

## THE *REPUBLIC*'S AMBIGUOUS DEMOCRACY

Mason Marshall and Shane A. Billsborough

In recent years, certain commentators have argued that Plato's *Republic* is far less hostile to democracy than it has been called. More important, some of them have even denied that in the *Republic* democracy is supposed to be any worse than timarchy or oligarchy.<sup>1</sup> Their claim is significant particularly insofar as it clashes with a conventional view. For a time, at least, Karl Popper had a sizable influence when he painted the *Republic* as radically antidemocratic. And regardless, quite a few scholars have thought the *Republic* is much less friendly to democracy than some of Plato's later works are—particularly the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.<sup>2</sup> The *Republic* has seemed to mean that only tyranny is worse than democracy. Yet in the *Statesman*, democracy is described as the best of lawless regimes and, apparently, as the best regime that is likely to exist (303a).<sup>3</sup> Further, the *Laws* has seemed to postdate the *Statesman* and to endorse a certain regime that presumably is a mix of monarchy and democracy (see 693c–694b; cf. 756e–757a).

So which of these two sides has it right? Does the *Republic* mean that democracy is worse than timarchy and oligarchy, or does it not? Our view is that pursuing this question leads to a dead end because it is not clear how bad democracy is supposed to be in the *Republic*. Perhaps a debate on this topic would help to answer *other* questions, whatever they might be; but, otherwise, it would be fruitless.<sup>4</sup> What we will do here is explain why we think so. Since at least two commentators have denied that, in the *Republic*, Socrates and his interlocutors *explicitly call* democracy worse than timarchy and oligarchy, we will start by mentioning a few reasons for which we think this is wrongheaded.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, next we will marshal (what we take to be) the strongest available evidence that democracy is supposedly *better* than timarchy and oligarchy. Then we will lay out (what we believe is) the strongest available evidence that it supposedly is *worse*.<sup>6</sup> And we will close by indicating why there seems to be an impasse. As far as we know, much of the evidence we will present has not yet been offered in essays on this topic.

## 1. BETTER THAN TIMARCHY AND OLIGARCHY

To begin with, when in books 8 and 9, Socrates and his interlocutors catalog three unjust regimes and souls that lead to tyranny—the timarchic, the oligarchic, and the democratic, in that order—on their terms, each of these regimes is worse than the previous. It does not work to deny this, as certain commentators have. Among other reasons, in one passage in book 9, Socrates asks Glaucon to “choose now for me who in your opinion is first in happiness, and who second, *and the others in order, five in all . . .*” (580b1–3),<sup>7</sup> and Glaucon replies that, “with respect to *virtue and vice*, and happiness and its opposite,” he ranks the five regimes—aristocracy, timarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny—“in the very order in which they came on stage” (b5–7; see also all of 580a9–c8). Plus, that is in line with other elements of the dialogue, such as the schema of approximation that has already emerged at that point in the conversation. In book 8, Socrates and his interlocutors agree (547c8, d3, d8, and 548c3–4) that timarchy is “a certain middle between aristocracy and oligarchy,” such that timarchy “imitates” (μιμήσεται: 547d1, d8) both aristocracy and oligarchy in certain respects; timarchy is an “amalgam” (μεμειγμένην: 548c3; μέμεικται: c5) containing elements of the regimes it stands between within the chain of events that lead to tyranny. And the rest of the conversation in books 8 and 9 about unjust regimes also suggests that oligarchy imitates both timarchy and democracy in various respects, that democracy is a similar sort of amalgam with respect to oligarchy and tyranny, and that every *other* regime within the chain of events that lead to tyranny is *also* a similar sort of amalgam with respect to the regimes *it* stands between. A schema of approximation thus emerges in which the closer a particular regime is to tyranny in the chain of events that lead to tyranny, the more closely that particular regime approximates tyranny and, in turn, the worse that particular regime is.<sup>8</sup>

Since this is how the discussion goes, there is, of course, strong indication that, in the *Republic*, Plato thinks democracy is worse than timarchy and oligarchy. Nonetheless, as surprising as this is, there also is considerable evidence that he does *not* think this and, in fact, that he means for the discussion to point to democracy’s *superiority* over timarchy and oligarchy. To be sure, if Socrates and his interlocutors suggest that democracy is superior, this apparently is inadvertent on their part (or, at least, on the part of Socrates’ interlocutors: perhaps Socrates is sufficiently clued in). But regardless, it might be what *Plato* intends.<sup>9</sup> Here is why.

