

What Would Socrates Do?

Self-Examination, Civic Engagement,
and the Politics of Philosophy



JOEL ALDEN SCHLOSSER

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Socrates continues to be an extremely influential force to this day; his work is featured prominently in the work of contemporary thinkers ranging from Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, to Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière. Intervening in this discussion, *What Would Socrates Do?* reconstructs Socrates' philosophy in ancient Athens to show its promise of empowering citizens and noncitizens alike. By drawing them into collective practices of dialogue and reflection, philosophy can help people to become thinking, acting beings more capable of fully realizing the promises of political life. At the same time, however, Joel Alden Schlosser shows how these practices' commitment to interrogation keeps philosophy at a distance from the democratic status quo, creating a dissonance with conventional forms of politics that opens space for new forms of participation and critical contestation of extant ones.

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Preface

What would Socrates do? This question first occurred to me when teaching an undergraduate course on ancient political thought at Duke University. As we read and contemplated Socrates' injunction that "the unexamined life is not worth living," it struck me as all too easy to fold this demand for reflection and thoughtfulness into our twenty-first century obsessions with self-knowledge, self-exploration, and even self-infatuation. My students and I were already doing this, imagining ourselves as like Socrates: uniquely perspicuous, countercultural, and critical. We stood against the grain and, despite all being part of an elite university, we were speaking truth to power.

Were we? Who was to say we hadn't just lashed ourselves to a different mast? I kept wondering what Socrates would do, how Socrates might have questioned our assumptions, how his questions might have translated to our times. Socrates was not just an ancient version of the now famous Apple Macintosh advertisement to "Think Different." And if Socrates was not merely going to serve as window dressing for our late modern patterns of thought, we needed to think differently about what Socrates might mean.

This line of questioning and reflection took place at the same time as a major development at Duke as well as at other universities around the country: the advent of civic engagement. In 2007, Duke received two grants of \$15 million, from the Duke Endowment and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to found its Center for Civic Engagement and flagship program, DukeEngage. These programs and others like them sought to bring service learning to a new level, making knowledge developed in the classroom functional or even leaving the classroom behind entirely in favor of the kind of experiential learning attainable only on-site and hands-on: building clinics in Kenya or teaching migrant

workers' children in China or partnering with local organizations in Guatemala to create safer cooking stoves. The "change yourself, change your world" motto of DukeEngage expressed an underlying philosophy that while academics might give you knowledge (carried out in classrooms and laboratories on campus), transformation, both of self and of others, could only really occur outside the proverbial ivory tower. Transformation gave evidence of knowledge that really mattered. We needed to engage.

As I watched these new ideas take root (and as DukeEngage replaced Duke basketball as the number one reason given by applicants for why they wanted to attend the university), I kept wondering: What would Socrates do? Given his influence on the founder of *the Academy*, Plato, Socrates seemed like the quintessence of the academic: discussing theories of the good life rather than living it, hypothesizing about justice rather than making it a reality. Yet this story did not quite seem right. Yes, Socrates did not seek political accolades, although he did serve when called upon, both in the military and in high-level governmental positions chosen by lot. Yes, Socrates did not lead a revolution of the slaves against their masters or of Athenian women for greater empowerment, although nobody did such things in the Athens of his day. But Socrates' thought was not merely theoretical, nor were his inquiries abstracted from the place where he conducted them. Instead, I had the growing suspicion that we needed to understand the *practice* of Socrates' thought and how this practice mattered in its context. Only with such an understanding would we be in a position to dismiss "Socratic engagement" as abstruse and irrelevant. In any event, we had to ask ourselves: If Socrates really had been an analogue of today's insulated academics, would the Athenians have killed him?

What would Socrates do? This became the question behind my reflections on both our appropriations in the modern classroom (and the scholarly explications behind them) as well as the contemporaneous shift of attention (and money) to civic engagement as somehow more meaningful, authentic, and – perhaps most significantly yet also most obscurely – *engaged* than conventional, classroom-based learning. What of Socrates' engagement? I wondered.

As a political theorist, I also immediately began to consider these questions in the broader political context of democratic politics in the United States. If "Socrates" merely mirrored our approaches to self-actualization, if he merely functioned as another "success guru" to be placed next to Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey, and if Socrates'

philosophy embodied in the academy had been eclipsed in importance by the engagement of hands-on, community-immersed learning, then was Socrates completely irrelevant to thinking about, let alone improving, political life in the twenty-first century? I didn't want it to be so, but previous attempts to make Socrates relevant seemed guilty of domesticating him the same way my students and I had in the classroom. Socrates could be an ideal democratic citizen, an ideal dissenter, an exemplar of the liberal arts, or an enigmatic ironist. In each manifestation, Socrates became just one of us, regardless of where we stood; "Socrates" seemed infinitely malleable, and thus rarely a truly critical interlocutor.

This book emerged from these questions and reflections. It is my attempt to think long and hard about what Socrates would do and deepen our understanding of how to go about asking this question in ways that might produce alternatives to the current situation. If followers of Socrates are wont to assimilate him to their own modes of thinking (as my students and I once were), I suggest that reconstructing what Socrates did in his own, very different situation can inhibit these tendencies. Seeing the complicated and strange relationship of Socrates to his own times can illuminate how Socrates' philosophy might be translated in more complicated (and potentially estranging) ways to our own. If civic engagement threatens to overshadow "Socratic engagement" (as it seems to do at Duke and elsewhere), I show how Socrates' thought was embodied in Athenian public spaces as well as what Socrates' practices might look like in the world today. To envision what Socrates might do now, I turn our attention to innovative "Socratic" practices like the Socrates Cafés and the Clemente Courses to show how Socrates' philosophy might continue its legacy of provocative and associative questioning conducted both in public and around matters of public concern. Finally, if Socrates' ambivalent relationship to politics and democracy is too easily effaced by political theorists' desires to make something of Socrates (be it a democrat, a radical democrat, a liberal dissenter, a model of civil disobedience, or otherwise), I insist on the strangeness of Socrates, what in Greek is called his *atopia*, which must remain fundamental to all of our interpretations and appropriations if we are to keep the questions of Socrates alive and vital. "What would Socrates do?" may be unanswerable in any ultimate sense, but asking the question with honesty and rigor can, I hope, lead us to better ways of living together.

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This book has been long in the making, and I have many institutions and people to thank for their help along the way. It has been a pleasure to complete this book while on the faculty at Deep Springs College. The intellectual vitality of the Deep Springs community has been immensely important to my thinking, making possible a kind of intense and thoughtful conversation ranging from Socrates to Adrienne Rich that has sustained me throughout the writing and revising process. The sense of purpose and the industry with which this purpose is pursued at Deep Springs will never leave me and I can only hope a small portion of it is evident in my own work. To the students of Deep Springs who first brought me to the valley and have never since ceased to question – always generously and fruitfully – my own arguments and commitments, I owe the greatest thanks. I am also grateful to the president of Deep Springs College, David Neidorf, for his unstinting support of my research, as well as to the trustees of Deep Springs for the same.

At Duke University, where the book began to take shape, I owe thanks to the Department of Political Science, which fostered an astoundingly diverse and collaborative environment for work in political theory, as well as the Department of Classical Studies, which welcomed me with genuine *xenia*. I am also grateful for research support from the Graduate School of Duke University, the Hallowell Endowment for advanced language work, and the Earhart Foundation for substantial funding throughout my studies. During the writing process I also had the good fortune to return to Carleton College to teach in the Department of Political Science. I am grateful for the collegiality and support I received there as well as to the deans of the college, Scott Bierman and Bev Nagel, for their material support of my research.

As the book has developed, I have presented parts at many different venues and benefitted from countless insightful and humbling questions from my audiences at the following places: Deep Springs College; the University of Minnesota Political Theory Colloquium; the Duke Political Theory Workshop; the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meetings; the American Political Science Association Annual Meetings; the Western Political Science Association Annual Meetings; and the Association for Political Theory Annual Meetings. An early connection between James Baldwin and Socrates sprang from my participation in the “Contemplating James Baldwin” symposium held at Carleton College, April 13–18, 2008, and the faculty reading group led by Professor Harry Williams, whom I owe great thanks for introducing me to the work of Baldwin. Some brief passages from the article that resulted from my work on Baldwin and Socrates, published as “Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America” in *Political Research Quarterly* Vol. 66, No. 3 (September 2013) appear in [Chapter 6](#). I am grateful to Sage Publications for permission to reprint this material.

I am especially grateful to the many people who read portions or all of this manuscript at various times. While I shoulder responsibility for any missteps or errors in what follows, I owe the following people great thanks for their time and attention over the years: Josh Anderson, Libby Anker, Danielle Allen, Ali Aslam, Jed Atkins, Andreas Avgousti, Ryan Balot, Lawrie Balfour, David Belanich, Susan Bickford, James Bourke, Brendan Boyle, P.J. Brendese, Winter Brown, Peter Burian, Keegan Callanan, Evan Carver, Brother Kenneth Cardwell, Doug Casson, Jeff Church, Diskin Clay, Rom Coles, Larry Cooper, Brent Cusher, Stefan Dolgert, Bill English, Peter Euben, Jill Frank, Michael Gillespie, Ruth Grant, Laura Grattan, Shlomo Griner, Malachi Hachohen, Nora Hangan, Ben Hertzberg, Kinch Hoekstra, Matt Holbreich, Demetra Kasimis, Alisa Kessel, Matt Landauer, Melissa Lane, Christine Lee, Rebecca LeMoine, John Lombardini, Richard Mahon, Hollie Mann, Gerry Mara, Patchen Markell, Liz Markovits, David McIvor, Annie Menzel, David Neidorf, Jennifer Rapp, Dennis Rasmussen, David Rice, Steve Salkever, Arlene Saxonhouse, Dan Schillinger, George Shulman, Kim Smith, Tom Spragens, Christina Tarnopolsky, Rachel Templer, Nick Troester, Chip Turner, John Wallach, Laurie Ward, Amity Wilczek, Akira Yatsuhashi, John Zumbrunnen, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. I am also very grateful for the support and insight of Robert Dreesen, of Cambridge University Press, as well as to his staff.

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The development of this book emerged from the special community of political theorists around Duke University during my early years there. My fellow denizens of “Strauss House,” Ali Aslam and Nick Troester, had a formative influence beyond their knowing, as did those who joined me around the table for lively discussions at Peter Euben’s house: Ali Aslam, James Bourke, Winter Brown, P.J. Brendese, Stefan Dolgert, Bill English, Laura Grattan, Nora Hanagan, Ben Hertzberg, Liz Markovits, Alisa Kessel, and David Rice. My good fortune at happening upon this vibrant political theory community is only exceeded by my gratitude for the friendships that emerged from it. To Ali Aslam and David McIvor, fellow “Demophiles” and long-standing members of our “Dinner and Democracy” reading group, I am especially grateful.

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Long before I even read my first line of Greek, my family has supported my reading, writing, and thinking. I owe my parents, Tom Schlosser and Marilyn Loveness, as well as my brother, Peter Schlosser, and the whole Schlosser-Loveness family the deepest thanks. To Sarah Trent, I am grateful for years of confidence, intelligence, and playfulness. She has taught me far more than she knows. I am also grateful to her for the gift of another family; I thank Marilyn, Emily, and Liam, and especially Leo, for their love and support.

This book is dedicated to John Wesley Robb. Great-uncle, teacher, and friend, Wes put me on my present path many, many years ago.

Gadfly explanation

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates describes his relationship to Athens as like a gadfly to a noble horse. Like the incessant gadfly, Socrates tells the jury, "I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find yourself in your company." This striking image captures the essence of Socrates' own strangeness. Socrates appears opposed to conventional political life, but like the gadfly, this anti-conventional appearance stems not from a rebellious intent so much as an unflagging commitment to question the assumptions upon which the Athenian democracy rests, to rouse the horse to wakefulness. The image of the gadfly thus helps to illuminate philosophy's peculiar challenge for democracy more generally: its unremitting interrogation that can often irritate; yet its concomitant promise of a more lively, perhaps even better, politics.

Introduction: Socrates in democratic times

Over a decade ago, Christopher Phillips quit his job writing for magazines in order to “seek Socrates.”¹ Disillusioned with the numbing normalcy of his daily life, Phillips hungered for something else; his “love of the question” and “passion for challenging . . . assumptions” demanded another kind of existence. Stuck in a profession that no longer had meaning and with his personal life disintegrating, Phillips felt lost. But suddenly, his “Socratic sensibility kicked in.” Phillips realized that he wasn’t asking “fruitful questions” and once he did, the fog rose: He wanted to be a philosopher in the mold of Socrates and he wanted to hold Socratic dialogues.²

Following this revelation, Phillips founded and began to facilitate what he called “Socrates Cafés” as a way of putting his love of wisdom in action. The Cafés met (and meet) not just in cafés but also in prisons, retirement facilities, homeless shelters, public housing projects, hospitals, community centers, elementary schools, parks, and other public and semi-public spaces. Sometimes Phillips would facilitate; sometimes ordinary people would simply contact him to ask about how to begin their own groups. In all circumstances and with all kinds of founders, the Cafés initiated an active practice of philosophy, a practice instantiated among diverse groups of people who shared a passion for inquiry and came together in different spaces to question, converse, argue, and discuss the pressing dilemmas of their daily lives. As a facilitator, Phillips has traveled to

¹ In this paragraph and the following paragraphs, I draw on Phillips’ three books describing his own work and the Socrates Cafés: Phillips 2001; Phillips 2004; and Phillips 2007. I will quote mostly from Phillips 2001 because it gives the fullest description of the Cafés in action as well as an explanation of their genesis and the theory behind them.

² Phillips 2001, 128–30.

Greece and Spain, Japan and Korea, across Mexico, and throughout the United States from New York City to the Navajo Nation, talking with immigrants, the elderly, children, the homeless, the incarcerated, students, small-business owners, and many nameless but curious citizens. Now over 600 groups around the world meet to philosophize as part of the project of the Democracy Cafés, a nonprofit organization started by Phillips and his wife Cecilia.³

The Cafés, writes Phillips, began with Socrates and, like Phillips, participants in the Cafés share the “calling” of “seeking Socrates.” Here “Socrates” exemplifies a kind of philosophy that does not center around a single sage dispensing wisdom but rather a philosophy that lives in the people who practice it together. Phillips describes Socrates’ philosophy this way:

A type that utilized a method of philosophical inquiry that “everyman” and “everywoman” could embrace and take for his or her own, and in the process rekindle the childlike – but by no means childish – sense of wonder. A type of vibrant and relevant philosophy that quite often left curious souls with more questions than they’d had at the outset of the discussion, but at times enabled them to come up with at least tentative answers. A type of anti-guru philosophy in which the person leading the discussion always learns much more from the other participants than they could ever learn from him. A type of philosophy that recognized that questions often reveal more about us and the world around us than answers. A type of philosophy in which questions often *are* the answers.⁴

In other words, for Phillips the philosophy of Socrates, rooted in a shared love of questioning and investigation, exists neither for the aggrandizement of a particular individual, nor for the pursuit or achievement of a particular truth, but as a collective endeavor that both uplifts and humbles its participants through its tireless, reflexive examination.

The Socrates Cafés also seek to create new forms of community. Emerging in a variety of spaces and among diverse populations, the Cafés constitute what Phillips calls “a community of philosophical inquiry.”⁵ Discussions and the friendships that these discussions develop continue long beyond a particular evening’s conversation.⁶ In one instance, Phillips describes bringing together one of his “Philosopher Clubs” of children

³ This number comes from the website for the Democracy Cafés, www.philosopher.org/Socrates_Cafe.html (accessed September 15, 2013). In 2004, an article in *The New York Times* estimated that Phillips had helped start an estimated 150 such groups: Vasilopoulos 2004.

⁴ Phillips 2001, 6–8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

and a discussion group he facilitated with “older folks” in a senior center. The insistent “why” of the children meets the proclivity for reflection of those advanced in years to create a new community:

All too often children and seniors are at the margins of society, castoffs. But their peculiar status in society also unites them: younger folks and older folks *need* each other. They need each other to philosophize with. Unlike so many adults, older folks share with children a tenacious and passionate desire to keep asking and asking and asking: *Why? Why? Why?*⁷

This example of a new form of community also intimates the explicit political dimension of Phillips’ project. For Phillips, the questions of Socrates appeal to those “at the margins of society,” the “castoffs.” These people are provoked to question a world that dismisses them. Finding their desire to philosophize not only strong but more promising than the conventionally powerful and well-reputed, Phillips seeks to develop “new generations of philosophers steeped in the Socratic method and ethos.”⁸ The resulting “congregations” of aspiring philosophers, followers of what Phillips calls “the heretical tradition of the gadfly,” assemble to create a collective philosophical inquiry that by its very nature opposes established authority and hierarchies, emancipates self-understanding, and helps its practitioners to escape the intellectual prisons of societal constraint.⁹ A “shared ethos of rational, reflective, egalitarian and empathetic inquiry”¹⁰ follows, helping to create democratic and empowered communities as islands of freedom in otherwise disempowered political existence. As Phillips says, he hopes that “these foundational inquiries serve as a springboard for greater participation in society at large” and that they help “foment grass-roots democracy . . .”¹¹ Bonding and bridging groups at the margins around a common project of inquiry and questioning, the Socrates Cafés promise to pave the way toward more vibrant democratic life.

Yet the democratic promise of Socrates evident in Phillips’ Socrates Cafés also presents a puzzle. Phillips’ Socrates seems far removed from the conventional wisdom about Socrates’ political effects. I.F. Stone’s *The Trial of Socrates* gives a sense of how Socrates is more frequently viewed. On Stone’s polemical and impassioned account, Socrates deserved the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118–19. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹ As Phillips describes in Phillips 2001, 49–51, 53, 71, 86.

¹⁰ This quotation comes from the mission statement on the Socrates Café website homepage: www.philosopher.org/Home.html (accessed September 15, 2013).

¹¹ Quoted in Vasilopoulos 2004.

hemlock for his antidemocratic teachings and inaction during the bloody dictatorship of The Thirty Tyrants in 404 BCE; Socrates does not exemplify the democratic organizer of Phillips' vision so much as a harsh detractor of democracy sympathetic to despotic oligarchs.¹² Socrates upsets his fellow citizens and threatens political stability: His criticisms harmed Athenian culture and its system of education by undermining its democratically constituted authority and unsettling its civic conventions; his example today promises a "tyranny of truth" or worse.¹³ Far from the inspiring Socrates of Phillips' depiction, this image of Socrates appears in the shadows of harsh aspersions, less haunted by than deserving of the charge "corrupter of youth."

Following this line of argument, Sheldon Wolin conceives of Socrates as destructive to the kind of political work needful today. Indeed, one could read Wolin's *Politics and Vision* as dedicated to resuscitating a tradition of political thinking freed from the antipolitical biases Wolin sees as initiated by Socrates.¹⁴ According to Wolin, the figure of Socrates begat a line of philosophers that legislated what we could call a philosophic politics, a politics born in the minds of philosophers and destructive of organic and ostensibly genuine political life around it.¹⁵ So Wolin titles his chapter on Plato in *Politics and Vision*, "Plato: Political Philosophy versus Politics," and he writes that "from the very beginnings of political philosophy, a duality was established between the form-giving role of political thought and the form-receiving function of political 'matter.'"¹⁶ Socrates begot this tradition, Wolin implies, and now we must move past it.¹⁷

¹² Stone 1988. For a critical response, see Myles Burnyeat's review of Stone in Burnyeat 1988. For a reappraisal, see Schofield 2002.

¹³ We could also see Aristophanes and Socrates' activities as having key points of commonality in demanding thoughtful response from their audiences and thus participating in the political education of democratic Athens, as argued by Euben 1997, 109–38. "Tyranny of truth" comes from Latour's description of Socrates in Latour 1999. I treat both Euben and Latour more on this theme in Chapter 4.

¹⁴ Although this hardly provides definitive evidence, I find it worth noting that Wolin omits Socrates entirely from the index of the revised edition of *Politics and Vision* and Socrates rarely figures in Wolin's discussions of Plato.

¹⁵ Wolin 1990, 5. ¹⁶ Wolin 2004, 33.

¹⁷ Wolin describes the tenets of this lineage as follows: "Politics should be grounded in a higher truth to which philosophy alone has access; a basis in truth converted a society into a community, a close or solidaristic grouping; a good political society would be one in which philosophers not only were tolerated but were honored members of the community and, ideally, would have influence over those who ruled or, stated slightly differently, the alienation of the philosopher, as dramatized by the death of Socrates, the political isolation of Plato, and the flight of Aristotle from Athens, would be over; and,

Given the tension between Phillips' example and the countervailing arguments in writers such as Stone and Wolin, how can we characterize Socrates' relationship to democracy, ancient and modern? In what follows, I seek to make sense of these opposing poles. I argue that Socrates' philosophy promises to empower citizens and noncitizens alike by drawing them into collective practices of dialogue and reflection that in turn help them to become thinking, acting beings capable of more fully realizing the promises of democratic life. At the same time, however, I show how these practices' commitment to interrogation keeps philosophy at a distance from the democratic status quo, creating a dissonance with conventional forms of political life that both opens space for new forms of participation and critical contestation of extant ones. In other words, Socrates may not hold the great promise for democratic times that Phillips imagines, but neither should we exclude Socratic practices from public life altogether. While engaging the politics of his day, Socrates' philosophy offers an alternative to "politics as usual": modeling what it might mean to assert one's thoughts publicly and contesting the extant democracy through questioning and dialogue. Asking "What would Socrates do?" can indeed contribute to collective life, although not perhaps in the directly democratic way Phillips and others may wish.

RECONSTRUCTING SOCRATES

To consider Socrates in his times as well as our own, this book reconstructs what Socrates did in ancient Athens, rebuilding Socrates' philosophy from five primary and interlocking practices of Athenian democratic politics that Socrates took up and transformed with his philosophy: the practices of accountability; the erotic practices of democratic subject formation; the practice of free or frank speech; educational practices; and the spatial and temporal practices of quotidian political life. Turning to democratic Athens and examining Socrates' philosophy from within its broader historical context, I reconstruct a "notional" Socrates through the reports of his followers but also rooted in the world he inhabited.¹⁸ Our rich understanding of the background conditions of Socrates' life calls attention to basic points of contact between his philosophy and the

finally, the politics of virtually all of the Greek philosophers descended from Socrates was antidemocratic": Wolin, 1990, 5.

¹⁸ "Notional" comes from Cooper 2012.

Athenian democracy. Rather than taking one source on Socrates as the basis for reconstructing an understanding of Socrates' philosophy, I begin from the concrete circumstances of life in democratic Athens; I educe Socrates' philosophy not from any single source or author but rather by constellating the different practices observed by Socrates' near contemporaries: Aeschines, Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon. While Plato remains the principal source throughout, in order to reconstruct Socrates from these disparate and often conflictual sources, I seek common reference points related to democratic Athens and then detail particular departures, transformations, and appropriations that appear in descriptions of Socrates. This shows how Socrates takes up specific practices of the Athenian democracy and transforms them by incorporating them into philosophy.

