby to emend their ways. While Socrates famously claimed only to possess human wisdom or awareness of his ignorance (*Apology* 20d7-e3), he was not immobilized by this recognition, for it clearly is not at all equivalent to ignorance *simpliciter*, let alone ignorance of one's ignorance. Indeed, that recognition motivated a peculiar kind of engagement with the citizens of his community.

Socrates' main mode of participation -- or perhaps one should say, intervention -- in the polis was that of oral conversation. He did not

¹⁰ On the issue of Socrates' alleged quietism, see Ober 1998, ch. 4. Ober argues that while Plato chose "the quietist path" (p. 186), the politically active Socrates of the *Apology* (unlike that of the *Gorgias*) did not (p. 212). He also argues that the Socrates of the *Republic*, resolves the tension between the two, but in the context of the ideal polis (p. 237). By contrast, the present chapter attempts to locate an outlook that is consistent across the *Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*.

write philosophy, and so chose not to act politically through that medium. He stresses that he was not a "teacher," meaning that he did not accept tuition (*Apology* 33a-b). That he did in other senses teach others (sometimes by "teaching them a lesson," other times by showing them that a philosophical question exists and how to pursue it) is however undeniable. Socrates makes it perfectly clear that he has had great influence on the young (*Apology* 23c, 33c, 37d6-e2, 39d) and enjoys wide fame (*Apology* 34e2-4, 38c1-5). Socrates both was and was not a political actor; he modeled, so to speak, a highly unconventional practice of political engagement.

It was also a deeply controversial practice. The most striking and famous chapters of Socrates' life are his trial and execution. He appeared before 501 fellow citizens to answer the charges brought against him and, in effect, to justify the philosophical life. Socrates' defense stresses that the antagonism his public practice of philosophy generated is of long standing, and the Court's verdict confirms that reconciliation between himself and the polis -- indeed, a democratic polis -- is not to be. The relation of Socrates to his community is decisively (though of course not entirely) characterized by sustained antagonism.¹¹ Indeed, Socrates' statements, both here and elsewhere, suggest that on his own view, the conflict is deep and permanent:

Be sure, gentlemen of the jury, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time. (*Apology* 31d6-32a3)

When Socrates comments on the possibility of his going into exile, he says that he would "be driven out of one city after another," the hostility to his philosophizing recurring again and again (*Apology* 37d4-e2). By choosing examples from both the oligarchic and democratic periods of recent Athenian history to illustrate his resistance to collaborating with injustice, he implies that malfeasance is endemic to politics as such.

11 This is not to say that Socrates lacked friends, or to deny that they are in evidence at his trial. As Plato records it, Socrates states that "a switch of only thirty votes would have acquitted me," i.e., given him a simple majority (*Apology* 36a5-6). The vote was surprisingly close. For a different view about the relationship of Socrates to democratic Athens, see Ober's Chapter 7 in the present volume. Cf. Callicles' vivid polemic at *Gorgias* 484c4-486d1.

In the *Republic*, Socrates paints an equally dire picture of the dangerous ignorance of the polis and of its hostility to the one who truly knows how to guide the ship of state (488a2-489a2). The most revolutionary and famous argument of the *Republic* is quite probably that "Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, while the many natures who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils, Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race" (473c11-d6; recapitulated at 499b1-c5). Short of that extraordinary ideal, the antagonism between politics and philosophy seems deep and permanent, as books V, VI, and VII of the *Republic* argue in detail. Socrates states what very likely remains true today: namely, that not a single actual city is worthy of a philosophical nature (*Republic* 497b1-2). Indeed, it would take "divine dispensation" for a philosopher to grow to maturity uncorrupted (493a1-2). What is a philosopher to do, should he or she manage to escape the destructive forces inherent in any this-worldly community? Socrates' answer clearly ties into the passages of the *Apology* to which I have already referred, and indeed he cites his own decision (backed up by his "daemonic sign," also referred to in the same context in the *Apology* (31c4-32a3)) not to enter politics. Socrates goes on to comment on the rare souls who have

tasted how sweet and blessed a possession philosophy is, and at the same time they've also seen the madness of the majority and realized, in a word, that hardly anyone acts sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might go to the aid of justice and survive, that instead they'd perish before they could profit either their city or their friends and be useless both to themselves and to others, just like a man who has fallen among wild animals and is neither willing to join them in doing injustice nor sufficiently strong to oppose the general savagery alone. Taking all this into account, they lead a quiet life and do their own work. Thus, like someone who takes refuge under a little wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, the philosopher - seeing others filled with lawlessness - is satisfied if he can somehow lead his present life free from injustice and impious acts and depart from it with good hope, blameless and content. (*Republic* 496c5-e2)