In the picture that Socrates and his interlocutors paint together, the timarchic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical souls engendered by timarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny are disordered as a result

of being out of reason's full control. In *all* these *psuchai*, reason is overpowered by mainly either spiritedness or appetite: tyrannical souls are not *radically* different from their timarchic, oligarchic, and democratic counterparts but represent only a more extreme case of degeneration. But curiously, part of the very sense in which democracy is said to be worse than timarchy and oligarchy might also make it *better* than they are. Socrates and his interlocutors agree in book 8 that there is "license in [a democratic city] to do *whatever* one wants" (ἐξουσία ἐν αὐτῇ ποιεῖν ὅτι τις βούλεται: 557b5–6). In fact, they even agree (562b12–c3) that "surely in a city under a democracy you would hear that [freedom] is the finest thing [κάλλιστον] it has and that for this reason [democracy] is the only regime worth living in for anyone who is by nature free" (quoting b12–c2). No doubt, for them that feature of a democratic city manifests the extent to which democratic souls are degenerate—ruled by base desires and barely restrained by reason. Yet if *every* citizen (557b8) in a democratic city has license, then citizens who are philosophers do. Whereas citizens under a timarchy or oligarchy have to do what the rulers think is most conducive to amassing or maintaining honor or wealth, philosophical citizens under a democracy may philosophize freely, even searching for the just city together, as Socrates and his interlocutors do in the *Republic*. And in a city where citizens can freely philosophize with one another, there is a much greater chance that someone will gain knowledge of the Good, if no one already has it, and that if someone already has it, he can help other suitable souls gain it. This is significant, of course, in part since knowing the Good may be supremely important.<sup>10</sup>

All that might be neither here nor there were it not for certain elements of the *Republic* that hint strongly at the consideration we just mentioned. Most important, in book 8, Socrates says not only that a democratic city is "a convenient place to look for a regime" (557d1–2), but also that "it's probably *necessary* [ἀναγκαῖον] for a man who wishes to organize a city [πόλιν κατασκευάζειν], *as we were just doing*, to go to a city under a democracy" (d5–7). There is little ambiguity in this claim. In short, though elsewhere Socrates overtly indicates that democracy is worse than timarchy and oligarchy, he also is explicit in talking about democratic freedom and in saying that democracy is advantageous.

Admittedly, Socrates and Adeimantus may speak sarcastically at certain points in their discussion of democracy at 557b–558c.<sup>11</sup> But to speak sarcastically is to mean the *opposite* of what one says, and Socrates and his interlocutors are unlikely to mean that democracy *never* allows the license they describe. If they speak sarcastically, one claim they might negate is simply the claim (562b12–c3) that *democratic* freedom is the be-all and end-all of goods.<sup>12</sup> On their terms, another different sort of freedom is more important—namely, the freedom that the soul has in

being ruled by reason and in thus being spared from enslavement to spiritedness or appetite.

We also acknowledge that, even if Socrates is sincere in claiming that democracy has an advantage, his reason for making this claim is far from clear. For that matter, he might indicate to his interlocutors that democracy is advantageous not because of the *freedom* it allows but because of a certain *by-product* that this freedom has; for he says that democracy is advantageous because “*thanks to its license, it contains all species of regimes*” (557d4), meaning—perhaps—that thanks to democratic freedom, citizens under a democracy display a wide range of behavior that provides useful patterns (557e1; cf. 409c3–d5) to work with when philosophizing.<sup>13</sup>

But our point still holds. If Plato believes that democracy is advantageous, then he (and Socrates, too) might have more reasons for holding this view than just the reason that Socrates offers in the dialogue. Regardless of what reason Socrates offers, this passage (557b–558c) can prompt readers to notice how congenial democratic freedom is to philosophers. And that is significant, partly because this passage can thus work in concert with many other parts of the *Republic*, where Socrates and his interlocutors make claims that timocratic, oligarchic, or tyrannical rulers might deem subversive and respond to harshly.<sup>14</sup>

Besides, the fact remains that when Socrates offers a reason for saying that democracy is advantageous, it is quite difficult to make out what this reason is. The reason he offers might even be that democracy has a principled commitment to ensuring equality—in other words, to making sure that all citizens are treated as if they have equal *standing* with one another, meaning that they are treated as if no citizen can rightfully be subordinated to any other citizen, such that there are no *degrees* of citizenship. And it matters if democracy does have such a commitment—in other words, if it is dedicated to doing so much more than just aggregating preferences. In the Athens of Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates is sentenced to death, of course, on grounds that can seem pretty shaky.<sup>15</sup> Yet if the democracy of Plato’s *Republic* is committed to ensuring equality in the sense we just named, it might violate that commitment if it allowed a philosopher to be executed merely for acting like a philosopher; for in allowing the execution, perhaps by its own standard democracy would let the philosopher be treated as subordinate to other citizens. In working to ensure equality, democracy might aim to limit every citizen’s freedom just enough to limit all citizens’ freedom equally—that is, it might aim to operate on something like John Stuart Mill’s harm principle. And if that *is* the aim, then presumably citizens are forbidden from murdering one another, for example, but acting like a philosopher might be within

the limits that the democracy sets whenever it abides by its own standard. Granted, acting like a philosopher might be out of bounds if, say, philosophers genuinely corrupt the youth, as Socrates is charged with doing. But if Socrates is the hero that Plato can often seem to present him as and if we are to think he is representative of philosophers,<sup>16</sup> then perhaps philosophers are supposed to be innocuous enough.