Reconstructing Socrates depends upon a deeper and more contextual understanding of the Athenian democracy (and Socrates' relationship to it) than appears in many critical descriptions of Socrates. Such an understanding has been made possible by the past thirty years of scholarship on ancient Athenian democracy, which has brought new levels of appreciation for the complexities and successes of the world's first democracy.¹⁹ The Athenian democracy that existed in Athens roughly from the middle of the fifth century BCE²⁰ was "remarkable . . . unprecedented, unparalleled, exhilarating" and "capable of mobilizing extraordinary citizen involvement, enthusiasm, and achievement . . ."²¹ During the roughly two centuries of Athens' flourishing, the people (*dēmos*) genuinely held political power (*kratos*), creating a democracy in word and deed. The power of the *dēmos* fostered a public, open politics where the citizenry as a whole debated and decided all important political matters.²² Through

¹⁹ These three decades have brought a surge in scholarship, which Kurt Raaflaub usefully categorizes in the introduction to Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007.

²⁰ All dates refer to "Before the Common Era" ("BCE") unless otherwise indicated.

²¹ Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007, 3. "Unparalleled" comes from Hansen 1999, 313. See also the general discussion by Cartledge 2005, 11–22.

²² This language comes from Ober 1994, 22. In what follows I treat the fourth and fifth century BCE as one of relatively continuous democratic culture, following the arguments of Ober 1989 and Ober 1998. Given the lack of consistent evidence, we cannot know precisely how much the fifth century differed from the fourth; however, as Kurt A. Raaflaub points out, "there do not seem to be good reasons to assume that in the fifth century the citizens were substantially less involved in running their democracy than in the fourth": Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007, 5. Ober (2008a) has recently argued that if one takes the period from roughly 500 BCE – beginning with Kleisthenes and the democratic uprising of 508 BCE – until roughly 300 BCE – ending in 322 BCE and Athens' defeat in the Lamian war – Athens' radical democracy remained continuous.

formal institutions such as the Assembly and the law courts as well as customs such as rhetoric, civic education, and drama, ordinary Athenians created an extraordinary democratic polity that outperformed its rivals, promoted agreement while encouraging contestation, and sustained decision-making procedures for both timely and effective policy formation and implementation.²³

As the understanding and appreciation of Athens' robust and sophisticated democracy has grown, many scholars have revisited ancient political thought in order to explain its relationship to this context and the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between theory and practice.²⁴ Rather than viewing the political thought of democratic Athens apart from the thick democratic context that surrounded it, this book follows recent scholarship by viewing theory and politics as, in Sara Monoson's word, "entangled," intertwined and mutually constitutive and sharing a concern with how the Athenian democracy might best work (if at all).²⁵ Taking Monoson's example, one can read Plato's dialogues as mobilizing "the language, imagery, and principles that the Athenians themselves used to fashion their orthodox civic self-understanding."²⁶ Along these lines, as Andrea Nightingale has argued, we must treat the texts of political thought as existing in relationships of interdependence to one another and to concrete political situations – they are "intertextual," written by authors in conversation with other authors, including the ultimate actor in democratic Athens, the people (*dēmos*).²⁷ Few of these scholars go so far as to view the democratic context as completely determinative of a given

When crises arose, such as oligarchic rebellions after the Peloponnesian War, the democracy responded *democratically* through such innovations as the collection and publication of laws, the establishment of a board of lawmakers to review existing laws and create new ones, and the introduction of pay for attendance of the assembly (as noted by Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007, 17).

²³ Here I draw on Ober 2008b, 73.

²⁴ The distinction here between "theory" and "practice" is soft and not meant to reify thought as "theory" against action as "practice." Indeed, part of the project of the book is to show how these were (and are) always already intertwined. As Jill Frank notes, despite the significant differences between the classical Greek world and today's, "classical authors . . . are fertile resources for contemporary scholars because they inaugurated a reflective approach to the study of politics that is no less reflective for being about the world of action, power, and institutions, and no less political for being reflective" (Frank 2006, 176). Frank's article also provides a useful survey of the scholarship I discuss in this paragraph.

²⁵ Gerald Mara usefully treats Thucydides and Plato along these lines as participants in a "civic conversation" that provides "cultural resources for conversations about the things that matter to individuals and communities": Mara 2008, 16.

²⁶ Monoson 2001, 4. ²⁷ Nightingale 2000.

writer's options;²⁸ rather, viewing Athenian political thought as a *political response* to Athenian democracy has opened a new lens for understanding antiquity that can also potentially speak to the present.²⁹

With a better sense of the intense and dispersed involvement of all citizens in the political process, scholars have also begun to trace how the figure of Socrates appears to take up various aspects of the extant Athenian democracy.³⁰ G.E.R. Lloyd, for example, has suggested how styles for political and legal debate served as models and analogues for philosophical and scientific discourse: the use of concepts and evidence; the polemical or adversarial manner in which discussion was often held; the development of theories of rhetoric and demonstrative argument; the emphasis on abstract analysis of concrete situations; and the notion of "radical revisability" in both philosophy and democracy.³¹ As I discuss more in the next chapter, J. Peter Euben has connected Lloyd's work directly to Socrates by emphasizing aspects of "democratic accountability" embodied by practices such as *euthunai* and *dokimasia*, which underscore how democratic polemical argument and the giving of reasons formed the basis of Socrates' philosophy as described in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*.³² Other work has examined the democratic practice of *parrhēsia*, or "frank speech," and its significance in Socrates' philosophy.³³

²⁸ Paul Cartledge, following Quentin Skinner, may offer the most compelling argument for *situating* (in Monoson's phrase) all readings of Greek political thought in its political context. See Cartledge 2009.

²⁹ "Political response" comes from Allen 2006, 131. For ancient political theory as a "resource" for considering modern democracy, see the general discussion in Frank 2006. See also Stephen Salkever's comment on the propositions defining the "central tendency" of recent interpretive work on Greek political thought: Salkever 2009.

³⁰ I borrow "figure of Socrates" from Pierre Hadot, retaining the ambiguous meaning he gives it: Hadot 2002, 22–38. All our evidence of Socrates comes from the writings of others, with each taking "the mask of Socrates" (24). The scholars described in this paragraph all choose their particular sources for different reasons; I will explain my source selection and reasons later.

³¹ Lloyd 1992, 44. See also the earlier and broader suggestions in Vernant 1982 and Castoriadis 1991.

³² I follow Euben, then, by emphasizing "the degree to which elite critics (including Plato) remained dependent upon and incorporated aspects of that tradition [sc. the Athenian tradition of rethinking and reforming itself] even as they criticized it": Euben 1997, 92. Cf. the slightly different accent given by Josiah Ober in his reading of Plato as an "elite critic": Ober 1998, 156–247.

³³ See Saxonhouse 2003 and Markovits 2008. Two studies focused more on Plato's dialogues also give some attention to the figure of Socrates understood in the context of Athenian democracy: Mara 1997 connects Socrates' practices to the Athenian democracy in terms of their concern with the relationship of word (*logos*) and deed (*ergon*).

Studying how Socrates takes up and transforms specific democratic practices such as *euthunai*, *dokimasia*, or *parrhēsia* (among others) provides the general orientation for this book. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of practice helps to focus this approach.³⁴ A practice for Bourdieu takes place in the space of interplay between objective and determining factors (distributions of resources, ethnic diversity, geography, and so forth) and the subjective forms of life that work within these constraints (political and social institutions, culture generally).³⁵ "Practices" thus form what Bourdieu calls a "habitus," the set of responses conditioned by objective circumstances that also evolves as an improvisatory response to these conditions.³⁶ In ancient Athens, democratic practices arose under objective conditions of popular power and (relative) material abundance as responses to dilemmas created by these conditions.³⁷ For example, the practice of *parrhēsia*, or "frank speech," appears to have evolved in response to frustrations with the openness of the older form of equality of speech, *isēgoria*.³⁸ Originally a synonym for democracy,³⁹ *isēgoria* referred to the equal right of all citizens in good standing to address the Assembly. Yet this formal entitlement did not prevent perversions of the democratic process it ostensibly supported: manipulative and deceptive oratory could easily lead to poor outcomes. The practice of *parrhēsia* developed out of *isēgoria* to address these inadequacies within the terms of the Athenian commitment to an effective, participatory democracy, improvising on the democratic habitus by creating a discourse of "frank speech" that included norms of a speaker's motivation, his personal integrity, and critical appraisal of all speech, regardless of the speaker. By developing *parrhēsia* as a democratic practice from the original practice of *isēgoria*, the Athenian people found a way to establish confidence in the collective wisdom of the *dēmos* within the structures of political life that *isēgoria* had originally circumscribed.⁴⁰ Thus practices do not remain

Along these lines, Wallach 2001 takes Socrates as the vehicle for Plato's development of a way of bringing together *logos* and *ergon* under conditions of justice.

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu [1972] 1977 and Bourdieu [1980] 1990. This paragraph also draws on the use of Bourdieu by Allen 2000, 335–6.

³⁵ Bourdieu [1972] 1977, 52–65. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁷ See the discussion of political and cultural innovation in Ober 2008a.

³⁸ Here I draw on analysis by Monoson 2001, 51–63; Saxonhouse 2003, *passim*; and Markovits 2008, 47–80.

³⁹ See Herodotus' *Histories* 5.78 and discussion by Monoson 2001, 56 n. 21.

⁴⁰ Here Arnaldo Momigliano comments, "parrhēsia looks like a word invented by a vigorous many for whom democratic life meant freedom from traditional inhibitions of speech": Momigliano 1973, 260.

static but develop as innovative and improvisatory responses to felt social or political needs, conditioned by the circumstances of the community.

The example of *isēgoria* and *parrhēsia* suggests how Socrates' philosophy might also have developed as a *practice*.⁴¹ Just as the people of Athens adopted *parrhēsia* as a response to democratic inadequacies of *isēgoria*, Socrates' practice of philosophy emerged as a response to perceived inadequacies within aspects of the Athenian polis. By reconstructing Socrates' philosophy within the existing repertoire of Athenian practices, we can see how it responds to these inadequacies while remaining within the terms of the Athenian democratic habitus – an innovative and new practice related to and yet distinct from other extant practices. Socrates both is and is not of Athens. The resulting transformations might contain democratizing potential yet they also challenge the Athenian democracy and its citizens in highly demanding and perhaps even unsustainable ways. By reconstructing how Socrates took up and transformed extant practices of the Athenian democracy, this book shows how Socrates' philosophy is a practice and how understanding it as such illuminates important and novel approaches to the question of the relationship between Socrates and Athens, philosophy and democracy.⁴²

Reconstructing Socrates' philosophy from within the Athenian habitus allows us to identify general connections (and departures) without being caught up in the particularity (and contingency) of the ideas ascribed to Socrates by his various chroniclers.⁴³ We cannot trust “the exact words,”

⁴¹ There is more to say about Socrates' philosophy and *parrhēsia*, which I will discuss in Chapter 4.

⁴² Rather than repeating “Socrates' practice of philosophy,” I will simply refer to “Socrates' philosophy.” As I argue here, however, “philosophy” should be understood in terms of its being a practice related to yet distinct from the other practices of the Athenian habitus.

⁴³ This approach to reconstructing Socrates' philosophy offers an alternative to the typical approaches to understanding Socrates. Studies of Socrates have long been plagued by what one scholar calls “the doughnut problem”: “Socrates” has a hole in the middle, a gap at the most essential place because nothing remains of what Socrates might have written and we must therefore rely on the writings of his contemporaries and successors (Hughes 2011). The most influential response to this issue began with Friederich Schleiermacher's attempt to meld a definitive account of the historical Socrates by assembling the conflictual evidence available in four relatively contemporaneous sources: Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. Such an approach, however, rests on the false assumption that these sources shared today's modern sense of historical fidelity while, on the contrary, all evidence seems to indicate the opposite. Xenophon's and Plato's Socratic writings belong to the literary genre of the *logos sokratikos*, which authorized a great degree of fiction and freedom of invention; Aristophanes comedies clearly do not concern themselves with “getting the facts right” and Aristotle's discussions of Socrates are insubstantial. Given that all of our accounts of Socrates are

but we can outline Socrates' philosophy in connection and contrast to the extant practices he appears to take up. While we must still rely on the particular authors who transmitted our knowledge of Socrates, reconstructing Socrates' philosophy in terms of the Athenian habitus allows us to focus on moments within these accounts that resonate with the historical record, giving the added advantage of drawing on a much wider range of writers for evidence about that democracy. The following chapters thus begin with significant democratic practices and then reconstruct how Socrates took up and modified these practices.

BEFORE IRONY: SOCRATES' "ATOPIA"

Focusing on Socrates' philosophy as it takes up and transforms the extant practices of democratic Athens also calls attention to the dissonance produced by this philosophy. By incorporating Athenian practices into philosophy, Socrates changes them; these changes put his philosophy, however, at odds with the still regnant conventions. Reconstructing Socrates' philosophy as a practice that emerges from extant Athenian practices allows us to comprehend the range and nature of its dissonance with Athenian democratic life. Yet viewing dissonance as fundamental to Socrates' philosophy also raises the question of Socratic irony. Socrates' irony, or Socratic irony, offers perhaps the most frequent starting point for thinking about Socrates today. As Melissa Lane puts it, "That Socrates is ironic is something that many people who know little about Socrates believe."⁴⁴ In the most basic sense, "irony" has been used to name the strangeness of Socrates, his seeming inexplicability and the enigma of his motivation. This strangeness, or "incongruence," as Jill Gordon proposes, can describe a disjunct between what Socrates means and what he says, which can either be sardonic and harsh or playful and witty.⁴⁵ Yet what it means to attribute irony to Socrates has been interpreted in many ways. Leo Strauss makes irony a euphemism for Socrates' esotericism; Gregory Vlastos calls irony Socrates' method of conveying "complex" philosophical truths; and Jonathan Lear makes irony the heart of the entire Socratic teaching.⁴⁶ Irony has become the undefined concept

already interpretations of Socrates, then, the "Socratic problem" cannot be resolved on the basis of textual accounts alone. For discussion, see Kahn 1998, Clay 2000, Dorion 2011, and Long 2011.

⁴⁴ Lane 2011, 239. ⁴⁵ Gordon 1996.

⁴⁶ Strauss 1964; Vlastos 1991; Lear 2003. See Lane 2011 for a recent account of ironic interpretations of Socrates and their origins.

mysteriously informing nearly every argument about the identity of Socrates and the meaning of his actions. Viewing Socrates' philosophy as a practice, however, points to a more specific and contextual articulation of what often goes by the name of "irony." Instead of "irony" this book proposes "*atopia*," or strangeness, for describing the perplexing phenomenon of Socrates' philosophy and for many of those instances conventionally labeled as "ironic."⁴⁷

Whereas "irony" often names a deeper inconsistency or incongruence between intention (or intended meaning) and actual deed, *atopia* remains at the level of appearance, describing the disruptive effects and appearances of Socrates' philosophy.⁴⁸ In a literal sense, *atopia* means "a being out of the way" and thus, roughly something extraordinary in nature having the qualities of strangeness, oddness, or eccentricity.⁴⁹ Formed by the combination of an alpha privative and the Greek word *topos* meaning a place, position, location, or topic, *atopia* denotes a lack of place, an absence of position, a "topos-lessness." We cannot place something characterized by *atopia* – it eludes categorization, formulation, or a set geography; in fact, we can recognize *atopia* precisely because of the failure of these things to capture what appears, in contrast, *atopic*. Seeing Socrates' philosophy as *atopic*, then, emphasizes the ways in which this philosophy eluded description by his fellow Athenians. *Atopia* thus gains definition in contrast to its *topoi*, the practices endemic to a given place, location, or context. By remaining at the level of the phenomena themselves – that is, how Socrates appears within a given situation – *atopia* does not imply any essential claims about the nature, intent, or motives behind this philosophy; rather, *atopia* simply describes an unconventionality at the phenomenal level. As we will see in the following chapters,

⁴⁷ Despite relying (excessively, in my estimation) on "irony" to describe Socrates' philosophy, Vlastos does call attention to his *atopia* and thus first alerted me to its possible significance. Vlastos calls Socrates' "strangeness . . . the key to his philosophy": Vlastos 1991, 1–2. Although I use it in its Greek sense, I do not claim that *atopia* corresponds to the historical Socrates (although it is often attributed to Socrates in Plato's dialogues) but rather that it accurately describes how Socrates' philosophy might have appeared in democratic Athens. To emphasize it as a plausible plain English alternative to "irony" and for ease of reading, I will write "atopia" and "atopic" without italics in what follows.

⁴⁸ Drawing on Kierkegaard as well as psychoanalysis, Lear 2011 offers a radically different interpretation of irony from what has typically been attributed to Socrates and one that approaches what I call *atopia*. Yet as this and following chapters attest, the preponderance of evidence points to *atopia* as the keyword for encompassing (without "solving") Socrates' strangeness.

⁴⁹ See Liddell and Scott 1995.

attending to the ways in which Socrates appropriates and transforms extant practices of the Athenian democracy helps us to understand the distinctiveness of what Socrates did. By ignoring the specific contexts where Socrates' appropriations of extant practices result in his appearing strange, the label of "Socratic irony" obscures the more nuanced view facilitated by "atopia."

By rejecting "Socratic irony" as a useful concept, my argument goes significantly against the grain. Aristotle uses Socrates as an example of irony; the ironic Socrates appears in classical authors from Cicero onward; in the present, Socrates has his own definition under "irony" in the Oxford English Dictionary.⁵⁰ "Socratic irony" has an undeniable ring that has come with over two millennia of use. In fact, two dominant approaches to the study of Socrates – one approach initiated by Gregory Vlastos and another begun by Leo Strauss – structure their readings around particular understandings of irony. Yet literally ascribing irony as a translation of the Greek *eirōneia* or *eirōn* has recently come into question, and this both undermines Vlastos and Strauss's readings while also in turn illuminating another aspect of Socrates' philosophy, that is, its atopia.

In *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Gregory Vlastos introduces his concept of "complex irony" to describe Socrates' inauguration of a new era of *eirōneia*.⁵¹ Whereas in simple irony what one says does not comport to one what means, in complex irony what one says both is and is not what one means. As Vlastos puts it, "its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another" (1991, 31). Vlastos explains this with the example of Alcibiades and Socrates:

In the currently understood sense of pederastic love Socrates does *not* love Alcibiades or any of the other youths he pursues. But in the other sense which *eran* [to love; loving] has in the doctrine and practice of Socratic eros, he does love them: their physical beauty gives special relish to his affectionate encounters with their minds. (1991, 41)

Socrates loves Alcibiades and he doesn't – he does in fact love him, but in his own way not in the conventional sense. The irony of Socrates' loving

⁵⁰ See Lane 2006 and Lane 2011 for discussion of the sources and traditions of Socratic irony.

⁵¹ Vlastos' discussion of irony originally appeared in Vlastos 1987 but was incorporated into Vlastos 1991. Quotations in this paragraph refer to Vlastos 1991. Vlastos stands nearly alone among philosophers in his approach to irony, although see the modifications of Vassiliou 1999 and Vassiliou 2002 as well as the criticisms in Gordon 1996 and Gordon 1999. Nehamas 1998 follows Vlastos in part and I address this later.

lies in this interplay of affirmation and negation. Thus Socrates does not so much “out-sophist the sophists” by deceiving and tricking his interlocutors; rather, Socrates perplexes them, but with puzzles that bear working through. As Vlastos asserts, irony serves as a vehicle for the profession of ignorance, but this becomes intelligible if we understand Socrates’ disavowal of one kind of knowledge as “claiming another in the same breath” (1991, 13).⁵²

A contrasting argument about – or, rather, assertion for – a particular view of Socratic irony comes from Leo.⁵³ Strauss asserts that irony is “a kind of dissimulation, or of untruthfulness” (1964, 51). Connecting his definition to Aristotle’s, Strauss argues that irony denotes “the noble dissimulation of one’s worth, of one’s superiority . . . it follows that irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people”; Socrates’ irony may consist of a “byword,” that is, a commonly attributed but rarely considered epithet: “where there is smoke, there is fire” (ibid.). Strauss thus reads Socratic irony as conveying both an exoteric and an esoteric meaning. As Melissa Lane puts it: “For Strauss, Socratic irony is not just a graceful manner of speech. It is designed to make its true meaning accessible only to some, and to shield this meaning from those who are capable of understanding neither the irony nor the philosophy which it protects.”⁵⁴

Vlastos and Strauss both begin by assuming that Socrates means something different from what he says; irony describes the distance between the literal and the deeper, esoteric meanings. Yet neither questions whether the ironic Socrates actually exists, that is, whether or not a strong basis for this assumption about Socrates appears in accounts of Socrates’ philosophy. In two articles, Melissa Lane has advanced powerful arguments against this assumption. In the first, Lane argues against interpreting Socratic *eirōneia*, the Greek word on which the analyses of Vlastos and Strauss more or less implicitly rely, as Socratic irony. Lane separates a later tradition begun with Aristotle that propagated Socratic irony as meaning one thing while saying another from *eirōneia* in the Platonic dialogues, which possesses a different meaning. In the dialogues,

⁵² Vlastos elaborates this concept further in his essay “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” reprinted in Vlastos 1994, 39–66.

⁵³ Strauss 1964. Quotations in this paragraph refer to this edition. Similar remarks appear in Strauss’s 1958 lectures on Socrates, “The Problem of Socrates,” reprinted in Strauss 1989, 103–83. See also the approaches of Bernardete 1989, Bloom [1968] 1991, and Clay 2000.

⁵⁴ Lane 2011, 7.

Lane argues, “the (purported) purpose of someone called an *eirōn* is to *conceal* what is not said” whereas “the (purported) purpose of someone called an ironist is to *convey* what is not said.”⁵⁵ Moreover, Lane argues that we cannot take the ascription of *eirōneia* to Socrates in Plato’s dialogues at face value – these all come from unreliable interlocutors (e.g., Thrasymachus and Alcibiades) and have no specific substantiation in the text.⁵⁶ Thus Lane concludes that only later interpreters such as Aristotle and Cicero have bequeathed us “a portrait of Socratic irony which is utterly unsupported by the incidences of *eirōneia* in Plato” (2006, 80). *Eirōneia* means nothing like the irony we assume it to mean.

In a second article, Lane argues that little sense remains in the notion of “Socratic irony” once deprived of support in Plato’s work; she advises reconsidering any tradition which imputes philosophical significance to Socratic irony.⁵⁷ Three elements, Lane argues, typically form any analysis of Socratic irony: first, Socratic self-deprecation (as exemplified in Plato and described by Aristotle and Cicero); second, the meaning of *eirōneia* as ascribed by Platonic characters to Socrates; third, the apparent use by Plato’s Socrates of ironic praise (2011, 12). Lane systematically shows how each of these arguments fails: Interpreters insist that disavowals of knowledge (i.e., self-deprecation) must equate to irony without a strong basis; interpreters trust interlocutors such as Thrasymachus and Alcibiades to give accurate assessments of Socrates’ character despite these interlocutors’ highly questionable actions and other descriptions; and interpreters assume that Socrates’ terms of address actually connote irony, again without basis. Thus while Lane admits that “moments of irony” may appear in dialogues involving Socrates, she denies that “‘Socratic irony’ is a central organizing feature of Socrates as depicted by Plato” (2011, 26); without any textual basis, we might better leave irony behind.

While Lane’s argument is compelling, however, her desire to leave irony behind does not speak to what originally motivated interpreters to call Socrates ironic – that Socrates is very, very strange. Leaving irony behind does not help us deal with the elusiveness of understanding Socrates and his philosophy. Indeed, one of the achievements shared by Vlastos and Strauss was to make a great deal of this elusiveness and to show through the gravity and cogency of their own scholarship the

⁵⁵ Lane 2006.

