
Rescuing the *Gorgias* from Latour

Jeff Kochan

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Philosophy of
the Social Sciences
Volume 36 Number 4
December 2006 395-422
© 2006 Sage Publications
10.1177/0048393106293377
<http://pos.sagepub.com>
hosted at
<http://online.sagepub.com>

Bruno Latour has been attempting to transform his sociological account of science into an ambitious theory of democracy. In a key early moment in this project, Latour alleges that Plato's *Gorgias* introduces an impossibly rationalistic and deeply anti-democratic philosophy which continues to this day to distort our understandings of science and democracy. Latour reckons that if he can successfully refute the *Gorgias*, then he will have opened up a space in which to authorize his own theory of democracy. I argue that Latour's refutation of the *Gorgias* is a failure. Hence, his political theory is, by his own standards, horribly underdetermined. I present another reading of the *Gorgias*, and consider the dialogue's possible relevance for current theories of deliberative democracy.

Keywords: *Latour; Gorgias; Socrates; rhetoric; elenchus; deliberative democracy*

1. Introduction

Bruno Latour, a well-known sociologist of science, has recently begun to also style himself as a sociologist of politics and, above all, as a champion of democracy. His 2004 book *Politics of Nature* bears the sub-title *How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. This move from science to politics is not accidental. Latour has long recognized the tremendous influence contemporary science exercises in the political realm. Hence, it is quite unsurprising that his theory of science should have now led him to also formulate a theory of politics.

Received 19 December 2005

Author's Note: Thanks to Martin Kusch for his helpful advice and criticism on several versions of this material, Trish Glazebrook and Simon Schaffer for their encouraging remarks on an early draft, Michael Bresalier and Estheranna Stäuble for additional helpful comments, the participants of the University of Cambridge's STS Workshop for an advantageous discussion of a late draft of this essay, and an anonymous referee for this journal for a final helpful suggestion. Permission has been granted by Harvard University Press to reproduce passages from *Pandora's Hope* (Copyright © 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College).

The basic ground for Latour's move from science to politics was laid out in his 1999 book *Pandora's Hope*. There, Latour (1999, 258) argues that the traditional rationalistic model of science "is an ideology that never had any other use . . . than to offer a *substitute* for political discussion." In other words, Latour argues that this traditional model is inherently anti-democratic. In *Pandora's Hope*, he calls this model of science "Science No. 1." Latour has worked hard during many years, and during the course of many books, to replace "Science No. 1" with his own sociological model of science, which, in *Pandora's Hope*, he calls "Science No. 2." He argues that his model of science offers an empirically better-grounded picture of science as it is actually practiced in the laboratories and boardrooms of scientific communities. By debunking "Science No. 1" and replacing it with "Science No. 2," Latour also claims to have provided a model of science more amenable to democratic politics.

In this essay, I will not be offering an explication of Latour's "Science No. 2," nor will I discuss the theory of democracy he bases on this model of science. I will instead restrict myself exclusively to a consideration of Latour's attempt to justify his proposed political theory, that is, his attempt to authorize the importation of "Science No. 2" into democracy. Latour does this through an extended critique of Plato's *Gorgias*. Through his critical commentary on this dialogue, Latour claims to have offered an historical archaeology of the precise moment when rationalistic "Science No. 1" usurped genuine democracy. Latour reckons that if he can expose the anti-democratic politics of the *Gorgias*, then he will have succeeded in opening up a space in which the conceptual pairing of "Science No. 1" with anti-democratic politics can be legitimately replaced by the conceptual pairing of "Science No. 2" with his own reconstructed theory of democracy. A key question for this essay, then, is whether or not Latour has carried off his attempt to expose the *Gorgias* as an anti-democratic treatise, that is, whether or not he has succeeded in opening up a space in which to authorize his own theory of democracy. In what follows, I will argue that Latour has, in fact, failed in this attempt. As a consequence, the authority of his political theory is, by his own standards, heavily underdetermined.

The overall conclusion of this essay will not, however, be entirely negative; I aim to provide the reader with more than just a simple refutation of Latour's interpretation of the *Gorgias*. Indeed, in the course of demolishing that interpretation, I hope to also build up an alternative reading of the dialogue, a reading which I believe is better founded, more convincing, and more useful than Latour's own. Specifically, I wish to cast doubt on Latour's conflation of democracy and rhetoric. This conflation was probably

motivated by Latour's understandable distaste for rationalistic political theory. However, I believe that the proper response to such theory is not to take flight into a politics of rhetoric. I suggest, on the contrary, that a promising alternative to both rationalism and rhetoric, as models for understanding democracy, can still be found in the *Gorgias*. The Socratic project, now some 2,500 years old, might after all still provide us with important insight into the perplexities of contemporary democratic politics.

2. The *Gorgias* in Historical Context

Before proceeding to an examination of Latour's *Gorgias* commentary, it will first be useful to briefly sketch out the historical background of the dialogue. The *Gorgias* is widely considered Plato's most important political dialogue prior to the *Republic*. The dialogue picks up a theme familiar from many of Plato's dialogues, that is, the relationship among philosophy, sophistry, and rhetoric. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates engages three interlocutors in conversation: the sophists Gorgias and Polus, both teachers of rhetoric, and the rhetorician Callicles, an ambitious young aristocrat about to enter a career in politics. Socrates' professed goal in the dialogue is to demonstrate the superiority of philosophy over both sophistry and rhetoric. The assertion of philosophy's superiority over sophistry and rhetoric was of no small political importance. With the rise of democracy in the 5th century B.C., Athenian citizens looked for a new education to prepare them for participation in the public assemblies. In response, a number of self-styled teachers of rhetoric appeared on the scene offering training for political success (Grube 1981, 3).¹ They were called "sophists." However, for reasons to be discussed in section 6, sophistic rhetoric was viewed with suspicion by many Athenians. Socrates was among the critics of rhetoric. He sought not only to publicly censure the sophists but also to provide the Athenian *demos* with an alternative to sophistic rhetoric. Socrates' alternative was his *elenchus*, a form of conversation which he developed in response to the difficulties presented by rhetoric.

As is well-known, Socrates wrote nothing. Most of what we know about him comes through the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, both students of Socrates. Plato's dialogues are generally held to offer a more reliable

1. Cf. Waterfield (1994, ix). Grube (1981, 26n.4) notes that "Gorgias . . . was a celebrated rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric. He came to Athens in 427 B.C., and his rhetorical skills took the city by storm."

account of the teachings of the historical Socrates (Cooper 1998, 10). Even so, there is a marked transformation in the views professed by Socrates as one moves from Plato's early to his later dialogues. Most scholars accept only the early dialogues as providing a reliable depiction of the views of the historical Socrates (Cooper 1998, 10). In the middle and later dialogues, Plato makes use of Socrates only as a dramatic mouthpiece for his own mature philosophy.

A great deal of scholarship has gone into distinguishing between Plato's early and middle periods. It is generally agreed that the *Gorgias* is a late example of Plato's early, or "Socratic," dialogues.² The *Gorgias* contains some superficial signs of the "Platonism" characteristic of the middle and later dialogues, but it remains basically Socratic in both form and content. A more detailed discussion of the Platonic elements of the *Gorgias* will be undertaken in section 8. For the time being, it is enough to emphasize that the *Gorgias* belongs to Plato's early dialogues. This means, above all, that we cannot simply expect the *Gorgias* to express those views more characteristic of Plato's middle works. Specifically, we cannot assume that Socrates' philosophical method, his *elenchus*, simply represents an early version of the metaphysical and political views Plato only developed later in such middle-period dialogues as the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. These two dialogues introduce a metaphysical doctrine of transcendent and absolute forms which, I believe, there is good reason to reject. The *Republic*, in addition, presents an anti-democratic political theory which, I also believe, should be rejected. This is not to say, of course, that the *Gorgias* is necessarily beyond criticism. It may well still be possible to demonstrate that the *Gorgias* professes an absolutist and anti-democratic philosophy. In fact, this is precisely what Latour attempts to do in *Pandora's Hope*. But in order to argue this point plausibly, Latour must show why there is no essential difference between the Socratic philosophy of the *Gorgias* and the absolutist and anti-democratic Platonism of such later dialogues as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. With these points in mind, let us now move on to consider Latour's argument.