Certainly, it can seem odd to talk about *principled* equality and freedom in this context, but our suggestion is less anachronistic than one might think.<sup>17</sup> Plus, a quintessential feature of the democratic man in the *Republic* is that he holds a view on which a wide range of urges are worth indulging, including not only *necessary* desires but also certain *unnecessary* desires (560d2–561a5, 561b2–6, c3–5, 562b11–c3). And from that view, it would be a relatively short step to an ethic that says that not only *his* desires but also *everyone else's* desires are worth indulging. That might be the ethic at work when democracy “dispens[es] a certain equality [ἰσότητά] to equals and unequals alike,” as Socrates and his interlocutors agree it does (558c3–7, quoting c5–6). Admittedly, Socrates and his interlocutors do not specify what this equality is. But most likely, the idea is at least that each citizen under a democracy gets one vote, so as to have the same access to political power that all other citizens have. And if so, perhaps what undergirds the criterion for distributing votes is some commitment to equal standing.

At any rate, the *Republic* might, indeed, mean that philosophers are better off under a democracy than under a timarchy or oligarchy. And if it does, then democracy might supposedly be better than timarchy and oligarchy. No doubt, when various commentators *deny* that democracy is supposed to be *worse* than timarchy and oligarchy, their claim can be surprising. But perhaps it is not farfetched after all.

## 2. WORSE THAN TIMARCHY AND OLIGARCHY

Enough, though, about that. We will now offer a reason that democracy might supposedly be *worse* than timarchy and oligarchy. In doing so, we will simply point to some evidence that philosophers, in fact, are *not* better off under the *Republic's* democracy than under its timarchy or oligarchy. As we noted above, part of the very sense in which democracy is said to be worse than timarchy and oligarchy might also make it better—namely, if democratic souls are as degenerate as they are said to be, then unintentionally they might foster and preserve a sort of political freedom that is particularly conducive to philosophizing. Yet if philosophers are supposedly *not* better off under a democracy, then presumably the idea is that democracy on balance *is* worse than timarchy and oligarchy—worse, that is, because of how degenerate democratic men and cities are.

In book 6, for example, Socrates and his interlocutors agree (494a4–5, a6–7) that “it’s impossible that a multitude be philosophic” and that, as a result, “those who philosophize are necessarily blamed by them.” Especially when Socrates then starts to speak of the “mob” (ὄχλος), it is evident that the discussion here is focused mainly on democracy, under which the majority rules, of course. And he and his interlocutors talk about the influence the mob has on souls that are naturally philosophic—namely, it tends to turn them away from philosophy (490e ff.). For Socrates and his interlocutors, there still may be certain naturally philosophic souls that turn to philosophy in spite of the mob (492e6–493a3). But the idea is that only an act of a god can spare these souls from corruption. More important, the idea is also that when someone persuades a philosophic young man to take up philosophy, the mob stops at nothing to reclaim this young man. It even targets the person who has persuaded the young man, and in doing so, it organizes “private plots and public trials” (494d9–495a1, quoting e6–7). Obviously, there might be an allusion here to the formal charges brought against Socrates (cf. note 15 above), either the character in the Platonic dialogues, the historical figure, or both. And in short, this part of the *Republic* suggests that philosophers under a democracy face a serious threat—namely, the threat that a young philosophic soul will want to join them in philosophizing, whereupon the philosophers will be attacked.<sup>18</sup> So, perhaps we are to think that democracy is not an entirely successful means of securing the political freedom it promises.

And perhaps we are also to go much farther than that. Suppose it is the case that a democratic regime would violate its own commitment in letting a philosopher be executed just for acting like a philosopher. Even so, if a majority tries to have the philosopher executed and meanwhile a minority criticizes the effort, the criticisms might fall on deaf ears, even if the minority offers sound arguments. After all, at the least, if the democratic ethic says that *everyone’s* desires, and not just one’s own, are worth indulging, then there must be a certain point where *democratic* members of the mob do not reason very well. In attacking a philosopher just for acting like a philosopher, they encroach on other citizens’ freedom, patently violating the democratic ethic and the strictures of democracy. So perhaps either they are deeply akratic or they have somehow managed to overlook or ignore the nature of what they are doing.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps they have had to convince themselves that there is some way in which the philosopher is a danger to the *polis*, such that to let him keep doing what he does would be to treat other citizens as subordinate to *him*. We might think here again of Plato’s *Apology* and the charge that Socrates corrupts the youth. Even if most Athenians hate Socrates, his accusers apparently would not make much headway in saying just that Athens would be more pleasant without him in it.



In any case, if democratic men are capable of such deep *akrasia* or blindness—if they can so thoroughly preempt the guidance of reason—an ominous picture appears. And the picture is especially dim in light of certain remarks in books 6 and 8. Take, for example, the description in book 8 of the young oligarchic man who turns democratic. When his unnecessary desires finally overtake his soul (560b7–8), he develops “false and boasting *logoi* and opinions” (c2). After that point, he will not hear of anything that would aid the oligarchic faction within him. His oligarchic elders in his family might advise or scold him (cf. 559e9–560a3), but “those boasting *logoi* close the gates of the kingly wall within him . . .” (560c7–8). And they do so even if the young man regains a few oligarchic scruples (561a8–b3; cf. 560d2–7). Even then, he is utterly dismissive of true *logos* (561b7–c4). In other words, when he hears true *logos*, as we are told, he shakes his head (ἀνανεύει: c3).

