

Philosophy, Democracy & Poverty: The Philosopher as Political Agent in Plato's *Apology* of Socrates

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Why did Socrates choose to abstain from the political life of Athens? This question seems to have irked scholars, and is asked perhaps most succinctly by Paul Woodruff in his article “Socrates and Political Courage”.¹ In spite of his evident political courage, Woodruff states, Socrates chose not to employ this courage on the arena of politics. Woodruff thus accuses Socrates of in the worst case, cowardice, or, at best, a sin of omission. Ryan K. Balot, in “Socratic courage and Athenian Democracy”, finds that Woodruff’s question is timely, even though he holds that the answer is not so simple.² In the following I take a cue from these articles to the extent that they deal with Socrates as political figure; however, I disagree with them both. And I disagree not only with the answers that the respective writers provide to the questions concerning both the reasons for, and the implications of, Socrates presumed failure to act politically as a citizen, but also with the framing of the question itself: Why did Socrates choose to abstain from the political life of Athens? First of all, I do not agree to the premise that politics or political work is limited to institutions. In the light of this, other questions may prove more fruitful. Even so, I believe we should take Woodruff’s question seriously, predominantly for this reason: In the *Apology* Plato has Socrates explicitly address this issue: “Perhaps it may seem strange that I go about and interfere in other people’s affairs to give this advice in private, but do not venture to come before your assembly and advise the state.”³ As Plato seems to take the question seriously, so should we. The reason Socrates gives for abstaining from politics, is quite plain, although not very clarifying: his *daimonion* forbade it.⁴ He also says that had he engaged in politics, he would have “been put to death long ago, and done no good either to you or to myself”.⁵ This claim is what Woodruff bases

his criticism on, claiming that it is a false statement, and a detrimental one at that. This claim of Socrates' will also be at the centre of my reading, in which I argue that the distinction between private and public in the *Apology* points to yet another distinction; one between the individual and the masses. Placing the philosopher firmly in the private realm, that of the *idiotés*, Plato also gives us occasion to consider the ambivalence in the relationship between philosophy and politics, which are ostensibly so starkly contrasted in the *Apology*. I will make a lecture by Alain Badiou my point of departure in order to say something first about the relationship between philosophy and democracy, and second about the relationship between philosophy and politics in the *Apology*. The *Apology*, as all Platonic dialogues, is many-layered and has thus been the subject of a wide range of interpretations and readings. Here, the *Apology* is first and foremost read as a political work. In this article, I shall argue that Plato, contrary to what Woodruff holds, posed Socrates as a political agent and that his absence from the political forums of the polis should be regarded as a political act in itself. Socrates' very first remark in the *Apology*, although ironic, gives us a clue to how we could read his defence speech: He says that his accusers spoke so persuasively that they "almost made me forget myself".⁶ What is this "self" that he almost forgot and who is Socrates?⁷ On a superficial level the *Apology* can be said to provide at least two answers regarding this latter question: Socrates is poor, and he is unpopular. My claim is that Socrates' poverty, and the fact that Plato alludes to it on numerous occasions throughout the defence speech of his protagonist, should be a matter of import when we investigate the political implications of this dialogue. What kind of like the philosopher chooses to lead is not a matter of secondary interest when considering whether the philosopher may function as a political figure. In fact, Socrates himself brings this matter to the fore, asking himself why the prejudices against him has arisen.⁸ Since there would be no smoke without fire, since, if nothing were out of the ordinary, he would not stand trial on this day, Socrates claims he will try to answer his

hypothetical questioner truthfully and to give an honest explanation. Noting this, a rephrasing of Woodruff's question seems to be in order. I suggest we rather ask: How, or in which way, did Socrates choose not to partake in the everyday politics of Athens? I shall argue that Plato in the *Apology* points to two separate but related distinctions that are important for the understanding of his stance on politics; the distinction between the individual and the masses and the one he draws between the private and the public. These two separate but connected distinctions between societal strata, or functions, points to what I, inspired by Alain Badiou, will argue is an opposition between philosophy and democracy in Plato. Furthermore, in the last section of this paper, I will point to what I perceive to be the relation between life and philosophy and life and politics in the *Apology*, emphasizing the poverty of Socrates.

Framework for a Reading

The *Apology* holds a particular position within the corpus since it is in large part a monologue, a speech, and not a dialogue. Instead, it is what Leo Strauss call a “conversation with the city”.⁹ When reading the *Apology* one must, in other words, take special considerations into account regarding the matter of its content in relation to context. This only adds to the usual interpretative problems one encounters when reading Plato: Is it at all possible to talk of a Platonic philosophy? Are his texts to be considered educational pieces only, intended to hone the mind in order to prepare it for the true philosophical activity?¹⁰ Is Socrates the mouthpiece of Plato? How much of the original meaning has gotten lost, not only in translation from a now long since dead language, but in the sheer oceans of time separating us from the ancients? I will not dwell on these issues, on which many interesting contributions are available, for they are not the subjects of this article. Still, I would like to clarify two of the premises that underlie my own reading. First, I reject a developmentalist

line of reading, mainly on the basis of the two following points, both convincingly argued by Jacob Howland. The first is that there is no substantial argument that supports the hypothesis that the order of the dialogues is a prerequisite for understanding them, and the second is that we simply do not know in what order they were written.¹¹ Second, I here put forth what one might call a dogmatist view on Plato, in the sense that I do think that Plato has a positive, if not doctrine, at least a philosophy. While the Platonic dialogues may not make out a coherent whole, they belong to the same corpus. Further, while some are related in dramatic time, the sheer number of different ways of cataloguing the works of Plato should alert the reader to the fact that there are many and varied ways both in which the works of Plato can be seen as interconnected, and in which they mutually inform each other. In this reading I will try to take Jacob Howland's well put remarks to heart:

To understand the unity of each dialogue as a living conversation is also to understand its necessary incompleteness, and so to appreciate the ways in which it points beyond itself toward other dialogues that can help to complete it, not because these other dialogues are any more complete, but because their horizons are different. Indeed, it may well be that every dialogue in some way implicates every other dialogue in this manner.¹²

It is my view that the philosophical meaning imbedded in the ancient, but still surprisingly relevant works of Plato is best understood by looking at the dialogues as complimentary. Therefore, the reader of this piece will find that I rely on a number of Plato's other dialogues when making my interpretative claims about the *Apology*.