3. Latour's Argument Summarized

Near the end of his *Gorgias* commentary, Latour (1999) offers us this tidy description of the dialogue's penultimate moment: "Professor Socrates

2. See, for example, the discussions in Dodds (1959, 18-30), Irwin (1979, 5-8), and Vlastos (1992, 148, 154n.30).

writes on the blackboard his triumphant equation: politics *plus* absolute morality *minus* practical means *equals* the Impossible Body Politic" (257).

According to Latour, Socrates requires that the *demos*, in its political activity, strive towards an absolute moral standard. At the same time, Socrates robs the *demos* of the practical means by which to achieve that standard. The result is an impossible situation: the *demos* is assigned an end but denied the means to achieve it. This hopeless circumstance is then used by Socrates, so Latour (1999, 257) argues, to justify a final, dramatic move: "since the Body Politic is impossible, let us send the whole thing to hell!" Everyone is sent to their (political) death except Socrates and a few of his disciples.

Latour's Socratic equation can be simplified in these terms:

$$P + AM - PM = IBP$$

where P = politics, AM = absolute morality, PM = practical means, and IBP = Impossible Body Politic. Latour (1999, 256-57) argues that Socrates makes four decisive moves in his lead-up to this equation: (a) "Socrates *takes away* from the people of Athens their basic sociality, their basic morality, their basic know-how"; (b) stripped of their practical morality, "the people are portrayed as children, as beasts of prey, as spoiled slaves ready to attack one another at their slightest whim"; (c) Socrates then declares a state of emergency and the desperate need of a solution ("something needs to be done to keep this horrifying mob at bay and set up order against their disorder"); and (d) Socrates finally introduces an "absolutist" solution from "the exotic realm of geometrical demonstration."

The first two moves contribute to the equation's subtrahend, PM. Let us call them PM(i) and PM(ii). The last two moves contribute to the equation's addition, AM. Let us call them AM(i) and AM(ii). In the next four sections, I will discuss each of these four moves respectively, and assess whether or not they can be justifiably attributed to Socrates in the *Gorgias*.

4. Socrates' Alleged Theft of the *Demos*' Practical Morality [PM(i)]

Latour claims that Socrates, before foisting his absolute moral standard on the *demos*, must first "disarm" them of their own basic morality. Socrates does this, Latour (1999, 230) argues, by drawing a distinction between two kinds of persuasion, one that confers *pistis* ("belief" or "conviction") and

one that confers *episteme* (“knowledge”).³ The principal distinction between *pistis* and *episteme* is that, while beliefs can be either true or false, knowledge is always true (*Gorg.* 454d). In other words, while it is possible for one to have false beliefs, one cannot have false knowledge.

Socrates calls the persuasion which confers belief *empeiria* (“routine,” “know-how,” or “experience”), and the persuasion which confers knowledge *techne* (“art” or “expertise”). A routine, Socrates says, “lacks rational understanding either of the objects of its attentions or of the nature of the things it dispenses (and so it can’t explain the reason why anything happens)” (*Gorg.* 465a). Socrates classes rhetoric as a kind of *empeiria*. The rhetorician can only lead others to *believe* what he says is true, but not to *know* it is true, because he lacks a rational understanding of his own subject matter. Lacking such an understanding, he can give no reasons justifying his actions. He cannot explain *why* his actions are right rather than wrong, good rather than bad, just rather than unjust. For this reason, Socrates asserts that rhetoric is ill-suited for politics; it is merely “a phantom of a branch of statesmanship” rather than a genuine political art in its own right (*Gorg.* 463d).

Latour (1999, 237) describes this last assertion as “the iconoclastic gesture that destroys our much-treasured ability to deal with one another.” With this gesture, Socrates and his disciples “have turned a fleshy, rosy living Body Politic that kicked and bit into ‘a phantom,’ by asking it to feed on a diet of expert knowledge on which no such organism could survive” (Latour 1999, 237). Latour takes rhetoric, or *empeiria* more generally, to lie at the center of the *demos*’ political life. In other words, he equates rhetoric with democracy. According to Latour, Socrates, with his crystalline distinction between *episteme* and *pistis*, and with his cold assertion of the superiority of *episteme* over *pistis*, has pierced deeply and horribly into the very heart of democratic politics. “*Episteme*,” cries Latour (1999, 230), “how many crimes have been committed in your name!”

Let us consider this alleged outrage in more detail. Latour (1999, 231) focuses on what he takes to be the *Gorgias*’ single, central distinction between “real knowledge and know-how.” By “real knowledge,” Latour means *episteme*. By “know-how,” he means the *pistis* conferred by *empeiria*. He also describes this difference as one between the “unsituated knowledge of demonstration” and “pragmatic knowledge *in situ*” (1999, 231). By “demonstration,” Latour means *apodictic* demonstration, that is, demonstration which produces indisputable or absolute knowledge. We shall return to

3. Cf. *Gorg.* 454e. Unless otherwise noted, I will always cite from the same English translation of the *Gorgias* as Latour, that is, Waterfield (1994).

this in section 7. For now, we need only note that Latour takes Socrates to be distinguishing between abstract or theoretical knowledge, on the one hand, and situated or practical knowledge, on the other—between, in short, “theory” and “practice.” Placed in this light, Latour’s attack on Socrates appears simply as a re-enactment of the already well-known critique from practice leveled against a rather old-fashioned brand of epistemic rationalism, a brand of rationalism commonly associated with the doctrine of forms of Plato’s middle period. Indeed, Latour (1999, 231) explicitly attributes to Socrates a “contempt of practice.” Yet, as discussed in section 2, the *Gorgias* belongs to Plato’s early period. It predates Plato’s theory of forms. Hence, it appears that Latour may be falsely attributing to the *Gorgias* a rationalistic theory of knowledge which Plato only formulated later in his career.

To further elucidate this misunderstanding, we need only recall that Socrates operates with not one but two central distinctions: the first between *pistis* and *episteme*, and the second between *empeiria* and *techne*. The first pair stands to the second pair as ends stand to means. *Empeiria* and *techne* are the means for producing, respectively, *pistis* and *episteme*. While Latour clearly recognizes the relation of *empeiria* to *pistis*,⁴ he shows remarkably little interest in the relation of *techne* to *episteme*.⁵ The reason for this is surely that, having interpreted *episteme* as an unsituated, abstract, and apodictic form of knowledge, as a theoretical construct utterly disconnected from the world of belief and practice, Latour is unable to recognize Socrates’ assertion that *episteme* is, in fact, produced by a situated *techne*, by an “art” or “technique.”⁶ Latour is quite right to hold that there is a closer connection between knowledge and know-how than an antiquated rationalist epistemology would allow, and quite right also to insist that theoretical knowledge is itself firmly rooted in contexts of practical activity. He is, however, quite wrong to assert that the *Gorgias* subscribes to either of these two doctrines. In fact, the relations between the ancient Greek concepts of *pistis*, *empeiria*, *episteme*, and *techne* are more complicated than Latour suggests. Wolfgang Schadewaldt (1979, 166), commenting on “how Greek thinkers and philosophers, especially Aristotle, conceptually refined the long familiar notion of *techne*,” describes those relations in this way:

4. Cf. Latour (1999, 230, 232, 236, 242, 247).

5. By my count, the word *techne* appears only twice in Latour’s commentary (1999, 233, 242), both times embedded in the original Greek passages which he occasionally inserts into his citations from Waterfield’s English translation.

6. Perhaps Latour has been misled, in part, by Waterfield’s unusual translation of *techne* as “expertise.” In their own translations and commentaries, Allen (1984), Dodds (1959), and Woodhead (1961) all translate *techne* as “art,” and Irwin (1979) and Zeyl (1997) as “craft.”