The point we mean to make is simple enough: perhaps democratic members of the *mob* will simply shake *their* heads if someone tells them they are violating their own ethic in attacking a philosopher just for acting like a philosopher.<sup>20</sup> In light of the threat that this *is* what they will do, there is hefty reason to doubt that in the *Republic* democracy is supposedly better than timarchy and oligarchy.

### 3. HOW BAD IS DEMOCRACY SUPPOSED TO BE?

It is tempting to conclude, then, that, in the *Republic*, democracy is supposed to be *worse* than timarchy and oligarchy. Yet we contend that to draw this conclusion is to go too far. Now, again, if philosophers are not supposed to be better off under a democracy than under a timarchy or oligarchy, then presumably the idea *is* that democracy is worse than those other two regimes. And just now, we pointed to some evidence that philosophers, indeed, are supposed to be no better off under the *Republic*'s democracy. Yet it is not clear that this evidence carries the day.

Among other reasons, even if democratic men are *capable* of attacking a philosopher just for acting like a philosopher, there might be little danger that they will. Consider, for example, what Socrates and his interlocutors say in book 6 when they discuss three groups of men:

1. *certain nonphilosophers*. These men are naturally philosophic but are corrupted by nonphilosophic souls. Apparently, they end up neither philosophizing nor even pretending to philosophize (see 489e–495b, especially 491b9, c2, 494a12, 495a2–3, a6–7, b8–c1).
2. *ersatz philosophers*. These men keep company with philosophy,<sup>21</sup> and the mob associates them with philosophy

(489d1–5, 491a4–5, 495c3–6, 500b1–7). But they have “imperfect natures” (495d7; cf. c3) and only mimic philosophizing (491a1–2, 495c9). Accordingly, they disgrace philosophy (495c3) and produce nothing more than “sophisms” (σοφίσματα: 496a8).

3. *true philosophers*. These men are naturally philosophic, and in spite of the mob, they turn to philosophy and “do the good” (489e–495c, especially 495b4–5).

Socrates and his interlocutors say that, whereas the mob thinks the ersatz philosophers are wholly vicious (παμπόνηροι: 489d3; πᾶσαν κακίαν: 490d3) and are harmful,<sup>22</sup> the mob views the true philosophers as “perfectly decent” (487d3, 489d4).

Of course, these philosophers are also seen as useless (487d5, 489c5–7, d4, 490d3, e2–4). And as we have suggested, they may be at risk when a young philosophic soul decides to turn away from the mob and take up philosophy (494d9–495a1). But the danger may arise only rarely: Socrates and his interlocutors agree that naturally philosophic souls are few and far between (491a8–b2, 495b2, 503b7–10). Meanwhile, the loss of a *non*philosophic soul may leave the mob unperturbed. Nonphilosophic souls can do nothing great (495b5–6), and the reason that the mob reacts so dramatically to losing a philosophic soul is that the mob senses how much this soul is capable of (494b1–c3). So, in any case, philosophers under a democracy might be able to philosophize for long stretches of time without interruption.

Far more important, Socrates and his interlocutors end up agreeing, at least tentatively, that nonphilosophers could be persuaded that philosophers are useful—in fact, so useful that they should rule (500d10–e5, 501c4–502a3). Obviously, if nonphilosophers are so persuadable, there is reason to wonder whether they pose much threat. And if they pose little or no threat, then all in all democracy might not be worse than timarchy and oligarchy: as a matter of fact, democracy might have an edge on timarchy and oligarchy.

Here, though, the trickiness of all this should be easy enough to see. For one can ask the following question: does it matter that when Socrates and his interlocutors make their claim about persuading nonphilosophers, they do so specifically in the context of discussing *the aristocratic city* rather than democracy? A great deal turns on what the answer is, yet the answer is far from clear. Accordingly, democracy remains ambiguous in the *Republic*: the text simply underdetermines whether democracy is worse (and whether it is better) than timarchy and oligarchy.

And this is not the only point where the ambiguity emerges. First, consider another respect in which democracy can appear to outshine timarchy and oligarchy. If democratic men will deem the philosopher



useless, it might seem that timarchic and oligarchic rulers will be even less well disposed to philosophers. At the least, philosophizing may tend to consume a lot of time, and it may do little, if anything, to preserve or amass honor and wealth. So, in a timarchic or oligarchic city, philosophizing might be viewed as a drain on resources. Plus, it might be seen as a subversive threat to the stability of timarchy and oligarchy. Consequently, timarchic and oligarchic rulers might be prone to quash philosophizing.