It would be hard to imagine a more extreme statement of the hostility between philosophy and politics as they exist in the non-ideal world. The same thought is vividly echoed in the simile of the cave, which represents imprisoned cave dwellers who are "like us" (515a5) as wanting to kill the philosopher who had miraculously escaped to the regions above (517a3-6). And the philosopher is presented as preferring to be a miserable landless serf than to live again as a cave dweller (516d4-7).

What is at the heart of that antagonism? Let us return to Socrates' startling statement in the *Gorgias* that he alone – and not such celebrated figures as Pericles – takes up the true *techné* and practice of politics. As he there explains, “the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best” (521d6-9; on Pericles, see 516d2-3 and context). In effect, he demands that politics be based on knowledge of what is best for the community, and this means what is best for the “souls” of the citizens. Statecraft ought to be based on a philosophically defensible understanding of what is best for human beings. Socrates was famous, correspondingly, for leading every question back to an examination of his interlocutor's way of living (e.g., *Apology* 36c3-d1, 39c6-d2, *Laches* 187e6–188a5, *Symposium* 215e6–216c3), and for being concerned above all about how he should live his own life. One of the key methods Socrates used to raise the question of the justifiability of an individual's or community's *modus vivendi* was the paradigm of expert knowledge. We would surely grant that, say, in such areas as military strategy, horse training, or ship building, the relevant expert should dictate what is to be done. By analogy, must we not search for expert knowledge (*techné* or *epistémé*) about what we should do in politics; would it not be irrational and deleterious to settle for anything less?

Socrates is, in effect, demanding that we seek to guide ourselves by knowledge of what is best. This is not of course to say that we actually possess the requisite knowledge, only that we ought to pursue it both relentlessly and in a particular manner – namely, through the give and take of Socratic dialogue (I am not claiming that Socrates had or thought he had the knowledge at issue). The controversial metaphysical and epistemological assumptions built into this view of knowledge are scarcely evident in the *Apology* and *Gorgias*, but emerge in books V-VII of the *Republic* (among other places). In spite of the debatable character of those assumptions, and of the deeply difficult problem of what it would mean to be guided by an-unrealized ideal of knowledge, the motivation for Socrates' questions is difficult to resist.

Consider his conversation with Euthyphro. It is a splendid example of the type of exchange that fueled the antagonism against Socrates. The setting is the steps of the courthouse, where Socrates has gone to receive the indictment against him. Euthyphro is there in order to prosecute his own father on charges of impiety. The context, then, is politically and morally charged. Socrates remarks that nobody would take such an extraordinary step against kin unless he were wise about the matter in question – in this case piety – lest he be rightly accused of acting impiously himself. And who could disagree? Euthyphro responds that as a matter of fact he does have accurate knowledge of the nature of piety (*Euthyphro* 4e4–5a2). But the remainder of the dialogue

demonstrates that Euthyphro simply cannot answer the famous "what is it?" question. When Socrates reminds him that he surely would not proceed with so drastic an action without having a coherent account of piety and begs him to provide that account, Euthyphro flees and the dialogue ends.

Socrates is especially interested in the topic of piety because of Meletus's indictment against him. Certainly Meletus too must pretend to be wise in this as well as the other matters referred to in the indictment he has brought against Socrates (*Euthyphro* 2c2-d1), and he cannot avoid the implication that if he is unable to defend his claim to wisdom, he has no business bringing the indictment. Socrates' dialogue with him in the *Apology* is just long enough to support serious doubts about Meletus's ability to give any such account of himself. The consequences of his ignorance are as obvious as they are unjust.