Techne is that knowledge and ability which is directed to producing and constructing, and thus occupies a sort of intermediate place between mere experience or know-how, *empeiria*, and theoretical knowledge, *episteme*. . . . *Techne*, builds upon *empeiria*, experience. But whereas mere experience, which rests upon what is retained and associated in memory, regards only the particular instances and their conception, *techne* proceeds from many particular cases to a universal concept. . . . Whereas experience knows only the “that,” *techne* knows also the “why,” the reasons, and in this respect approaches theoretical knowledge, *episteme*.

Thus the ancient Greek distinction between *episteme* and *pistis* is not really as sharp as Latour imagines.⁷ *Techne*, the productive knowledge to which Latour strangely pays so little attention, stands as a bridge between the two. *Techne* builds upon, is an auxiliary to, *empeiria*, which is itself the basis of *pistis*. *Techne*, by subjoining *empeiria*, attempts to transform *pistis* into *episteme*. For Socrates and his descendents, then, *episteme* could exist in neither the absence of *pistis* nor that of *techne*. Without beliefs and opinions at its base and as a point of departure, Socrates’ philosophical art would be quite impossible.⁸

Hence, Latour’s argument that Socrates robbed the Athenians of their basic practical morality is unfounded. If Socrates had made irrelevant the beliefs and convictions of the *demos*, not to mention the know-how, the experience or *empeiria* which confers those beliefs and convictions, then he would have eliminated the very basis of his own philosophical *techne*, the “elenctic” method by which he set out to examine himself and others in the pursuit of knowledge. Socrates always knew what even Immanuel Kant, that arch-rationalist, had the good sense to admit when he observed that to philosophize in the absence of experience and belief is like a bird attempting to fly in a vacuum.⁹

The first of Latour’s allegations against Socrates is thus false. Socrates did not take away from the Athenian *demos* their basic sociality, their basic morality, and their basic know-how. He tried, at most, only to supplement that basic morality through the introduction of his own elenctic *techne*. Even so, Latour’s case against Socrates cannot yet be dismissed. It may still be that Socrates’ attempted intervention in the *demos*’ basic moral practices itself amounts to a criminal act. In order to decide this, we must still consider the legitimacy of Latour’s three remaining allegations against Socrates.

7. At one point, Latour (1999, 254) calls it an “absolute difference” (emphasis in original).

8. Dodds (1959, 206) notes that the *Gorgias*’ distinction between *pistis* (belief) and *episteme* will, from the *Meno* onwards, become the more well-known Platonic distinction between *doxa* (opinion) and *episteme*.

9. Cf. Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A5/B8-9.

5. Socrates' Alleged Portrayal of the *Demos* as Immoral and Violent [PM(ii)]

Let us now consider Latour's allegation that Socrates portrays the *demos* as immoral and violent, and that he hated his fellow citizens. As we saw in section 3, Latour motivates this allegation, PM(ii), with allegation PM(i). Indeed, he argues that the Socratic distinction between knowledge and know-how "has *no other content* than Socrates' disdain for the common people" (Latour 1999, 231; original emphasis). In the last section, allegation PM(i) was found to be false. Hence, the plausibility of allegation PM(ii) has already been significantly weakened. However, the fact that Socrates did not rob the *demos* of its basic morality does not dismiss the possibility that he still hated them. Latour also produces textual evidence in support of this allegation. In this section, we shall consider the strength of this textual evidence.

Latour (1999, 216-17, 220) relies upon these two key passages from the *Gorgias* to support allegation PM(ii):

[SOCRATES:] In fact, Callicles, the expert's opinion is that co-operation, love [*philian*], order, discipline, and justice *bind heaven and earth, gods and men*. That's why they call the universe an ordered whole, my friend, rather than a disorderly mess or an unruly shambles. (*Gorg.* 507e-508a; Latour's emphasis, my brackets)

CALLICLES: I can't explain it, Socrates, but I do think you're making your points well. All the same, I'm feeling what people invariably feel with you: I'm not *entirely* convinced.

SOCRATES: It's the *demotic love* [*eros*] residing in your heart which is resisting me, Callicles. (*Gorg.* 513c; Latour's emphasis, my brackets)

In the second passage, Socrates questions the moral fitness of Callicles' love of the Athenian *demos*, that is, his "demotic love." Responding to this passage, Latour (1999, 220) writes, "Obviously the love of the people is not stifling Socrates' breath! He has a way to break the rule of majority that no obstacle can restrain. What should we call what resists in *his* heart if not 'demotic hatred'?" Latour concludes that if Socrates does not promote love, then he must promote hatred. This is, of course, a precarious move. While the opposite of love might be hatred, hatred does not capture all the possible alternatives to love. Two implicit premises seem to have determined Latour's movement in this direction. First, Latour takes for granted the truth of allegation PM(i). He assumes that Socrates is attempting to rob the *demos* of its basic morality, and to thereby "break the rule of majority." Second, with reference to the first of the two key passages from the *Gorgias* cited above,

Latour takes love to be central to moral order. Insofar as Latour is concerned specifically with democratic moral order, he thus seems to equate demotic love and majority rule. Hence, Latour takes Socrates' rejection of demotic love to be commensurate with his alleged rejection of popular morality, PM(i).

In section 4, allegation PM(i) was shown to be false, and so the first premise is disallowed. This leaves only the second premise, that love is central to moral order. The question before us is whether the first *Gorgias* passage supports this premise, for it is from this passage that Latour draws his support.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, it turns out that the passage does not support this premise. This can be seen by considering a peculiarity in the use of the word "love" in the two passages. It is the apparent identity of this word across the passages that allows Latour to equate the rejection of demotic love in the second passage with the rejection of established moral order in the first. But these two words, as Plato wrote them, are not identical. As I have indicated with the brackets inserted into the passages, in the first, "love" translates the word *philia*; in the second, it translates the word *eros*.¹¹ It is standard to translate *eros* as "love."¹² However, it is not clear why Waterfield chose to also translate *philia* as "love," and this not just because he translates it as "friendship" in the immediately preceding sentence.¹³ Indeed, four other translators of the *Gorgias* render *philia* in the passage under examination (as well as in the sentence which immediately precedes it) as "friendship."¹⁴ Waterfield's translation deviates from a well-established convention, and the notes to his translation offer no explanation for this deviation. It thus seems quite arbitrary, and, alas, this arbitrary deviation appears to have badly misled Latour. *Contra* Latour (and Waterfield), it is wholly reasonable to interpret the first of our passages as asserting that, not love, but *friendship* is central to the established moral order. Hence, given the balance of evidence, Latour's second premise must also be disallowed. As a consequence, Latour's already precarious conclusion, that because Socrates rejects demotic love he must embrace demotic hatred, simply falls to pieces. There are many alternatives to love, and friendship is one of them. As will be discussed in section 7, there is good reason to take Socrates as rejecting demotic love only in order to embrace friendship as a

10. The premise might be true anyway, on the basis of different evidence, but that is another matter.

11. My edition of the Greek text is Dodds (1959), which Waterfield (1994, xxxvii) describes as "the only edition worth consulting." Indeed, Waterfield's translation is from Dodds's edition (Waterfield 1994, 2).

12. See Allen (1984), Irwin (1979), Woodhead (1961), and Zeyl (1997). They all translate *eros* as "love" in the passage under consideration.

13. *Gorg.* 507e: "co-operation is a prerequisite for friendship [*philia*]."

14. See Allen (1984), Irwin (1979), Woodhead (1961), and Zeyl (1997).

central aspect of Athenian popular morality. For now, however, it is enough to have simply shown that Socrates did not hate the Athenian *demos*.