But this line of thought gets fairly speculative, of course; and as long as speculation is in order, one can also imagine a scenario in which philosophers, qua philosophers, are on good terms with timarchic or oligarchic rulers. To repeat, philosophic souls, as they are pictured in the *Republic*, are extraordinarily talented. Perhaps they could, as it were, market themselves to monarchs, offering clever strategies for maintaining or increasing wealth, honor, or power. By Plato's standards, a scenario of this sort might not be hopelessly fanciful, especially if some of the *Letters* attributed to Plato have a chance of being authentic or at least true to life. We have in mind, of course, the *Letters*' would-be autobiographical tales of how Plato cozied to Dion and Dionysius with the hope of making Dionysius more philosophical. Granted, the story has it that Plato was in Dionysius's good graces only for a time, if at all. And if Dionysius warmed to Plato, this might not be because Plato pitched himself as a Machiavelian strategist. But regardless, the idea is that Plato worked to ingratiate himself with a monarch. For that matter, the idea is also that Plato tried to effect political change by influencing Dionysius. And there is some sense in taking this tack. As difficult as it might be to sway a fickle monarch, it might be even harder to sway a fickle mob. To be sure, crafting useful strategies to offer a monarch might consume a lot of time that could be spent philosophizing. But if it provides more safety or security than a philosopher can enjoy under a democracy, then timarchy and oligarchy might have an advantage over democracy. Presumably, it would be better to philosophize by night than not at all.

Yet the hitch, of course, is that, even if at some point in his life Plato deemed it feasible to befriend and appease monarchical rulers, at the point when he wrote the *Republic*, he might not have thought this was conscionable. Worth recalling is the passage in book 6 where Socrates talks about how a true philosopher acts outside a just regime (496c–497a). Socrates says that the philosopher

keeps quiet and minds his own business—as a man in a storm, when dust and rain are blown about by the wind, stands aside under a little wall. Seeing others filled with lawlessness, he is content if somehow he himself can live his life here *pure of injustice and unholy deeds* [καθαρὸς ἀδικίας τε καὶ ἀνοσίωων ἔργων], and take his leave from it graciously and cheerfully with fair hope. (496d6–e2)

To aid an unjust ruler in the ways we have pictured just now might be, on the *Republic's* terms, to participate in injustice. Now, apparently it only might be: perhaps, for example, philosophers could ultimately influence a monarch for the good, and perhaps if they did so their actions would not be unjust in the final estimation.<sup>23</sup> But the danger is genuine enough. Plato might not worry that a monarch's vices would rub off on philosophers: Plato might take it for granted that, even after seeing power and luxury up close, a philosopher still would be moderate in appetite. The point is simply that, perhaps in Plato's view, to aid an unjust ruler is to act unjustly.

And even when all the speculations are set aside, there still is ambiguity at the heart of the issue of how bad democracy is supposed to be in the *Republic*. As we have said, democracy might allow more freedom for philosophizing than timarchy and oligarchy do; so democracy might ultimately be less bad than timarchy and oligarchy because, under a democracy, philosophers might have a better chance of knowing the Good, and knowing the Good might be supremely important. But perhaps by Plato's standards in the *Republic* the importance of knowing the Good does not dictate, by itself, how good or bad a particular regime is.

After all, without question, philosophers who came to know the Good might bring us far closer to achieving the Kallipolis than we otherwise would have been. And this might be crucial, in Plato's estimation. But for him, does it matter more than the fact that democratic men and cities will be rotten by virtue of being democratic? As vital as Plato may think it is to improve the chances that someone will come to know the Good, does he deem it worth the price of democratic degeneracy? Similarly, in knowing the Good, philosophers might "be in a state that is of the highest value" (Wolf, "Truth as a Value in Plato's *Republic*," 37), having reached "quite literally the truest fulfillment we can experience" (Barney, "Eros and Necessity in the Ascent from the Cave," 360; citing 538b–586e), as a couple of commentators put it. But for Plato, does *this* compensate for how bad off everyone else will be in a democratic city?<sup>24</sup>

Here, too, a lot hinges on what the answers are, yet the answers are quite hard to discern. Perhaps they can be pieced together from the text. But if so, it is not clear how. At one turn after another, the *Republic* clouds the issue of how bad democracy is supposed to be. In the end, the issue is murky enough, we submit, that to pursue it is to head down a blind alley.<sup>25</sup>

*Pepperdine University*

## NOTES

1. They are D. Roochnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's "Republic"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); and S. S. Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 115–18. See also G. Recco, *Athens Victorious: Democracy in Plato's "Republic"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); P. Coby, "Mind Your Own Business: The Trouble with Justice in Plato's *Republic*," *Interpretation* 31, no. 1 (2003): 37–58; W. J. Prior, "Protagoras' Great Speech and Plato's Defense of Athenian Democracy," in *Pre-socratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, ed. V. Caston (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 313–26; W. Hanasz, "Poetic Justice for Plato's Democracy?" *Interpretation* 25, no. 1 (1997): 37–57; G. M. Mara, *Socrates' Discursive Democracy: Logos and Ergon in Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); A. W. Saxonhouse, "Athenian Democracy and Modern Mythmakers: A Lesson from Plato about Democracy, Equality and Gender," *Thamyris* 1, no. 2 (1994): 105–22; idem, "Response to Jennifer Tolbert Roberts," *Thamyris* 2, no. 2 (1995): 273–76; idem, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); J. P. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); and M. Nichols, *Socrates and the Political Community: An Ancient Debate* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). And see R. B. Talisse, "Misunderstanding Socrates," *Arion* 9, no. 3 (2002): 111–21; idem, "Socratic Citizenship," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 13, no. 2 (2006): 4–10; C. Audard, "Socratic Citizenship: The Limits of Deliberative Democracy," in *Challenging Citizenship: Group Membership and Cultural Identity in a Global Age*, ed. S. Tan (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 89–97; D. Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); idem, *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); idem, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and D. Nails, "A Little Platonic Heresy for the Eighties," *Teaching Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1985): 33–40, though they tend to pertain far more to Plato's Socrates than to Plato. Much like Recco, Roochnik (79, *passim*) goes as far as to claim that the *Republic* is a "qualified and cautious" *defense* of democracy, and in this he seems influenced by Leo Strauss. See, e.g., L. Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe, 1959), 36; and *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 131, though for a contrast with Roochnik, see Strauss, "Plato," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, 7–63 (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 9, 22–23.