Euthyphro is a sort of fanatic, not only in claiming explicitly what so many assume implicitly – knowledge of what piety is – but also in asserting without qualification that if an act is wrong (impious), then whoever did it should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, even if the wrongdoer is your own father (4b7-e3). Meletus is in his own way a fanatic. He is taking drastic steps in the absolute certainty that he is in a position to assess whether or not someone is corrupting the youth or acting impiously, and yet he is without a rationally defensible account of the very concepts he himself is employing. Neither Euthyphro nor Meletus discharges adequately the heavy responsibilities they have shouldered. They hubristically pretend to have knowledge they do not possess. This is in effect Socrates' indictment of them and of many others, and it is, quite understandably, not a charge they appreciated, especially when its validity was demonstrated publicly. By contrast, Socrates comes off not as a fanatic but as moderate precisely (if paradoxically) because of his zealotry for philosophical discussion, as well as humble in his admission that he does not know the answers (cf. *Theaetetus* 210c5-d4). This is the ethical and political dimension of the great divide Socrates sees between himself and just about everyone else, as he tells the jury:

And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one's superior, be he god or man. (*Apology* 29b1-7)

Socratic politics – or better, his applied political philosophy, if one may so put it – is premised on the tenet that ignorance corrupts, that

the (philosophical) pursuit of knowledge saves the soul (to use Socrates' term), and that bettering the soul ought be our chief pursuit in life.

Socrates' compatriots rarely care about that pursuit. Instead, they devote themselves to the cultivation of the body and the accumulation of wealth and power (perhaps we are not altogether unlike them), whereas for Socrates these cannot be beneficial things unless guided by knowledge of the good (for example, see *Apology* 30a7-b4). Socrates' disinterest in the pursuit of wealth, power, and adornment of the body mark him off starkly from most of his fellow citizens, and help constitute the unconventional persona for which he became famous. Enacting his principles would revolutionize the community from the inside out, so to speak, for it would turn each soul in a direction that would cause a drastic shift of individual and collective priorities. Socrates is quite explicit that he aims for nothing less (e.g., *Apology* 29e3-30b4). His is fundamentally the politics of self-transformation.

Does Socrates recommend that everyone ought to strive to become a philosopher? The *Apology* certainly suggests an affirmative answer. In principle, everyone should focus primarily on self-knowledge and the perfection of his own soul. As we have seen, the *Apology* also makes perfectly clear that this is extremely unlikely to happen, and dialogues such as the *Republic* assert that few will ever in fact become philosophers in the full sense of the term. Is Socrates therefore recommending the impossible, and acting on that recommendation? In the next section I will say something more about that subject, but by anticipation note that it would not be irrational to believe that some philosophical self-awareness is better than none at all. Given, however, that most people will not become philosophers in any full sense (including that modeled by Socrates) and that their lives communally and individually will therefore depend on beliefs for which they lack defensible philosophical reasons, the antagonism – or at least the tension – between philosophy and political life would seem irresolvable. A comprehensive understanding of politics would include the recognition that this antagonism or tension is likely to be permanent.

If that is true, however, why does Socrates engage in political life at all? Why not retire behind a "little wall" somewhere, and like the Thales he sketches in the *Theaetetus* (173d-175e), contemplate the unchanging patterns of things, or conduct dialogues with philosophical friends in private, and focus on perfecting one's own soul?

The form that Socrates' answer takes in the *Apology* – to the effect that his philosophical quest was coeval with his political involvement, following an event he narrates – is unconvincing. As he tells the story, when his impulsive friend Chaerephon (well known to the jury, and as Socrates is careful to underline, a partisan of the democracy) took it

upon himself to ask the Oracle at Delphi whether any man was wiser than Socrates, the Pythian replied that "no one was wiser." Naturally, Socrates was puzzled, and hit upon a way of attempting to "refute" the Oracle – namely, that of cross-examining those who claimed to be wise (*Apology* 21a, c1). If any were such, then the Oracle erred. The impulse to test by refutation is paradigmatically Socratic, suggesting that Socrates had long since understood what it means to philosophize (further, nowhere else in the dialogues does he suggest that his philosophical quest began with the Oracle's pronouncement). This task of examining others is one he sets himself. The Oracle at Delphi never sent Socrates on any mission, never pronounced him the god's gift to humankind, and never gave any directive whatever (contra *Apology* 23b5, 30d6–31a2). Socrates quite accurately remarks, after the guilty verdict, that "if I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical" (37e5–38a1).