Before closing this section, it is worth addressing a few remaining points with respect to allegation PM(ii). Latour (1999, 220) writes, "If you make a list of all the derogatory terms with which the common crowd is branded by Callicles and Socrates, it is hard to see which of them despises it most." I have argued that Latour's premise that Socrates hated the *demos* is indefensible. Yet one might still object that if Latour can produce a list of insults that Socrates directed at the *demos*, then the premise may still hold some merit. In fact, Latour does proffer a list of sorts in the form of three rhetorical questions. The passage just quoted continues,

Is it because assemblies are polluted by women, children, and slaves that they deserve this scorn? Is it because they are made up of people who work with their hands? Or is it because they switch opinions like babies and want to be spoiled and overfed like irresponsible children? All of that, to be sure. (1999, 220)¹⁵

On the contrary, "none of that" would be closer to the truth. First, as is well-known, women, children, and slaves did not count as citizens in ancient Athens, and so they were barred from participation in the assemblies. Second, while there was indeed an aristocratic disdain for the manual arts (*techne banausos*) in 4th-century Athens, there is no convincing evidence that Socrates was himself an aristocrat.¹⁶ Furthermore, Latour points to no

15. The passage continues that the worst quality of the *demos*, in the eyes of Callicles and Socrates, is that "there are simply *too many* of them." I shall postpone comment on this until section 8.

16. Thus, Latour's (1999, 241) reference to "Socrates' aristocratic scorn" is more fancy than fact. Indeed, many scholars have held that Socrates was quite the opposite of an aristocrat. For example, Nietzsche (1990, 39-44) sharply distinguishes Socrates from the Athenian aristocracy, classing him as "rabble" (42), and Vlastos (1991, 233) describes Socrates as "plebeian." Many passages in the dialogues seem to support such claims. At *Apology* 38b, for example, Socrates confesses that he has no money, and at *Theaetetus* 149a he calls himself "the son of a good hefty midwife." Copleston (1985, 96), however, cautions that Socrates' statement that his mother was a midwife does not necessarily imply that she was a midwife in the modern professional sense. He further notes that, since Socrates had served as a fully armed hoplite, he must have had sufficient patrimony to enable such service (Copleston 1985, 96). The implication is that Socrates came from an aristocratic background after all. But, by imitating Copleston's own admirable caution, one might respond that Socrates' ownership of hoplitic armaments does not yet sufficiently prove his aristocratic legacy. In any case, the issue here is Socrates' alleged aristocratic *character*, not his aristocratic *background*. Even if one were to convincingly demonstrate that Socrates was an aristocrat by birth (a very big 'if' indeed), one would not yet have demonstrated that his mature philosophy is the expression of aristocratic, to wit, anti-democratic, interests.

evidence in the *Gorgias*, and I can find none, that Socrates turned his nose up at manual labor. In fact, Socrates made liberal analogical use of the manual arts in deploying his own elenctic method. Why should he have done this if he viewed those arts with such contempt?¹⁷ Third, while Socrates does criticize intemperance of opinion, his target is Callicles, not the Athenian *demos* (*Gorg.* 481d-e). In sum, Latour's list provides no support for allegation PM(ii).

Latour also draws attention to passages in the dialogue referring to the *demos* as "ten thousand fools" and "human debris," and repeats these phrases several times, presumably in order to press home Socrates' alleged demotic contempt.¹⁸ Yet "human debris" is Callicles' term, not Socrates' (*Gorg.* 489c).¹⁹ And although Socrates himself utters the phrase "ten thousand fools," he does so in a characterization of Callicles' own position (*Gorg.* 490a).²⁰ Hence, even these clearly insulting terms provide no support for allegation PM(ii).

Latour has provided no more justification for allegation PM(ii) than he did for allegation PM(i). Both allegations are unfounded. Let us now move on to consider allegation AM(i).

6. Socrates' Alleged Declaration of a State of Emergency [AM(i)]

Allegation AM(i) holds that Socrates declared Athens to be in a state of deep crisis demanding immediate and revolutionary countermeasures. Latour claims that it was through this declaration of a crisis that Socrates sought to authorize an unconscionable revolution of reason; only through the muscular imposition of reason on an immoral and potentially violent *demos* could civil order be maintained.

Clearly, this allegation piggybacks on allegation PM(ii). Latour suggests that it is by characterizing the *demos* as deeply fraught with immoral and violent tendencies that Socrates justified his intervention. In Latour's

17. As Roochnik (1992, 185) notes, "It has long been recognized that Socrates' use of both the term and concept *techné* in arguments that are analogical in structure is crucial in Plato's early dialogues."

18. By my count, the phrase "ten thousand fools" appears eight times in Latour's text, and the phrase "human debris" five times.

19. Cf. Latour (1999, 222).

20. Cf. Latour (1999, 222). Yet Latour (1999, 224) misleadingly refers to "Socrates' ten thousand fools."

(1999, 217) words, “[S]omething needs to be done to keep this horrifying mob at bay and set up order against their disorder.” Yet, in the last section, allegation PM(ii) was found to be indefensible. There is no good reason to accept Latour’s claim that Socrates was motivated by feelings of demotic fear or hatred, that he took the *demos* to be a violent threat to public order. Without the benefit of allegation PM(ii), the plausibility of allegation AM(i) is significantly reduced. It is, however, not refuted. Perhaps the *demos* really was in trouble, and perhaps Socrates really did feel compelled to intervene, though not out of a sense of demotic fear or hatred. In this section I will argue that this was, in fact, the case. Hence, there is some truth to allegation AM(i), even if Latour’s own grounds for that allegation are inadmissible. Having said that, I wish then to moderate the level of crisis reflected in Latour’s wording of the allegation. Declarations of civil emergency all too often authorize revolutionary and potentially anti-democratic countermeasures. I wish to suggest that, while Socrates was indeed responding to real trouble in the political life of Athens, his intervention is better described as reformist rather than revolutionary.

It will be useful to first address the not uncommon but completely false belief that to be against rhetoric is to be against democracy. This belief is at work in Latour’s *Gorgias* commentary. As witnessed in section 4, paragraph 3, Latour takes rhetoric to lie at the heart of popular government. Hence, he interprets Socrates’ attack on rhetoric, and *empeiria* in general, as an attack on democracy. Latour zeroes in on Socrates’ critique of *empeiria*, alleges that Socrates seeks to eliminate *empeiria*, and so concludes that Socrates also seeks to eliminate democracy. In actual fact, as argued in section 4, Socrates does not seek to eliminate *empeiria* but only to supplement it with an auxiliary *techne*, his elenctic method. From this it follows that Socrates did not seek to eliminate the established democracy of Athens, but only to supplement, or reform, it. Socrates argued that the *empeiria* of rhetoric is unable to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, and just and unjust, and that this makes it unsuitable for politics. He attempts to reform rhetoric, to supplement this *empeiria* with his own elenctic *techne*, in order to render it more fit for politics.

Socrates’ elenctic *techne* is a method of refutation. Using this method, he engaged his fellow Athenians in conversation, testing their beliefs and often refuting their claims to knowledge. He contended that only those beliefs which could survive the *elenchus* were genuine candidates for knowledge. Socrates’ *techne*, then, was above all a method of falsification. Beliefs were true only if they survived rational criticism, only if they could not be falsified. Socrates held this method of falsification to be of great

political use, for it provided a powerful means for uncovering lies, for exposing deception, in public discourse.

At the end of section 4, I suggested that even though Socrates did not attempt to eliminate the basic morality of the Athenian *demos*, but only to supplement it with his elenctic *techne*, it could still be that his intervention in Athenian life was immoral and anti-democratic. This would be the case if it could be shown that Socrates' intervention directly violated the basic moral interests of the Athenian *demos*. However, it turns out that Socrates' *techne* did not do this. In fact, there is a clear sense in which his *techne* of falsification can be said to have *promoted* those interests. As Jon Hesk (2000, 22), in his marvelous study of ancient Athenian democracy, has shown,

[I]n the public spaces of Athenian civic and democratic exchange, there was a strong and persistent ideological construction of deceit and trickery as *negative* categories of communication and behavior which served to define what it meant to be a good Athenian male citizen. . . . [T]he *democratic* and *civic* culture of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries develop[ed] powerful representations of deceptive communication as inimical to its very existence.