The Relationship Between Philosophy and Democracy

In a 2006 lecture, Alain Badiou addressed the relationship between democracy, politics and philosophy.¹³ He observes an inherent contradiction in philosophy in that philosophy in itself

on the one hand is fundamentally democratic in its attitude, while, on the other, the developed political concepts of most philosophers, from Plato to Nietzsche and Hegel, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Deleuze – and he sees fit to include himself in this group – are “not democratic in the generic sense of the word”.¹⁴ Still he maintains – and I think he is right – that the development of philosophy and democracy is fundamentally intertwined in Western thinking. The reason for this is, according to Badiou, twofold: First, the development of philosophy as it came to be with Plato, is dependent on, and coinciding with, the development of democracy. Badiou argues that the democracy of the Greek polis was a prerequisite for the development of philosophy as we know it, and that philosophy is therefore indebted to democracy. Second, philosophy in its essence is connected to democracy: in philosophy, at least ideally, it is irrelevant *who* the speaker is – the sole focus is on the contents of what is being said. Badiou holds this to be a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian trait, an aspect that Plato himself seem to endorse, at least if we let the following passage from *Theaetetus* be decisive.

The philosophers grow up without knowing the way to the marketplace, or the whereabouts of the law courts or the council chambers or any other place of public assembly. Laws and decrees, published orally or in writing, are things he never sees or hears. The scrambling of political cliques for office; social functions, dinners, parties with flute girls- such doings never enter his head even in a dream. So with questions of birth, - he has no more idea whether a fellow citizen is high born or humble, or whether he has inherited some taint from his forbearers, male or female, than he has of the number of pints in the sea, as they say.¹⁵

In this passage, Plato lets Socrates paint a picture of the philosopher as an egalitarian. Interestingly he does so in a dialogue that criticizes Protagoras’ famous postulate; “man is the measure of all things”, a view that can be taken to imply that all opinions are equally valid.¹⁶ The fundamentally egalitarian roots of philosophy can also be found in the *Apology*, although they are not made the subject of an investigation, when Socrates says that he shall examine

“anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger”, and also that he is “equally ready to question the rich and the poor”.¹⁷ Badiou observes that even if philosophy originates from democracy, it cannot necessarily accept democracy as a goal of its practice. Since Plato, Badiou asserts, the goal of philosophy has been, first, to distinguish between correct and incorrect opinions, and second, as anyone could happen to have a right opinion on false terms; to distinguish opinions from truth. While anyone can be a philosopher, not all statements are equally valid in philosophical terms. Pluralistic conceptions of truth are thus a contradiction of the essence of philosophy, which in turn comes to contradict the democratic principles of the freedom and the equality of opinions. In philosophy, equality of minds does not imply the equality of opinions.¹⁸ Since the democracy of Athens was in Badiou’s view a crucial prerequisite for the very conception of philosophy, he regards it as a paradox that the movement from philosophy and back towards politics still presents itself as problematic. In the words of Badiou: “If you want, democracy is a necessity before philosophy, and a difficulty after philosophy.”¹⁹ Badiou consequently asks: what is it, then, that the philosophical act changes in politics? The answer is to be found in the relation between the democratic conception of freedom and the philosophical conception of truth. If there is such a thing as political truth, this truth is an obligation for every rational mind. If there is no political truth, then there is no positive relation between philosophy and politics. The three concepts of philosophy, democracy and politics are interconnected by the question of truth – in itself an obscure category. Badiou suggests justice as a political equivalent of philosophical truth.²⁰ In the following, I will base my reading of Plato’s *Apology* on this premise, in order to inquire whether it may illuminate the question of Socrates as a political figure.

In the passage quoted above from the *Theaetetus*, and in passages preceding it, Socrates is making a point of how ridiculous the philosopher must appear when entering the

political arenas, as would anyone forced to appear at a public event unbeknownst of the social conventions called for at that particular event. Socrates is of course exaggerating in his description; he knows his way to the courts to which he has been summoned. The case at issue is not so much that he is oblivious to the conduct expected of him by the *demos*, but that he refuses to accept the premises of politics; they seem to be incompatible with the premises of philosophizing. This becomes strikingly clear in the *Theaetetus* when Socrates compares the men of politics to slaves.²¹ Only the philosopher thinks freely, or so Socrates seems to claim. Within the *Apology* itself the opposition between the philosopher and the men of the *demos* also becomes manifest by the fact that Socrates continuously points out the differences between himself and the political citizens of Athens.²²

The Goals of Philosophy and the Goals of Democracy: Truth vs. justice

From the very beginning of the dialogue, Plato establishes what we, in accordance with Badiou, may call a connection between philosophical truth and political justice. Socrates' opening remark is, as mentioned, an example of the famous Socratic irony: he praises his accusers for their riveting speeches, although "hardly anything they said were true."²³ Furthermore, Socrates claims not to be an accomplished speaker; "unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth."²⁴ "From me you will hear the whole truth (...)" And furthermore: "for I put my trust in the justice of what I say."²⁵ He makes a plea for the jurors not to mind the way he speaks, for he will not speak in "embroidered and stylized phrases", like his accusers, and implores the jurymen to "concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth."²⁶ As is often the case in the Platonic dialogues, the prologue provides valuable hints as to the main themes of the dialogue, indicating what the careful