2. See, e.g., the citations in C. J. Rowe, "Killing Socrates: Plato's Later Thoughts on Democracy," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001): 66n.10; and

idem, "The Place of the *Republic* in Plato's Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's "Republic,"* ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27n.1. These scholars do not necessarily hold the traditional view that, when a certain "second-best" city is endorsed at *Laws* 739a3–740c3, the better city is supposed to be the *Republic's* aristocratic *polis*. We mention this particularly since that view has been attacked in a variety of quarters (see, e.g., P. Simpson, "Plato's *Laws* in the Hands of Aristotle," in *Plato's "Laws": From Theory into Practice: Proceedings of the VI Symposium Platonicum Selected Papers,* ed. S. Scolnicov and L. Brisson [International Plato Studies, 15] [Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2003], 298–303; Christopher Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002]; the citations in Rowe, "Place of the *Republic*," 28n.2; and in C. Gill, "Foreword," in J.-F. Pradeau, *Plato and the City: A New Introduction to Plato's Political Thought,* trans. J. Lloyd, xi–xvi [Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002], xvi, n.4). On another point, commentators such as L. Brisson ("Ethics and Politics in Plato's *Laws*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 28 [2005]: 93–121) think that both the *Republic* and the *Laws* are deeply critical of democracy.

3. Herein all references to Platonic dialogues are to the texts in Burnet's edition, and translations of passages in the *Republic* are based on A. Bloom, trans., *The "Republic" of Plato,* 2d ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

4. M. Schofield might agree with us on this. See the last paragraph of his review of Pradeau, *Plato and the City,* and T. Samaras, *Plato on Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), in the *Journal of the International Plato Society* 3 (2003), <http://gramata.univ-paris1.fr/Plato/spip.php?rubrique1>.

5. The two commentators are Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements,* 115–18; and A. W. Saxhounhouse, "Democracy, Equality, and *Eidē*: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998): 274n.3.

6. Below for the most part we do not defend our view that the evidence and counterevidence we focus on are the strongest available, since we think doing so would get tedious (though for problems with Roochnik, see, e.g., N. Pappas's review of *Beautiful City* in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42, no. 2 [2004]: 218–19). For the same sort of reason, we cite few essays on this issue in which certain pieces of the evidence have been offered. But we have gleaned a lot of from various work not mentioned above or below, such as D. Estlund, "Making Truth Safe for Democracy," in *The Idea of Democracy,* ed. D. Copp, J. Hampton, and J. Roemer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 71–100; idem, "Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority," in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics,* ed. J. Bohman and W. Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 173–99; idem, "Why Not an Epistocracy of the Educated?" in *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 206–22; J. Annas, "Wickedness as Psychological Breakdown," in *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 43 (2005), supplement: *Ancient Ethics and Political Philosophy* (Spindel Conference 2004), ed. T. Roche: 1–19; G. Santas, "Plato's Criticism of

the 'Democratic Man' in the *Republic*," *Journal of Ethics* 5, no. 1 (2001): 57–71; idem, "Plato's Criticisms of Democracy in the *Republic*," in *Freedom, Reason, and the Polis: Essays in Ancient Greek Political Philosophy*, ed. D. Keyt and F. D. Miller Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 70–89; and B. Rosenstock, "Athena's Cloak: Plato's Critique of the Democratic City in the *Republic*," *Political Theory* 22, no. 3 (1994): 363–90.

7. Notice that this is the question Socrates asks, so it does not matter much that at 580b8–c4 he says only that the aristocratic man is the happiest and that the tyrannical man is the most wretched. Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*, 118, overreaches in claiming that at 580b8–c4 Socrates "does not endorse the entire ranking." Her other evidence also seems insufficient. E.g., following Saxonhouse ("Democracy, Equality, and *Eidē*," 274n.3) she says that "a word for 'decline' does not appear in" the discussion of regimes in book 8. "We instead hear of 'changes' (*metaballei*, 545d), 'movement' (*kinēthēnai*, 545d), and 'mistaken' (*hēmartēmenas*, 544a) regimes" (115–16).