Indeed, Athenian citizens were worried enough about the dangers of deceptive political discourse to introduce laws and curses guarding against such forms of deception (Hesk 2000, 64). Sophistry and speech-writing (*logography*) were treated as especially threatening: "sophistry and logography [were] demonised because they [were] perceived as lacking an ideological priority of commitment to the *demos*" (Hesk 2000, 216). The Athenian *demos* clearly held sophistic rhetoric to be a potentially anti-democratic practice, and they actively sought ways to protect themselves from the deceptive tricks of politically ambitious rhetoricians. Latour's equation of the Athenian *demos* with rhetoric is thus profoundly mistaken. The relationship between rhetoric and democracy in 4th-century Athens was in fact deeply ambivalent. Socrates' own attack on rhetoric, and his *techne* for exposing falsehood in moral discourse, very much represented the basic moral interests of the Athenian *demos*. Hence, Latour's (1999, 257) claim that Socrates "was not a part of the public" is simply false. Not only was Socrates a member of the Athenian *demos*, but he appears to have also been strongly committed to its cause. As Hesk (2000, 3) ably demonstrates, the philosophical denigration of rhetoric in democratic Athens, to which Socrates so powerfully contributed, "can be located in political, legal and cultural discourses which defined Athenian democracy itself." Socrates was, in short, a true-blue Athenian democrat.

Allegation AM(i), as Latour introduces it, is false. Properly qualified, however, it does hit upon an important truth. Socrates' denigration of rhetoric was not also a denigration of democracy. He did not perceive the *demos* to be immoral or violent. He did not declare Athens to be in a state of moral emergency, and so he did not use such a declaration to authorize a revolutionary and anti-democratic intervention in Athenian public life. However, like his fellow citizens, Socrates did recognize a serious threat to Athenian democracy in the potential deceptions of rhetoric, and he thus sought to introduce measures mitigating that threat by reforming the discursive practices of his fellow citizens. Socrates was, in his own peculiar way, simply emulating the interests and concerns of the Athenian *demos* in general.

7. Socrates' Alleged Introduction of an Absolute Moral Standard [AM(ii)]

Latour's first two allegations against Socrates have been dismissed, and the third accepted with important qualification. Taken together, all three allegations were meant to support the plausibility of allegation AM(ii), that Socrates foisted an absolute moral standard on a "disarmed" Athenian *demos*. The plausibility of allegation AM(ii) has thus already been significantly weakened. The alleged state of emergency [AM(i)] which authorizes Socrates' revolutionary introduction of an absolute moral standard has been reduced to a state of public concern motivating calls for political reform. This alleged state of emergency was in turn validated by Socrates' alleged hatred of the Athenian *demos*, his construal of the *demos* as immoral and potentially violent [PM(ii)]. But there is no evidence that Socrates hated the *demos* or that he considered them fundamentally immoral and violent. This alleged hatred was itself underwritten by the allegation that Socrates robbed the *demos* of its basic morality [PM(i)]. In section 4, this allegation was shown to be false. Hence, allegation AM(ii) must prove valid, if indeed it is valid, independently of the corroboration of allegations PM(i), PM(ii), and AM(i). Let us now consider the validity of allegation AM(ii).

Latour builds his case for the admissibility of allegation PM(i) on Socrates' distinction between *pistis* and *episteme*. Latour characterizes this distinction as one between "pragmatic knowledge *in situ*" and the "unsituated knowledge of demonstration." He charges Socrates with filching the *demos'* *pistis*, along with the *empeiria* that produces it, and replacing them with *episteme*, with "the absolute certainty of a transcendent force," with "an unquestionable and indisputable absolute truth coming from nowhere,"

with, in short, apodictic knowledge (Latour 1999, 15, 20). Latour equates Socrates' elenctic method with *apodeixis*, that is, with a theoretical and rationalistic form of demonstration which confers apodictic knowledge. He names this form of demonstration "mathematical demonstration" (Latour 1999, 218). Two central characteristics of what Latour calls "mathematical demonstration" should be noted: first, it results in certainty; and, second, it is deductive. The question of whether Socrates' elenctic method can be legitimately equated with *apodeixis* can thus be rephrased as the question of whether Socratic *elenchus* is a deductive method yielding certainty.

A deductive demonstration is only as certain as its basic premises. Hence, if a deduction yields indubitable truth, then it must begin with one or more indubitable and primitive facts. As primitive, these facts will themselves be indemonstrable, that is, their validity will be self-evident. Such indubitable and primitive facts are often termed "axioms." Thus *apodeixis*, what Latour calls "mathematical demonstration," can be described as an axiomatic form of demonstration. From this it follows that if Socrates' elenctic method is apodictic, as Latour maintains, then it must also be axiomatic: it must confer truth on the basis of axioms.

In section 4 we saw that, in addition to the distinction between *pistis* and *episteme*, the *Gorgias* also introduces a distinction between *empeiria* and *techne*. *Empeiria* and *techne* stand to *pistis* and *episteme* as means stand to ends. While Latour curiously fails to discuss the relevance of the Greek concept of *techne* for Socrates' elenctic method, on the basis of his attribution to Socrates of an apodictic method conferring *episteme*, it seems reasonable to infer that Latour understands Socratic *techne* to be axiomatic. It follows from this that Socrates' *techne*, his *elenchus*, must have as its starting point one or more indubitable and primitive facts, that is, axioms. But in section 4 we saw that Greek *techne* does not start with axioms. It starts with *pistis*, or beliefs. And beliefs are, as we know, far from indubitable; they can be either true or false. Hence, Greek *techne* is not deductive. According to Schadewaldt, cited in section 4, "*techne* proceeds from many particular cases to a universal concept" (1979, 166). In other words, Greek *techne* is not deductive but *inductive*; it begins with particular cases and, on that basis, attempts to arrive at valid generalizations. If Socrates' elenctic *techne* is characteristic of Greek *techne* in general, then we should find that it is a form of induction and not, as Latour claims, a form of deduction.

But there is, at least on the surface, reason to doubt that Socrates' *techne* is inductive rather than deductive, and Latour is quick to pick up on this reason. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates makes several references to geometry, a branch of mathematics which is both deductive and axiomatic. Specifically,

Socrates characterizes friendship in terms of “geometrical equality.” In section 5, I cited a passage from the *Gorgias* wherein Socrates argues that *philia*, “friendship,” is central to moral order. A bit later in the dialogue, Socrates states a traditional view that friendships exist between like-minded individuals (*Gorg.* 510b). The term “geometrical equality” seems shorthand for the idea that friendship is a proportion of equality holding between individuals with common interests. The practical moral imperative contained in this proportion is, Socrates says, “that doing wrong is more contemptible than suffering wrong” (*Gorg.* 508b). This moral imperative (to do wrong is worse than to suffer wrong) stands as a central principle governing moral order as Socrates sees it. But is it an axiom?

Summing up his argument that to do wrong is worse than to suffer wrong, Socrates tells Callicles that

these are the conclusions that we reached before . . . and they’re securely tied down (if you’ll pardon the rather extravagant expression) by arguments of iron and adamant. That’s how it seems to me, in any case. And unless you untie these bonds . . . anyone whose opinion differs from the one I’m proposing at the moment cannot fail to be wrong. (*Gorg.* 508e-509a)

This seems a quite strong expression of certainty. One could be forgiven for reading this passage as a dogmatic assertion that “geometrical equality” is an indubitable axiom of moral life. Yet Socrates immediately goes on to say,

All I’m saying is what I always say: I myself don’t know the facts of these matters, but I’ve never met anyone, including the people here today, who could disagree with what I’m saying and still avoid making himself ridiculous. (*Gorg.* 509a)

Here Socrates restates his oft-made claim that he possesses no knowledge at all, that is, no *episteme*. The two statements thus appear inconsistent with one another. The first seems to claim knowledge; the second clearly disavows it. Yet, as Terence Irwin (1979, 228-29) has argued, the two statements “are not only consistent, but even explain each other; Socrates claims stable beliefs supported by elenctic argument . . . without knowledge.” In other words, Socrates takes “geometrical equality” to be a belief, *pistis*, not an indubitable fact, *episteme*. Furthermore, it is a belief supported and stabilized by elenctic *technē*. Socrates has put this belief to the test in elenctic conversation, and has met no one who was able to refute it. “Geometrical equality,” while not certainly true, has never yet been falsified. All who have tried, including Callicles, end up looking ridiculous.