⁵⁶ Although with one exception in Plato’s *Apology* (37e) where Socrates proposes that he might be interpreted as ironic. I discuss this later.

⁵⁷ Lane 2011. Quotations in this paragraph refer to this edition.

depths of Socrates (and Plato and Xenophon).⁵⁸ Vlastos and Strauss's arguments begin from the experience of dissonance between Socrates' words and deeds and among his various incarnations in the dialogues. At the beginning of *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Vlastos recounts how he discarded a book manuscript on Socrates because it seemed to occlude Socrates' strangeness; Vlastos recognized that he must push Socrates' paradoxes to the "dead center" of any new book.⁵⁹ Along these lines, Strauss also emphasizes how Socrates' own irony renders any judgment about the dialogues' content or teaching provisional. While Strauss still seems to retain a holistic understanding of the dialogues that presents a strong reading of Socrates denuded of his strangeness, the elusiveness of Strauss's own approach would seem to indicate that he too continued to battle with Socrates' atopia.⁶⁰

How and why both Strauss and Vlastos begin with Socrates' strangeness and then efface this strangeness through their own interpretations exceeds the scope of this book, but I have dwelled on their particular readings because they point to the initial experience of Socrates' atopia. A more recent interpreter of Socrates' irony, Alexander Nehamas, offers one final approach that indicates what an atopic understanding of Socrates' philosophy might look like and why atopia better describes what has typically gone by the name of irony.⁶¹ Reading Socrates as a model for what Nehamas calls "the art of living," Nehamas emphasizes the openness of whatever teaching Socrates seems to offer. Socrates' irony – Nehamas retains this word with unfortunate consequences – means that he leaves the process of learning "absolutely indeterminate" (1998, 11); his "deeply ironical relationship with the reader" makes Socrates a tantalizing but ever receding model: Socrates' irony always remained concealed and inscrutable, a "form of silence" that allows for unique possibilities of "imitation" (1998, 13). Unfortunately, retaining a concept of irony shadowed by Vlastos' argument leads Nehamas to impute a deeper meaning beneath Socrates' mask rather than tarrying with the strangeness of the mask itself. Nehamas assumes that Socrates intends to convey a "teaching" about the way to live and irony simply enriches this account. Nehamas recognizes the irreducible ambivalence of Socrates'

⁵⁸ On "the return to the ancients" as part of Strauss's project, see Zuckert and Zuckert 2006, 27–57.

⁵⁹ Vlastos 1991, 2. ⁶⁰ This inference emerges from Ferrari 1997.

⁶¹ Nehamas 1998. Nehamas 1999 also touches on many of these themes. Quotations in this paragraph refer to Nehamas 1998.

philosophy, but Nehamas cannot help filling this void: “I shall try to articulate and give voice to Socrates’ silence,” he writes, “better, I shall try to open a space where his silence can be heard” (1998, 98). Nehamas wants to dwell with Socrates’ strangeness, but he still finds it necessary to “articulate and give voice” to it; “hearing silence” requires Nehamas to put words in the mouth of an enigmatic Socrates, words that initiate the project of the art of living.

Still, Nehamas’ account draws attention to the impossibility of pinning down Socrates. More than Vlastos and Strauss, Nehamas acknowledges the silence of Socrates, that we cannot fathom the desires and motivations behind his philosophy, and that we can only deal with the strangeness of its appearance. Beginning with irony leads Nehamas astray: Assuming a teaching “down there” overlooks the possibility that no “there” may exist; Socrates may not have a latent teaching, even one as apparently contentless as Nehamas’ “art of living.”⁶² In contrast, *atopia* captures the “undecidability” about whether such a teaching exists or not. As we have seen, Socrates provokes his interlocutors and readers to ask questions of themselves but he resists providing answers to these questions; what answers that do appear lose certainty with further questions and so on and so on. In other words, we can never apprehend Socrates, what he demands of his fellow Athenians, or what he demands of us with any finality. Socrates remains strange.⁶³

The appellation of irony thus takes us away from the confounding reality of what Socrates did, a reality made visible by situating Socrates’ philosophy in the extant practices of democratic Athens. In Jonathan Lear’s words, “what is almost impossible for us to hold on to is the idea that everything about Socrates is right there on the surface.”⁶⁴ In other words, before irony is strangeness. To put this assertion in more specific context, let me turn to Plato’s *Apology* and the single instance in Plato’s dialogues when Socrates describes himself as ironic.⁶⁵ After the

⁶² There is a *possibility* that no “there” exists, that is, that Socrates possesses no ultimate teaching; yet I take this possibility not as an answer to the question of Socrates’ philosophy so much as an insight that should chasten any overconfident assertion about what Socrates believed or taught.

⁶³ Gordon 1999, 117–33, usefully points out that we can assume Socrates seeks to turn others to philosophy; however, her account still remains unhelpfully mired in the language of irony.

⁶⁴ Lear 1998.

⁶⁵ As Melissa Lane points out, the word for irony, *eirōneia*, does not appear in Xenophon or Aristophanes: Lane 2011, 239. Morrison 1987 notes Socratic ironies in Xenophon but also contends that irony is not important to Xenophon’s (or Plato’s) depiction.

jury has voted to convict him, Socrates proposes, hypothetically, that he might stay in Athens if he were to cease practicing philosophy. He responds:

Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss excellence [*aretē*] every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not a worthwhile life for a human being, you will believe me even less. (37e – 38a, 33)⁶⁶

This passage is fascinating for a number of reasons. First, we have to note that Socrates explicitly does not entertain that he cease believing whatever controversial doctrines he may hold; he only suggests his response to a change in his activities. The situation that might provoke a charge of being ironic does not relate to a disjunct within Socrates' words – as Strauss and Vlastos would have it – but rather between his words and his deeds. What might prompt Athenians to call Socrates ironic lies in the strangeness of his activities, for which no explanation would suffice.

Second, and along the same lines, Socrates introduces irony not as an accurate description but as an errant judgment, a misapprehension of the reasoning Socrates offers for practicing philosophy. "Irony" names, for Socrates, the *false response* to the perplexity his practice of philosophy creates. As Christina Tarnopolsky puts it: "Socrates utters the truth as he sees it. Yet, for this very reason, he ends up appearing strange, annoying, nonsensical, mocking, and thus ironical to the very Athenian audience he refuses to flatter."⁶⁷

Third, Socrates introduces irony to describe the evasion of argumentation. Calling somebody ironic functions like a kind of disavowal.⁶⁸ While the Athenians know that Socrates speaks sincerely, they refuse to act on this knowledge. Calling Socrates ironic fails to confront the strangeness of his activity, a strangeness resulting from the disjunct between the arguments that Socrates proposes, arguments that strike their listeners as cogent, and the unreflective commitments to inherited beliefs with which these arguments are at odds. In the context of this

⁶⁶ Translation modified. All citations to Plato's dialogue refer to the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the page number of the translations in Cooper, ed. 1997 unless otherwise indicated.

⁶⁷ Tarnopolsky 2010, 118. Quoted in Lombardini 2012, 8.

⁶⁸ On disavowal, see Shulman 2008.

passage, as John Lombardini describes, “Socrates’ conception of piety . . . is more demanding than the traditional notion of piety . . . it requires that he actively serve the gods in his everyday words and deeds.”⁶⁹ Calling Socrates ironic evades the pain of seeing one’s own life implicated by Socrates’ philosophy.

This moment from the *Apology* thus points to the intersection of Socrates’ philosophy, its seeming inexplicability, and the Athenians’ difficulty responding to – let alone understanding – the implications and consequences of this activity. From this reading, we can see the logic behind Alcibiades and Callicles calling Socrates “ironic”: both recognize the disturbing effects of his philosophy; both also seek to evade the consequences, clinging to their visions of the good life despite the questions Socrates raises. Yet the appellation of irony, by imputing a teaching or a deeper meaning, also refuses to confront the strangeness that attends Socrates’ philosophy. The willingness (and courage) to appear strange by questioning the constitutive commitments of Athens accompanies interlocutors such as Theaetetus, Meno, and even Apollodorus and Aristodemus. By reconstructing Socrates’ philosophy as it takes up and transforms extant practices of Athenian democracy (while setting aside our own attachment to irony in the process), we too can encounter and tarry with Socrates’ atopia.

TRANSLATING SOCRATES

Confronting the atopia of Socrates’ philosophy positions us to ask the question of this book: “What would Socrates do?” This question may come off as glib, as an audience-flattering imitation of the original, “What would Jesus do?” Indeed, the question threatens to trivialize Socrates not to mention the difficult work of bridging his ancient Athenian context and our twenty-first century one.⁷⁰ Yet despite these risks, asking this question is useful and productive. First, it focuses us on an essential tension between two moments of Socrates: the strangeness or dissonance (atopia) produced by his philosophy and the authority he accrues with his interlocutors (as well as the authority he has accumulated in the history of interpretations). In other words, if the basic movement of Socrates’ philosophizing is toward questioning that takes

⁶⁹ Lombardini 2012, 8.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., the warnings of Waldron 1996 as well as discussion in Wallach 2001, 393.

up and transforms extant practices,⁷¹ this often runs against the tendency of interpreters to locate authority in Socrates (as we saw in the tendency to occlude Socrates' strangeness with the logic of irony). A tension is created by the simultaneous elusiveness of Socrates' philosophy and the conclusive, summarizing practice of interpretation. Just as interpreters defer to the literal, "red letter" words of Jesus as the source of salvation, so too interpreters often take Socrates' words as gospel – or impute a gospel beneath or behind his words. As will become clearer in what follows, however, this approach to Socrates – not to mention Jesus – denies the challenges of interpreting a figure whose words come only mediated by his near contemporaries, who wrote nothing, and whose conversations emerge only in specially marked historical circumstances among particular interlocutors. By asking "What would Socrates do?" in light of a reconstructed Socrates, we can overturn the conventional wisdom that treats Socrates as an unquestioned authority while also calling attention to this tendency as a misguided approach.⁷²

Second, "What would Socrates do?" is a question that remains open throughout the book – and one that must remain open. Given the atopia of Socrates' philosophy, its dissonance with the forms of life surrounding it, definitively answering the question of what Socrates might do forecloses the persistent strangeness of Socrates. Atopia is never one thing: it depends upon a shifting context; what may seem strange today will not necessarily appear the same tomorrow. Potential responses to the question of what Socrates might do thus remain in the conditional: if a given *topos* prevails, philosophy might move in this direction; if not, then taking up these practices would not be atopic.

Third, asking "What would Socrates do?" opens new horizons of social and political action. Atopia entails a level of indeterminacy not often welcomed by modern thinkers. While the dissonance of Socrates' philosophy can serve to revitalize politics by opening previously closed questions and raising new issues to public scrutiny, it also shadows every attempt to "solve Socrates" and move his philosophy irrevocably into (or out of) the realm of politics. Dissonance may provoke rupture and conflict; it may well undermine the very conditions of its possibility.

⁷¹ As Cooper 2012 writes: "Socrates always takes the role of questioner of others' opinions, specifically on issues concerning what is of value in a human life" (Cooper 2012, 42).

⁷² My approach thus parallels Bonnie Honig's recent intervention in receptions of Antigone (Honig 2013). Like Honig, I seek to interrupt a certain Socrates and reconstruct an alternative that can challenge the political insights that the former Socrates had been used to authorize.

“What would Socrates do?” thus persists as a question: It challenges us to tireless critical examination of ourselves and the conditions of our existence; still, it remains importantly apart from the politics (or conclusions) that result, maintaining reflective distance alongside engagement that might contribute to a more vibrant political life.

This manner of asking “What would Socrates do?” also suggests a significant departure from the predominant approach for considering “the politics of Socrates” and their relevance today.⁷³ Socrates and his philosophy have often been invoked as responses to the political challenges and dilemmas of the day, but “Socrates” has almost always been taken as a lonely figure of virtue positioned against the unthinking and corrupted masses. Beginning with the “Socratic Movement” immediately after the death of Socrates, the figure of Socrates became an exemplar of the good life, modeling a dedication to justice to which all people should aspire.⁷⁴ In the Italian Renaissance, Francesco Petrarch and Marcello Ficino both promoted Socrates as a paragon of virtue for their Christian humanist philosophies.⁷⁵ A few centuries later, Voltaire wrote a play about Socrates, depicting him as a symbol of the value of independent thought amid societal dogma. Hegel located a crucial pivot of his account of the development of Western philosophy in Socrates’ incipient rationalism leveled against Athenian traditions. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, Matthew Arnold, and J.S. Mill all found Socrates exemplary for his iconoclasm. Socrates has also been invoked as a model response to dilemmas in modern liberal democracies.⁷⁶ Michael Walzer takes Socrates as the ideal “connected critic” who risked his life in order to call Athens to its best self. Socrates sought to “question, examine, test, and reprove” the people of Athens “not only for their

⁷³ Most recent studies of Socrates’ politics focus not on his political activities but rather his political philosophy (e.g., Griswold 2011). This is unhelpful for the present approach. For two exceptions to the trend, see Hansen 1996 and Ober 2005, 157–70.

⁷⁴ See the essays collected in Vander Waerdt, ed. 1994 as well as Long 1988. Cf. James Miller’s reading of the history of philosophy through the lens of Socrates’ “examined life” in Miller 2011.

⁷⁵ See the discussion by Melissa Lane in Lane 2001. This paragraph borrows from her examples extensively. For individual studies of many of the uses of Socrates, see the volumes edited by Michael Trapp: Trapp, ed. 2007a and Trapp, ed. 2007b. Cf. Monoson 2011.

⁷⁶ In addition to Walzer and Villa, I should also mention the work of Martha Nussbaum and Alexander Nehamas. Nussbaum endorses Socrates most fervently in her defenses of liberal education and the humanities: Nussbaum 1997 and Nussbaum 2010. Alexander Nehamas adduces Socrates as the first and foremost teacher of “philosophy as the art of living” in Nehamas 1998.

own sakes but also for the sake of the city.”⁷⁷ Along these lines, Dana Villa argues for an embrace of “Socratic citizenship” as “dissident citizenship” that “teaches the art of estrangement,” questioning political dogmas through “ceaseless renewal and provocation.”⁷⁸ For both of these commentators, then, Socrates’ ultimate task lies in bringing citizens to think what they are doing, entailing not political withdrawal but a new kind of activism.

All of these invocations of Socrates stand as reasons for a turn to Socrates, yet I argue that they misunderstand Socrates’ philosophy by focusing exclusively on Socrates taken apart from the extant practices of democratic Athens. At the most basic level, such a focus occludes seeing how Socrates’ philosophy both requires and involves others: Socrates’ philosophy takes up and transforms practices that are social; philosophy thus takes place within and among other participants in social and political life. Most recent turns to Socrates have ignored this context for philosophy, instead framing the figure of Socrates as representing philosophy in a contest with politics.⁷⁹

Seeing how philosophy could take up aspects of Athenian political life and transform them depends upon understanding the differentiated structures of political activity in Athens and thus the ways in which citizens were engaged in political life across different formal and informal institutions, straightforwardly public spaces and less clearly delineated spaces. Athenian democracy depended on sustained and attentive participation, and the democracy met this challenge by enlisting and engaging its citizens through a variety of ingenious and innovative practices.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Walzer 2002, 13. Herbert Marcuse invokes Socrates in very similar terms as a critic connected to Athenian democracy: Marcuse 1964.

⁷⁸ Villa 2001, 3, 15, 58. For a reading of Socrates along similar lines, see also Kateb 2006.

⁷⁹ As Villa points out, this understanding of the separation between philosophy and politics also frames two of the most influential approaches to Socrates in the last century, those of Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss. See Villa 1999, 246–298. I treat Arendt’s complex response to Socrates in Chapter 5.

⁸⁰ As Osborne 2010 notes, the study of Athenian democracy has shifted in the past 60 years to focus on how democracy worked at the everyday level, not just in the institutions for which it is rightly famous. Whereas previous scholarship studied the Athenian constitution apart from the practice of politics, recent work has explored what was previously neglected: the importance of local politics at the level of the *deme*, Athens’ “village-like communities” that formed the building block of the whole democratic structure; democracy as a way of thought; the grounding of our understanding of Athenian democracy in its material conditions; how Athenian law worked in practice; the politics of Athenian religion; and so forth.

“Citizenship” in democratic Athens was not limited to voting, making political contributions, or attending the occasional public hearing, as it often is today; instead, Athenians participated in the life of their community at nearly every turn of daily life: in conversation with their neighbors with whom they served on local councils, on rotating juries or administrative positions at the polis level, or by serving in the army or raising funds for a festival. Simply in order to function, the system of Athenian democracy required the sharing of information and common concern; it necessitated political involvement at multiple levels ranging from neighborhoods to nation; and its civic rituals and customs had intrinsic political functions. Athens developed structures and practices at every level of society to meet these needs.⁸¹ In this community, citizenship did not exist as one possible pursuit but as an unquestionable way of life. As Martin Ostwald describes the Athenian citizen: “No act of his can make him an active member of the community: the degree to which he is a citizen is not determined by himself, but by the expectations of the community of which he is a part in terms of the contributions he can make to its functioning.”⁸² By pitting Socrates against apathetic (or overly enthusiastic) other citizens, we miss how different kinds of political activity found a place across the distinctive sites of Athens’s political structure.

While this book asks, “What would Socrates do?” much of the argument focuses on reconstructing what Socrates did. The complexity and variety of Athenian democratic life necessitates involved treatment; the historicity of *atopia*, moreover, requires different responses to the question of “What would Socrates do?” at different times. With an eye toward considering Socrates for the twenty-first century, however, this book undertakes a comparative project: to seek to understand, on its own terms, the conditions of democratic life in ancient Athens; to reconstruct Socrates’ philosophy within those conditions; and to translate this reconstruction of Socrates to the conditions of democratic life today, noting the “poor translations” – losses of meaning, of nuance, of poetic significance – that come up along the way while nonetheless striving to offer something intelligible for the present.

⁸¹ Josiah Ober has recently provided the most compelling argument for how widespread, both vertically and horizontally, participation contributed to the exemplary function of Athenian democracy: Ober 2008a. See also the more schematic account of participation by Sinclair 1988.

⁸² Ostwald 1996, 56.

How then can Socrates speak to today's democratic times? Each of the following chapters develops a facet of the reconstructed Socrates in conversation with a recent political interpretation of Socrates advanced by the likes of Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Hannah Arendt, and James Baldwin. These thinkers take up Socrates as a negative or positive example for contemporary political life; these examples thus remind us of the "conventional wisdom" about Socrates predominant today and provide a basis for rethinking received doctrine in conversation with the reconstructed Socrates developed over the course of the book. In other words, reading Socrates with and against Butler, Foucault, Latour, et al. has a twofold function. First, these interpretations help us to situate *ourselves* – this book's readership – in a common world with a shared history of collective life. Situating ourselves in the present allows us to identify a set of political problems we all share as well as a set of political resources at our disposal with which to address these problems. These practices can help us to identify a common problem and then suggest means of mobilizing common resources to offer one way of addressing this problem. The significance of Socrates' philosophy for today depends on the *topoi* we can identify and the extant practices we might take up and transform.

Second, situating ourselves can also serve as a way of resisting overly facile importation of the reconstructed Socrates. Political life in the twenty-first century faces challenges that Socrates cannot help address, yet if we fail to understand the peculiar landscape of today's political world, we risk forgetting the uniqueness of our particular moment (not to mention Socrates'). To use the metaphor of translation, an able translator not only knows the nuances and complexities of the language *from which* she translates but also those of the language *into which* she translates.⁸³ This is not to say that either language is transparent or without its own contradictions and disagreements: misunderstandings will occur; shades of meaning intended by the translator will be missed by the audience (or the translator will not anticipate an audience's distinctive position of understanding). Every translation risks misapprehension. Yet by situating ourselves and beginning to reflect on the position from which we attempt to understand, in comparative perspective, a radically different political world, we become aware of the possibility of mistranslation and wary of anything that appears too easily

⁸³ See the illuminating reflections on translation in Benjamin 1968 [1955], 69–82, and Steiner 1975.

conveyed, imported, appropriated, or simply understood. Even while we seek to reconstruct Socrates and in the process say something about what Socrates did in democratic Athens and what Socrates might do today, we cannot risk forgetting the residual strangeness of Socrates and the need to keep any tendencies to authorize a particular Socrates at bay. Every Socrates is but a “Socrates,” an interpretation with all the provisionality and impermanence of the word.

As will become clear in the rest of the book, the Socrates Cafés offer at best an imperfect translation of the reconstructed Socrates, yet their concrete example of revivifying Socrates in the everyday practices of ordinary people nonetheless inspires my argument. Reconstructing the full range of Socrates’ philosophy in the following five chapters allows us to come to terms with the ambivalent relationship between philosophy and democracy, to do justice to the objections of Stone and Wolin while also building on the promise embodied by the Socrates Cafés. It also allows us to connect (and also to complicate) the theoretical insights of contemporary uses of Socrates to the ongoing practices of the Cafés (as well as the Clemente Courses discussed in [Chapter 7](#)) and thus see how such practices could be deepened and broadened by this book’s account of Socrates’ philosophy. To anticipate what working through the reconstruction of Socrates will allow readers to recognize, let me briefly discuss three interlocking implications of the practices suggested by the Cafés.

First, the Cafés illustrate practices of self-examination that are neither solitary nor essentially private. For participants in the Cafés, self-examination not only can occur but needs to occur among others; we can thus see how one can take up philosophy among and along with others. Part of what motivates this self-examination is simply the desire not to be alone, to pass time in the company of others; yet the Cafés show how this desire can lead people to join a common project of inquiry, to link their own desires for self-examination to the collective undertaking of creating and sustaining the conversations of the Socrates Cafés. These Cafés thus model a shared activity that is public, collective, and engaged in the world.

Whereas students of politics who chart declines in participation and “diminished democracy” in the United States have long lamented the basic apathy about politics discovered by their surveys,⁸⁴ the Cafés

⁸⁴ Cf. Skocpol 2003, Berger 2011, Eliasoph 1998. Berger focuses his argument on a critique of the overly broad invocations of “civic engagement,” which he in turn breaks down to political, civil, and moral engagement. Under his definitions, my proposed form

suggest a way of revitalizing associational life not through external interventions but rather through creating spaces for collective inquiry to take place – and then standing back and watching the momentum accumulate. Moreover, while the conversations within the Cafés develop organically without any set curriculum, they invariably address the conditions and possibilities of shared public life. The Cafés thus become intellectual incubators for political action, sites for imaginative and rigorous exploration of how we could live together well.

In this way, the Socrates Cafés suggest a new mode of civic engagement that situates potential political activity outside formal institutions and in such a way that appeals to all types of people. In this way the Cafés offer an image of “decentered” civic engagement: opening spaces for popular participation to differentiated spaces and different groups of citizens that might then allow for meaningful political activity outside the conventional spaces of politics.⁸⁵ Decentering such engagement to informal spaces can offer an alternative to the dominant model of political participation that consists of voting or making campaign contributions, creating a recourse for citizens wishing to become involved in political life but soured on conventional institutions. By staging discussions in alternative spaces, the Socrates Cafés create, in effect, “a polis within a polis,” an organized association oriented toward the public realm yet opposed to the public realm in the name of greater inclusion or openness. Moreover, the Cafés show how civic engagement can take place outside the traditional spaces of the secondary school or university.⁸⁶ The example of the Socrates Cafés thus helps us to imagine how citizens might disagree in productive and active ways and open the public realm to more participative forms of deliberation.