8. Moreover, in book 8, the comments about oligarchy and the oligarchic *psuchē* are more biting than the remarks about timarchy and the timarchic man, and in books 6 and 8, the remarks about democracy and the democratic soul are in large part more disparaging than the comments about oligarchy and the oligarchic man. Cf. with one another especially 547e1, 548a6–7, b4–6, e6–7, 549a1–2, 550e4–8, 551a1–11 in relation to timarchy; 552a4–b1, d1–2, d4–5 in relation to oligarchy; and 559a3–7, c3–5, ἀνοφελῶν at 561a3, plus the passages discussed below, in relation to democracy.

9. Our claim here should not seem altogether radical. As many of the most prominent Anglo-American scholars now do, we are simply *taking seriously the possibility* that Socrates does not (always) speak for Plato in the *Republic*. See, e.g., C. J. Rowe, "Plato," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. D. Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 116–17; idem, "The Literary and Philosophical Style of the *Republic*," in *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's "Republic"*, ed. G. Santas (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), e.g., 8; idem, "Interpreting Plato," in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. H. H. Benson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), esp. 23; idem, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); M. M. McCabe, "Form and the Platonic Dialogues," in Benson, ed., *A Companion to Plato*, 39–54; M. Schofield, "Likeness and Likenesses in the *Parmenides*," in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, ed. C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 51; idem, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16–19; J. Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 10; idem, "Plato," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, 3d ed. rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1190, 1191; idem, *Plato: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9–10, 25–42; idem, "Ancient Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century," in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. B. Leiter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 32; M. Frede, "Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4, supplement: *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*, ed. J. C. Klagge and N. D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 201–19,



repr. in *Plato: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1: *General Issues of Interpretation*, ed. N. D. Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 251–69; C. Gill, “Translating Plato,” *Phronesis* 43, no. 2 (1998): 199; J. M. Cooper, “Introduction,” in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), xviii–xxv; M. L. Gill, “Introduction,” in *Parmenides*, trans. M. L. Gill and P. Ryan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), 5n.3; and C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

10. We will have more to say about this in §3 below. R. Woolf (“Truth as a Value in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Phronesis* 54, no. 1 [2009]: 31–37), e.g., argues that “to be in possession of philosophical truth is, one might . . . say, to be in a state that is of the highest value” (37). Cf., e.g., R. Barney, “*Eros* and Necessity in the Ascent from the Cave,” *Ancient Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2008): 360: “Knowledge of the Forms is quite literally the truest fulfillment we can experience (538b–586e)”; R. Kraut, “Reason and Justice in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Phronesis* 1 (1973), supplement: *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. Rorty: 222–23; idem, “The Defense of Justice in Plato’s “*Republic*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 311–37, repr. in *Plato’s “Republic”: Critical Essays*, ed. R. Kraut (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 218–19n.19 and the text to it; idem, “Return to the Cave: *Republic* 519–521,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1991): 43–62, repr. in *Plato*, vol. 2: *Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, ed. G. Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 244.

11. Cf., e.g., 557c4–5, 558c2 with b5–c1, 562a4–6.

12. Cf. *Republic* 562b12–c3. And on various kinds of freedom in Plato, see A. Laks, “Freedom, Liberality, and Liberty in Plato’s *Laws*,” in Keyt and Miller, eds., *Freedom, Reason, and the Polis*, 132–33.

13. I.e., Monoson (*Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 167) might be wrong that the idea at 557d4–7 is that “a democracy sustains the kind of openness that allows all regimes to be tried out *in speech*.” Perhaps, instead, the idea is that democratic men shift among the dispositions that are characteristic of aristocratic (561d2), timocratic (d4), oligarchic (d4–5), and tyrannical souls (see the  $\pi\alpha\sigma\iota\nu\ \eta\theta\epsilon\sigma\iota\nu$  at 557c6). Cf. especially J. Lear, “Inside and Outside the *Republic*,” in *Essays on Plato’s Psychology*, ed. E. Wagner (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 185–86.

14. This is a point that Roochnik (*Beautiful City*), Monoson (*Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*), and Saxonhouse (*Athenian Democracy*) often return to.

15. We hardly mean to equate the democracy described in the *Republic* with the Athenian democracy under which Socrates was sentenced to death. No doubt, there is supposed to be a breach between actual Athenian democracy and the democracy envisioned, say, at *Republic* 563b4–d1 (cf., e.g., Samaras, *Plato on Democracy*, 63–64; J. P. Anton, “Plato as Critic of Democracy, Ancient and Contemporary,” *Philosophical Inquiry* 20, no. 1/2 [1998]: 1–17); Saxonhouse,



*Democracy, Equality, and Eidē*, 274; Ober, *Athenian Revolution*, 63–64, 90–91, 114, 178; J. T. Roberts, “Myths of Democracy and Gender in Plato’s *Republic*: A Reply to Arlene Saxonhouse,” *Thamyris* 2, no. 2 [1995]: 263–66; J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s “Republic”* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981], 300). Plus, consider the distinction at *Statesman* 302d1–303b7 between “lawless” (παρὰ νόμους: 302e2) democracy and democracy ruled “according to laws” (κατὰ νόμους: e1): perhaps unlike the Athenian democracy under which Socrates was executed, the *Republic*’s democracy might be more like the lawless sort of democracy than the other sort (cf., e.g., D. Nails, “The Trial and Death of Socrates,” in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006], 16, on the tightening of laws in Athens following the restoration of democracy in 403 BCE).