“Geometrical equality” is not an axiom, because Socrates’ elenctic *techne* is not axiomatic. “Geometrical equality” is an empirically well-tested generalization. It is drawn from out of a field of situated beliefs and experiences via the *techne* of inductive inference. Hence, it is uncertain. It may yet be falsified. Socrates admits that he may still come across someone who can refute this principle, but he has never yet met such a person.²¹

The inconsistency between Socrates’ two statements appears only if one assumes that the elenctic *techne* is deductive. Latour makes precisely this assumption. Hence, for him, Socrates’ second statement, his disavowal of apodictic knowledge, comes as a startling about-turn: “What is so extraordinary is that Socrates, very late in the dialogue, recognizes the obvious commonsense nature of what he has spent so much strenuous effort to prove” (Latour 1999, 254). In an impressive but misdirected feat of imagination, Latour (1999) explains this apparently extraordinary about-turn by arguing that, while Socrates leaves the *demos*’ own moral standards in place, he makes off with their practical means for achieving those standards:

We need an enormously long conditioning to see this question [whether it really is true that doing wrong is worse than suffering it] as crucially important. . . . The only thing Socrates adds to turn this into a “big question” is the strict and absolute order of priority that he imposes between suffering wrongdoing and doing it. In exactly the same way as the *absolute* difference between knowledge and know-how was imposed by a *coup de force* for which we had only Socrates’ words . . . the absolute difference between what every moral animal knows and what Socrates’ higher morality requires is to be imposed by force. (p. 254)

In section 4, it was found that Latour’s allegation that Socrates introduced an absolute distinction between knowledge and know-how in order to rob the *demos* of their practical morality [PM(i)] is untenable. In the above passage, Latour argues that Socrates attempted to do the same with the distinction between wrongdoing and suffering wrong. But Latour is no more successful with this argument than he was with the first. It is a false claim that Socrates held up “geometrical equality” as an indubitable moral principle. Latour (1999, 257) argues that “geometrical equality” is, for Socrates, “an absolute

21. At *Metaphysics* 1078b, Aristotle credits Socrates with the introduction of inductive arguments. He also comments that Socrates did not try to “separate” his valid generalizations, or universal definitions, from the data of experience. Socrates did not, in other words, turn those definitions into indubitable and transcendent axioms. Plato, in contrast, did just that: “Socrates did not make the universals or the definitions exist apart; his successor, however, gave them separate existence, and this was the kind of thing they called Ideas” (*Metaphysics* 1078b; cited in Copleston 1985, 104).

requirement that renders morality and know-how inefficient.” Put otherwise, Latour interprets “geometrical equality” as being, for Socrates, the axiomatic ground for a sort of moral deductivism. But Socrates’ elenctic *techne* was not deductive; it was inductive. The substitution of deduction for induction is the abracadabra transforming “geometrical equality” from *pistis* into *episteme*. But the magic wand lies in the hand of Latour, not Socrates. For Socrates, “geometrical equality” was never more than an empirically well-rooted generalization, a generalization nursed from out of the field of beliefs and practices of the Athenian *demos*, a generalization which Socrates discovered he was able to stabilize and ensure through the attentions of his elenctic *techne*.

Latour’s allegation AM(ii) is thus false. Socrates did not try to introduce an absolute moral standard into the Athenian *demos*. However, there is still one puzzle which remains to be solved. If Socrates’ elenctic *techne* was not a form of *apodeixis*, if it did not deal in indubitable and indemonstrable axioms, then why at all did Plato put the language of geometry into the mouth of Socrates? This question carries us into the next section.

8. *Elenchus* and Mathematics in the *Gorgias*

Fortunately, the puzzle of the *Gorgias*’ geometrical language has already received a neat solution from Gregory Vlastos (1992). In section 2, a crucial distinction was drawn between Plato’s early “Socratic” dialogues and his middle “Platonic” dialogues. The *Gorgias* is a late example of Plato’s early dialogues. It sits on the cusp of Plato’s departure from the teachings of Socrates. The *Gorgias* is still an “elenctic” dialogue, but it shows indications of new developments in Plato’s thinking. Chief among these developments was an interest in mathematics. Vlastos (1992, 148) writes that “the *Gorgias* can be dated on good internal evidence soon after Plato’s first journey to Syracuse.” During his stay in Syracuse, Plato spent considerable time with Pythagorean philosophers, including Archytas of Tarentum, “a perfectly brilliant mathematician . . . [and] a leading statesman of his city” (Vlastos 1992, 148). Vlastos suggests that Plato was so impressed by the political wit and mathematical genius of Archytas that he resolved to incorporate the mathematical insights of Pythagorean metaphysics into his own political investigations.²² In short, he decided to change his method. He gave up Socratic *elenchus* in favor of Pythagorean *apodeixis*.

22. In contrast, Socrates avoided formal involvement in politics and cautioned against the study of advanced mathematics (Vlastos 1992, 148).

Written when Plato was still fresh from Syracuse, the *Gorgias* is the last of the “elenctic” dialogues. Socrates’ use of inductive generalization and elenctic refutation still forms the body of the dialogue, but Plato now hangs that body in some of the garments of geometry. He could do nothing more. In the *Republic*, Plato would require from philosophers a full 10 years of mathematical propaedeutics before they were deemed fit to train in philosophy. Surely Plato himself would have required at least several months before the fruits of his own mathematical studies could take substantial shape in his writings. The *Gorgias* was written too soon after Plato’s return from Syracuse. It uses some of the language of geometry, but it shows no signs of advanced mathematical knowledge. Such signs make brief appearances not long after in the *Hippias Major* and the *Euthydemus*, before coming out with a splash in the *Meno*. Finally, in the *Phaedo*, the metaphysical doctrine of forms will take center stage in all its brilliant and horrible beauty.²³

Plato’s mathematical turn had a tremendous impact on his moral thinking. He argued that training in mathematics would provoke a qualitative change in one’s perception of reality. In the *Republic* (521c), he described this qualitative change as the “turning of a soul from a kind of day that is night to the true day, being the upward way to reality which we say is true philosophy.” Plato claimed that virtuous leaders, “philosopher-kings,”

23. Karl Popper’s (1966) treatment of Plato’s philosophy supports the present conclusion, but through a different argument. Popper demonstrates that Plato’s axiomatization of philosophy should be read together with his response to a contemporaneous crisis in Pythagorean geometry. The early Pythagorean program of reducing the methods of geometry to those of arithmetic broke down with the discovery of the irrationality of the square root of two, alluded to by Plato in the *Hippias Major* and the *Meno* (Popper 1966, 249). The crisis was eventually resolved through the axiomatic method of Euclid. Plato’s introduction of deductive arguments played a key role in this resolution: “Plato was *one of the first to develop a specifically geometrical method* aiming at rescuing what could be rescued from, and cutting the losses of, the breakdown of Pythagoreanism” (Popper 1966, 249). In one of his last works, at *Laws* 757b-d, Plato would distinguish between two kinds of equality, “proportionate” and “arithmetical.” Popper (1966, 250) writes that the later Plato claimed that proportionate equality was “something more aristocratic than the democratic arithmetical or numerical equality.” Popper also notes that some commentators have identified Plato’s later anti-democratic notion of proportionate equality with the *Gorgias*’ earlier notion of geometrical equality, and he objects that this identity cannot be sensibly maintained in light of the intervening breakdown of the early Pythagorean arithmetization of geometry: “‘geometry’, in [the early Pythagorean] language, is the name of a certain kind of numerical (i.e. arithmetical) proportion” (Popper 1966, 250). Hence, also on the basis of Popper’s argument, Latour’s allegation that geometrical equality in the *Gorgias* is anti-democratic must be rejected.

could be produced through mathematical discipline. Mathematical knowledge was a necessary condition for moral wisdom. Hence, only those with the requisite mathematical training could be granted the authority to discuss matters of moral and political importance. Plato's mathematical turn was thus also an elitist turn. The authority to deliberate on right and wrong, good and bad, justice and injustice, was to be limited to an elite group of mathematically disciplined philosophers.