reader should be observant of. In this specific text, we are introduced to the literary drama *in medias res*. As such, there is no prologue, but I will count the passage up to and including 18a5 as an introduction.²⁷ The philosophical themes suggested in the prologue can be taken to be the following: The concepts of truth and justice, but also the power of language and oratory, and the relationship between language and truth. Truth and justice are, ideally, fixed sizes, in the sense that what is true and what is just is independent of language. Language, on the other hand, can be both deceptive and truthful. It is the medium through which both lies and truths are expressed. The ability to see through language, and to separate truth from lies is then the hallmark of a true judge, Socrates seems to say. In the first passages, where Socrates is addressing the jurymen, and “the men of Athens” in general, defending himself against “the old slanders” (up until 24b2), Socrates keeps insisting he “speaks the truth” (*talithi legini*). In fact, the word “truth” (*aletheia*) is mentioned no less than 11 times only in these first passages. Socrates continues to repeat himself, almost poetically, in claiming that he tells the truth, throughout the dialogue.²⁸ When he turns to cross-examining Meletus, on 23c - 28a5, the theme of truth is downplayed as he dismantles the charges against him. Still, Socrates maintains that he speaks the truth and that Meletus does not, and he concludes his examination, turning away from Meletus as though he has grown tired of him, by again stating that he, Socrates, has told the truth.²⁹

Even if refuting Meletus seems boringly easy, Socrates claims that he and his accusations are not the real threat. As Plato again lets the defendant turn to address the audience in general, Socrates remarks that the current accusations are not what will be his undoing, but that he has a far more elusive and difficult adversary to tackle; the rumours and old slanders and the unpopular reputation his philosophical examinations has gained him. These old slanders, that he himself proclaimed he had made a “sufficient defence before” earlier, is what he now addresses in the remainder of his defence.³⁰ From this point on he

turns his inquisitive powers to a much more interesting subject: himself. The performative self-examination that we, and the audience, then witness have two major themes: the first part (28a5-31c5) revolves around virtuous conduct, i.e. the question whether Socrates has acted impiously, or unjustly.³¹ In the second part of the self-examination Socrates turns, quite abruptly, to the question of politics, and what follows in this passage is what will be the focus of the next sections of this paper.³²

Justice Does Not Take Place in Politics

My reading depends on the idea that justice does not take place in politics, a view that I find affirmed in the following, much discussed statement: “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”.³³

In this quote, Plato can be read as stating that justice cannot take place in democracy. Perhaps it cannot take place in politics at all. If we return to Badiou’s claim that justice is a political equivalent to philosophical truth, this means that democracy, as it were, is not a goal in itself for philosophy, or at any rate, not for Plato, even though this seems to be taken for granted as a premise by both Woodruff and Balot. Woodruff asserts that the incidents that Socrates refers to as evidence for the proclaimed dangers associated with engaging in politics, were anomalous, and that Socrates’ use of these examples are painting a false picture of the threat represented by the democratic system in Athens.³⁴ The amnesty of 403 BC has been in effect for four years when Socrates gives the potential threat to his life as a reason for his absence from politics, and, Woodruff further argues, even before that there were only a few cases of political murders that we know of.³⁵ One of them was the execution of Antiphon who was condemned for plotting to overthrow democracy. Woodruff comments as follows: Had Socrates plotted with Antiphon to overthrow the democracy, he would have put his life

in danger, but normal political action would have had no such result.”³⁶ This argument is problematic in that it relies on a premise that Socrates was democratically inclined, a premise that I in the following shall argue is false.

Badiou problematizes the general agreement on democracy as ideal governance in an article entitled “Highly Speculative Reasoning on the Concept of Democracy”. Here he claims that the notion of democracy as the one good form of governance is one of the authoritative opinions of our times. The overall consensus on democracy should, in itself, be enough to raise suspicion in the philosopher.³⁷ This, of course, comes down to a question of what the real *purpose* of politics is. We said that the goal of philosophy is truth, and the goal of politics, justice. Is democracy then the most just form of governance? In order for it to be a goal in itself for the philosopher this would have to be the case. Badiou observes that the evil twin of mass democracy is always mass tyranny, or the dictatorship of the majority. Socrates seems to make a similar point when he recounts his experience as a council- member. After the battle at Arginusae, the majority put themselves above the law and tried to silence Socrates by threats, as Woodruff also mentions. Accepting Woodruff’s accusation that Socrates should have used his courage on the political arena implies a premise that the public democratic arena *is* the place where one can do the most good to the benefit of the most people. I will argue that this shows itself as a highly problematic premise in the *Apology*, as well as in several others of Plato’s works.

Why is it That Justice Does Not Take Place in Politics?

In the following I will try to clarify some of the fundamental aspects of this question – which is of course much too complex to be comprehensively accounted for here. I suggest that in Plato’s political thought there are (at least) two aspects to this question. One has to do with

the individuals of whom the masses are composed; the other concerns the masses as one body. When it comes to the issue of the individuals that in sum constitute the political arena, Plato, through his dialogues, maintains a distinction between the private and the public, which I will argue is transferable to a distinction between the individual and the masses. Plato lets Socrates himself give an answer to Woodruff's question as to why he did not participate in politics: His response to hearing that no one was wiser than himself, and to indeed discover that this was so, was not to immediately try to assume power or influence. Instead he went to each one privately and "(...) conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit".³⁸ This decision, to do his work outside of politics, implies that Socrates sincerely thought the personal, or private, sphere to be the one where he and his form of knowledge could make an impact of some consequence. The citizens of the Athenian polis in the 5th century BCE surely had conceptions of "private" and "public" different from our modern conceptions. The Athenian men of a certain social and economic standing was expected to devote a large part of their time to managing the city, but the city itself was not comprised only of free Athenian male citizens. The *polis*, as used synonymously with society, or the community governed by a political entity, included slaves, women, children and men without the status of citizens. The *politeia*, as Aristotle makes clear, is the governing body or the political organization of the city-state.³⁹ One should of course be careful not to think that a translation of terms means that one has identified a corresponding phenomenon. One example of the way in which the Greek ancient *polis* differs from society in its modern sense is that we tend to include social and economic relations in the latter term, while for the Greeks these matters belonged to the *oikos* - the household. In other words, they were private matters.⁴⁰ So the ancient Greek society can be said to consist of three distinct, although constantly interchanging spheres; the *oikos*, the *polis* and the *politeia*.⁴¹ When Socrates says he preferred to do his work in the private realm, the realm of the *idiotés*, this should not to be taken to mean that he confined