16. For Kraut (“Reason and Justice in Plato’s *Republic*,” 213), e.g., a philosopher in the *Republic* is “one who knows Forms.” But if that definition is operative in the *Republic*, so is another definition—familiar from the *Lysis* (218a2–b6), *Phaedrus* (278d3–6), and *Symposium* (e.g., 199e6–200b3, 204a1–7)—on which philosophers strive after knowledge by virtue of lacking it. See especially *Republic* 475b8–10 and 485a10–b4 with, e.g., D. R. Morrison, “The Utopian Character of Plato’s Ideal City,” in Ferrari, ed., *Cambridge Companion*, 236–38, and the far more extreme C. J. Rowe, “Plato on Knowing and Merely Believing,” in *Ideal and Culture of Knowledge in Plato*, ed. W. Detel, A. Becker, and P. Scholz (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2003), 57–68.

17. Perhaps D. Scott (“Plato’s Critique of the Democratic Character,” *Phronesis* 45, no. 1 [2000], 36–37) would call it misguided for other reasons, though we are in line with, e.g., Annas (*Introduction to Plato’s “Republic,”* 135). Samaras (*Plato on Democracy*, 22n.18), among others, might regard our suggestion as anachronistic. And it might be objected that a commitment to equal standing has to rest on a notion of rights and that no ancient Greek ever had such a notion (see, e.g., Ober, *Athenian Revolution*, 87). But see especially F. D. Miller Jr., *Nature, Justice, and Rights in Aristotle’s “Politics”* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 93–117. Plus, in Plato’s day, at the least there might have been a notion of “dignity” (see Ober, *Athenian Revolution*, 101) or of what citizens owe one another, what governments owe citizens, etc. Further, in relation to the idea of limiting freedom for the purpose of ensuring equal liberty, see especially Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, 6, 40, 144, 179–83; and *Athenian Revolution*, 86–106. And see also note 15 above on actual Athenian democracy versus the *Republic*’s democracy.

18. This seems to us a much greater threat than, e.g., that which 488a7–489a2 suggests. What Socrates and Adeimantus say at 448a7–489d6 may allow for the possibility that if philosophers do not try to gain power in a democratic city, they will be safe enough. See §3 below.

19. Here we simply bracket the issue of whether the *Republic* affirms *akrasia*. To see some of the debate, contrast G. R. Carone, “*Akrasia* in the *Republic*: Does Plato Change his Mind?” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2001): 107–48; and C. Shields, “Simple Souls” in Wagner, ed., *Essays in Plato’s Psychology*, 137–56, with C. Bobonich, “*Akrasia* and Agency in Plato’s *Laws* and

*Republic*,” in Wagner, 203–37; idem, *Plato’s Utopia Recast*, 235–57; R. D. Parry, *Plato’s Craft of Justice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 93–94, 158–62; T. Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith, *Plato’s Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 90n.25, 98n.35; T. Penner, “Thought and Desire in Plato” in *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays*, vol. 2: *Ethics, Politics, and Philosophy of Art and Religion*, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1971), 96–118; idem, “Plato and Davidson: Parts of the Soul and Weakness of Will,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16, supplement (1990): *Canadian Philosophers: Celebrating Twenty Years of the CJP*, ed. D. Copp: 35–74; C. H. Kahn, “Plato’s Theory of Desire,” *Review of Metaphysics* 41, no. 1 (1987): 77–103; and C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato’s “Republic”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 131–35, esp. 134.

20. Granted, to whatever extent or at whatever point democracy violated one of its own commitments, it might be not just a *bad* democracy but a *nondemocracy*—so it might be tempting to say that nothing *democratic* would pose a danger of the sort we refer to here. But even if a democracy will cease to be a democracy once philosophers are attacked for being philosophers, the fact remains that *within a democratic city*, philosophers will face the danger of being attacked in this way.

21. ὁμιλώσι: 496a6. Cf. ἐπεισελθόντες at 495c3; 495e4–8; ὁμιλούντων at 496b1.

22. Cf. especially οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ πολλῶν κακῶν ἀξιοί ἐσιν at 495c5–6.

23. Doubtless, Plato may be opposed to consequentialism (see, e.g., M. M. McCabe, “Out of the Labyrinth: Plato’s Attack on Consequentialism,” in *Virtue, Norms, and Objectivity: Issues in Ancient and Modern Ethics*, ed. C. Gill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 189–214). But consider, e.g., what Socrates and Glaucon say at 443e4–444a3, which suggests that whether an *action* is just depends on whether it “preserves and helps to produce” the soul’s justice (quoting e6; cf. 366e–367a; 588b–591e).

24. See, e.g., 420b5–421c7 and 519e1–520a4, where Socrates says the task is not to make any one group in a city exceptionally happy but to seek the happiness of the city as a whole.

25. Thanks to the following people for comments on earlier versions of this essay: Caleb Clanton, Ian Flora, Dan Graham, Debra Nails, Rob Talisse, Henry Teloh, Mark Wheeler, and Dave Yount, many of whom were in the audience at the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy session at the 2009 meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association.