The themes of collective self-examination and decentering of different forms of participation point to a third promise in the example of the Socrates Cafés: The Cafés politicize philosophy by showing its potential relevance to public life. This understanding of philosophy runs against a

of participation most likely would qualify as “moral engagement,” but I also show how this engagement took place in political spaces and used political language in ways that gave it undeniable political effects. Thus, I suggest that the distinctions that Berger draws rather sharply in theory do not always persist in practice.

⁸⁵ For fundamental suggestions about decentering democracy, see Young 2000. See also Warren 2002 and Urbinati 2000.

⁸⁶ This offers an alternative to arguments such as Gutman 1999 and Nussbaum 2010. Nussbaum adduces Socrates as an essential element of this education in Nussbaum 1997 and Nussbaum 2010.

tradition identified by Wolin as beginning with Socrates, one that also finds advocates in contemporary thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Michael Walzer.⁸⁷ Both Rorty and Walzer seek to separate philosophy from democracy lest the former overwhelm or silence the latter; both see the pursuit of truth that is characteristic of philosophy as running contrary to the opinion-mongering of politics.⁸⁸ Contrary to this tradition, however, the Cafés illuminate a kind of philosophy that can enhance (even while also threatening to undermine) political life. Philosophy becomes an avenue for improving public life as participants take up and develop politically relevant skills such as deliberation and judgment. The Cafés suggest that philosophy is not antagonistic to political stability but can rather be pursued by citizens and noncitizens with public benefit. While these practices differ from more formal organizing efforts and do not enlist the explicitly political passions of their participants, the Socrates Cafés nonetheless cultivate an appreciation for associational life that holds a promise of revitalizing civil society and the trust networks and civic associations upon which vibrant political life depends.

Along these lines, the Socrates Cafés and Earl Shorris' *Clemente Courses* (which I discuss more in [Chapter 7](#)) offer promising examples of how Socrates can inspire people to realize the promises of political life. Both practices also highlight the usefulness of reconstructing Socrates in two ways. First, with a richer notion of Socrates' philosophy in hand, it becomes possible to resist some of the overly facile aspects of the appropriation; the reconstructed Socrates also illuminates the deeper logic of Socrates-inspired practices today in ways that can motivate a more far-reaching and potent practice. Second, the importance of explicitly translating ancient practice to today's political situation becomes clear for considering questions of civic engagement and participation in today's radically more open (and diverse) political world.

While this book shows how the reconstructed Socrates might be potentially useful for political life today, it also argues that any translation of Socrates' philosophy must also translate the dissonance-producing aspects of this practice. A comprehensive reconstruction of Socrates' activity helps us to understand the dissonance produced by Socrates' philosophy as it moves against democratic life as well as its resistance

⁸⁷ For the tradition's beginning in Plato, see Arendt 1990, Rorty 1990 and Walzer 1981 present arguments about the necessary separation of philosophy from democracy.

⁸⁸ See also similar criticisms by Wolin 1990, Latour 1999, and Rancière 1991. I discuss these more in what follows.

to contemporary paradigms of citizenship, civic education, and democratization. While this dissonance can serve to revitalize political life by opening previously closed questions and raising new issues to public scrutiny, it also shadows every attempt to “solve Socrates” and move his philosophy irrevocably into the political realm. “What would Socrates do?” remains a question: It challenges us to tireless critical examination of ourselves and the conditions of our existence; still, it remains importantly apart from the politics that result, maintaining reflective distance alongside any political engagement.

Beyond “Socratic citizenship”: Transforming accountability

The unexamined life is not worth living. This remains perhaps the most famous line “uttered” by “Socrates.” Of course, it was not “uttered” but rather written and not by the actual Socrates – at least not as far as we know – but by Plato, the creator of the “Socrates” in his *Apology of Socrates*.¹ Xenophon’s version of Socrates’ speech to the jury has no comparable line nor does anything similar appear in Aristophanes. Yet its questionable veracity and provenance notwithstanding, “the unexamined life is not worth living” has become the watchword of Socrates and a key component of his legacy.² “From Socrates to Nietzsche,” as James Miller puts it, “the examined life” has signified the challenge of living a philosophical life, of not just pursuing wisdom but *living* it.³ The unexamined life is not worth living because the unexamined life is the unfree life, the life still constrained by inherited prejudices and false opinions, the life not actually lived. Philosophy promises a way to understand human nature, human values, and thus the best possible human life; in this sense, philosophy offers an art of living.⁴ Philosophy as the art of living, as Alexander Nehamas writes, began with Socrates.⁵

Yet not only does the ideal of the “examined life” constitute a significant strain of ethical thinking running from Socrates until the present;

¹ Moreover, while “an unexamined life is not worth living” has become the best known Socratic catchphrase (at least in English), a more apt translation would be “the unexamined life is not a worthwhile life for a human being.”

² Two recent accounts of philosophy in this spirit give a sense of Socrates’ diverse influence: Miller 2011 and Taylor 2009b. Cf. Taylor 2009a.

³ Miller 2011.

⁴ On philosophy as a way of life, see Hadot [1995] 2002 and Hadot [1987] 1995 as well as Cooper 2012.

⁵ Nehamas 1998, 6.

it also offers the basic orientation toward Socrates that has inspired invocations of Socrates as an exemplary citizen.⁶ As Danielle Allen writes, quoting Dana Villa: “A Socratic citizen develops an examined life, which ‘does not consist in tidying up our intellectual and moral household, ridding ourselves of those false beliefs which clutter our moral self-understanding. Rather, it consists in the endless and seemingly circular questioning of the basic terms of our moral culture, those whose meaning seems self-evident and unarguable’.”⁷ The “Socratic citizenship” approach has claimed that Socrates introduced a form of critical individualism as well as “intellectual sobriety” as new standards for justice and civic obligation, thereby creating “dissident citizenship” that is “essentially critical yet not fundamentally anti-democratic.”⁸ “Socratic citizenship” is best characterized, according to Susan Bickford, “by the notion of ‘dissolvent rationality,’ where what is dissolved through the use of reason is the lazy or dogmatic assumption that the beliefs we hold are true.”⁹ Examination thus becomes the practice that all citizens ought to have; it promises a set of critical capacities that could improve the activities of citizens by helping them to avoid injustice and exercise better judgment.

Recent studies of ancient Athens have also begun to detail how Socrates’ philosophy emerged from – and was thus clearly indebted to – political practices of accountability in the democratic regime. As Martin Ostwald has exhaustively shown, popular institutions of accountability arose alongside the development of popular sovereignty in the fifth century BCE in Athens.¹⁰ Two specific practices, *dokimasia* and *euthunai*, have received special attention. *Dokimasia* named the preliminary scrutiny that any Athenian citizen had to undergo before assuming office; *euthunai* described the final accounting upon leaving office. Both took place before a jury of Athenians selected by lot. Because virtually every male

⁶ Dana Villa has offered the most comprehensive treatment of “Socratic Citizenship” in Villa 2001. See also Wallach 1988, Brown 2005, and Kateb 2006. Susan Bickford’s critical discussion of Villa has also informed my own: Bickford 2009.

⁷ Allen 2006, 131, quoting Villa 2001, 20. ⁸ Villa 2001, 5.

⁹ Bickford 2009, 126. Bickford’s essay also sets out to critique “Socratic Citizenship” from an angle different from my critique here, focusing on Socrates’ use of stories and inspirational power while not discussing the limitations inherent in any discussion of “citizenship.” Nonetheless, I have found her essay helpful.

¹⁰ Ostwald 1987, especially 40–77. On accountability and institutions in Athens, see Roberts 1982, Sinclair 1988, and Hansen 1999 as well as other literature cited in Euben 1997, 93 n. 9. This paragraph relies heavily on the treatment of accountability in Euben 1997, 94–102, for which I am grateful.

citizen would serve in office during his life, each one could expect to be held accountable. Moreover, as Josiah Ober writes, *dokimasia* and *euthunai* were only "the most obvious and formal manifestations of the generalized power of the Athenian masses to review the actions, behavior and political status of all citizens."¹¹ What J. Peter Euben calls "a culture of scrutiny and accountability"¹² was the Athenian norm.¹³

Work on accountability in ancient Athens has two implications for the present study. For one, identifying Socrates' philosophy with a general "culture of accountability" in Athens suggests an argument against "Socratic citizenship" as a paradigm for understanding Socrates' philosophy. If, as scholarship has sought to show, citizens in democratic Athens were always already engaged in holding one another to account, both through formal institutions such as the *euthunai* and *dokimasia*, and informally throughout their political lives, then Socrates' call to examination and critical scrutiny did not constitute a hugely significant departure from the norm. Instead, Socrates takes up and transforms these practices of accountability: philosophy emerges from the particular situation of the democratic polis; even while it transforms aspects of this political life it remains indebted to it.¹⁴ At the very least, it would be an egregious exaggeration to pit "Socratic citizenship" as a practice of examination and scrutiny against the "unthinking mass" that lacks such activities altogether. It would be much less of an exaggeration to say, as Frederick Whelan writes, that Socrates' "commitment to intellect itself reflects Athenian values."¹⁵ Or as Euben puts it, "Even where Socrates seems to violate a democratic principle . . . he can be read as co-opting another."¹⁶ While the magnitude of departure from these democratic principles remains open to interpretation, it is a matter of degrees, not a revolutionary opposition.

¹¹ Ober 1989, 329. *Eisangelia*, or impeachment, is another significant institutional mechanism of accountability. Sinclair (1988, 159) also notes *apophasis*, a report of investigation that could be employed against political enemies or potential threats to the democracy; *probolē*, the lodging of a complaint to the Assembly; and *endeixis*, the laying of information which would allow, although not require, the prosecutor to effect an arrest. Also see Markovits 2008, 51–61, for discussion of both formal and informal institutions of accountability in democratic Athens.

¹² Euben 1997, 93.

¹³ "Culture of accountability" does not, however, formally include ordinary, passive citizens – the *idiotai* of democratic Athens. I discuss this more in Chapter 4.

¹⁴ On philosophy's emergence in the democratic polis: Lloyd 1992, 44. See also the earlier and broader suggestions in Vernant 1982 and Castoriadis 1991.

¹⁵ Whelan 1983 quoted in Euben 1997, 104. ¹⁶ Euben 1997, 103–4.

But second, work situating Socrates in democratic Athens also helps to focus a closer inspection of exactly how Socrates' philosophy took up and changed particular aspects of the Athenian culture of accountability. In other words, with the repertoire of accountability practices available to him we can ask what Socrates did with these – that is, how he appropriated and thus transformed them. Socrates does not explicitly refer to any of the institutions of accountability extant in Athens (although Socrates does refer to *parrhēsia*, arguably part of the accountability apparatus, which I will discuss in [Chapter 4](#)). In order to understand the specific innovations Socrates introduces, then, we need to consider the indirect ways he co-opted practices of accountability and redeployed them as part of philosophy: not taking up *dokimasia* directly, for example, but rather repurposing it in terms of its occasion, content, location, or participants. Only then can we disentangle the nature of Socrates' "democratic entanglements" and begin to address the question: "What would Socrates do?"¹⁷

As described in the previous chapter, the Athenian democracy depended on the sustained and attentive participation of ordinary people, and the democracy met this challenge by enlisting and engaging citizens through a variety of ingenious and innovative practices. But while "citizenship" as a category extended far beyond our modern concept, it was also marked by a fundamental exclusion. While praising itself as a regime based on equality (*isonomia*), democratic Athens nonetheless made only some of its residents equal. Women, foreigners, and slaves all lacked the rights of male citizens.¹⁸ Although these segments of the population played important political roles in other ways, their lack of formal recognition circumscribed the impact and importance of their participation.¹⁹ This does not mean that the democracy lacked all sense of egalitarianism. Although Athens limited citizenship to Athenian-born males with equal participation rights, this itself marked a step toward greater equality. As Ian Morris has argued, wealth had justified dominance over subjects in many ancient states, but the Greeks substituted for it birth within a broad male citizen body, creating, perhaps for the first

¹⁷ Euben 1997 has some tantalizing suggestions, drawing on Vernant and Castoriadis, about Socrates' creation of a "philosophical *agora*" yet these remain undeveloped in specific terms. This chapter seeks to continue on the path Euben intimated.

¹⁸ Patterson 2009. Patterson also notes the important differences within the categories of slaves, foreigners, and women, correcting the frequent (and incorrect) grouping of all under the same umbrella.

¹⁹ On the formal groupings of citizens and noncitizens, see Todd 1993.

time in history, a new level of inclusiveness and thus broader possibilities for participation and leadership.²⁰ This baseline of equality spread power across the body of citizens; ordinary people mattered in Athenian democracy in ways they do not today. However, these ordinary people consisted only of Athenian-born male citizens.

Viewed from this vantage point, Socrates’ philosophy appears quite radical. Improvising on the extant practices of accountability in Athens, Socrates develops philosophy as an emancipated form of these practices; freeing itself from the conventional constraints of the Athenian habitus, philosophy takes up and transforms practices of accountability in inclusive directions. Socrates’ conversations with women, foreigners, and slaves – to which accounts by Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon all attest – challenge the boundaries of an Athenian political imaginary that placed such noncitizens outside the number of countable people. By presupposing that any person, citizen or “other sort,” can participate in the practices of accountability, Socrates’ philosophy brings these practices to a broader and more representative group of people. To borrow from James Tully, Socrates’ philosophy “citizenizes” those previously excluded from citizenship: These people begin to act as if they were citizens even while being formally excluded.²¹ Socratic dialogues thus enact disruptions of exclusionary Athenian norms even as Socrates’ philosophy uses the practices of democratic Athens to challenge these exclusions.

Such a reading of Socrates’ philosophy contrasts with the “Socratic citizenship” paradigm in one new important way.²² While the argument for the “Socratic citizen” has brought rightful attention to the political significance of Socrates’ philosophy, its focus on citizenship as the primary category with which to understand this practice misses how Socrates does *not* limit himself to citizens nor to questions of citizenship. Instead Socrates proceeds from the basic assumption that *all people*, citizens and noncitizens, can free themselves to develop their own judgment and that, further, this process of emancipation proceeds not solely through negative elenchus but rather by means of an open-ended process consisting of questioning as well as imaginative provocation, suggestive statement, and playful eroticism. The “Socratic citizen” delimits too narrow a vision for Socrates’ philosophy; in what follows I describe a

²⁰ Morris 1993, 41–42.

²¹ On “citizenizing” practices, see Tully 2009.

²² For literature on “Socratic citizenship,” see [note 6](#) above as well as discussion in [Chapter 1](#).

more capacious – and politically radical and potentially dangerous – understanding, using Plato’s *Meno* to develop this reading.

THE TORPEDO FISH

The *Meno* features a striking image of Socrates – the torpedo fish, a species of electric ray – that brings together the many elements of Socrates’ philosophy in the dialogue.²³ In the middle of their conversation, Meno exclaims to Socrates:

Socrates, before I even met you I used to hear that you are always in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed. Indeed, if a joke is in order, you seem, in appearance and every other way, to be like a torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you now seem to have that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. (80a-b, 87g)²⁴

The numbing effects of philosophy have struck Meno. This numbness describes the famous consequences of any conversation with Socrates: *aporia*, the experience of dislocation and crisis, of being at a loss, or of total perplexity – all potential translations of the Greek²⁵ – that often results. *Aporia* occurs at multiple levels: the epistemological perplexity of not knowing what to say next as well as the psychological perplexity of being at a loss, of finding one’s reliable beliefs vanish.²⁶ Socrates *acts* like a torpedo fish, and his interrogation has numbed Meno – both Meno’s mind and his tongue. As Meno explains, he has given many speeches about excellence before large audiences – “on thousands of occasions” – but now he cannot even say what excellence is. The numbing effects of the torpedo fish do not merely silence Meno, but they deprive him of his

²³ I take this image as a heuristic, then, for unfolding the facets of Socrates’ philosophy. The striking and memorable quality of this image in the *Meno* serves as reason enough, in my judgment, for using this dialogue as opposed to other similar dialogues such as *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis* and others.

²⁴ As in the previous chapter, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. 1997 English translation in the text (unless otherwise indicated).

²⁵ Liddell and Scott 1995, 215.

²⁶ As Mary Margaret MacKenzie notes, Socrates also describes himself as in *aporia* in *Protagoras* 361c, *Lysis* 222c2, d7, and *Laches* 200e5, among other places: MacKenzie 1988, 333.

security, even of the certainty of his own experiences. Everything once seemed easy and straightforward to Meno; now numbed, Meno feels as if he has lost his identity. Thus along with the epistemological dimensions of the effects of Socrates’ philosophy come a psychological or emotional dimension as well – feelings of shame, a loss of certainty, resentment, and even anger.²⁷ The questioning of Socrates’ philosophy cuts deeply into one’s self-image, replacing knowingness with self-conscious ignorance, and confidence with doubt. Socrates claims his own perplexity but he also infects those around him by questioning what they thought they knew and undermining their certainty until it disappears.

This experience of *aporia*, encapsulated by Meno’s description of Socrates as a “torpedo fish,” usefully figures a way of reading the dialogue as a whole.²⁸ As in many other aporetic dialogues (so called because they end in “*aporia*”),²⁹ Socrates encounters another man with whom he begins to discuss some political or ethical concept: excellence, in the case of the *Meno*.³⁰ Through a process of examination and refutation, Socrates disabuses his interlocutor of his false opinions, but also leaves him at a loss – another translation of *aporia* – for any constructive answer to the question with which they began. In the *Meno*, Meno approaches Socrates and asks how one can acquire excellence. Meno offers a series of definitions, but none satisfies the criteria of a definition that Socrates and Meno agree as suitable; Meno’s attempted definitions therefore fail. Socrates and Meno then change tack and Socrates recounts a story about recollection that he illustrates through a brief conversation with Meno’s slave. This leads Socrates and Meno to pursue the idea that excellence is a form of knowledge, which in turn suggests that there ought to be teachers of excellence. Yet finding themselves unable to name any such teacher, Socrates and Meno run into another dead end. They thought they had established excellence as teachable because it was a form of knowledge, but now it appears otherwise. Socrates offers an alternative, that virtue is true opinion, but the knowledge of excellence, what Meno

²⁷ As noted by MacKenzie 1988, 334.

²⁸ See the reading of Roslyn Weiss, which very ably expounds how Socrates’ philosophy works along aporetic lines: Weiss 2001.

²⁹ Other “aporetic” dialogues arguably include the following: *Lysis*, which discusses friendship; *Laches*, which discusses courage; *Charmides*, which discusses moderation; and *Euthyphro*, which discusses piety. *Theaetetus*, which discusses knowledge, is often classed as “aporetic”; in Chapter 5 I suggest how this holds true in part, but not entirely.

³⁰ I translate *aretē* as excellence here and throughout, modifying the Cooper, ed. translation. See the arguments by Nehamas for this particular translation: Nehamas 1999, xxi.

sought, seems out of reach. Socrates and Meno conclude that they still need to investigate the nature of excellence before they can establish with any clarity how it is acquired.³¹

This account of the dialogue would seem to support the approach to Socrates favored by advocates of “Socratic citizenship.”³² To return to Dana Villa’s argument, Socrates’ mode of interrogating his fellow citizens yields a negative practice relevant for politics, “the art of estrangement” (2001, 15), a style of questioning that distances the questioner and those who listen to him from the accepted world around them, alienating them from the “dogmatism . . . woven in the very fabric of our moral being” (2001, 79). Meno enters the conversation with Socrates confident in his knowledge of excellence, but Socrates’ interrogation soon reveals the claims of Meno’s chosen expert, Gorgias, as “baseless illusions” (2001, 18). Socrates’ philosophy thus opposes conventional doctrines such as those embodied in what Villa calls the “aesthetic monumentalism” of Pericles’s funeral oration. Responding to these civic dogmas, Socrates’ philosophy seeks to bring his fellow Athenians to entertain the possibility that the demands of morality may, in fact, run counter to the established norms of the society and its conception of virtuous citizenship.

Leaving aside the important differences between questioning the expertise of Gorgias (which Socrates does in the *Meno*) and questioning all civic dogmas (which Socrates does not do), I want to focus on expanding the meaning of Socrates’ philosophy beyond this singular “aporetic” account as well as beyond the “Socratic citizen.” This will entail expanding accounts of “Socratic dialectic and democratic accountability,” in Euben’s phrase, to include both conventional citizens and subjects beyond conventional politics as participants. The image of the torpedo fish provides a useful heuristic here. While it aptly captures the *aporia* provoked by questioning, Meno’s image also evokes the atopia of Socrates’ philosophy – as well as of Socrates himself – and searching out the origins and function of this strangeness adds a few more layers to a reading of the dialogue. For one, the effects of Socrates’ philosophy exceed description in human terms, leading Meno to compare it to

³¹ Paraphrasing Dominic Scott: “He [Socrates] concludes that virtue comes by divine dispensation, although he adds that they still need to investigate the nature of virtue before establishing with any clarity how it is acquired”: Scott 2006, 2.

³² According to Dana Villa, this stems from Hannah Arendt and her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations”: “Arendt locates the center of Socrates’ philosophical activity precisely in its negative character”: Villa 2001, 19.

something like an animal.³³ The additional association of this practice with magic and bewitchment – at the end of the dialogue Meno warns Socrates that if he behaved this way anywhere else he would be accused of sorcery – further emphasizes a sense of strangeness about philosophy.³⁴ Socrates' philosophy ensorcells its participants (including Socrates); the strange effects escape explanation, hence Socrates often earned the title of magician that we see here: Socrates' philosophy casts a spell over souls.³⁵ As Athens had developed a more complicated and "rationalized" political structure, magic had taken an increasingly marginal role, making accusations of sorcery akin to accusations of witchcraft in sixteenth-century Massachusetts;³⁶ unpopular sophists often received these epithets.³⁷ The strangeness of Socrates' philosophy thus not only resembles the bestial, but the marginal and dangerous. As a practice related to but distinct from extant Athenian practices of accountability, Socrates' philosophy appears out of place and odd (atopic).

In other words, Meno generates such an ambiguous and provocative image for Socrates' philosophy with good reason. First, the image suggests a way of complicating the "aporetic" reading where Socrates disabuses his overly confident interlocutor, teaching him about his own ignorance. If the stinging numbness of *aporia* afflicts both Socrates and Meno, what can one teach the other? Rather than educating, Socrates' philosophy proceeds from ignorance and seeks empowerment of its participants; yet this holds some disturbing consequences. Second, as a representation of the world of nature, the image of the torpedo fish also suggests how all human beings, regardless of formal political status, are equally subject to natural phenomena. Along these lines, Socrates' philosophy begins from

³³ As John Heath suggests, the blunt head of the torpedo fish resembles Socrates' own snub nose and high forehead. Heath further argues that by comparing Socrates to an animal, Meno attempts to shame him: Heath 2005, 306–314. As we will see, shame often accompanies the "elenchus," and we could thus read Meno's shaming as *quid pro quo* for Socrates'.

³⁴ R.W. Sharples also adds that the electric ray was used for food and Galen records its use for curing headaches through an improvised electric shock treatment – all strange comparisons for Socrates: Sharples 1985, 141.

³⁵ As Michelle Gellrich puts it, "it is precisely the tendency of Socrates' performances to engross and stun audiences that elicits the not uncommon observation in Plato's dialogues that he is indeed a magician, a *goēs*, fitted out with techniques that involve his interlocutors in the mental equivalent of sleights of hand and prestidigitation": Gellrich 1994, 275.