Socrates examines others so as to learn something about himself – that part of his *Apology* self-presentation seems right, incomplete though it is. He cannot simply talk to himself; he needs to work out various claims, especially claims about how best to live, through dialogue with others who are attracted to their own views of the subjects in question (consider *Gorgias* 486d2–7 and context, and 487a; *Charmides* 166c7–d6; and *Protagoras* 348c5–e4). The exchange may be beneficial for his interlocutor, as Socrates asserts in the *Apology*. There is no reason to doubt that Socrates also wished philosophy to benefit others, including in a non-ideal state of affairs when philosophers do not rule. His political involvement, however, is not primarily altruistic. To live one's own life virtuously is an axiomatic imperative of his enterprise, one to which all else is subservient. He is above all (but not exclusively) concerned with self-knowledge (*Phaedrus* 229e4–230a7) and the perfection of his own soul. His willingness to intervene politically, even when his life might be placed in danger, is governed by those axioms.

If one keeps in mind his radical position that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology* 38a5–6) and therefore that one's chief duty is to improve one's own soul, the minimalism of Socrates' political involvements (putting aside his philosophical interventions) shows itself as part of a moral life conceived along the lines of a perfectionist moral outlook.¹² He was willing to die rather than give it up; if ordered to prevent you from pursuing the examined life, he would refuse; and he would assist you in the pursuit insofar as doing so forms part of his own. Whether he would die in order to protect your pursuit of self-perfection

12 On the meaning of "perfectionist moral outlook," see Griswold 1999(b).

is questionable. Socrates' political philosophy is deeply tied to a perfectionist conception of the individual's moral life, and therefore also to the "transcendentalist" metaphysics on which he claims it rests.

2. RECONCILING THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL

The intentions of the *Republic* have been a matter of controversy for millennia. Aristotle read the dialogue as proposing a program of political reformation (see n. 23). Other readers down to the present day have also, in effect, read the dialogue as setting out a blueprint that Plato's Socrates or Plato meant to put into practice.¹³ Another school reads the dialogue as "ironic" and as warning us *against* any effort at radical political reform guided by a heavenly "blueprint" (they cite *Republic* 592b2-5); the tensions internal to Socrates' "perfect" polis, and between it and any non-ideal polis, are taken to yield a sort of secondary political theory that meshes with Socrates' practice of staying out of politics as far as possible in order to pursue philosophy.¹⁴ Yet other readers emphasize the "literary" or dialogical dimension, seeing the dialogue as evolving in a way that successively opens up new horizons for reflection on ethics as well as politics. The dialogue is here viewed as structured in ways that indicate Plato's intention that the closed regime of the middle books of the *Republic* be read as open to question.¹⁵

The ancient Platonists and Stoics, and at least one prominent modern scholar, deny that the dialogue is primarily about politics; rather, they claim, it is primarily an ethical treatise.¹⁶ After all, books II through X are an effort to answer the famous challenge put by Glaucon and Adeimantus to Socrates: show us that justice is in and of itself good for the soul that possesses it (367d2-5). The "political" discussions are introduced as a means of understanding the soul and what is best for it (cf. 611e1-612b5). The city being the soul writ large (see 368e-369a) – the "greatest

13 For example, Popper 1966, vol. 1, pp. 153-156. For an argument that while not a "blueprint," the *Republic's* ideal city is intended to be a practicable (and desirable) possibility, see Burnyeat 1999. Some of the material at the start of this section is taken from Griswold 1999(b).

14 This reading is offered by Leo Strauss and his followers. See, for example, Bloom's "Interpretive Essay" appended to his translation of the *Republic*: "Socrates constructs his utopia to point up the dangers of what we would call utopianism; as such it is the greatest critique of political idealism ever written" (Bloom 1968, p. 410). See also Strauss 1964, p. 65: "Certain it is that the *Republic* supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition." I criticize this approach in Griswold 2003, Section I.