his philosophical activities to the *oikos*, the private homes. He simply means outside of the governmental institutions of the *polis*, although his philosophical activities were very much “public” in the modern sense of the word. The distinction Socrates makes when he places philosophy firmly in the non-political realm appears to be based in a notion that humans behave differently as a part of a crowd from how they would behave in more private situations. This claim finds support in an often-quoted passage from *The Republic*, where the masses are compared to a large and irrational animal:

Not one of those paid private teachers, whom the people call sophists (...) teaches anything other than the convictions the majority express when they are gathered together. It is as if someone were learning the moods and appetites of a huge strong beast that he’s rearing – how to approach and handle it, when it is most difficult to deal with or most gentle and what makes it so, what sounds it utters in either condition, and what sounds soothe or angers it. Having learned all this (...) he calls this knack wisdom (...). In truth, he knows nothing about which of these convictions is fine or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, but he applies all these names in accordance with how the beast reacts – calling what it enjoys good and what angers it bad.⁴²

Here, it seems to be implied that the opinion of the crowds, “when gathered together”, at least potentially differs from the opinion they each hold as individuals. The sophists, the rhetoricians, and the members of the *demos* are not only lacking in virtue, they are lacking in insight into what virtue *is*. Hence, neither possessing nor having knowledge of justice they are not even able to pose the question regarding what is the purpose of the state, far less are they able to answer it. If what Socrates accuses his fellow citizens of holds water, lacking even the knowledge that justice is the measuring standard for the body politic, the members of the *demos* could not tell whether a given state or political decision is good or bad. The democratic *polis* is comparable to a ship adrift at sea, where everybody fights to be the one steering, but nobody thinks to ask where they are going.

Alcibiades as the Embodiment of the Distinction Between the Private and the Public

Persona

The distinctions between the private and the public, and between the individual and the crowd, can also be said to be illustrated in Plato's work through the story of Alcibiades. Alcibiades, who is a young man on the verge of adulthood in the dialogue that bears his name, is about to set out for a career in politics. This he intends, despite the fact he doesn't know the first thing about justice, which, it becomes clear in the course of the dialogue, is the very insight that is required for the good management of the affairs of the *polis*. Socrates makes him see that he lacks the knowledge to do what he has set his mind to, but the ominous words at the end of the dialogue points to the downfall of them both: "I should like to believe that you will persevere, but I'm afraid – not because I distrust your nature, but because I know how powerful the city is – I'm afraid it might get the better of both me and you."⁴³ In the *Symposium* the same Alcibiades relates his inner turmoil at the sight of Socrates. On the one hand, he's torn between the Socratic ideal of self-examination and truth-seeking, and "– yet; the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways: I cave in to my desire to please the crowd".⁴⁴

The character of Alcibiades can thus be said to serve as an example of how the distinction between the public and the private person is displayed in Plato. In his private talks with Socrates Alcibiades admits to not having the knowledge needed for politics, but as soon as he enters the public realm the sway of the crowds outweighs that of Socrates' philosophical insight.⁴⁵ In the *Apology* Socrates makes much of his own unpopularity, calling the prejudices "most harsh and grievous".⁴⁶ One can therefore be tempted to ask whether to be unpopular is also a prerequisite for philosophy, or if it is the other way around: if one is popular one is most likely not engaged in philosophy? I said before that the distinction

between private and public could be transferred to a distinction between individuals and masses. I think it needs to be pointed out that this is not a seamless transference. While individuality seems to be an irreducible size in the Platonic dialogues, in the political writings of Plato, the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the private sphere understood in terms of the *oikos*, the household, seems to be what is problematic and what needs to be eliminated for the sake of a just state.⁴⁷ In *the Republic's* Book V, we find that in Socrates' famous proposal that women also should be included in the guardian classes, Plato lets Socrates claim that the upbringing of children shall be taken over by "officials appointed for the purpose" and that "no women are to live privately with any man."⁴⁸ Similarly, in the *Laws*, the meals should be communal, both for men and women. Plato has the old Athenian, the main speaker in the *Laws*, give several reasons for this. I will account for one: he first poses the question: What if someone thinks that even if one *could* proclaim laws for private conduct that doesn't necessarily imply that one should. Suppose he thinks that a man ought to be allowed to do what he likes with his day, and not be regulated at every turn. The Athenian's answer to his own question is unambiguous: "Well, if he excludes private life from his thinking, and expects that the citizens will be prepared to be law-abiding in their public life as a community, he's making a big mistake."⁴⁹ Leaving out the women and the feminine realm of the *oikos* is losing half the battle, so to say.