³⁶ E.R. Dodds provides the most famous argument for this in *The Greeks and the Irrational*: Dodds 1951.

³⁷ See Gellrich 1994.

the supposition that all human beings are equally capable of their own liberation; the consequences of this “axiom of equality” appear most strikingly in the discussion with Meno’s slave and show a further transformation of extant practices of accountability. And third, by virtue of its strangeness and marginality, the image of the torpedo fish also suggests how Socrates’ philosophy does not carry forward the conventional work of citizenship but something much different: The image connotes a willingness to transgress the boundaries of the familiar, to appear atopic, which forms an essential aspect of philosophy as displayed in the dialogue. In the next three sections, I treat each of these registers of the image of the torpedo fish, in turn, as aspects of Socrates’ philosophy.

AN IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER³⁸

The logic of accountability depended upon a situation of reciprocity where each party related to the other on relatively equal terms; such a situation, however, runs against the dominant approach to Socrates as a teacher. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates declares that he has “never been anyone’s teacher,”³⁹ yet contemporary sources frequently show people approaching Socrates in search of some kind of teaching, perhaps most famously in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (which I treat in [Chapter 4](#)). Moreover, Socrates also frequently appears to lead his interlocutors to particular positions. Socrates may not present himself as an ordinary pedagogue – the word in Plato’s *Apology* is *didaskalos* – but he ostensibly has something to offer.⁴⁰ Readers have often focused on Socrates’ method of refutation as a way of resolving this apparent contradiction. Such an approach, however, occludes the reciprocity characteristic of Socrates’ philosophy, the recognition of which allows us to see how this philosophy takes up and transforms extant practices of accountability.⁴¹ “Refutation” suggests

³⁸ This heading comes from the title of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*; Rancière 1991. Much of the following owes its inspiration to Rancière’s provocative writings.

³⁹ *Apology* 33a5, 30. Or, as Socrates says in the *Meno*: “I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him” (83e, 882). Indeed, as Alexander Nehamas points out, Socrates often describes himself as a willing disciple of others who claim knowledge, such as in the *Euthyphro* (5a3 – b7). See Nehamas 1999, 25 n. 28.

⁴⁰ For a recent example, see Scott 2000. Scott usefully surveys the recent literature concerning “Socrates as educator” in [Chapter 1](#).

⁴¹ I say “focusing” because recent readings of the elenchus have persuasively broadened its scope to include more of the elements I detail in this section. See, for example, the essays collected in Scott, ed. 2004.

that Socrates remains the master and his interlocutors, the students. On the contrary, Socrates' philosophy uses a much more capacious "method" in order to emancipate his interlocutors, to free them from the constricting bonds of dogma and ideology and bring them to think and to act for themselves. Moreover, in doing so Socrates plays the role of what Jacques Rancière calls the "ignorant schoolmaster," a master who induces mastery in his or her "students," bringing the intellect to obey only itself by asking the most basic question: "What do you think about that?"⁴² Socrates' philosophy, viewed through these additional meanings of the image of the torpedo fish, thus begins from a similar intellectual egalitarianism as Athenian practices: "Master" empowers would-be "master," and every participant has the capacity to investigate political and ethical life.⁴³ Yet while starting at a similar starting point, philosophy departs from extant practices by expanding them in inclusive directions.

Plato's *Meno* portrays an ignorant schoolmaster at work.⁴⁴ Beginning with Socrates' denial of knowledge at the start of the dialogue through his reminder that he too suffers from the perplexity wrought by his own stinging questions, Socrates appears not so different from Meno. While Meno appears to pride himself on some knowledge of excellence when the conversation begins, as Socrates asks him to give an account, this confidence quickly erodes. Midway through the dialogue, Meno literally echoes Socrates' admission of ignorance, declaring that he too knows "not at all" (*to parapan*) what excellence is.⁴⁵ Meno treats Socrates as if

⁴² I should note that Rancière advances a contrary reading of Socrates in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, suggesting instead that "the Socratic method is thus a perfected form of stultification," the process opposed to emancipation: Rancière 1991, 29. While Rancière does not closely examine any Platonic dialogue, he refers to the discussion between Socrates and Meno's slave; I will return to Rancière's reading, then, when I discuss this section of the *Meno*.

⁴³ Scott 2000 also uses the language of empowerment to describe the consequences of engaging in Socrates' philosophy: "Socrates' gift is designed to liberate and empower rather than to enslave its recipients" (171). Here I expand on Scott's suggestions, although with some wariness about the residual power relationships evident in understanding Socrates as the only genuine gift giver (which is Scott's reading).

⁴⁴ As will become clear in what follows, my reading of Plato's *Meno* is concerned less with what Dominic Scott calls "the quality of the arguments" than with the manner in which Socrates takes up these arguments and what kind of relationship this establishes with Socrates' interlocutors, especially if – and, if so, how – Socrates' philosophy extends or counters practices of Athenian democracy. For an alternative approach, then, see Scott 2001.

⁴⁵ Nehamas quite usefully points out that Meno's later admission of ignorance echoes Socrates' insistence on ignorance here – both know "not at all" (*to parapan*). See Nehamas 1999, 6–8.

Socrates could teach him something, but while Socrates admires Meno's question, he denies having any wherewithal to answer it. "I myself," Socrates tells Meno, "am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about excellence" (70b, 871). Socrates confesses ignorance and proposes a collective examination that he and Meno might undertake together. While Meno insists that Socrates answer his question, Socrates contends again that he has no answer, turning the question back on Meno. Wishing to pursue some kind of answer and left with no choice – and note that Meno, not Socrates, initiates and continues the conversation – Meno relents. The first third of the dialogue consists of Meno's two different definitions of excellence, each of which corresponds to an inherited authority: first the sophists, then the poets.⁴⁶ Neither leads to any definitive conclusion.

Yet while Socrates does not teach anything, this does not mean that he plays a passive role. The process of trying to make Meno think for himself requires more than a refutation-focused method, and the dialogue with Meno reveals important aspects of Socrates' philosophy as it helps Meno to free himself from his unscrutinized dogmas and to achieve the liberating state of perplexity. Alongside the negative work of liberation comes a more constructive undertaking, a sharing of philosophy that unites Socrates and Meno in a common endeavor.⁴⁷ In the conversation, Socrates and Meno must create a common vocabulary for their investigations, build trust such that they can subject deeply held commitments to scrutiny, and craft stories that imagine where their inquiry might lead. These aspects of Socrates' philosophy appear at important moments in the dialogue.

To begin with, beneath the question-and-answer of the elenchus runs an erotic undercurrent that points to how Socrates and Meno's conversation enacts a classic ritual of ancient Greece – the flirtation between an older man and a winsome younger one. After Meno's first definition of

⁴⁶ Here I differ from Bartlett 2002, who thinks there are three definitions. Weiss 2001 argues for two different attempts at defining excellence.

⁴⁷ In this sense, I respond to Gerald Mara's criticism of Villa's position in Mara 2008. Mara argues that "without a more active form of civic involvement, this form of Socratic citizenship may come perilously close to the self-absorbed soul's exclusive concern with its own activity" (254). On my reading, the *Meno* offers such an "active form" by creating an inclusive community dedicated to philosophy. Further, Socrates does not simply reproduce his own skepticism, as Mara worries Villa's Socrates does, but rather frees them to think and act for themselves as citizens – even without the formal recognition of citizenship.

excellence proves inadequate, Socrates introduces the analogy of shape and color: “What is this which applies to the round and the straight and the other things which you call shapes and which is the same in them all?” Socrates asks. “Try to say, that you may practice for your answer about excellence” (75a).

Meno: No, Socrates, but you tell me.

Socrates: Do you want me to gratify you? [*Boulei soi charisōmai*];

Meno: I certainly do. (75b1–3, 875)

While at one level referring to giving a possible answer for Meno, at another Socrates’ question invites an erotic relationship – to which Meno responds with a playful, if not enthusiastic, “yes.” Such a colloquy fits with an aspect of Socrates’ philosophy, which often includes a declaration of love for its interlocutors;⁴⁸ Socrates had already alluded to Meno’s lover Aristippus (perhaps as a competitor) at the dialogue’s beginning (70b). Just a few lines after this interchange, the erotic suggestions continue as Meno again demands an answer from Socrates and Socrates exclaims: “You are outrageous, Meno! You bother an old man to answer questions . . .” (76a). And when Meno promises to submit to questioning after just one more answer from Socrates, Socrates responds:

Even someone who was blindfolded would know from your conversation that you are handsome and still have lovers. . . . Because you are forever giving orders in a discussion, as spoiled people do, who behave like tyrants as long as they are young. (76b-c, 876)

Socrates sounds at once ironic and infatuated, manipulative and powerless. Taken as sincere, we can understand this and Socrates’ subsequent submissions to Meno’s demands as evidencing his erotic attachment. Taken as playful mockery, Socrates baits Meno to continue the conversation, lest Meno’s obstinacy derail it.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ As Kenneth Dover comments: “We encounter Socrates in a strongly homosexual ambience; some of Plato’s earlier dialogues are set in the gymnasium, Socrates’ youthful friends are commonly – one might say normally – in love with boys, and he fully accepts these relationships”: Dover 1978, 154. In addition to the *Meno*, Dover notes appearances of homosexual, erotic love in *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, *Republic*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Symposium*. I discuss how Socrates takes up and transforms the erotic practices of democratic Athens in the next chapter.

⁴⁹ Zuckert 2009 asserts that this passage shows Meno “has not budged – or learned anything from the conversation in the meantime” (564 n. 84). But this reading overlooks the playfulness of Socrates and Meno’s exchange, a playfulness that becomes more evident if one acknowledges the context of erotic relationships between men and boys in

In a second moment in the dialogue, Socrates reassures Meno that they share a state of perplexity, creating a common ground from which the dialogue can proceed when it has stalled. Socrates' reiteration that he and Meno can recommence their conversation calls attention to the collective nature of their inquiry (however slow and painful at times), one that could serve as a background for continued investigation. After Meno's initial definitions have failed, Socrates seeks to regain his trust. Socrates' language reflects this: He desires that they examine and seek (*skepsasthai kai suzētēsai*, 80d4) what excellence is. This first word, from *skeptein*, meaning to inquire or investigate, recurs throughout the dialogue acting as a hortatory call to collective examination.⁵⁰ The second word, from *zetein*, also often occurs as part of the elenchus, but here Socrates adds the *sum-* prefix, denoting something pursued in common, as part of a collective.⁵¹ *Together* (*sum-*), Meno and Socrates will continue, having experienced perplexity (*aporia*) that provoked their recognition of a shared space that they can either accept or reject. The painfulness of perplexity becomes a referent for the collective undertaking of philosophy, and the numbness provoked by the torpedo fish becomes a constituent moment for the inquiry in common that follows.⁵²

A third moment illuminates the use of stories in Socrates' philosophy. When Meno has confronted Socrates with his famous paradox, asking how one can inquire into something of which one has no knowledge, Socrates responds with a story, the famed account of recollection. Shifting the terrain, Socrates recounts a tale told by priests and priestesses who concerned themselves with being able to give an account of their practices (81a). As Socrates continues, these priests and priestesses claimed that the human soul is immortal, dies and is reborn, and by passing often from life to life has seen all things here and in the underworld. Therefore "there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is not surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both

democratic Athens (on which, see Dover as well as [Chapter 3](#)). If this is playful, Meno is not the tyrant that Zuckert takes him as being and the conversation with Socrates may well have more of an effect than she believes.

⁵⁰ Vlastos 1994, 4. ⁵¹ Liddell and Scott 1995, 1670.

⁵² While it may be true that, as Zuckert puts it, "to change Meno's disposition, Socrates would have to converse with him more than once" (Zuckert 2009, 570), Socrates' philosophy establishes the basis for continued conversation with the shared experience of perplexity, a painful and thus memorable state of doubt and confusion that Meno himself takes up in the exchange with his slave-boy (84b). While we only have record of a single conversation, the *Meno* points toward future ones – with or without Socrates.

about excellence and about other things" (81c-d, 88o). Thus every human being can recollect – what people call "learning" (*mathēsin*) – and discover everything for itself, for searching and learning constitute recollection (81d). "I trust that this is true," Socrates says, "and I want to inquire along with you into the nature of excellence" (81e, 881).

Whereas only a few lines before Socrates had posed an nearly identical question and Meno had responded with his polemical paradox, Meno's response here marks the shift accomplished by Socrates' story. "Yes, Socrates," Meno answers, an emphatic affirmative after the apparent breakdown before Socrates' story. "But how do you mean that we do not learn," he asks, "but that what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me that this is so?" (81e, 881). Meno has not fully imbibed Socrates' tale – he still asks if Socrates can tell him its truth – but Meno revises his request, instead asking that Socrates show him what this story means. Thus while questions may have shown Meno his own ignorance, Socrates' story enlists him anew. Again we see that philosophy does not consist solely of question and answer but that the discussion requires more: a shared language, erotic playfulness, and stories. Whether or not the story contains truth, a shared commitment to it can lead toward truth. The story allows the conversation to continue; Socrates and Meno can proceed in the belief that if they investigate and search out the things they do not know, they might approach truth rather than simply surrender the quest before beginning it. Declaring himself and Meno "of one mind" on this matter, Socrates then reiterates his question yet again: "shall we try to find out together what virtue is?" (86c, 886). This time Meno joins affirmatively: "Certainly." The story seems to inspire investigation after the disillusion and confusion of perplexity.

The story not only effects a change in Meno; it also creates an image that pervades the conversation that follows, providing another language with which Socrates and Meno can conduct their dialogue. When Meno asks again whether excellence is something teachable (86d), Socrates uses the story to ask whether one can teach (or be taught) excellence or whether one must recollect it (86c). The investigation that follows focuses on how one might learn anything, and the need to seek despite one's not knowing. The story thus also shifts from questions of different excellences to questions of knowing and learning and defuses the fraught vocabulary suffused by poets and their often aristocratic notions of beauty and nobility. While inspiring Meno and changing the terms of the conversation, Socrates' story also buttresses a shift in vocabulary within the *Meno* from the language of teaching as conveyance of

knowledge – often associated with the sophists – to that of shared inquiry – seeking and searching in common – in the realm of opinion. Whereas the earlier conversation had emphasized one’s acquisition of excellence, the story changes the register of excellence altogether, moving it to the soul. Since the story describes an immortal soul, excellence in the soul also becomes a matter of realization rather than attainment. Excellence becomes, like the conversation itself, a matter of seeking and pursuit. And as the demonstration with Meno’s slave boy seems to indicate, the work of recollection also requires another person – not a teacher who transmits knowledge, but someone capable of sharing Socrates’ philosophy and who can free another to develop his or her own account.

FREEING THE SLAVES

This more capacious understanding of the question-and-answer aspect of Socrates’ philosophy does not lack political ramifications. As Euben has argued, Socrates created a kind of “philosophical agora” that continued and radicalized the practices of accountability vital to Athenian democracy.⁵³ Socrates thus brings Meno, a young aristocrat from Thessaly and not an Athenian citizen, into a “citizenizing” practice, eliciting from him something deeply akin to the Athenian practice of giving an account of one’s past and present – precisely the kind of relentless cross-examination endemic to Athenian political institutions. Philosophy similarly reinforces extant practices of accountability even as it improves them. Indeed, the very subject of Socrates and Meno’s conversation – excellence (*aretē*), the pinnacle of ethical and heroic achievement in ancient Athens – shows the coincidence of affirmation (of the basic value) and negation (with philosophy’s critical scrutiny directed at the instantiation of that value). Often translated into English as “virtue,” *aretē* marked the chief aspiration of any well-born Greek; we might think of it, as Alexander Nehamas has suggested, as somewhat akin to “success,” although with a distinct moral connotation as something “outstanding” and worthy of high regard (of *kleos* in Greek).⁵⁴ While originally associated with the traditional virtues of heroes, Athenians “made *aretē* a virtue of the demos,”⁵⁵ democratizing *aretē* to form part of the democratic moral lexicon, subverting and appropriating the terminology and ideals of the aristocrats in the

⁵³ Euben 1997, 91–108.

⁵⁴ Nehamas 1999, 5.

⁵⁵ Balot 2006, 53.

process.⁵⁶ Meno and Socrates thus take up, in a democratic way, the fundamental concept for the democratic life – the meaning of success – and one of the chief contested concepts in the constant and dynamic struggle between mass and elite within democratic Athens. Yet while supporting *aretē* by treating it as a worthy object of discourse, Meno and Socrates radically interrogate current instantiations. Walking with the Athenian practices, they nonetheless question their realization.

Joining Socrates, Meno begins to act as if he were a citizen by holding himself and his fellow citizens (and noncitizens) accountable. The conversation with Socrates thus *frees* Meno by opening up the possibility of different definitions of success while it also suggests better and worse ways for assessing these definitions. To anticipate an argument I will develop more in Chapter 4, we could say that together, Socrates and Meno take up a kind of philosophical frank speech (*parrhēsia*), an integral part of Athenian freedom (*eleutheria*).⁵⁷ *Parrhēsia* included the right “to advise, criticize, admonish, or abuse anyone, individual or collective, by telling the truth as one saw it.”⁵⁸ By safeguarding equal treatment across class lines and distinguishing democratic citizens from noncitizens, *parrhēsia* bolstered the central democratic concepts of *eleutheria* and civic equality.⁵⁹ Here Meno and Socrates subvert *parrhēsia* toward greater inclusion, but do so while working within extant democratic practices. Speaking frankly with Socrates, Meno appropriates Athenian freedom even while the rigid boundaries of Athenian membership deny it to him.

The opening of Athenian democratic practices to noncitizens through Socrates’ philosophy goes a step farther when Meno and Socrates turn to Meno’s slave.⁶⁰ Slaves represented one more excluded “other sort” in

⁵⁶ As Josiah Ober has put it, “as long as the demos remained arbiter of public opinion and policy, the word *dēmokratia* was a name for a political society and culture in which the most basic and elemental human power – the power to assign meanings to symbols – belonged to the people”: Ober 1989, 339. This challenges the argument of Loraux 1986 who argues that democracy never achieved a language or conceptual system independent of aristocratic ideas. At least for my purposes, we can see these words as between aristocracy and democracy, and their meanings as inflected by the particular backgrounds and uses of the interlocutors.

⁵⁷ For *parrhēsia* as “an integral part of Athenian freedom,” see Henderson 1995 as well as Chapter 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵⁹ On the close relationship of free speech and Athenian freedom, see Ostwald 1995.

⁶⁰ I will refer to this character as “Meno’s slave” or “the slave.” While remaining nameless in the dialogue, we do know it is a slave *boy* because of the gender of the noun, *pais*.

democratic Athens. As Moses Finley has argued, ancient Greece was a slave society, not just a “society with slaves.”⁶¹ “The slave was taken for granted in almost all aspects of daily life and the presumption [was] that his or her existence was inevitable or necessary.”⁶² Moreover, Athenians defined themselves in political terms as “not slaves.” As Kurt Raaflaub explains, in the Athenian imagination subjection to a tyrant became equated with slavery and thus with a lack of freedom; this functioned as the “primary contrasting concept” to freedom itself.⁶³ Athens’ heavy emphasis on speech (*logos*), its “logocentric” aspect,⁶⁴ also structured the distinction between citizen and slave. As bodies without the means of self-control and self-rule, slaves were thought to lack the deliberative element in Aristotle’s account – slaves could thus not account for themselves in the most basic sense of providing a *logos* for their actions.⁶⁵ While slaves played an important role in Athenian daily life – as key contributors to the welfare of the household; or while working alongside resident foreigners and citizens on the Acropolis; or even when running Pericles’ estate⁶⁶ – they remained isolated from the *spaces* of public discussion, forbidden to participate in typical citizen activities, not only from explicitly political institutions but even from exercising in the palaestra.⁶⁷

In this context, Socrates and Meno turn toward Meno’s slave. While some have taken the example with the slave as a farce that demonstrates only Socrates’ effectiveness as a teacher of basic geometry and others have implied that Socrates’ leading questions indicate the control Socrates exerts over the slave, a control that is the opposite of emancipation, I suggest here a contrary reading.⁶⁸ Granted, Socrates clearly guides Meno’s slave through pointed questions and brings him to insights

⁶¹ Quoted in Patterson 2009, 155.

⁶² *Ibid.* As Patterson continues: “The slave is the preeminent ‘other’ in the Athenian social universe.”

⁶³ Raaflaub 2004, 252 and 8. ⁶⁴ Markovits 2008, 49.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b22–23, 1260a12–13. Yet Aristotle also points out that if slaves did not participate in reason at all that they would be unable to follow their masters’ orders (*Politics* 1254a23–24). This is precisely the contradiction that Socrates’ philosophy exploits in the *Meno*. On Aristotle’s views concerning slavery, see the illuminating discussion by Frank 2005.

⁶⁶ See the discussion in Patterson 2009, 157–61.

⁶⁷ Todd 1993, 184–94. On being forbidden from exercising in the palaestra, see Patterson 2009, 156. Todd notes that while slaves were forbidden from participating in some religious festivals, they were explicitly allowed to partake in others: Todd 1993, 188.

⁶⁸ For the first reading, see Richard Kraut: “True, a slave can learn geometry, but that hardly shows that he can acquire a knowledge of virtue, justice, the good, etc.”: Kraut 1984, 204–5. For the second, see Rancière 1991, 29.

unconnected to anything he knew before. Yet as Alexander Nehamas has argued, it remains for the slave to say whether he agrees or disagrees.⁶⁹ Socrates interrogates the slave as another human being capable and worthy of answering. Moreover, the very fact that Socrates turns to the slave and inquires about what the slave thinks marks a significant break from the ideology of slavery in democratic Athens. Having the slave join an inquiry into excellence, the fundamental concept of political society, makes this yet more radical.⁷⁰ Socrates and Meno not only give the slave license to speak, but they request his participation in a broader conversation of substantive importance; they transform Athenian practices of accountability by extending it to this excluded and marginalized "other sort." Philosophy develops extant practices in inclusive directions, reinforcing while also questioning.

In other words, the episode with Meno's slave presents a serious reflection on the kind of engagement that Socrates undertakes.⁷¹ The conversation with the slave not only functions to exhort Meno to continue but also shows how inquiry can move from perplexity to an awareness of the need for knowledge. Moreover, the episode extends philosophy from foreigners to slaves, transforming the practices of accountability in the process. If not only a Thessalian aristocrat can appropriate and use the practices of democracy but even his nameless slave can, the "Socratic citizen" goes out the window. In its place, we have the liberating effects of philosophy, available to all who commit to its practice.

⁶⁹ Nehamas, "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as Teacher" in Nehamas 1999, 3–26. This essay has influenced my own approach to the *Meno*.

⁷⁰ Here I dissent from Rancière's characterization of the episode as "in no way a path to emancipation": Rancière 1991, 29. Rancière claims that Socrates treats Meno's slave *as a slave* and that the slave's demonstration of knowledge is "a demonstration of powerlessness" (*ibid.*). On the contrary, I am suggesting that this is precisely *not* stultifying (in Rancière's terms) because Socrates' requiring the participation and affirmation of the slave treats him as if he were a fully capable human being (and citizen). Socrates leads, but he also leaves it to the slave to take up these questions as he sees fit. As Alexander Nehamas puts it, quoting Myles Burnyeat, "the appreciation or understanding of any such information is something that each person must work out for himself. . . . The conveying of information is not enough for teaching in the sense of bringing the learner to know something" (Nehamas 1999, 21). Socrates *empowers* the slave by asking him to agree or disagree, to state his judgment and then support it. This is an emancipatory process.