Plato's mathematics and his elitism thus went hand in hand. Just as his mathematical turn was simultaneously a turn away from Socratic *elenchus*, so was his elitism a disavowal of the populist morality which lay behind his former teacher's elenctic mission. "Where," asks Vlastos (1992, 139), "could we find a sharper antithesis to [Plato's] restriction of ethical inquiry to a carefully selected, rigorously trained elite than in the Socrates of Plato's earlier dialogues?" While Plato sought to limit moral discourse to an elite few, Socrates took his political philosophy into the streets: "He draws into his search for the right way to live the people he runs into on the street, in the marketplace, in gymnasia, convinced that this outreach to them was his god-given mission" (Vlastos 1992, 139).²⁴ The truth, Socrates insisted, is out there in the streets, the marketplace, and the sport halls. He acted on the

exceedingly bold assumption . . . that side by side with all their false beliefs, his interlocutors always carry truth: somewhere in their belief system Socrates can expect to find true beliefs entailing the negation of each of their false ones. (Vlastos 1992, 140-41)

Hence, Socrates sought to engage all and sundry in elenctic conversation. Through such one-to-one exchanges, he hoped to uncover the truths which he was confident must lie beneath the often conflictual and sometimes contradictory beliefs and interests of his fellow Athenians. Moreover, Socrates taught *elenchus* to others. And he predicted that those others would likewise commit themselves to the exposure of the tricks and deceptions of self-interested rhetoricians, to the winnowing out of those public

24. Vlastos (1992, 139, 152n.9, 152-53n.10) points out that Socrates was not satisfied to limit his conversations to adult male citizens but was also willing to engage with youths, resident aliens, and women. Martha Nussbaum (1980, 88) has noted that Plato, in his middle dialogues, "charges his teacher (ironically, in his teacher's own *persona*) with contributing to moral decline by not restricting the questioning-process to a chosen, well-trained few."

truths held in common by everyone, and to the day-to-day protection of popular morality.²⁵

With these considerations in place, we can now better assess one last charge which Latour lays against Socrates. Let us call it the “too-many argument.”²⁶ Latour (1999, 220) claims that, for Socrates, “the great constitutive defect of the people is that there are simply *too many* of them.” Latour introduces this argument in support of allegation PM(ii), that is, the allegation that Socrates hated the *demos*, that he took them to be immoral and violent. The too-many argument is specifically meant to serve Latour’s false claim that Socrates was an elitist. He misconstrues Socrates’ abstention from public oratory as proof that the elenctic method was the esoteric practice of a privileged few, and he equates Socrates’ commitment to one-to-one conversation with the allegedly apodictic character of the elenctic method (Latour 1999, 229). But the *elenchus* was not apodictic and Socrates did not restrict its practice to a privileged few. Socrates’ abstention from public oratory was not a rejection of democratic politics but a broadening of politics beyond the institutionalized realm of political speech-making. He was convinced that one-to-one examination and refutation, if practiced widely enough, could yield powerful political effects at the institutional level. He was also convinced that, because every individual carries the truth within him or herself, only a truth-seeking method directed towards individuals would provide a reliable means for routing out the deceptions and trickery of self-interested rhetoricians. In the *Gorgias* (476a), Socrates tells one of his interlocutors, “I’m content if *you* testify to the validity of my argument, and I canvass only for your vote, without caring about what everyone else thinks.”²⁷ By engaging with the Athenian *demos* on a person-by-person basis, Socrates attempted to politicize the everyday realm of

25. At *Apology* 39c-d, addressing those jury members who sentenced him to death, Socrates says,

You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way.

26. Cf. footnote 15.

27. Responding to this passage, Latour (1999, 229) writes, “But politics is precisely about ‘caring for what everyone thinks.’” By eliminating the ‘else’ from the passage, Latour gives the false impression that Socrates’ method of conversing with only one individual at a time is motivated by a disdain for popular knowledge in general.

interpersonal relations. He recognized that it is at the level of everyday interaction that a person's moral character ultimately takes shape. The formal, institutionalized mechanisms of a democracy will thus only be as sound as the everyday interpersonal relations which serve as its base. With his elenctic *techne*, Socrates attempted to invigorate and fortify a popular culture of criticism, a culture of criticism committed to the preservation of its own immanent and collectively generated moral standards, a culture of criticism which was as essential to 4th-century Athenian democracy as it is to the democracies of today.

9. The Argument of the Essay Summarized

The central point of this essay has been to rescue the *Gorgias* from Latour. I began with the question of whether or not Latour has succeeded in opening up a space in which to authorize his reconstructed theory of democracy. He has not. Latour's attack on the *Gorgias* is unfounded. Latour charges Socrates with the introduction of an anti-democratic and misanthropic moral theory, a moral theory which Latour claims holds us captive even to this day. Latour alleges that Socrates makes four decisive moves in executing this crime. I have examined all four of these allegations and shown them all to be indefensible. Three are clearly false, and one can be admitted only with considerable qualification. Hence, Latour's critique of the *Gorgias* is an unequivocal failure.

The failure of Latour's *Gorgias* critique raises important doubts about Latour's own positive political program. For it is through this critique that Latour has sought to authorize his theory of democracy. He argues that Socrates introduced absolute morality into politics, that he removed the practical means for realizing that morality, and that he thereby rendered the body politic impossible. This argument was summed up in the equation

$$P + AM - PM = IBP$$

I have shown that Socrates neither removed practical morality from politics nor introduced an absolute moral standard. On the contrary, he attempted to modify and strengthen the *demos*' practical morality through the introduction of his elenctic *techne*. Hence, Latour's equation, as a gloss on Socrates' elenctic mission, is nonsense.

Latour's mission can also be glossed in an equation. Through his *Gorgias* critique, Latour attempts to remove Socratic *elenchus* from politics

and to introduce in its place his own new definition of democracy. He writes, “I will try to show that the Body Politic could behave very differently if another definition of . . . democracy were provided” (Latour 1999, 219). If we take P to stand for “politics,” SE to stand for “Socratic *elenchus*,” LD to stand for “Latour’s new definition of democracy,” and NBP to stand for “the new body politic,” then Latour’s strategy can be depicted as follows:

$$P - SE + LD = NBP$$

However, Latour can only justify the introduction of his new definition of democracy if he can justify the excision of Socratic *elenchus* from politics, and he can justify this only if he can cast doubt on the democratic legitimacy of Socrates’ elenctic *techne*. He has not done this.

There can be no question that a fully authorized new definition of democracy would have a tremendous impact on contemporary political practice. However, given the stakes, it would seem that the criteria used to authorize such a new definition should be set rather high. We cannot, on the argument presented here in this essay, rule out the possibility that Latour’s proposed new definition of democracy might still fulfill such high criteria. To rule against Latour’s positive proposal would require a detailed examination of his political theory and carry us well beyond the narrow focus of the present work. Here I hope simply to have shown that Latour’s political theory, whatever its content, is unjustified by its own criteria. Latour seeks to authorize a new definition of democracy by delegitimizing Socratic *elenchus*. But, because he has failed to delegitimize Socratic *elenchus*, his own definition of democracy cannot claim any authority of its own. In order to rebut the *Gorgias* and authorize his own theory, Latour must offer us a better critique of the *Gorgias*. Until he has done this, the significance of his political program remains woefully underdetermined, and Socratic *elenchus* still stands as a legitimate model for theorizing contemporary democracy.