Another important reason why the private realm should be regulated, I suggest, has to do with the accumulation of wealth, although this is not explicitly mentioned in this passage of the *Laws*. Here we will have to go back to the *Republic* again, before I will go on to try and show how all this relates to the *Apology* and Socrates as a political agent. It is in the private sphere man can pursue and accumulate goods and luxuries. In the *Republic* Socrates describes a city where each individual has what is needed, and not much more. But when Glaucon protests, Socrates goes on to say that they might as well make up a luxurious city,

and that indeed this might shed light on what they are looking for: “how justice and injustice grows up in cities.”⁵⁰ That Plato goes on to describe sharp limitations for property, and for all intents and purposes abolishes private life for his guardians all together, is well known and there is no need to go further with this line of reasoning here. Let it suffice to say that while the specific behaviour of the masses as opposed to the individual is what seems to present itself as problematic in politics, the solution to this problem seems to rest upon a notion that the private life is what must be abolished, or at least severely restricted, for the sake of a better public realm. In the *Republic* Plato expels part of the private realm in the sense of the *oikos*. But the private sphere in the sense of the part of *polis* that is not *politeia*, governmental institutions, is as mentioned not extinguished, rather the contrary: In the *Republic*, it is the private realm, the *polis*, the realm of philosophy that governs the *politeia*. In this sense neither the public nor the private sphere is abolished, but the relation of power is shifted so profoundly between them that the words hardly can be taken to hold their original sense any longer. With this, Plato can be said to include both the *oikos*-and the *politeia*-sphere into the *polis*-sphere, or to extend the *polis* to contain all three spheres in such a way that the city can be said to truly be one with itself. In the *Republic* Book IV, the importance of the city being at one with itself is elaborated upon just before Socrates proposes that marriages, wives and children should be governed by the old proverb: “Friends possesses everything in common”.⁵¹ What makes a city one, so that it can rightfully be called *a* city, and not in reality be many cities; “at war with each other”, is the elimination of both wealth and poverty.⁵² This, in turn brings me to the last section of this paper, where I would like to look at Socrates as political figure in the *Apology* in relation to his poverty.

Life and Teachings: Socrates' Poverty as Political Criticism

The final point that I would like to make is concerned with the relationship between life and teachings with regard to Plato's Socrates. Balot writes that anyone who wishes to succeed in politics "will have to digest and regurgitate Demo's own opinions back to it": "The successful politician must adopt the demos' own conception of the good."⁵³ He claims that this aspect of political life would lead to a corruption of Socrates' soul if he were to enter into politics on these terms, and that this is the reason for Socrates' lack of involvement on the political scene.⁵⁴ While this may be true, at least in part, I am suggesting that this also says something important about democracy in itself, and also about the philosopher's role as a political agent. I would also like to propose an alternative, and less selfish, reason for Socrates' absence from the political scene. Political success within a democracy depends on one's ability to adjust, as Balot himself points out.⁵⁵ The chances of succeeding are proportionally greater the less critical one is of the system within which one is operating. This in turn raises the question: What, exactly, is it then, that one succeeds in? From the beginning of the *Apology*, Socrates distances himself from the public life of Athens, and makes it clear that his interests are oriented elsewhere: "The position is this: This is my first appearance in a law court, at the age of seventy; I am therefore simply a stranger (*xenos*) to the manner of speaking here."⁵⁶ I want to relate this to the poverty of Socrates. This aspect of the *Apology* is also treated of in Drew. E Griffin's article "Socrates' Poverty: Virtue and Money in Plato's *Apology*".⁵⁷ Griffin notes that while earlier biographies of Socrates never fail to treat the matter of his poverty as a subject of some philosophical importance, more recent biographies tend to pass over the subject quickly - as if poverty no longer is of any philosophical interest.⁵⁸ Socrates alludes to his poverty several times in the *Apology*; the first time is at 23 c. Socrates concludes the account of his philosophic practice by saying that he has neglected his own affairs and is in "vast poverty (*penia*) on account of my service to the god".⁵⁹ Directly after this he describes his followers as "the young men who have most

leisure, the sons of the richest men”.⁶⁰ The reason why Plato makes this contrast is not completely clear, but one suggestion is that he simply wants to make the rhetorical point that Socrates might very well have made a profit from his occupation. The fact that he has not, goes to show that his commitment is moral and his actions guided by a sense of duty, not greed. This is further supported by Socrates calling on his poverty as witness to the truth of his words, at 31c. Here again Socrates makes a point of the fact that he has not derived any profit from his practice.⁶¹ When he is about to propose his own punishment, he again makes a point of his philosophical endeavours being so all-encompassing that he has neglected the things that absorb most people, at least, we might add, the members of the *demos*, namely: “wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or the other offices, the political clubs and factions that exists in the city (...)”.⁶² He furthermore holds that he thought himself too honest to be able to survive were he to set out in such a direction, and that he instead: (...) went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not to care for the city’s possessions more than for the city itself (...).⁶³ Shortly after this, he states that he is a poor benefactor, and that, while the Olympic victor does not need to eat, he himself actually does.⁶⁴ Seeing as his endeavours has been of “the greatest benefit” to the Athenians, he suggests that he is not deserving of punishment at all, but rather to be dined at the Prytaneum as was custom for Olympian victors.⁶⁵ His poverty is made a point also at 38b when Socrates suggest the assembly sets his fine to the amount he can afford to pay: one *mina*.⁶⁶

One main obstacle for interpreting the poverty of Socrates as an unambiguous sign of virtue is the scholarly controversy surrounding the sentence of 30b: “*ouk ek khrimaton aretè gignetai all’ ex aretés khrimata kai ta alla agatha toís anthrohpois ápanta kai dimosía.*”. Here Socrates can be taken to state that “Wealth does not bring about excellence, but

excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men”, which John Burnet holds to be the correct translation.⁶⁷ The alternative, that has also been the standard translation, runs like this: “Not out of money does virtue arise, but out of virtue money and all other goods for human beings, both private and public”.⁶⁸ This translation raises some fundamental problems; if Socrates is poor it then follows that he is not virtuous, or alternatively: that he is lying. Griffin holds the latter alternative to be the probable explanation, and solves this problem by distinguishing between caring *about* something, and caring *for* it. While it is possible to care about numerous things at the same time, here; money and virtue, one can only care for one of them at the time. Thus, he argues that money is simply not a matter of interest for Socrates. It is not a matter of Socrates being opposed to or disgusted by having a fortune, but this is simply a matter of no consequence for the virtuous philosopher. Strycker and Slings are in tune with Griffin in their commentary, presenting what Burnyeat claims is the “only reasoned opposition” to Burnet’s interpretation: “If Plato had wanted to say what Burnet makes him say, he would certainly not have said it in such an ambiguous and misleading way.”⁶⁹ After showing that both translations are philologically possible, Burnyeat also makes a case for Burnet’s translation on philosophical grounds, asking; “Where else does Socrates in *properia persona* call money or wealth a good?”⁷⁰ And I might add a rhetorical a question of my own: Where else does Socrates address the demos, the city of Athens? One could suggest that Strycker and Slings overlooks how radical Socrates criticism of his fellow Athenians is: In *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* the case of the poor being more just than the wealthy is given as an example of an example that would surprise and invoke scepticism in the listener:

Examples are of two kinds; for some things turn out according to our expectations, others contrary to them. The former cause credit, the latter discredit. For instance, *if some one declares that the rich are juster than the poor and instances certain just actions on the part of rich men, such examples are in accordance with our*

*expectation, for one can see that most men think that rich people are juster than poor people. If, on the other hand, some one shows that certain rich individuals have acted unjustly in order to get money, thus employing an example which is contrary to expectation, he would cause the rich to be distrusted.*⁷¹

So, when the impoverished Socrates takes it upon himself to lecture the Athenians on justice, he does not have convention on his side. The mere claim that Socrates should be exemplary in any way is extremely radical. Wealth in itself was likely seen as an evidence of virtue, a view not far from what is proffered by Cephalus in the *Republic*, when he claims that great substance is not the only requirement for being just, but makes it a lot easier.⁷² This claim, as it turns out, is connected to the view that justice is defined as speaking the truth and to pay one's debts. This suggests that Plato may well have had good reasons for stating his claim a bit ambiguously. And, if Leo Strauss' description of Plato's writings as a text that will, "and is designed to, say different things to different readers"⁷³ has any truth to it, this must be especially true in regards to the *Apology*. Let us not forget that in this specific text, the *Apology*, Socrates is addressing both his friends, the "true judges", but also the Athenian assembly as well as all men, in general. In other words, Plato had strong rhetorical reasons for leaving the claim about the relation between money and virtue a little muddy. Still, the most convincing argument for interpreting this sentence in the sense that virtue makes everything good for men, I find is this: At the very end of the dialogue, after he has received his verdict, and right before his famous closing remark, Socrates, still addressing the "true jurors", seems to turn to the men of the demos again:

However, I make this request of them: when my sons grow up, gentlemen, punish them by troubling them as I have troubled you; if they seem to you to care for *money or anything else more than for virtue*, and if they think they amount to something when they do not, rebuke them as I have rebuked you (...) If you do this both I and my sons shall have received just treatment from you.⁷⁴

This is Socrates' dying wish to the city that has condemned him. There is no trace of irony here; it seems highly unlikely that Socrates is speaking in jest or simply taunting the Athenians by stating, as he has earlier, that he has cared for them as a "father or an elderly brother".⁷⁵ It is hard to believe that a father's dying request for the care of his three sons could be made out of spite. Especially so considering that it is for the sake of his sons that Socrates comes as close to pleading as he ever does in the *Apology*, asking the jurors not to cast their vote in anger, and by vindictiveness deprive three children of their father.⁷⁶ With this I conclude that Burnets' translation is by far the most plausible. This means that money and wealth not only make it on to the very long list of things that philosophers don't care about, but are to be seen as something that Plato explicitly addresses in this dialogue, as something we should guard against.

If we are to see the life and teachings of Socrates as interconnected, which I think we should, seeing as Socrates presents himself as exemplary⁷⁷, and seeing as Socrates way of life is made point in so many of the Socratic dialogues, I think it is possible to deduce something of more profound philosophical and political meaning from Socrates' poverty: The fact that Socrates does not engage himself in the pursuit of material goods, puts him in a unique position for engaging in criticism. Someone who has no economic interests in the current state of affairs, is free of one of the strongest interest in preserving this state of affairs, as well as of any incentive to change or exploit the system for his own economic benefit. Therefore, it is precisely Socrates' poverty and indifference towards material wealth that makes him dangerous; he is incorruptible, and he is loyal not to the system, but to truth. At the same time, his way of life in itself represents an implicit criticism against those who work towards achieving the greatest possible benefits for themselves, and who care more about what polis has to offer, than they do about the city itself. I will not elaborate at length on the meaning of "the city itself" here. Rather, I will let it suffice to refer to the discussion between Socrates

and Callicles in the *Gorgias*, where political activity seems to be summed up by the goal of making citizens “as good as possible”.⁷⁸ This view is also expressed in the *Apology* itself. Socrates, in his interrogation of Meletus, asks: If he, Socrates, is the one corrupting the young, then who is it that improves them? The answer to this is: those who know the laws, that is, the judges and all other citizens. In the following, however, it becomes clear that the one who knows the laws best, and who is furthermore willing to uphold them, is Socrates himself.⁷⁹ With this it becomes clear that also in the *Apology*, betterment of the citizens is a goal, at least for Socrates. So, to propose a tentative conclusion, I hold that Plato in the *Apology* establishes the philosopher as very much a political agent, but in terms of engaging in subversive activity. He thus places the philosopher outside of the everyday political discourse. If we see the *Apology* as mainly a political work, and Socrates as a political figure it is not unlikely that Plato in the *Apology* depicts the execution of Socrates as a political murder. Taking into consideration the relationship I have premised between politics and philosophy – the goal of philosophy is truth, and the goal of politics is the political equivalent of truth, justice – one can suggest that what is sentenced to death in the Athenian democracy is justice, in other words, truth. With this it seems that justice does not hold a place in democracy. But does this amount to saying that there is no positive relation between philosophy and politics at all? It is not possible to answer this question without a longer elaboration on the relationship between philosophy and politics as it appears in the *Republic*, but it is my view that the concept of politics in the *Republic* is so radically altered that one might, tentatively, conclude that this is the case. At the very least it is, according to my reading, safe to say that Plato’s Socrates was not a democrat, and so that he had real reason to fear what would become of him if he was to engage in a political life. The philosopher’s role, and plight, is the search for truth and, in a political context, justice. By posing the uncomfortable questions nobody wants to hear, the philosopher becomes unpopular and a

menace to society, or to democracy, in the case of Socrates. I will let Socrates have the final word, perhaps summing up the political role of the philosopher at the same time: “I know well enough that this very conduct makes me unpopular, and this is a proof that what I say is true”.⁸⁰

1. Paul Woodruff, “Socrates and Political Courage” in: *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (©Mathesis Publications, 2007), 289-302. See also Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, (Princeton University Press, 1973).