⁷¹ See the discussion in Weiss 2001, 77–126. Weiss correctly argues that Socrates' "overriding concern . . . is to make Meno a better man by encouraging him to continue to probe with Socrates the question of what virtue is" (126) and that the demonstration with Meno's slave serves this purpose. But what becomes of Meno's slave? Weiss does not speculate.

Socrates' philosophy thus frees noncitizens to take up and transform extant practices of accountability. In a political community where speech held special predominance, emancipation comes through realizing the capacity to speak with others. Socrates calls attention to the slave's ability to speak as the basis for philosophy after Meno calls the slave forward. "Does he speak Greek?" Socrates asks (82b, 881).⁷² Questioning him, Socrates brings the slave to see that "the opinions were in him," (85c, 885) that he could judge for himself and form his own thoughts. Moreover, this exchange puts the slave on the path toward continued reflection. Whereas before the slave did not know he was perplexed (*aporein*, 84a8), now he recognizes being so and does not even think he knows enough to answer Socrates' questions (84b). Socrates declares that they have done something useful because now Meno's slave "can actually inquire into it gladly"; if he had thought he knew, he would not have inquired. Only through the experience of perplexity does the slave recognize that he did not know and begin to long to know (84c). Socrates has not instructed him, but only questioned.

While we cannot say whether or not Meno's slave continued to pursue philosophy after this encounter with Socrates, Socrates nonetheless introduces the possibility of asking questions to him. Perhaps more important, Socrates "places in question"⁷³ the assumption of his fellow Athenians that slaves could not speak and participate in, let alone critically engage democratic life. By posing questions, Socrates has shown that through philosophy one can experience *aporia* and begin to desire deeper insights about the world – even a slave can think for himself. While foreigners and slaves were prevented from speaking and acting in the conventional spaces of Athenian politics, philosophy creates an alternative space in the house of Anytus, where the conversation takes place. Constituting a discursive association that includes noncitizens, Socrates *politicizes* the nondemocratic spaces of Athens where such non-citizens conventionally went unseen and unheard.

Along these lines, the conversation of the *Meno* also introduces a strange and new sense of temporality to political discussions. Ungoverned by the finite time-horizon of a trial or assembly meeting, the dialogue's lack of resolution creates an open-ended, indefinite temporality. As they wend toward "true opinion" as the best substitute for

⁷² See discussion by LeMoine 2014 on the persistent exclusion of non-Greek speakers in Plato's dialogues.

⁷³ To borrow a phrase from Smith 2000.

knowledge, Socrates and Meno put process over result. Knowledge lies beyond our capacities and only the process of forming and scrutinizing opinions can begin to approximate knowledge. Even so, all judgments remain provisional and subject to further revision. In this sense, Socrates’ philosophy appears, in Roslyn Weiss’s phrase, “shockingly unprofessional”: It does not promise a doctrine as its outcome nor does it offer a compelling answer to the elegant, if empty, formulations that Meno parrots from Gorgias at the dialogue’s beginning.⁷⁴ Instead, it journeys toward an unknown destination with questionable fellow travelers: a foreigner, a slave, and Socrates.

ANYTUS’ ATHENS

But the *Meno* does not end here. Before Meno and Socrates can finish, Meno’s host in Athens, Anytus, interrupts the conversation. A wealthy politician, Anytus joined two others in bringing the accusations against Socrates that led to his trial, conviction, and execution.⁷⁵ Although Anytus had also participated in the oligarchic coup of the Thirty Tyrants, he later won high office in the restored democracy. At the dramatic date of the dialogue, circa 401–402 BCE, Anytus had recently earned praise from Isocrates for his support of democracy and for refraining from vendettas against those involved in the preceding oligarchic coups. While he appears as Meno’s guest-friend and host in the dialogue, his reputation as a democratic Athenian contrasts with Meno’s aristocratic and foreign background.⁷⁶ As Meno and Socrates have begun to inquire about the teachability of excellence, Anytus enters and Socrates turns the question to him.

Unlike Meno or Meno’s slave, Anytus does not respond favorably to the strangeness (atopia) of philosophy; Anytus’ strong associations

⁷⁴ Weiss 2001, 12–13. As Weiss puts it earlier: “It is not putting the case too strongly . . . to say that virtue [excellence], for Socrates, is the inquiry into what virtue [excellence] is” (6 n. 10). I would add that this remains *provisional*. Inquiry could discover a better alternative and thus an end to inquiry. See my suggestions about this possibility in Chapter 5.

⁷⁵ When addressing the charges, Socrates says he fears the rumors even more than the official accusations, saying: “These [the unofficial charges] I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends, though they too are formidable” (*Apology*, 18b, 19). On Anytus, see Nails 2002, 37–8. On Socrates’ association with those opposed to Anytus, see Waterfield 2009.

⁷⁶ This hints at how Anytus anticipates many of the themes anticipating in Aristophanes’s *Clouds* that culminate with Callicles in the *Gorgias*. See Chapter 4.

with the Athenian democracy further suggest a disjunct between the Athens Anytus stands for and the Athens Socrates' philosophy embodies. If philosophy picks up Athenian democratic practices such as accountability and scrutiny and transforms these, Anytus instinctively defends the status quo of Athenian democracy against such radical changes: Socrates' philosophy represents revisability, openness, and a playful willingness to explore ideas; Anytus' version of Athens, in contrast, views these changes as potentially destabilizing, disruptive, and dangerous. Let me discuss each of these briefly and the questions they raise for understanding both Socrates' philosophy and its potential political consequences.

To begin with, Anytus' Athens is an Athens defensive, perhaps still shaken by the oligarchic revolutions of 411 and 404 BCE. When Socrates suggests that the sophists might offer the education to excellence that he and Meno have sought in their conversation, Anytus reacts with fury:

By Heracles! Hold your tongue, Socrates! May no one of my household or friends, whether citizen or stranger, be mad enough to go to these people and be harmed by them, for they clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers. (91c, 890)

Anytus will not countenance Socrates' question about the potential for sophists to teach excellence. The language of corruption and ruin will, of course, appear again in the trial against Socrates. Yet like Meletus in Plato's *Apology*, Anytus cannot say how exemplary Athenians actually ensure that subsequent generations retain their excellence. As Socrates wonders why excellent Athenians such as Themistocles, Lysmachus, and Pericles could not raise equally excellent sons, Anytus fears questioning the traditions that have led the democracy to its current vitality. While it might seem easy for us to accuse Anytus of inflexibility, doing so overlooks both the real achievement of the Athenian democracy that Anytus purports to represent as well as the continuing struggle among committed democrats to protect the power of the people. Still, Anytus resists the revisionary impulse we might call integral to democracy; his refusal to scrutinize himself effectively rejects extending the democratic practices of accountability upon which Socrates' philosophy builds.

As a defensive Athens, Anytus' Athens is also an exclusive Athens. Anytus argues that the sophists exhort only those stupid enough to pay and that, on the contrary, any upstanding Athenian (*hoi kaloi kagathoi*, 92e) could make someone better than the sophists would. But while Anytus seems to symbolize the resurgent Athenian democracy, this phrase and his explanation of it appear less than inclusive: It seems to

ignore that a foreigner like Meno could become good let alone teach or learn excellence. Anytus' impulses toward exclusion appeared earlier, in his rejection of the Athenian practice of admitting foreign visitors. Cities who allow sophists – "any citizen or stranger who attempts to behave" in the manner of sophists (92b) – are "mad" (92a-b, 891). If Anytus had his way, he would never allow any of his people to meet a sophist or someone who appeared as a sophist. Anytus wishes to contain, if not foreclose the axiom of equality that animates Socrates' philosophy and leads him to conversations with foreigners, slaves, and women. In the name of protecting the "good men" of Athens, Anytus circumscribes who might become good in the first place.

Finally, Anytus rejects the disturbing strangeness of Socrates' philosophy, its constituent atopia. Anytus' Athens is an intolerant Athens – or at least an Athens where toleration barely holds ostracism in check.⁷⁷ This third aspect of Anytus' Athens appears starkly in his final words of the dialogue:

I think, Socrates, that you easily speak ill of people. I would advise you, if you will listen to me, to be careful. Perhaps also in another city, and certainly here, it is easier to injure people than to benefit them. I think you know that yourself. (94e, 893)

The capaciousness of Socrates' philosophy, evident in his willingness to engage any topic with any interlocutor appears to Anytus as aspersive and potentially dangerous. Atopia disrupts and disturbs the fragile community that Anytus has helped to build. Anytus' Athens cannot find room for this philosophy.

Given Anytus' later role as an accuser of Socrates, it might seem tempting to read Anytus' rejection of Socrates' philosophy as demonstrating the incompatibility of democracy and philosophy entirely, yet such a reading is incorrect in at least two ways. First, it falsely presumes an identity between the Athens that Anytus represents and the actuality of Athenian democracy. The facts that both nearly half a jury of Athenians voted against Anytus' charges and that Anytus previously acted on behalf of the oligarchs indicate important distance between Anytus' version of Athens and Athens itself. Second, such a reading also ignores the important similarities between Anytus' and Socrates' positions. While the three aspects of Anytus' Athens effectively reject the strangeness of Socrates' philosophy – condemning its revisionist impulses, its inclusivity, or its

⁷⁷ Cf. Forsdyke 2005.

presumptive toleration – a few moments in the exchange with Anytus also suggest some commonality. Anytus does appear exclusive in his belief that only good Athenians can teach excellence, but he also acknowledges that he wishes his friends, “neither citizen nor stranger,” never to be corrupted by a sophist (91c, 890). Anytus’ language of “gentleman” could also sound more open. This phrase, *hoi kaloi kagathoi*, had been taken up by democrats and incorporated into a democratic moral vocabulary.⁷⁸ Once a supporter of the oligarchs but now a resurgent democrat, Anytus could well intend “gentleman” to include all of his fellow Athenians, ordinary and extraordinary. Excellence, Anytus might mean to suggest (and in a way not so different from the axiom of equality that accompanies Socrates’ philosophy), comes from all of us. The issue prompted by the exchange between Anytus and Socrates instead concerns Anytus’ own willingness to pursue these questions, and his own confidence in the Athenian democracy that it can sustain radical questioning of its principles and boundaries. Socrates’ philosophy proceeds from a great trust in the Athenian democracy’s resilience that Anytus lacks.

Still, Anytus’ response to Socrates’ philosophy suggests an unwillingness to transgress the familiar boundaries of the Athenian democracy, an inability to sustain philosophy’s atopia. Meno and Socrates continue their conversation, but Anytus remains in silent consternation. While Meno and Socrates may conclude that despite not yet knowing excellence they might still pursue it through inquiry, Anytus holds back. Whether or not his silence represents the Athenian democracy’s inability to adjust to the transformed practices of accountability Socrates and Meno enact or Anytus’ own inflexible knowingness, masquerading as democratic, we cannot decide. Philosophy may effectively democratize through its open inquiries, but Meno remains an aristocrat from Thesaly while his slave remains a slave; moreover, any challenge to the extant practices of democracy, however democratizing, may well destabilize and undermine the order it challenges. Anytus has the favor of the people, having staked his life on behalf of the democratic resurgence, and he will simply not listen to Socrates, even while Socrates ends the dialogue with a gesture toward persuasion:

But now the time has come for me to go. You convince your guest friend Anytus here of these very things of which you have yourself been convinced,

⁷⁸ As noted by Ober 1989, 339.

in order that he may be more gentle. If you succeed, you will also confer a benefit upon the Athenians [*kai Athēnaious onēseis*, 100c2]. (100c, 897)

Echoing Anytus' warning but insisting on the benefits of the dialogue they have just conducted, Socrates suggests that such a conversation might gentle Anytus as it has Meno. The final word of the dialogue, *onēseis*, also appears in slightly different form when Socrates appeals to the jury in Plato's *Apology* to listen to his argument against Anytus' charges because it will benefit them (as Athenians).⁷⁹ It does not appear accidental that the language of the *Apology* also addresses the charges that Socrates corrupted the youth of Athenians. In these glancing references, Socrates seems to call what has occurred between Meno and himself the work of philosophy while also reiterating the questions of what in fact he did in Athens, and whether or not he taught anything. While depicting its promise, the *Meno* thus raises again questions about the consequences of Socrates' philosophy: Does it cause pain and provoke vengeful retribution? Or does it enliven and improve citizens and noncitizens?

APORIA AND ATOPIA

It seems appropriate that the *Meno* ends with this further *aporia*: a perplexity about what philosophy promises for democracy. Without the safety of citizenship containing this practice, the potentially destabilizing and disturbing consequences of philosophy's atopia become more evident: Not just questioning "civic dogmas," Socrates' philosophy transforms democratic practices of accountability while constructing an alternative space and time for holding a broader spectrum of citizens and noncitizens accountable. The dialogue does not resolve the tensions evident between those willing to carry philosophy forward, trusting in the resilience of the principles and institutions it interrogates, and those unwilling. It leaves readers confused and yet stimulated after this encounter with the torpedo fish.

The exchange with Anytus with its foreshadowing of Socrates' trial also points to another implication of atopia and thus another meaning of the *aporia* it provokes: distress and discomfort.⁸⁰ Encounters with the torpedo

⁷⁹ *Apology* 30c4.

⁸⁰ Liddell and Scott 1995, 215. Each of the following senses corresponds to a possible meaning of *aporia* or *aporos*.

fish *hurt*. Philosophy poses difficult questions; they bruise as well as confuse. Anytus blames Socrates for this, and he may be correct to do so. Socrates, after all, most frequently poses the impossible questions. This possibility gives reasons for ambivalence about Socrates' philosophy, and it marks a severe limitation that one should not lightly ignore.

Moreover, just as citizens like Anytus may reject the painful labors of Socrates' philosophy, so too democratic regimes could refuse it. Here another sense of *aporia* emerges: democracy itself may prove helpless, unable to deal with the development of its own logic. In other words, the *Meno* suggests that possibility that a democracy may not be able to sustain the expansion of its practices of accountability, a transformation that it makes possible and seems to encourage. In other words, the Athenian democracy may reject the politicization that comes in the form of the emancipation and empowerment integral to Socrates' philosophy. As the dialogue ends without resolution to the question of excellence, Socrates' philosophy leaves open the field of possible consequences for engaging citizens and noncitizens in practices that challenge and provoke the extant democratic order.

One more sense of *aporia* emerges from this reading of the dialogue. In response to the question – What would Socrates do? – the *Meno* lacks the resources to provide a definitive answer. Instead, the dialogue further complicates this question, showing the capaciousness of Socrates' philosophy, its promise as well as its potential peril. The *Meno* depicts the radical implications of the axiom of equality for practices of accountability and how transformation of these practices might begin to create new kinds of discursive associations, communities of interlocutors in which philosophy can take place, constituted spatially and temporally in agonistic relation to the surrounding democratic community. Still, these intimations do not define Socrates' philosophy. While illuminating one aspect, much mystery remains.

Socrates in drag: Love beyond the polis

Drawing on the late lectures of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler returned to the figure of Socrates for an image of “giving an account of oneself,” and with it a more emancipatory approach to subject formation in the contemporary world (Butler 2005). In contrast to modern processes of subjectivization that constrain and dominate the subject, for Butler the activity of “giving an account of oneself” modeled by Socrates illuminates a form of address that is dialogic, has room for both passivity and assertiveness, and creates a relationship for self-revelation and self-discovery. As a commitment to dialogue rather than understanding, this practice does not occlude the opacity of the human subject; yet as a revelatory process conducted with others, it nonetheless promises a path toward greater autonomy achieved through communicative interaction. With this argument, then, Butler suggests a way of translating Socrates and his imperative of examination into politics today that avoids the limiting horizon of “Socratic citizenship.” Socrates’ examination founds a new ethical practice.¹

As we saw in the previous chapter, the image of Socrates as a torpedo fish in the *Meno* already suggested a more capacious understanding of Socrates’ philosophy, one that went beyond “Socratic citizenship” by transforming the practices of accountability in democratic Athens, bringing foreigners and slaves alike into “citizenizing” practices and freeing them from the exclusions of Athens’s democratic ideology. Philosophy also goes beyond the “elenchus” narrowly understood, involving its question and answer approach but also employing images

¹ Butler’s account owes much to Foucault’s, although I will discuss Foucault’s later appropriations of Socrates, focusing on his treatment of *parhēsia*, with more detail in Chapter 4.

and stories while maintaining an open-ended commitment to scrutinizing the core beliefs of participants. Finally, the dialogue ended with a multifaceted *aporia* that provoked both playful affirmation and discontented rejection, seen in the contrasting responses of Meno and Anytus. Socrates' philosophy reinforces while it questions. While thus expanding the account of philosophy, the dialogue also opened a new question about whether or not the radical freedom to question enacted by Socrates' philosophy may go too far for Anytus' Athens – and to what degree this transformation of accountability makes an impossible demand for democracy entirely.

Put into conversation with Butler, these questions from the previous chapter gain greater stakes. While the vitality of the democratic polis depended on a pervasive and consistent culture of accountability, at a deeper level this aspect (as well as others) of democratic culture rested on an ideal democratic subject. In other words, along with the norms concerning membership discussed in the previous chapter, the Athenian democracy also constructed a set of beliefs and practices surrounding desire, or *erōs*, that cultivated a model democratic citizen. The democracy depended on erotic practices for the education of its citizens to become democratic subjects; it envisioned an erotic basis for commonness among these citizens; and it created itself as an object of its citizens' *erōs* to inspire devotion and patriotism. Butler's turn to Socrates as a counter-image for subject formation today thus begs the question for the historical context: While appropriating Athenian political practices of accountability does Socrates transform these into ethical practices as well? What kind of change in the participants would such a transformation require – what different kinds of democratic subjects does Socrates' philosophy help to produce? What further political implications might follow? In the bluntest terms: What change of life does Socrates require and is this change actually tenable, both in terms of democratic Athens and from the perspective of today?

To explore these questions, this chapter turns to the role of *erōs*² in the associations Socrates' philosophy creates and sustains. Whereas *erōs* functioned only as a subtext in the *Meno's* elaboration of philosophy, I read Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* to confront more

² I leave *erōs* in italics throughout but use "erotic" for ease of reading. As a foundational concept in the Athenian imagination, *erōs* also possessed a multitude of meanings. The meaning at stake with respect to Socrates' philosophy should become clear as this chapter proceeds.

directly how Socrates engages one of the Athenian democracy's most foundational elements – its intertwining of *erōs* and *polis*. Here the story becomes more ambivalent than the previous chapter might have led one to believe. I show how Socrates' philosophy takes up and transforms the extant erotic practices of Athenian democracy, changing their practice in ways that might help people begin to think and act for themselves; at the same time, such changes do not entirely redound to the good, at least when viewed from the perspective of the Athenian democracy. As Plato's *Symposium* highlights, Socrates' challenge to the conventions of Athens leaves at least one of his associates, Alcibiades, at a loss for how to live his life. Scholars have frequently taken Alcibiades as indication that philosophy could not exist in Athens or perhaps even in any political community.³ I suggest, however, that the relationship of Socrates' philosophy and the Athenian democracy with respect to *erōs* is more complex.⁴ Drawing on the concept of drag, I show how Socrates' philosophy subverts the Athenian erotic status quo in two ways, both opening up the exclusions of the erotic imaginary while also destabilizing this imaginary in potentially dangerous ways.

Plato's depiction of Alcibiades and Socrates raises questions also elicited by Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Xenophon's depictions of Socrates provoke the question of whether or not Socrates effectively makes himself into an object of desire – and thus denies the reciprocity his philosophy seems to promise. On the one hand, by focusing on exclusive aspects of Athens's erotic ideology, Socrates' philosophy politicizes the erotic basis for democratic solidarity by removing it from residually aristocratic forms such as pederasty and re-embodying *erōs* toward greater inclusion and reciprocity. On the other hand, in doing so Socrates unseats the foundational myths of *erōs* and denies the structure of desire that enlists *erōs* in the construction and maintenance of the Athenian polis. By appearing to inhabit the center of this erotic transformation, Socrates risks not only destabilizing its psychological foundations but replacing the polis with himself as the ultimate object of erotic desire.

³ Martha C. Nussbaum put this argument most starkly in Nussbaum 2001. See also Gagarin 1977, Saxonhouse 1992, and Lear 1995, 148–66. I discuss this work more later in the chapter.

⁴ Other scholars have challenged the status quo established by Nussbaum, and I follow their work in part, albeit with important modifications and qualifications, which I discuss later. Challengers of Nussbaum et al. include Nichols 2009 and Mara 1997.

THE EROTIC PRACTICES OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY⁵

In democratic Athens, the belief that *erōs* and *polis* could and should support and reinforce one another began with a story. From the inception of the democracy, the Athenians celebrated Harmodius and Aristogeiton's status as lovers and how *erōs* served to motivate and develop the free citizens of the nascent Athenian democracy with great benefit to the Athenian polis as a whole.⁶ In the Athenians' mythic imagination, prior to the founding of the Athenian democracy, Harmodius killed Hipparchus, the brother of the tyrant Hippias, for interfering with Harmodius' love for Aristogeiton; shortly thereafter, the tyranny fell and Athens took her first steps toward democracy.⁷ The story of how Harmodius and Aristogeiton and, more importantly their *erōs*, led to the vanquishing of tyrants and the freeing of the *dēmos* became, as Paul Cartledge writes, "the most important charter myth of the Athenian democracy."⁸ *Erōs* not only provided a path to training good Athenian citizens, it directly fostered public freedom. *Erōs* and erotic practices formed the basis for a just and free polity; by creating democratic subjects, the "erotics of Athenian democracy" constituted the citizenry.

Put more generally, *erōs* in Athens formed the locus of a set of highly political practices. While scholars have long recognized the prevalence of relationships between men (*erastai*) and boys (*erōmenoi*), in the last thirty years historical research drawing on vase painting, epigraphy, and less frequently studied literary sources (such as speeches of the orators) has begun to contextualize the philosophical *erōs* associated with Socrates within the beliefs and practices of Athens at large. From this research, it has become clear that *erōs* possessed immense political significance.⁹ Three facets of the erotics of democracy call for comment:

⁵ The phrase "the erotics of Athenian democracy" comes from the subtitle of Victoria Wohl's *Love Among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens* (Wohl 2002).

⁶ See Dover 1978, 41–2; Monoson 2001, 21–50; and Wohl 2002, 3–11.

⁷ This was the Athenian version of the story, although Thucydides (among others) points out that the actions of Harmodius and Aristogeiton actually made the tyranny of Hippias worse and that only the help of the Spartans allowed Athens to free herself. Many different ancient sources recount this myth, including Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium*. I have simply retold its rudiments, following Monoson's analysis. See also her important note regarding these sources: Monoson 2001, 22.

⁸ Cartledge 2002, 32.

⁹ Dover 1978; Foucault 1985 [1984]; Halperin 1989, 1–12; Wohl 2002, 12–20.