15 See Clay 2002.

16 See Annas 1999.

of all reflections on human nature," to borrow Madison's phrase – a problematic city/soul analogy guides much of the discussion, but is not [according to this view] to be mistaken for a political philosophy.¹⁷

These interpretive debates have been accompanied by mostly negative responses to the political proposals Socrates puts forward in the dialogue. The critique began almost immediately with Aristotle. In the modern age, luminaries of the liberal Enlightenment, such as Jefferson, Madison, and Adams, were pointed in their criticism of Plato.¹⁸ The most famous recent polemic is undoubtedly that of Karl Popper, while I. F. Stone's much discussed book presented an attack at a more popular level.¹⁹ For Popper, Plato's views were "totalitarian" and prepared the way for Nazism and Stalinism (certain Nazi theorists did in fact take themselves to be continuing the program of Plato's *Republic*).²⁰ Even though Popper's interpretation of Plato has been subjected to a great deal of critical assessment,²¹ it remains difficult to free oneself from the long-standing judgment that Socrates' political proposals in the *Republic* are deeply flawed.

The specific accusations against the political philosophy presented in the *Republic* are fourfold in nature. First, Socrates' "beautiful city" (*Republic* 527c2; cf. 497b7) is accused of being unfair because it is not committed to a notion of the moral equality of human beings. Socrates' theories seem inegalitarian at their core, and the social and political schemes he sets out are, to our sensibilities, offensively hierarchical. Correspondingly, we hear nothing here about "natural rights" or their equivalent.²² Second, Socrates' proposals seem illiberal to the extreme. Especially as presented in the *Republic*, they seem to leave very little

17 Madison wrote, in *Federalist* no. 51: "But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary." See Hamilton et al. 1961, p. 322.

18 In his semi-retirement, Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams that "It is fortunate for us that Platonic republicanism has not obtained the same favor as Platonic Christianity, or we should now have been all living, men, women and children, pell mell together, like beasts of the field or forest." Jefferson to Adams, July 5, 1814; in Cappon 1988, p. 433.

19 I refer to Stone 1988. For discussion of Stone's book, see Griswold 1991, Burnyeat 1988, and Schofield 2002.

20 See Popper 1966, vol. I, p. 87 et passim. On the appropriation of Plato by Nazi theorists, see Hoernlé 1967, pp. 32–35.

21 For a sample of the debate, see the essays collected in Brambough 1967 and in Thorson 1963; also Robinson 1969, ch. 4, and Klosko 2006.

22 Averroes, an otherwise sympathetic reader of the *Republic*, objects to the *Republic's* view that the Greeks are best suited by nature to perfection. See Averroes 1974, pp. 13–14 [section 27.1–13].

room for political liberties. And this too strikes us as unjust. Third, they are accused of being tied to complex and doubtful metaphysical doctrines that just about nobody wants to defend.

A fourth set of criticisms alleges that the political proposals presented in the *Republic* are simply unworkable or fail to produce the results intended. Aristotle's arguments to the effect that abolishing private property does not remove either strife or the desire for accumulating property fall into this class.²³ James Madison took it to be a crucial axiom of statecraft that "a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato."²⁴ Locke's pragmatic criticisms (in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*) of a civic religion that is coercively implemented are echoed over and over again in the liberal Enlightenment by thinkers such as Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Voltaire, and are implicitly directed against the *Republic*. The dialogue's infamous censorship of the poets (many of whom are advocating conventional Greek religion) has also been roundly criticized (for its final statement in the dialogue, illuminated by the "ancient quarrel between it [poetry] and philosophy," see 606e-608a).

To these points about the impracticality of Plato's scheme we may add the objection, articulated by Rawls (without specific reference to Plato), that since there exists no popular consensus as to the truth of a single notion of the human good, a "city in speech" such as that put forward in the *Republic* would be politically irrelevant even if its truth could be established philosophically. Modern democratic republics are characterized by wide, even extreme, disagreement about the human good in the sense Plato's dialogues speak of that good.²⁵ This characteristic of modern liberal societies is a cause of lament for some, and of celebration for others. In either case, Rawls takes it to be a basic fact that must orient any realizable theory of justice. As Rawls puts it, a theory of justice must be "political" and based on an overlapping consensus rather than be "metaphysical." And "the conception of justice should be, as far as possible, independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm."²⁶