2. Ryan K. Balot, “Socratic Courage and Athenian Democracy” *Ancient Philosophy* 28 (©Mathesis Publications, 2008), 49-69.

3. *Apology* 31c. Harold North Fowler trans., in: *Euthyphro: Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus*, (Loeb edition, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015.) Most translations, and all Greek, will be from this work, although some translations will be from G.M.A Grube, in: *Plato Complete Works*, John M. Cooper (ed), (Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company 1997). The first will be marked by the insertion of (i) after the reference, while the latter by (ii) where I deem this to be necessary.

4. *Apology* 31c. Socrates also says that he simply did not have the “leisure” to do so, on account of his service to the God (Apollo), *Apology* 23 b8.

5. *Apology* 31 d.

6. *Apology* (ii), 17 a.

7. This is a large question, to which a fair number of scholars has devoted their attention, and my answer is in this perspective a very limited one. See e.g. Cathrine H. Zuckert for a narrative approach in “Becoming Socrates” in: *Reexamining Socrates in the Apology*, (Fagan & Russon (eds.), Northwestern University Press, 2009). The matter of Socrates’ identity is certainly made subject in a number of other dialogues as well, and Jacob Howland (1998)

makes this issue a main concern in his readings of *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Cratylus*, *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, posing these as Socrates' philosophical trial, as opposed to the law-trial of the *Apology*. Jacob Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy. Socrates Philosophical Trial*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1998). Other dialogues, perhaps most notably the *Phaedrus*, also calls forth the question of Socrates' identity, as, amongst others, Page duBois notes in "The Homoerotics of the *Phaedrus*" in: *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 17, No. 1/2, 1982), pp. 9-15.

8. *Apology* (i), 20c.

9. Leo Strauss, *City and Man*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 56.

10. See e.g. John Beversliius, "A Defence for Dogmatism", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, (2006), 85-111, for an account of the views of the so-called anti dogmatist.

11. Jakob Howland "Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology" *Phoenix*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (1991). 189-214.

12. Howland, Jacob, "Re-Reading Plato" (1991). 195.

13. Alain Badiou "Highly Speculative Reasoning on the Concept of Democracy" *Abrégé de métapolitique*, (Seuil: Paris, 1998).

14. Ibid.

15. *Theaetetus*. 173 c - 174. (M. J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat trans., *Plato Complete Works*, Cooper ed., (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997). It can be objected against this interpretation that his picture of the philosopher seems to be somewhat caricatured since Socrates first question about Theaetetus in fact is about his birth. Socrates seems to address Aristophanes' slandering of him in the *Clouds*, but manages to turn the picture around so that the politicians are portrayed as the ones with their heads in the clouds. See also Rachel Rue, "The Philosopher in Flight: The Digression (172C-177C) in the *Theaetetus*" (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 10 (71):71-100 1993)

16. It can be objected to this interpretation that his picture of the philosopher seems to be somewhat caricatured since Socrates first inquiry about *Theaetetus* is in fact about his birth.

17. *Apology*, 30a, 33b.

18. Badiou, Alain “Highly Speculative Reasoning”, (1998).

19. Badiou, “Highly Speculative Reasoning”, (1998).

20. Badiou, “Highly Speculative Reasoning”, (1998).

21. *Theaetetus*, 172 e 6.

22. *Apology*. E.g. at 17 d 4 he uses the word *xenos*, stranger, to describe his presence in the courts.

23. *Apology* 17 a 4.

24. *Apology* 17 b.

25. *Apology* (ii) 17 c.

26. *Apology*. 17 b -18 a.

27. *Apology*. 18 b 6 is the point where Socrates begins to address the charges against him.

28. *Apology*. 17 a 4, 17 b 9, 17 b 10, 18a7, 18 b 3, 18 b 7, 19 e 2, 22, 22 b 7, 24 a 5, 24 a 9.

29. *Apology*, 26 b, 28 a 5.

30. He does so at *Apology* 24 b.

31. Vlastos makes a point of the fact that the Greek word *dikaosynê*, normally translated by “justice”, in Aristotle has both a broad and a narrower meaning. In the first sense, it covers all virtuous conduct towards others. But most often *dikaosynê* is used specifically in the sense of refraining from gaining advantage by grabbing what belongs to another, or denying him what is rightfully his. Vlastos, Gregory (1973)116. Cf. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* V.1 & 2. It seems that Socrates is trying to prove that to convict him would be unjust in both the wide and the narrow meaning of «justice». In his examination of Meletus and in the first part of his self-examination it seems to be the broad meaning of the term Socrates addresses, and what²⁴

he wants to prove that he is innocent of; namely that of not practicing, or mal-practicing social virtuousness. In his defence against «the old accusers», and in the second part of the self-examination, it is the narrower sense of justice he addresses: He shows that convicting him of the charges will be unjust, first in the sense that he has not unrightfully gained anything that belonged to any other (but the men of the assembly have – they have taken what belonged to the city), and second: that convicting him will be unjust because, since he has not acted unjustly in the broad sense, i.e, not trespassed against the «practices of the city» or gained what is not rightfully his, a sentence is not what is due to him and also therefore unjust. In his examination of Meletus, Socrates repeatedly uses the word *nomixo*, most often translated «belief» or “to believe”, but also means «to practice, or use customarily». So, what Meletus is accusing Socrates of could be understood as not «practicing the gods» of the city. The word (*nomixo*) is repeated a striking number of times in the passages 23 c - 28 a 5, the interrogation of Meletus.