*paiderastia*¹⁰ as an educative institution of citizen formation; the ideal of like-mindedness or *homonoia* founded in *erōs*, which tied subject formation to the democracy as a whole; and the vision of the *polis* as the object of its citizens' *erōs*, which cemented a democratic structure of desire.¹¹ Each one of these contributes to the context I propose for seeing how Socrates' philosophy takes up and transforms the erotic practices of the Athenian democracy.¹²

First, not only did *paiderastia* appear as normal and praiseworthy when practiced within acceptable conventions, but the pederastic relationship formed an important site for the political formation of young Athenians.¹³ At its most basic level, *paiderastia* consisted of a sexual relationship between an adult citizen (a male) and an adolescent. Such relationships were nonexclusive and negotiated an emotional and erotic asymmetry created between an erotic lover (*erastēs*), who could take physical pleasure in the relationship, and an affectionate beloved (*erōmenos*), who would not experience pleasure but rather benefitted more indirectly. In addition to describing sexual relations between man and boy, *paiderastia* also had a social role: The adult facilitated the adolescent's entry into the masculine society that led the city on the economic and political level. Moreover, through *paiderastia*, older citizens initiated younger ones to the zero-sum competition of Athenian politics where "winners were dominant, active, and penetrating" and "losers were submissive, passive,

¹⁰ Brisson notes that the Greek *paiderastia* had a very different meaning from today's "pederasty": "pederasty" differs from *paiderastia* on the following three points: (1) it has no other finality than sex; (2) it involves no age limit; (3) because the great inequality (on many levels) between an adult and a child, it always takes place, if not in a climate of violence, then at least in a relation of coercion" (Brisson 2006, 229). As with *erōs*, I will italicize the Greek for the nominative form (*paiderastia*) but use the English "pederastic" as an adjective for ease of reading. The reader should keep in mind that "pederastic" refers to *paiderastia*, not today's "pederasty" (and that the same applies to *erōs* and "erotic").

¹¹ By identifying three major facets of the erotics of Athenian democracy (as located in *paiderastia*, *homonoia*, and city as an object of *erōs*), I partially follow Ludwig 2002, 19. Ludwig also offers an excellent discussion of the relationship between *erōs* and empire in the Athenian context. While a case could be made for the relevance of Socrates' philosophy to a critique of the relationship between *erōs* and empire, I do not advance such an argument here. I propose that the three major facets of *erōs* under scrutiny here describe more fundamental phenomena. *Erōs* in its imperialistic and pleonexic mode best describes a pathology of these more basic erotic practices of Athenian democracy.

¹² Here the "erotics of Athenian democracy" describes prescriptive ideals, not ordinary behavior. As Winkler notes, there are "revealing gap(s) between prescriptive discourse and social reality" (Winkler 1990, 6).

¹³ Brisson 2006; Rahe 1994, 114–21; Dover 1978, 49–54.

and penetrated.”¹⁴ *Erōs* and the sexual practices it promoted polarized its participants, dividing them into opposed categories and constituting the background hierarchy of Athenian society by constructing Athenian identity in terms of citizenly *erōs* shared exclusively among men.¹⁵ Yet just as in the myth of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, Athenians viewed the differences and tensions within the pederastic relationship as spurring political heroism and harmony: “Harmodius and Aristogeiton are the prototype for this socially productive erotics.”¹⁶

In addition to its role educating citizens, the pederastic relationship also functioned as an ideal vision of Athenian citizenship in general. As Monoson has shown, the trope of “citizen as *erastēs*” pervaded democratic Athens.¹⁷ The ideal *erastēs*, with his complete devotion to the *erōmenos* and to manly virtues, modeled an ideal of citizenship. Again, the myth of Harmodius and Aristogeiton exemplified this public fiction: The Athenians celebrated Harmodius and Aristogeiton’s status as pederastic lovers and how their intimate motives greatly benefitted the Athenian *polis*. With this story in mind, as Monoson puts it, when Thucydides depicts Pericles in his Funeral Oration exhorting citizens to conceive of themselves as “lovers (*erastai*) of the *polis*,” “Pericles is proposing that Athenians can – and should – turn to their ordinary understanding of what it is like to love as well as to the well-known, clearly defined codes of conduct regarding legitimate sexual behavior and the maintenance of an intimate relationship between an adult citizen lover (*erastes*) and a free-born boy beloved (*eromenos*) for some guidance in thinking about the demands of democratic citizenship.”¹⁸ “Every Athenian was an Aristogeiton,” and by mapping the dynamics of *paiderastia* onto an ideal of citizenship, the homoerotic bond constituted the core of Athenian political freedom by generating manly virtues of courage, boldness, and self-sacrifice.¹⁹

¹⁴ Winkler 1990, 54; Monoson 2001, 68.

¹⁵ As David Halperin writes: “Sex was a manifestation of personal status, a declaration of social identity; sexual behavior did not so much express inward dispositions or inclinations ... as it seemed to position social actors in the places assigned to them, by virtue of their political standing, in the hierarchical structure of the Athenian polity” (Halperin 1989, 32).

¹⁶ Wohl 2002, 4. ¹⁷ Monoson 2001, 21–50 and 64–87; Ludwig 2002, 160–62.

¹⁸ Monoson 2001, 64.

¹⁹ As Wohl expands: “The whole Athenian demos can be imagined as a polity of *erastai*: elite, active, and sexually potent, penetrating as they desire a variety of socially inferior *eromenoi* – boys, women, slaves” (Wohl 2002, 9).

The citizen as *erastēs* trope also extended to a second major facet of the erotic practices of the Athenian democracy: the pursuit of like-mindedness, or *homonoia*.²⁰ By binding together the members of the polis through their individual passions, *erōs* conduced to *homonoia* and to civic friendship, aligning the desires of all Athenians against internal or external threat. In the myth of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, *erōs* led to cooperative action against the tyrants. The myth created a purely Athenian founding (omitting the Spartans' role) and thus associated *erōs* and *homonoia* by building solidarity through its telling. As Paul Ludwig has argued, Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* also depicts a vision of *homonoia* where *erōs* creates perfect cohesion among the once divided pairs and allows society to thrive. Born as singular entities, human beings were punished for their audacious attempt to take Olympus by being cut in half, leaving them miserably divided from their original selves. *Erōs* came as an act of pity from Zeus, allowing human beings to reproduce and thus create some community with one another.²¹ In democratic Athens, the citizens as *erastai* sought to cultivate such a community through *paiderastia*, which channelled desires through a hierarchy of *erastēs* and *erōmenos*. This is not to say that Athenians ever believed they might achieve something akin to the "community of pleasure" described in Plato's *Republic*. Given the intrinsic emphasis on hierarchy and separation – visible in the starkly divided roles of *erastai* and *erōmenoi* – *homonoia* always manifested itself through a highly differentiated society. Yet from within the hierarchy, the aspiration toward greater *homonoia* remained, and *erōs* provided instigation. Erotic practices of *homonoia* united citizens not by an accident of birth but by virtue of their individually felt and willed desires.

Paiderastia as a political practice and as a model of citizenship combined with *homonoia* to create a third, overarching facet of the erotic practices of the Athenian democracy: as Wohl puts it, an erotic imaginary underlay the political imaginary.²² *Erōs* in the traditional understanding arose as a response to the beautiful, as a "passionate longing awakened in us by the appeal of physical beauty"; as such, *erōs* was object-directed, acquisitive, and all-consuming.²³ In democratic Athens this vision of *erōs*

²⁰ This arose as response to the threat of *stasis*, or faction. As Cartledge writes: "Precisely because of the dangers of a peaceable division turning into an outright civil war, the governing ideal remained *homonoia*: not merely consensus or passive acquiescence in the will or power of the majority, but literally and full-bloodedly 'same-mindedness', absolute and total unanimity" (Cartledge 2009, 24).

²¹ Ludwig 2002, 194. ²² Wohl 2002, 4. ²³ Halperin 1985, 163 and 165.

became the understanding of citizenship and political life. As Pericles indicates in the Funeral Oration, the city could and should function as the object of *erōs*. *Erōs* thus not only constituted citizens but permeated democratic politics: *erōs* arose from the power relations among citizens; it formed the basis for their commonality; and it attached them to the *polis*, the beautiful object of every citizen's desire. Agathon's fulsome speech in praise of *erōs* in the *Symposium* would have resonated with his fellow listeners (despite its exaggerations); every real man in Athens had to follow *erōs*.

Gathering together these three facets of the erotics of Athenian democracy, it becomes clear the degree to which *erōs* and *polis* intertwined to create subjects as democratic citizens. As Wohl argues, these erotic ideals constructed a new polity and a new citizen around a "dominant fiction" of model democratic *erōs*: the protagonist was the Athenian citizen as *erastēs*; the plot was driven by the killing of tyrants and the manly defense of one's fellow lovers; the denouement was the vision of the *polis*'s beauty united through erotic *homonoia*. In short, *erōs* became unimaginable outside of the *polis* – any detour from the erotics of democracy threatened the very basis of an individual Athenian's identity by robbing him of the most important story about himself. In such a thick context of belief, deviations could only appear, in Wohl's words, as "parodies, perversions, and travesties" of the just *erōs* of Athenian democracy. Just such a deviation appears in Plato's *Symposium*.

SUBVERTING THE EROTIC PRACTICES OF ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

In the guise of Diotima, the Socrates of Plato's *Symposium* takes up and transforms the extant erotic practices of the Athenian democracy, replacing the erotic competition among lovers and beloveds with a new erotic practice rooted in a morally equal and reciprocal intersubjective relationship. By doing so, Socrates subverts the Athenian erotic fiction, creating a new subject in contrast to the democratic subject formed by the erotics of Athenian democracy. In classical Athens, as we have seen, the dominant fiction of *erōs* depended on the repeated performances of *paiderastia* both among men and boys and in the political spaces of the *polis* through invoking *paiderastia* as the basis for political cooperation (*homonoia*) and manly citizenship. Socrates' appropriation of these erotic practices for philosophy calls attention to the constitutive assumptions of the "erotics of Athenian democracy"

and shows their contingency; moreover, in Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates performs this interrogation by mimicking a woman speaking with knowledge in an arena consistently reserved for men.²⁴ Philosophy thus takes up and transforms the extant erotic practices of the Athenian democracy. Put provocatively, the Socrates of Plato's *Symposium* is a "Socrates in drag."²⁵

Indeed, by impersonating a foreign woman, Diotima of Mantinea, Socrates disturbs the erotics of Athenian democracy without uttering a word.²⁶ Given the intensely masculine understanding of *erōs* in classical Athens, to speak of *erōs* in the words of a woman would immediately strike a dissonance. According to Athenian conventional beliefs, as Michael Kochin writes, "women are weak, prone to excessive lamentation, incapable of resisting their fears; they are also rapacious in their appetites, abiding no limitations of their desire for food, drink, and intercourse." Women "represent the forces that the city exiled beyond its bounds."²⁷ Without a role in the relationship of *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, women did not participate in practicing the "dominant fiction" of democratic Athens. Moreover, in the space of the symposium, an institution primarily devoted to promoting *paiderastia* and its attendant practices,²⁸ speaking as a woman appears even stranger; the participants in Plato's *Symposium* had explicitly expelled the flute girl from their select gathering.²⁹ Viewed

²⁴ On Diotima's being a woman, see Halperin 1989, 113–51; cf. Hobbs 2006.

²⁵ "Drag" being an anachronistic term to apply to classical Athens, I do not mean to claim that any of Plato's readers (or Socrates' contemporaries) thought of Socrates' being actually "in drag," but rather that the idea of drag illuminates important aspects of Socrates' performative subversion as well as how *paiderastia* functioned as a practice susceptible to performative revision. "Drag" thus calls attention to the dependence of all practices on their iteration and thus practices' susceptibility to subversion and transformation through the actions of participants. By actively revising – through an enactment contrary to convention – Socrates' philosophy not only appears as a contrast to the Athenian erotic practices of democracy, but Socrates also appears to foment Alcibiades' crisis. Alcibiades' reaction suggests the degree of Socrates' subversiveness, which we see in relief by virtue of conceptualizing it in terms of drag. I thank Stefan Dolgert for suggesting this approach.

²⁶ Scholars have debated about whether or not "Diotima" corresponds to an actual person, but her historicity does not seem important for my claims here.

²⁷ Kochin 2002, 21.

²⁸ On the symposium, see Hunter 2004, 3–15; and Thorton 1997, 199–200.

²⁹ *Symposium* 176e. This is not to say that women did not play an important role in democratic Athens, but this role did not involve *erōs* (at least explicitly). As in the previous chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. 1997 English translation in the text unless otherwise indicated.

in the context of the erotics of Athenian democracy, then, Socrates' performance as Diotima appears quite arresting.³⁰

While the details of Socrates' speech find no echo elsewhere in treatments of Socrates,³¹ they help to set off the contrast between the erotics of the Athenian democracy and the new erotics embodied by Socrates' philosophy. As Diotima, Socrates recasts the origins of *erōs* and then begins to redescribe its use for human beings. This account expands the ken of *erōs* to include not just the erotics of democracy but *erōs* as it pertains to every object: All human beings want good things and this wanting Diotima calls *erōs* (205a). *Erōs* thus includes not just *paiderastia* or the erotic love of the polis but also money-making, love of gymnastics, and philosophy. Human beings understand these things as good and therefore they love them and wish to possess them always; *erōs* describes all of these desires. *Erōs* no longer appears quite so bounded by the political or the demands of democratic subject formation.

Nor is *erōs* solely directed at beautiful things. *Erōs* exceeds the *polis* as an object both quantitatively (its objects extend beyond the polis) and qualitatively (*erōs* may go beyond what appears as beautiful). As Socrates puts it, speaking in the voice of Diotima, *erōs* "is reproduction and birth in beauty" (206e, 490). By asserting that human beings love to create in the beautiful, Socrates as Diotima subordinates the creation of excellent citizens to one kind of creation among many, appropriating the language of pregnancy to this new erotic practice. Whereas the *polis* in Athens constituted the sole object for a citizen's *erōs* and thus his only hope for immortality, Socrates as Diotima proposes that all *erōs* aims for immortality through its generation in the beautiful; *erōs* is not, in fact, of the *polis* but of immortality itself: "it is for the sake of immortality that everything shows this zeal, which is Love" (208b, 491).³²

The subversive consequences of this redefinition of *erōs* become clearest when Socrates as Diotima imagines the ascent of *erōs*, the proverbial

³⁰ To be clear: Socrates' performance as Diotima does not challenge each and every aspect of Athenian political culture pertaining to women. His challenge focuses on making *erōs* in particular inclusive and more beneficial to all Athenians, including non-citizens, by connecting it to philosophy.

³¹ There is a partial echo insofar as Alcibiades' reactions are attested by others, including Aeschines. On Socrates' *erōs* in the dialogues of Aeschines, see Kahn 1994. For the contrast between Plato and Xenophon in their treatments of Socrates with respect to *erōs*, see O'Connor 1994.

³² Laurence Cooper explores the relationship between *erōs* as a longing for infinity, and its relationship to political community in Cooper 2008.

“ladder of love.” Performing as Diotima, Socrates describes how giving birth in the beautiful can take different forms. Each of us is pregnant, but some are pregnant in body and some in soul. At first, this sounds much like the extant erotic practices of the Athenian democracy, where giving birth to children, while seen as necessary, occupied a lower position in the social hierarchy than the creativity of poets, craftsmen, and, most importantly, lawgivers. “The good ordering of cities and households,” which is called “moderation and justice,” receives Diotima’s highest praise (209a, 491). Everyone would want such children, Diotima asserts, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind” (209d, 492). So too, as Pericles puts it in the Funeral Oration, can Athenian citizens leave behind their polis as an immortal memorial of their good action.³³

But Socrates as Diotima does not stop at modifying the erotic practices of democracy. As if to emphasize the radical next step, a step that seeks to transform the conventions of gender relations undergirding the erotics of Athenian democracy, Socrates has Diotima pause in her account of the “rites of love” (209e, 492). Socrates returns to the differences between those pregnant in body and those pregnant in soul and now describes a movement of erotic practice from the mundane to the heavenly. Going beyond the conventional contrast between the *erōs* of the body – the nonpolitical, womanly *erōs* – and *erōs* of the soul – the political, manly *erōs* – Socrates introduces a new hierarchy of *erōs* that extends beyond the polis and its gendered erotic founding and democratic subjects. Here, *paiderastia* offers just one stage – “correct *paiderastia*” forms a single rung on the ladder (211b, 493).³⁴ (The language here also becomes impersonal, as if to emphasize the unimportance of gender specificity.)³⁵ One begins with beautiful bodies, begetting beautiful ideas in one body. Yet soon one sees the necessity of moving from a single body to the beauty of all bodies and then from the beauty of bodies to the beauty of souls. Next, giving birth to ideas that make the beloved better forces the lover to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and then to see that the beauty of knowledge exceeds these even more. The beloved (*erōmenos*) falls away at this stage and the lover (*erastēs*) becomes the sole

³³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II.39: Strassler, ed. 2008, 113.

³⁴ The phrase here is *orthōs paiderastein*. The Cooper edition translates it as “loving boys correctly.”

³⁵ Here the text uses the impersonal verb *dein*, which begins the description of the ascent (*dei gar*, 210a4 and *dei*, 210b2). That said, the following personal pronouns and participles do resort to the default masculine gender.

object of attention; the *polis* fades into the background. One moves from bodies to souls and then from generalities to abstractions, each step going farther away from the starting point of the erotics of democracy, farther from the manly *erastēs* and the youthful *erōmenos*.

The connection between *erōs* and *homonoia* also disappears with the account of *erōs* described by Socrates as Diotima. While this *erōs* includes associations that form around *erastai* looking for beautiful youths where they might beget, the hierarchy of *erastēs* and *erōmenos* fades, replaced by a vision rooted in intersubjectivity that also ultimately seeks satisfaction beyond this.³⁶ Here the aim of *erōs* transcends the physical gratification of *paiderastia* (think of Aristophanes' speech) and everyone becomes a lover, an *erastēs*. As Halperin puts it, "there is no role for passivity in the search for truth"; Socrates' words spoken through Diotima "emphasize the active, restless character of desire that is common to the passionate pederast and the aspiring philosopher."³⁷ To make progress toward immortality, which all human beings desire, one must become a lover, an *erastēs*, moving beyond political *paiderastia* to pursue truth and beauty among fellow lovers.

Moreover, the ascent of *erōs* casts the things of this world – where *homonoia* might matter – in less alluring light. Once the *erastēs* has seen the beauty of knowing truth, there follows a "turn towards the vast sea of the beautiful," where the *erastēs* "will give birth to many beautiful, indeed magnificent, discourses and thoughts in a boundless love of wisdom" (210d, 493). Ultimately this leads to a recognition of the very thing for which all previous labors were undertaken – a vision of the beautiful itself:

That is the life . . . which most of all a human being should live, in the contemplation of beauty itself. (211d, 493)

Once one views the beautiful, no amount of gold or garments or beautiful youths can compare. The vision of the beautiful transforms the beholder; life in any other form seems unworthy of living. In fact, this vision affects one so profoundly that mundane life proves a sorry thing in comparison (212a).

³⁶ Here I differ from Halperin's account of "erotic reciprocity": Halperin 1986. Halperin focuses mostly on Plato's *Phaedrus*, and while Nichols 2009 correctly notes that the account of *erōs* in the *Symposium* dovetails with that of the *Phaedrus* and could support some idea of reciprocity in theory, for the purposes of my argument, it is only important that Socrates' account in the *Symposium* supports *pederastia* and *homonoia* much less than the traditional erotics of Athenian democracy.

³⁷ Halperin 1989, 72–3.

The intertwining of *erōs* and *polis* thus completely unravels in Socrates' speech as Diotima. Whereas the extant erotic practices of the Athenian democracy regarded its erotic and political imaginaries as one and the same, Socrates' performance of Diotima weaves an erotic fiction of wholly new cloth. *Erōs* of the beautiful itself replaces *erōs* of the *polis*; this experience of *erōs* obviates the pursuit of *homonoia* as one turns away from worldly things and toward the unchanging forms; the immortality of dwelling with and giving birth in the beautiful supplants the immortality of having one's deeds memorialized in the polis. Concluding his speech, Socrates echoes Agathon in declaring that "every real man must honor *erōs*," yet Socrates' "real man" could hardly resemble Agathon's less.

ALCIBIADES AND THE CRISIS OF SUBVERSION

The words embodied by Socrates as Diotima have immediate consequences in action of Plato's *Symposium*. While Aristophanes tries to respond directly to what Socrates says, Alcibiades' abrupt and wild entry echoes the disruption that Socrates enacted by speaking as Diotima, materializing its abstract account of *erōs* and depicting the effects of Socrates' transformation of Athenian erotic practices. Alcibiades' eulogy to Socrates portrays the personal crisis into which Socrates has led him, and the loss of direction that Socrates' transformation of the erotic practices of the Athenian democracy has created: Socrates refuses the pederastic relationship Alcibiades seeks (and expects); he leads Alcibiades to question his political commitments and activities; and he intimates to Alcibiades an object for his *erōs* beyond the *polis*. Yet to embrace everything that Socrates demands would require Alcibiades to reject the entirety of his life hitherto, something which appears simply beyond the pale.³⁸

Viewed as the aftermath of Socrates' performance as Diotima, Alcibiades' speech suggests the kind of volatile and dangerous consequences that might come from Socrates' transformation of Athenian erotic practices. Moreover, there is proof of Alcibiades' reaction from outside Plato's

³⁸ In a reading similar to mine, Sheffield reads Alcibiades' speech as a satyr play that parodies while complementing Socrates' own speech: Sheffield 2006a, 183–206. Unlike Sheffield, however, here I put the accent on the difficulty of Alcibiades' accepting Socrates' transformation of extant erotic practices; it is not a simple choice, as Sheffield has it, but a complete transformation that philosophy demands, and given the extant erotic practices in Athens, this is not a transformation easily undertaken. By reading Alcibiades' speech as a direct response to Socrates, I follow Nussbaum 2001 and Lear 1995.

Symposium. Xenophon's *Memorabilia* recounts how Alcibiades and Critias could overpower their ignoble desires when in the company of Socrates, but once freed of him they reverted to lawlessness. While they associated with Socrates, they were also annoyed by his painful examinations.³⁹ Aeschines devoted a whole dialogue to Alcibiades as well. Aeschines' *Alcibiades* consists of Socrates' narrating a conversation he had with Alcibiades. When Socrates brings Alcibiades to awareness of his ignorance, the effects are, in Kahn's words "overwhelming."⁴⁰ Alcibiades weeps, lays his head on Socrates' knee and begs Socrates to help him overcome his depraved condition. While it remains too fragmentary to allow for conclusive judgment, Aeschines' dialogue appears to suggest that Alcibiades' paroxysmal response to Socrates was not Plato's invention.

Nonetheless, Plato's account offers the most vivid contrast between the new erotic practices of Socrates' philosophy and the Athenian status quo that Alcibiades appears to represent. From the very beginning of his speech Alcibiades characterizes Socrates in terms that depict Socrates as appearing "in drag," as it were. Alcibiades struggles with Socrates' appearance as one thing – an *erastēs* – when Alcibiades himself feels erotically drawn toward Socrates – to be an *erastēs* himself rather than an *erōmenos*, even to disabuse Socrates of his youthful philosophy and show him the importance of conventional political life. Alcibiades' image of Socrates as like a statue of Silenus sitting with his flute, hollow inside but full of little gods, captures this confusion of appearances and reality: Socrates appears like a erotic animal, but within he has transcended these human passions to the level of divinity. Alcibiades expects Socrates to conform to his apparent role of *erastēs* but instead Socrates acts the opposite way, as if he were an *erōmenos* in Alcibiades' mind. But this does not quite fit either: Alcibiades can only think of Socrates as semi-divine; an erotic practice beyond those extant in the Athenian democracy seems unimaginable; the foundations of *erōs* and *polis* begin to crack.