Seemingly every aspect of the *Republic* is, then, the subject of controversy. Yet we may venture to observe that the dialogue is continuous with the *Apology* in the sense that it insists that a form of expert knowledge

23 See *Politics* 2.1261a37-1264b25, where this and other of the *Republic*'s proposals are criticized.

24 See Hamilton et al. 1961, no. 49, p. 315. For a similar point, see Hume 1987, p. 514.

25 See Rawls 1999, pp. 290-291, 214-215; and 1996, pp. xli, 134.

26 Rawls 1996, pp. 10, 9.

is required if individuals and communities are to live well. That knowledge turns out to be the dialectical or philosophical knowledge of the Forms, in particular, the Form of the Good, "the most important thing to learn about" and that thanks to which "just things and the others become useful and beneficial." Without knowledge of the Good "even the fullest possible knowledge of other things is of no benefit to us" (505a2-b1). We will not become "perfect" (499b3) either individually or collectively until the philosopher (hence, the knower of the Good) rules. The *Republic* presents much more fully than do the other dialogues we have mentioned the perfectionist basis of Socrates' political philosophy. One might say that Socrates' politics is theological in the sense that it is premised on a notion of the divine understood as the Good and the other Forms.²⁷ Strangely, though, the achievability of knowledge of the Good at the political level – the achievability of the "ideal" state – is in severe doubt. Partly because the institution of philosopher-rulers is unlikely, the attainability of perfect wisdom by the individual is also in doubt (see *Republic* 499a11-c5). And if this is right, then the *Republic* ultimately harmonizes with the *Apology's* insistence that human, not divine, wisdom is all that we are likely to attain.²⁸ I note that we are also told that were the perfect city to come into being, it would soon die; it seems to carry the seeds of its own destruction (546a-e).

Perhaps this is one reason why at the end of book IX, Socrates asserts that the best polis will come to be only by "divine good luck," absent which the person of understanding will not take part in the politics of his fatherland (592a7-9). Instead, as Glaucon puts it, one will "take part in the politics of the city we were founding and describing, the one that exists in theory (*en logois*), for I don't think it exists anywhere on earth." Socrates adds that perhaps "there is a model (*paradeigma*) of it in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it and to make himself its citizen on the strength of what he sees. It makes no difference whether it is or ever will be somewhere, for he would take part in the practical affairs of that city and no other" (592a10-b5).²⁹ The best city must be

27 The word "theology" is used (apparently for the first time in the history of philosophy) at 379a5-6, as Socrates drastically revises conventional Greek religion in a way that effectively turns the gods into his conception of the divine (the Forms).

28 Is this consistent with Socrates' statement in the *Gorgias* quoted at the start of this essay? I think the answer is affirmative, if one emphasizes the verb "take up" (*epicheirein*, at *Gorgias* 521d7); Socrates does not there actually claim to possess the political art, only to be one of the few to attempt it and thereby to practice [no doubt imperfectly] the "true politics." Cf. *Gorgias* 517a1-3.

29 This passage echoes a much earlier description at 500b8-d2. Cf. 611e1-612a6.

writ small in the soul; the "constitution within" (591e1) alone matters in this, our non-ideal world. The emphasis at the end of the *Republic* is on the individual's formation of self, and thus of a way of life. This is a major theme of the myth with which the dialogue concludes.

The *Republic's* famous descriptions of the perfected constitution nevertheless come to serve a crucial purpose, whether or not perfection of self or polis is realizable. They provide the telos, and therewith the standard to which everything – including the politics of the day – should aspire. They help one to understand the respects in which the non-ideal is lacking, and to realize that the non-ideal cannot (thanks to the sort of thing it is) ever become ideal (no soul will ever *be* a Form, no created being, including a polis, will ever last, and so forth). What is the political upshot? The phrases from the end of book IX just quoted might suggest quietism. But that would be a mistake. To begin with, as we have already seen, the aspiring dialectician – the Socratic philosopher, in short – cannot but live and participate in a community. The character of the community cannot but matter to him, and the philosopher will affect it in turn.