32. At *Apology* (ii), 31 d 7.

33. *Apology*. 32a.

34. Woodruff, “Socratic Courage” (2007)

35. Woodruff, “Socratic Courage” (2007)

36. Woodruff, “Socratic Courage” (2007), 293.

37. Badiou, Alain, “Highly Speculative Reasoning”, (1998).

38. *Apology* (i), 36c.

39. Joshia Ober “The Polis as a Society, Aristotle, John Rawls and the Athenian Social Contract”, *The Ancient Greek City- State*, Hansen, Mogens Herman (ed.), (The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1993). Aristotle, *Politics* 1279 a 25, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library Vol XXI, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950 (1932)). Cf. also Allan Bloom’s translation of the *Republic* (Basic Books: A Division of

HarperCollins Publishers, 1991). *Politeia* is also the original Greek title of the Platonic dialogue we by convention call the *Republic*.

40. Wolff, Francis in: *Dictionary of the Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, Cassin, Apter, Lezra, Wood (eds.), (Princeton University Press, 2014.)

41. Ober, Joshia, “The Polis as a Society” (1993).

42. *Republic* 493 a-c.

43. *Alcibiades* 135 e. See also Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001) for an elaboration on the character of Alcibiades.

44. *Symposium* 216 b. Nemahas and Woodruff, trans., Plato Complete Works, Cooper ed., (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997)

45. This distinction can perhaps also be related to the concept of shame, a feeling of which the individual is capable, but that the crowd lacks. See Arlene Saxonhouse’s article in this volume for a thorough investigation of how shame and shamelessness is related to, respectively, an internal or external moral standard. Another aspect on which the philosophical distinction between the public and private realm may have an impact is that of time, on which Kristin Sampson, also in this volume, expounds. When Socrates has been found guilty he relates that he is not surprised, “for we have only conversed with each other a little while”. Philosophy takes time, as is also affirmed in the passage of *Theaetetus*, where philosophical activity is contrasted to political activity in that the latter is subject to the “water-clocks” at 172 e.

46. *Apology* 23 a. Also, 21e, 22 a, 24 a, 28 a,

47. By claiming that the individual seems to be an “irreducible size” I mean that Plato, by emphasizing pedagogy, and by writing in the form of the dialogue, seems never to lose individuality from sight, fine-tuning the Socratic dialectic depending on the personality of his interlocutor.

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48. *Republic* 460 b, 457 c. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve trans., *Plato Complete Works*, Cooper ed., (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997)
49. *Laws*, 780 b. *Plato Complete Works*, Cooper ed., (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997)
50. *Republic* 372 e.
51. *Republic* 424 a.
52. *Republic* 422a, 442e.
53. Balot, Ryan K. "Socratic Courage", (2008) 65.
54. Balot, Ryan K. "Socratic Courage", (2008).
55. Plato makes this point himself, in the *Gorgias*, when he lets Socrates state that one who seeks to be successful, must make himself, not only approximate to the regime within which he wishes to succeed, but *like* the regime in every way: "You mustn't be their imitator, but be naturally like them in your own person if you expect to produce any genuine result toward winning the friendship of the Athenian people (demos)." *Gorgias*, *Plato Complete Works*, Cooper ed., Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1997 513 e.
56. *Apology* (i) 17d.
57. Drew E. Griffin. "Socrates' Poverty, Virtue and Money in Plato's *Apology* of Socrates", *Ancient Philosophy* (Vol. 15, Issue 1, 1995), 1-16.
58. Griffin, Drew E. "Socrates' Poverty" (1995) 1.
59. *Apology* (i), 23c1
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.* 31 c.
62. *Apology* (ii) 36 b- c.
63. *Apology*. 36 c-d.
64. *Apology* 36 d.

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65. *Apology* 36 c-d.
66. A considerable sum. The equivalent of 100 standard daily wages. See note 8 by G.M.A Grube, trans. in: *Plato Complete Works*, John M. Cooper (ed), (Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company 1997).
67. Burnet, John, *Plato's Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito*, Oxford University Press, Amen House, London, 1948, 127. This is also the translation used in the Cooper edition from 1997, with the original Grube translation noted as an "alternative". Point made by M.F Burnyeat, "Apology 30B 2-4: Socrates, Money, and the Grammar of ΓΙΓΝΕΣΘΑΙ" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, (Vol. 123, 2003.)1-25.
68. Griffin, Drew E "Socrates' Poverty" (1995). See Burnyeat, M.F. "Apology 30B 2-4", (2003) for an historical overview of the translations.
69. Burnyeat, M.F. "Apology 30B 2-4", (2003), Strycker, Emile de. *Plato's Apology of Socrates. A literary and Philosophical Study with a Running Commentary*. (Brill, Leiden - New York - Köln, 1994).
70. He exempts those passages where Socrates is appealing to his interlocutors' values (in *Protagoras, Gorgias*), and those passages where he launches the idea to refute it (*Meno, Euthydemus, Lysias*). Burnyeat, M.F. "Apology 30B 2-4" (2003) 3- 4.
71. Pseudo-Aristotle, *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, 1429b. My italics.
72. *Republic* I, 329 e – 331 d.
73. Strauss, Leo, *City and Man*, (1978).
74. *Apology* (ii), 41 e. My italics.
75. *Apology*, 31 b.
76. *Apology*, 34 c-d.
77. As noted also by Patricia Fagan and John Russon, "Socrates examined" in: *Reexamining Socrates in the Apology*", Fagan & Russon, (eds.), (Northwestern University Press, 2009.) 28

78. *Gorgias*, 515d.

79. *Apology*, 25 d.

80. *Apology*, (ii) 24 a- b.