10. Concluding Remarks: Socratic *Elenchus* and Deliberative Democracy

The overall mood of this essay has been somewhat negative. I have set myself against Latour’s interpretation of the *Gorgias*, and attempted to expose its fatal weaknesses. In this concluding section, however, I would like to offer some more positive reflections. Specifically, I would like to

briefly consider the possible relevance of Socratic *elenchus* for contemporary democratic theory.

As noted in section 1, Latour's 2004 book *Politics of Nature* addresses the theme of "how to bring the sciences into democracy." The book can thus be read as a treatise in the scientization of politics. Latour aims to bring his sociological model of science to bear on issues of modern democracy. Furthermore, he attempts to authorize his project by blocking the legitimacy of Socratic *elenchus* with respect to those same issues. Jürgen Habermas (1971, 69) has argued that the "relation of the sciences to public opinion is constitutive for the scientization of politics" (emphases removed). In other words, any prescriptive theory of science and democracy must give its full attention to the relationship between scientific knowledge and public opinion.²⁸ Latour claims that Socratic *elenchus* repudiates public opinion. I have shown this claim to be false. In fact, public opinion is the very air in which Socratic *elenchus* takes flight. I have furthermore argued that Socratic *elenchus* emerged in response to the problems facing 4th-century Athenian democracy. Socrates sought to reform the discursive practices of his fellow citizens such that they might better defend themselves against the deceptive strategies of self-interested rhetoricians. In this light, Socratic *elenchus* might be viewed as a tool for democratic empowerment. By helping establish a popular culture of criticism, *elenchus* gave Athenian citizens a means by which to critically influence the political decisions which were shaping their future. If we transpose *elenchus* into the modern context, then we might view it as potentially contributing to, in Habermas's (1971, 73) terms, the "endeavor to direct consciously what had previously taken place spontaneously and without planning: the mediation of technological progress with the conduct of life in large industrial societies." The idea is that, since public opinion will inevitably influence political decisions, it makes good sense from a democratic standpoint that the public should be empowered to consciously direct that influence. Put another way, it seems eminently reasonable that the public should be given the power to deliberate over its own future. Thus, if Socratic *elenchus* is at all relevant to modern democracy, then surely its relevance will be most clearly felt in questions specifically of deliberative democracy.

As James Fishkin (2002, 221) has shown, "The modern debate about deliberative democracy can be thought of as an exploration into the compatibility of three principles—deliberation, political equality and

28. I believe Habermas to be correct on this point. However, one should not mistake this limited endorsement of Habermas's position for an endorsement of that position in general.

non-tyranny.” The debate centers on an apparent tension between the two principles of deliberation and political equality, a tension that can be articulated in terms of the third principle of non-tyranny. Both proponents of deliberation and of political equality claim that their own side provides better insurance against tyranny. Deliberationists argue that democracy is more meaningful when citizens make decisions on the basis of preferences settled through informed discussion. Equalitarians counter that deliberation is simply impracticable in large political groups. Deliberative bodies must necessarily be small, and hence they will exclude the majority of citizens from the decision-making process. This is simply undemocratic, claim the equalitarians; it grants a disproportionate amount of political power to a small deliberative elite. In the worst case, this elite will turn to tyranny, using their power to undermine the interests of the majority. Deliberationists respond that a non-deliberative majority, making decisions on the basis of uninformed and unreflective preferences, are susceptible to political manipulation by persuasive but immoral politicians. Such politicians may secure the acclamation of the majority of voters, and this may in turn lead to a tyranny of the majority threatening the safety of minority groups. Deliberation and equality thus appear to be irreconcilable positions. According to the equalitarians, deliberation undermines equality and thus threatens to underwrite elite tyranny. According to the deliberationists, equalitarianism undermines deliberation and thus threatens to underwrite majority tyranny.

Fishkin argues that this irreconcilable tension is only apparent. In fact, deliberation need not undermine equality. To support his claim, Fishkin (2002, 231) turns to the example of 4th-century Athens: “Largely lost in the dust of history, the Athenian solution remains a viable alternative.” The Athenians employed a small deliberative body, the Council of 500, to advise the Assembly on many key issues. Crucially, members of the Council were selected randomly by lot from the general citizenry. Fishkin (2002, 231) argues that this selection of Council members by lot “gav[e] each citizen an equal random chance of being decisive. Such a solution comports with the root notion of political equality.” It would seem, then, that 4th-century Athenian democracy, the historical context in which Socrates developed his elenctic *techne*, provides a powerful model for thinking through the conundrums of modern deliberative democracy.

However, Fishkin’s “Athenian solution” is perhaps not quite as tidy as his account would suggest. In this essay, I have indicated the somewhat precarious condition of 4th-century Athenian democracy. Athenian citizens were indeed equally empowered to decide the future of their city. But

sophistic rhetoric threatened to upset this balance by cutting democratic deliberation loose from a shared and reliable notion of the good. As Socrates argues in the *Gorgias*, sophistry is unable to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, justice and injustice. I have shown in this essay that Socrates' worries about sophistry simply reflected the more general concerns Athenians had about the dangers posed by sophistry to their democracy. If Fishkin is right in maintaining that 4th-century Athens provides an edifying model for present-day theories of deliberative democracy, then surely that model will prove all the more instructive if it is considered together with the 4th-century struggle between sophistry and philosophy. In his rejoinder to the *Gorgias*, Latour has attempted to erase this struggle from the field of current debate. His attempt has failed. In this essay, I have tried not only to demonstrate that failure, but in these concluding remarks I hope to have also highlighted the abiding relevance of Socratic *elenchus* to democratic theory in the 21st century.

References

- Allen, R. E. 1984. *The dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Cooper, John M. 1998. Socrates (469-399 BC). In *Routledge encyclopedia of philosophy*, vol. 9, edited by Edward Craig, 8-19. London: Routledge.
- Copleston, Frederick. 1985. *A history of philosophy*, vols. 1, 2, and 3. New York: Doubleday.
- Dodds, E. R. 1959. *Plato: Gorgias*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon.
- Fishkin, James S. 2002. Deliberative democracy. In *The Blackwell guide to social and political philosophy*, edited by R. L. Simon, 221-38. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Grube, G. M. A. 1974. *Plato's Republic*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- . 1981. *Plato: Five dialogues*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1971. *Toward a rational society: Student protest, science, and politics*, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro. London: Heinemann.
- Hesk, Jon P. 2000. *Deception and democracy in Classical Athens*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Irwin, Terence. 1979. *Plato: Gorgias*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon.
- Latour, Bruno. 1999. *Pandora's hope: Essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2004. *Politics of nature: How to bring the sciences into democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1990. *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*. London: Penguin.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1980. Aristophanes and Socrates on learning and practical wisdom. *Yale Classical Studies* 26:43-97.
- Popper, Karl Raimund. 1966. *Plato*, rev. ed., vol. 1 of *The open society and its enemies*. London: Routledge.
- Roochnik, David L. 1992. Socrates' uses of the techne-analogy. In *Essays on the philosophy of Socrates*, edited by Hugh H. Benson, 185-97. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Schadewaldt, Wolfgang. 1979. The concepts of nature and technique according to the Greeks. *Research in Philosophy & Technology* 2:159-71.
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1992. Elenchus and mathematics: A turning-point in Plato's philosophical development. In *Essays on the philosophy of Socrates*, edited by Hugh H. Benson, 137-61. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Waterfield, Robin. 1994. *Plato: Gorgias*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Woodhead, W. D., trans. 1961. Gorgias. In *The collected dialogues of Plato*, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, 230-307. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zeyl, Donald J., trans. 1997. Gorgias. In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, 792-869. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Jeff Kochan is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) postdoctoral research fellow in philosophy at the University of Alberta. His essay "Feenberg and STS: Counter-reflections on Bridging the Gap" recently appeared in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*. His research background is in philosophy of technology, sociology of scientific knowledge, and Heidegger. His current research combines an interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy with ancient notions of friendship and contemporary theories of democracy.