But what sort of community precisely? Governed by what sort of constitution? What would its economic, social, and political structure look like? Plato's Socrates does not provide firm and detailed answers to such questions, and in that sense he does not have a "political theory." His views about self-perfection do have political consequences, however. As already mentioned, certain regimes would be unacceptable (e.g., one that requires its citizens to commit great injustices, such as arresting Leon of Salamis) and others would come in for philosophical critique (ancient democracy and tyranny come to mind). More positively, it would seem that in a non-ideal world, a polis that avoids injustice, makes possible the pursuit of wisdom, allows for the voicing of demands to the effect that wisdom ought to rule, encourages debate, and tolerates the tension between philosophy and the demands of the non-philosophical majority would be better than a polis that does otherwise. Reflections such as these at least narrow the scope of acceptable regimes, even though they leave the assessment of the character of the alternatives to judgment.

Some interpreters have suggested that of the next-best regimes Socrates sketches in the *Republic*, a slight and surprising preference for democracy might be indicated for the sorts of derivative considerations just sketched. Democracy is characterized by its liberty (including freedom of speech, 557b5), license (557b5), the leave given to each to arrange his private life as he judges best (557b4–10), and therewith its permissiveness with respect to the pursuit of wisdom as well as luxury and decadence. Strikingly, even the democratic soul is said to be attracted

to "philosophy" at times (561d2). Socrates at one point remarks that democracy is "a convenient place to look for a constitution" for the reason that "it contains all kinds of constitutions on account of the license it gives its citizens. So it looks as though anyone who wants to put a city in order, as we were doing, should probably go to a democracy, as to a supermarket of constitutions, pick out whatever pleases him, and establish that" (557d1-9). If one were to have the sort of conversation that is the *Republic*, one should do so in a democracy where the requisite variety of regimes are advocated. This is a non-trivial, though hardly conclusive, suggestion about the relative worth of a specific regime in a non-ideal world.³⁰

3. CONCLUSION

The *Crito* may seem to offer a counter-example to the proposition that Socrates has no political theory properly speaking, no specific political outlook with a worked-out notion of political obligation. The particular issue before Socrates is whether or not to heed Crito's urgent plea that he flee from prison in order to save his life. As Socrates frames it, the issue is "whether it is just for me to try to get out of here when the Athenians have not acquitted me" (48b10-c1). Notably, the case for staying put is voiced by the (Athenian) "laws," not by philosophical rationality as such (and not by Socrates in his own name). And Socrates also enunciates an important principle that constrains the reach of the argument: "I think it important to persuade you before I act, and not to act against your wishes" (48e3-5). The argument is very much directed to Crito, who is a loyal friend and decent man but not even remotely a philosopher. The laws conclude with an injunction that Socrates not let Crito persuade him. Socrates strikingly adds: "these are the words [those of the laws] I seem to hear, as the Corybants seem to hear the music of their flutes, and the echo of these words resounds in me, and makes it impossible for me to hear anything else. As far as my present beliefs go, if you speak in opposition to them, you will speak in vain. However if you think you can accomplish anything, speak" (54d3-8). Crito must yield (and indeed, his final and resigned response is simply "I have nothing to say, Socrates").

³⁰ For a cautious statement of Socrates' preference for democracy all things considered, see Roochnik 2003, ch. 3.1. See also Kraut 1984, ch. 7, and his exchange with Orwin (Kraut 2002 and Orwin 2002); Euben 1996; Mara 1988; de Lattre 1970; Versenyi 1971; and Griswold 1999[b]. Consider as well the appraisals of Ober 1998, pp. 245-247; Reeve 1988, ch. 4 (esp. pp. 231-234); Saxonhouse 1996, ch. 4; Monoson 2000; and chs. 2 and 3 of Schofield's outstanding *Plato: Political Philosophy* (2006).

Correspondingly, whether or not the speeches of the laws purporting to prove that it would be unjust to escape from prison are endorsed by Socrates without qualification is the subject of a great deal of scholarly controversy.³¹ For the sorts of reasons just indicated, among others, I would argue in favor of the view that Socrates is here presenting an argument that is designed to encourage adherence to the laws of the (democratic) polis by non-philosophers. For Socrates, this is a wiser course than to encourage the Critos of the world to break the law whenever their free-thinking "philosophy" persuades them that it is just to do so. The *Crito* brings its addressee to the same conclusion Socrates has, for different reasons, arrived at (namely, not to escape from prison). The laws are made to say:

You must either persuade it [the city] or obey its orders, and endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure, whether blows or bonds, and if it leads you into war to be wounded or killed, you must obey. To do so is right, and one must not give way or retreat or leave one's post, but both in war and in courts and everywhere else, one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice. (51b4-c1)

The "persuade" proviso both limits the sort of regime under discussion to one in which avenues for persuasion exist (the laws are those of democratic Athens) and provides an alternative to *merely* obeying *whatever* the laws enjoin. At the same time, the striking statement just quoted seems patently at odds with Socrates' critiques of majority rule (for example, he holds that the truth is not determined by a vote; see *Laches* 184d5-185a9), as well as with his corresponding invocation, made here (*Crito* 48a5-7; cf. 44c6-7, "My good Crito, why should we care so much for what the majority think?"), in the *Apology* (29d3-4), and in the *Republic*, of higher principles that serve as the measure of that claimed by one's community. They turn out to include the Form of the Just, and ultimately of the Good.³²

31 For the view that Socrates endorses the arguments put in the mouth of "the laws," see Kraut 1984. For the view that the *Crito* presents an argument designed to give Crito reasons to obey the law, rather than reasons endorsed without qualification by Socrates, see Weiss 1998, Harte, 1999, and Miller 1996.

32 See also Socrates' remarkable praise in the *Gorgias* of "a philosopher who has minded his own affairs and hasn't been meddlesome in the course of his life" (526c3-4), and his proclamation that "I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that" (526d5-e1).

If this line of interpretation is correct, Socrates is not committed without qualification to the proposition that the truth shall make you free, as though every soul were by nature prepared to understand the truth and to act on that understanding wisely. His politics – and the conversation that is the *Crito* exhibits his politics at work – is moderated by the recognition that in this non-ideal world, philosophers in his particular sense of the term are few and far between. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates argues that the philosophical rhetorician both knows the truth and the soul of his interlocutor, such as to be able to present the subject in a way that the interlocutor is capable of grasping without being harmed (*Phaedrus* 271c10–272b2, 272d2–273a1, 276e4–277c6). This may well entail that a particular interlocutor (or kind of soul) is best addressed with a discourse that communicates some but not all of the truth about the subject. Even in the *Republic*, Socrates states that the “ideal state” (in our phrase) requires the telling of a “noble falsehood” as well as the therapeutic use of “falsehood and deception” (414b8–c7; 459c2–d2). Many people suspected that Socrates knew more than he let on (*Apology* 23a3–5), his famous irony being an instance thereof. At work in the political realm, Socratic philosophy inevitably takes on a rhetorical dimension (which does not mean that he is simply an ironist, let alone an esotericist, but that he must proceed like the good rhetorician he describes in the *Phaedrus*).

But if the speeches of the laws do not explain why Socrates refused to escape from prison, what does? Certainly, he does not take death in and of itself to be evil (*Apology* 40c1–2). Socrates' dream recounted at the start of the *Crito* (44a5–b5), the invocation of god in the last sentence of the dialogue, and the remark in the *Apology* that his “daimonion” or inner voice had not diverted him from his course of action (40a2–c4) together suggest that he had decided that the time to die had arrived (cf. *Apology* 41d3–5: “it is clear to me that it was better for me to die now and to escape from trouble”). It is not irrelevant that Socrates was already an old man (see Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates* 6–7). Further, if he were to escape death either by persuading the jury through debasing means (say, by appealing for pity; *Apology* 34c1–d10, 38d5–e2) or by escaping from prison, his moral standing and reputation would have been fatally compromised (*Apology* 34e1–35a3, 28d9–29a5). After all, Socrates publicly insisted that he was not afraid of death; either of those courses of action would have made him a mockery forever. Socrates is explicitly attempting to define and justify a new human possibility – the “philosopher” understood in a distinctive and innovative way – and the manner of his death was an inherent part of his enactment of that deeply controversial life. Socratic politics aimed to establish publicly and persuasively, and therefore in deed as well as word, that the philosophically examined life is best.

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