Images combining seduction and deception pervade Alcibiades' speech, testifying to the disturbing strangeness (atopia) of Socrates' subversion. Alcibiades describes Socrates' words as having an extraordinary effect like the satyr Marsyas, enchanting with his divine melodies of words alone. "Let anyone – man, woman, or child – listen to you or even to a poor account of what you say – and we are all transported, completely possessed" (215d, 497), Alcibiades says.

³⁹ *Memorabilia* I.2: Bonnette 1994, 7.

⁴⁰ Kahn 1994, 91. Pseudo-Plato's *Alcibiades* depicts a similar exchange.

Still, I swear to you, the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me – and, let me tell you, I am not alone. I have heard Pericles and many other great orators, and I have admired their speeches. But nothing like this ever happened to me: they never upset me so deeply that my very own soul started protesting that my life – *my* life! – was no better than the most miserable slave’s. And yet that is exactly how this Marsyas here at my side makes me feel all the time: he makes it seem that my life isn’t worth living! (215e-216a, 497 – 8)

Because of this mix of seduction and repulsion, Socrates’ words lead Alcibiades to feel as if he were drunk, outside himself and possessed – less a beloved *erōmenos* than a manic *erastēs*. Yet Alcibiades also seeks to share in Socrates’ wisdom and thus to play the role of *erōmenos*. Socrates makes Alcibiades feel as if his life were not worth living. While Alcibiades has preoccupied himself with attempting to escape from Socrates’ spell and thus to elude the trap implicating Alcibiades’ whole way of life (216b), Socrates shames Alcibiades whenever he comes around, forcing him to flee Socrates for lack of any other way to deal with him. Alcibiades’ wild and erratic response to Socrates – his “madness and frenzy of philosophy” (218b) – Alcibiades likens to a snakebite (217e): one can only talk about it with fellow victims because they alone understand the pain. Yet Socrates’ effects exceed even Alcibiades’ chosen animalistic imagery: Socrates bites Alcibiades’ soul “more cruelly than a snake” (218a). Later, Alcibiades also warns Agathon of Socrates’ mistreatment of those he erotically loves; being a beloved of Socrates, he suggests, can have such dangerous effects (222c). The *erōs* embodied by Socrates seems to possess an explosiveness and flammability when mixed with the likes of Alcibiades that exceeds the self-control and mastery apparent in Socrates’ comportment.

But Alcibiades’ histrionics do not come solely from his particular character; Alcibiades’ description also illuminates the profound subversion of the conventional erotic practices of the Athenian democracy that make up Socrates’ philosophy. As Alcibiades depicts it, Socrates’ new erotic practice upsets Athenian “just *erōs*” by rejecting the roles of *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, leaving Alcibiades without a proper vocabulary to deal with Socrates’ dissonance. Socrates has broken the Athenian conventions, yet his effrontery comes from a lack of expected behavior – he transgresses by not transgressing, by refusing to breach codes normally broken, by refraining from the desired (and technically illicit) physical contact. Alcibiades’ comparison of Socrates to the satyr Marsyas further

emphasizes this strange side to Socrates' outrageousness. In the Greek imagination satyrs represented hypersexualized desire, marked by boundless sexual energy and enlarged genitalia,⁴¹ yet Socrates is anything but hypersexualized in his calm and unaroused response to Alcibiades; Alcibiades can only offer this incoherent description. Alcibiades depicts Socrates and his *erōs* as wildly and erratically disturbing Athenian erotic conventions – this despite the fact that Socrates remains chaste while Alcibiades wishes for fulfillment (alongside some expected violation) of pederastic conventions.⁴²

While Alcibiades cannot fathom Socrates' *erōs*, Socrates' apparent demand that Alcibiades change his life overwhelms Alcibiades. Alcibiades seeks not just physical gratification but feels Socrates' demands in his very soul, yet Socrates' *erōs* differs so dramatically from Athenian norms that Socrates' claim on Alcibiades' way of life pains him, leaving Alcibiades feeling purposeless yet enslaved. Alcibiades cannot trust the radically different kind of emancipation promised by Socrates' philosophy, freedom from extant erotic practices. Rather than appearing eager to share in the new erotic pursuits promised by Socrates' philosophy, Alcibiades appears irritated, angry, and resentful.⁴³ When Socrates claims interest in beautiful boys, Alcibiades says, Socrates doesn't actually care if the person is beautiful; Socrates seems more concerned with boys' souls (216e) and with what they possess inside. Yet such a concern and Socrates' claims to love Alcibiades erotically conflict with Athenian life around him and cause painful friction and dislocation rather than energized inquiry.⁴⁴

Alcibiades thought Socrates wanted a conventional erotic relationship, and Alcibiades sought to develop one with Socrates, trying to let

⁴¹ On the hypersexualized satyr, see Lissarrague 1990.

⁴² As Wohl has shown, the "normativity" of *erōs* in democratic Athens also came with its "discontents," of which Alcibiades represents one: Wohl 2002, 3–11. But Alcibiades' perversion appears as such precisely because he respects, to all appearances, the norm; the violation of the norm also supports it, as Wohl shows. Here I argue that Socrates' subversion disrupts this twinning of normal and paranormal because his transformation of erotic practices with their incorporation into philosophy undermines the foundations of both.

⁴³ Here Halperin comments: "For some of his followers ... this erotic inspiration is productive and congenial; for others (Alcibiades numbers Charmides and a certain Euthydemus, in addition to himself, among the victims) ... the Socratic community is a theater of frustration and torment": Halperin 1986, 68. These different responses are consistent with those observed in the *Meno*.

⁴⁴ See the similar suggestions by Saxonhouse 1992, 181.

Socrates have his way in order that Socrates might teach Alcibiades what he (Socrates) knew (217b). But despite finding himself alone with Socrates, taking exercise together with him, even inviting Socrates to dinner as if Alcibiades were the *erastēs* and Socrates the *erōmenos*, Alcibiades could not approach the normal pederastic relationship with Socrates that would conform to Athenian erotic practices (217c-d). Socrates refuses to give Alcibiades what Alcibiades wants, to hand over wisdom in exchange for Alcibiades' pleasing presence. Rather than turning Alcibiades toward care for himself, Socrates maddens him. When Alcibiades confronts Socrates, confessing that he wishes to become the best possible, Socrates chastises him. Should Socrates accept "bronze for gold"? he asks. Socrates admonishes Alcibiades to think again and consider what is best for both of them. But such coyness infuriates Alcibiades: Socrates spurns Alcibiades' beauty (219c), which Alcibiades thinks stems from nothing but Socrates' amazing arrogance and pride; Alcibiades is "deeply humiliated" yet also cannot bear to lose Socrates' friendship (219e). "I had no idea what do to," Alcibiades says, "no purpose in life; ah, no one else has ever known the real meaning of slavery!" (219e).

All that Alcibiades can call Socrates' behavior is "strange," *atopon*.⁴⁵ Socrates' *atopia* makes Alcibiades unable to account for him – and unable to account for Socrates' uncanny admixture of seduction and repulsion. This strangeness stems from Socrates' nonconformity: Rather than performing the standard rituals of pederastic courtship, Socrates throws everything out of joint; as Alcibiades asserts, he can find no parallel for Socrates (221d). Alcibiades' response became clear on the campaign in Potidaea, when Socrates and Alcibiades shared a mess. Socrates stood up to hunger, could drink copiously without becoming drunk, and proved amazingly resistant to cold (220a-b). Standing outside all day, dawn to dawn, giving Alcibiades a medal that Socrates himself deserved, showing courage at the retreat in Delium, Socrates presented a powerful and impressive figure but one without motivations

⁴⁵ Readers might expect a turn to "irony" here as the best description of how Socrates appears to Alcibiades. Indeed, two passages from Alcibiades' speech (216e2–5 and 218d6–7) buttress Gregory Vlastos's influential interpretation of Socrates as an "ironist": Vlastos 1991, 24–5. For my comments on Vlastos, see Chapter 1 and further discussion in Chapter 6. For the purposes of reading the *Symposium*, I would also note that *atopia* and its variants appear more frequently than *eironeia* (leaving aside whether or not one ought to translate *eironeia* as "irony"), both in Alcibiades' speech and in the dialogue as a whole.

comprehensible to Alcibiades (220c-e; 221a-b). One could say many marvelous things, but without understanding why or how they occurred – Socrates appears unique, so bizarre with his ways, and so unusual in his character:

But this man here is so bizarre (*atopian*), his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you'll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who's even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs, and the same goes for his ideas and arguments. (221d, 503)

Yet while Socrates does not conform to Alcibiades' expectations, Alcibiades does not know any other way to continue their relationship. Thus Alcibiades still suspects that Socrates withholds something from him, something Alcibiades might receive in exchange for conventional blandishments. Like those hollow statues of the Silenus, Socrates appears ridiculous at first – talking about pack asses and other things, “making the same old tired points in the same old tired words” (221e, 503) – but once you see behind these words, Alcibiades asserts, you can never go back: “they're truly worthy of a god” (222a, 503). One can hear Alcibiades struggling with Socrates' language as well as intimations of how Socrates' philosophy has transformed extant erotic practices, yet Alcibiades cannot grasp any of it.

Moreover, despite his attractiveness to Alcibiades, Socrates stands opposed to the conventions of Athenian life in seemingly every aspect; Socrates thus repels Alcibiades from everyday life around him. Socrates' strange behavior on the battlefield calls attention to the dissonance between Socrates' subjectivity and the conventional Athenian subject; echoes of this opposition between Socrates and the erotics of Athenian democracy resound throughout Alcibiades' speech: declaring Socrates superior to Pericles (215e); confessing how Socrates convinced Alcibiades to turn to himself and away from political affairs (216a); feeling ashamed when he does not feel he should (216b – c); and remarking on the ways in which Socrates seems to embody aspects of political excellence such as courage and moderation without their being grounded in a normal democratic subjectivity (219d). Socrates' strangeness and his countercultural *erōs* leave Alcibiades nonplussed – Socrates seems both “wonderful” and “vile,” both enchanting and disgusting. Socrates resembles no other human being and escapes any words or categories with which Alcibiades might try to contain him. I do not know what to do with this man, Alcibiades concedes (216c).

Socrates' atopia, his strangeness, appears outrageous to Alcibiades. Here Alcibiades employs the language of *hubris*. This language, normally reserved for sexual violation, marks the degree of philosophy's subversiveness while underscoring how much the charges of hubris it provokes depart from the norm.⁴⁶ Alcibiades declares Socrates to be hubristic from the very beginning of his speech, saying "You treat people insolently (*hubristēs ei*). Isn't that true?" (215b) immediately after Alcibiades has described Socrates as a Silenus. Socrates' silence indicts him, Alcibiades continues. The strangeness of Socrates' refusal to practice conventional erotic relations constitutes his greatest outrage for Alcibiades. This appears again in the second accusation of hubris against Socrates. After describing his attempts at conducting a normal affair with Socrates, Alcibiades says: "Yet despite all that, he completely defeated me, and despised and mocked and insulted my beauty (*hubrizen*) . . ." (219c, 501). Yet again Socrates prevails by not prevailing and commits hubris by not committing hubris, when judged on both counts against Athenian conventions. Returning to the association of Socrates with satyrs, Alcibiades reiterates the accusation of hubris a third time at the end of his speech, saying that Socrates' words may strike his listeners as ridiculous at first because they come cloaked in depictions as coarse as the hubristic hides of satyrs (*saturou dē tina hubristou doran*, 221e). Socrates' hubris deceives as well as outrages; its combined subterfuge and subversion of the norm creates its outrage: Socrates deceives by appearing to play the *erastēs* while actually making the apparent *erōmenos* become an *erastēs* as well, demanding that the new *erastēs* join Socrates in pursuing *erōs* beyond the polis. Everything effectively reverses predictable roles and upsets Alcibiades' expectations as well as Athenian conventions. Alcibiades' final use of hubris puts this point emphatically:

Well, this is my praise of Socrates, though I haven't spared him my reproach, either; I told you how horribly he treated me (*hubrizein*) – and not only me but also Charmides, Euthydemus, and many others. He has deceived us all: he presents himself as your lover, and, before you know it, you're in love with him yourself! (222a-b, 503)

Socrates' hubris for Alcibiades thus revolves around *erōs* and Socrates' performance in drag: Socrates' philosophy breaks with the expected

⁴⁶ Dover discusses hubris in this sense: "A man of strong sexual appetites, more shameless, importunate and headstrong in pursuit of their satisfaction than society regarded as acceptable, was *hubristēs*": Dover 1978, 36.

erotic behavior and this deviance (and deception) outrages not only Alcibiades but other promising young men such as Charmides and Euthydemus. Socrates turns their worlds upside down with his strange subversion of the erotic practices of the Athenian democracy.⁴⁷

SOCRATES AND HIS GIRLFRIENDS: XENOPHON'S
"MEMORABILIA"

In an article focusing on the construction of democratic subjectivity through "the gaze," Simon Goldhill has suggested that Socrates' activity presented a radical challenge to the erotics (and economics) of the Athenian democracy analogous to the one I have developed in this chapter thus far.⁴⁸ Goldhill details the aspects of Athens' "performance culture" and how this culture constructed a democratic gaze. With the Kleisthenic reforms and the subsequent growth of democracy, new and specifically democratic civic spaces were created for competitive performance. The citizen became a *theatēs*, a member of an audience, and democratic politics became the spectacle played out in institutions ranging from the Assembly to the theater, from novel architectural experiments to tribally organized team beauty contests (*euandriai*).⁴⁹ This intertwining of performance and spectatorship as part of the repertoire of citizenship thus pervaded much of political life, as Goldhill explains:

The democratic city of Athens – its institutions and practices – constituted a particular *culture of viewing*, in which the roles, statuses, positions of the democratic actors were constantly being structured in and through the gaze of the citizens. This collective, participatory audience is a fundamental element of the democratic *polis* – a fundamental aspect of what constitutes public life.⁵⁰

To connect this to the language of subjectivity employed by Butler: The democratic subject emerged through this culture of viewing, viewing itself as meant to be seen and practicing spectatorship when looking at

⁴⁷ Sheffield has exhaustively shown the connections between Alcibiades' and Socrates' speeches in the Symposium: Sheffield 2006a, 187–8.

⁴⁸ Goldhill 1998. For translations of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* I have relied on Bonnette 1994.

⁴⁹ Goldhill 1998, 105–8. See also Osborne and Goldhill 1999 on performance culture and Monoson 2001, 88–110, on the citizen as *theatēs*.

⁵⁰ Goldhill 1998, 108. Emphasis in the original.

others. Moreover, this self-formation was self-conscious: Discussions of optics by Democritus and others as well as questions about sight and knowledge in tragedies like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* or the challenges to perception by the sophists all testify to how scrutiny of this viewing constituted part of a self-reflexive democratic discourse.

Goldhill directs our attention to a set of passages in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* where Socrates challenges these "politics of looking," continuing a kind of subversion similar to what we saw in Plato's *Symposium*. Xenophon recounts a series of episodes where Socrates shows his usefulness to those practicing arts and workmanship. As Goldhill notes, a major facet of Xenophon's writings on Socrates consists in demonstrating Socrates' usefulness;⁵¹ the point here is not to evaluate his judgment on this matter but rather to find further evidence that Socrates' philosophy took up and transformed the extant erotic practices of the Athenian democracy. Three smaller vignettes beginning at *Memorabilia* 3.10 build to a longer one at 3.11 significant for this discussion. Socrates visits a painter (Parthasios), a sculptor (Cleiton), and an armorer (Pistias) in turn. In each of these conversations, Socrates' questions and the subsequent discussion leads to the introduction of the idea that visual representation should aim at creating the best democratic citizen. To take the second of these as an example, Socrates wonders at the beautiful statues of athletes and asks Cleiton the sculptor how the quality of lifelikeness "seduces men through their faculty of vision."⁵² When Cleiton is at a loss, Socrates suggests that such images come from lifelike models. The question then turns to how the sculptor can assimilate the works of the soul in his image. Because qualities of character show themselves in the face and body, questions of beauty immediately turn to questions of the good. Socrates leads the artists to see the ethical's place in representation by connecting the beautiful and the good directly, calling into question the democracy's tendency to prefer appearances over what may lie beneath. As Goldhill puts it, for Socrates, "the politics of looking requires that the role of ethics in artistic representation is recognized and controlled – as what is useful to the city in making better citizens."⁵³

Yet rather than simply reinforce the conventional equation of the good and the beautiful as embodied by the robust democratic subject (such

⁵¹ Goldhill 1998, 109. See also Morrison 1994 and O'Connor 1994.

⁵² Goldhill's translation. Bonnette reads: "... draws the souls of human beings through their sense of sight" (Bonnette 1994, 99).

⁵³ Goldhill 1998, 111.

as in the form of Alcibiades), Socrates moves in a different direction. Following the conversations with the painter, sculptor, and armorer, Socrates makes one further visit to an artist's studio – this time to visit a beautiful woman and famous model named Theodote. From the beginning of the episode, Xenophon marks Theodote as someone “who conorted with anyone who persuaded her,”⁵⁴ which positions Theodote as a *hetaira*, one who needs to be persuaded for an appointment – neither an obedient wife or daughter nor a *pornē*, a figure on display who could be bought by anyone with money. Because Theodote is a *hetaira*, Socrates can raise the question of what benefit comes from her being viewed: It is a question of her value and what price she might be worth. But while asking this question, Socrates can also raise the question of her potential as a seductive threat to democratic male self-sufficiency (and thus the extant erotic practices of Athens).

Coming upon Theodote, Socrates asks his companions if they should be grateful to Theodote for seeing her or if she should be grateful to them for being seen. Does she gain more from their praise or they from the pleasure of seeing her? Socrates' companions and Theodote agree that she benefits: these men see and desire her and they will report her beauty to their friends – both will redound to her benefit with future customers. This leads Socrates to ask how Theodote seduces her clients and he offers that she has a net for hunting more effective than any dogs or trap: her body. Yet still Theodote must know how to “induce hunger” in someone for what she has. Theodote proposes that Socrates should help her and become her “fellow hunter of friends.” Socrates responds: “If, by Zeus, you persuade me.” He then pleads his own busyness, that he has female friends “who will not allow me to leave them day or night” – not to mention fellows like Apollodorus and Antisthenes who “are never absent.” Theodote may visit him to learn his “love charms, incantations, and spells,” “unless some female dearer to you is inside,” he tells her.⁵⁵

In this striking exchange, two important motifs emerge for our discussion. First, we see Socrates' subversion of the democratic gaze by raising the question of how beauty connects to excellence. The exchanges with the artisans and with Theodote hearken back to those Socrates describes in Plato's *Apology* when he seeks to find what different craftsmen know.

⁵⁴ Goldhill's translation. Bonnette reads: “... who was the sort to keep company with whoever persuaded her” (Bonnette 1994, 101).

⁵⁵ Drawing on Goldhill's translation. Cf. Bonnette 1994, 101–5.

Nobody can give an account of how their craft might make others better; nobody knows what excellence looks like. Socrates' philosophy involves transforming the structure of desire built on a politics of looking, enacting instead a politics of thinking that points to a wholly different structure of desire, as we saw in Plato's *Symposium*. The beauty that attracts us ought to make us better. Socrates' usefulness, according to Xenophon, lies in his connecting the visual to the actual, beauty to excellence, while beginning to enlist ordinary people – painters, sculptors, armorers, even *hetairai* – to think about what this excellence could be. This process of investigation ought to lead us to desire different things.

But what if, convinced we must reject the beauty of an Alcibiades or a Theodote, we instead fall for Socrates? This suggests a second implication from Socrates' exchange with Theodote, one that also raises a question implicit in Alcibiades' outburst at the end of Plato's *Symposium*: Does Socrates effectively make himself the new object of desire to replace the democratic polis? While the episode with Theodote begins with her as the object of desire, it ends with Socrates as the object. Socrates can point to his girlfriends and boyfriends as evidence of his seductive powers. As Goldhill puts it, Socrates inverts the power relations of the scene, yet in doing so the dialogue written in celebration of Socrates actually reveals the threat of Socrates and the corruption he might bring to the city.⁵⁶ Socrates destabilizes the reciprocities of citizenship constructed in the gaze of the collective audience; philosophy seems to wield some exceptional or unfair power that undercuts the space of appearances where democratic subjectivity is constructed.

The threat of Socrates evident in these passages from the *Memorabilia* resonates with the threat apparent in Alcibiades' speech from Plato's *Symposium*. There too Socrates proved unsusceptible to conventional beauty – that of Alcibiades – and instead turned the tables of desire. Refusing the conventional pederastic relationship, Socrates subverted the building block of democratic citizenship. Yet Socrates' subversion of the erotics of Athenian democracy throws Alcibiades into crisis: Unable to negotiate Socrates' challenges, Alcibiades resorts to fantastic comparisons (satyrs, Corybantes, Pericles) and manic behavior. Perhaps this is the result of subverting the forms of subjectivity upon which the democratic polis depended: one falls in love with Socrates and must suffer as the endlessly spurned lover.

⁵⁶ Goldhill 1998, 122.

Yet Alcibiades does not present the only example of responses to Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*. The same Apollodorus mentioned by Socrates in Xenophon speaks the first words of Plato's dialogue: "In fact, your question does not find me unprepared" (172a, 458). Apollodorus is not unprepared because he has made it his job to know exactly what Socrates says and does each day. In a telling contrast to Alcibiades, Apollodorus continues by describing himself prior to becoming a follower of Socrates:

Before that, I simply drifted aimlessly. Of course, I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless man on earth – as bad as you are this very moment: I used to think philosophy was the last thing a man should do. (172c – 173a, 458)

Whereas Alcibiades lost direction through his encounter with Socrates, Apollodorus found it. Now, he says, his "greatest pleasure" comes from "philosophical conversation," even when he only listens (173c). Alcibiades felt his life was worthless when subjected to Socrates' scrutiny, but this paralyzed him; Apollodorus declares himself invigorated.

Alongside Apollodorus is another counterexample, that of Aristodemus. Aristodemus, Apollodorus explains, originally told Apollodorus what occurred at Agathon's house. Aristodemus had attended the party because he was an *erastēs* of Socrates (173b). While Aristodemus does not describe himself as did Apollodorus, he recounts his first meeting Socrates prior to the symposium at Agathon's and that, upon seeing Socrates freshly bathed and wearing fancy sandals, he asked him why he looked so good (174a). The word here, *kalos*, could mean "beautiful," "handsome," "pretty," "attractive," or "lovely," and when applied to a human being it often comes with erotic associations.⁵⁷ Thus Aristodemus reiterates his status as an *erastēs* of Socrates, but also in the context of a very different kind of *erōs* contrasted to Alcibiades: Aristodemus' memory of the conversation at Agathon's house is the possession of Socrates he pursues, not the physical possession articulated by Alcibiades. Moreover, while he does not follow Socrates everywhere like Apollodorus, Aristodemus knows Socrates well enough to find his changed appearance – the clean body and attractive sandals – remarkable. Later, Agathon calls Socrates' standing alone outside strange, but Aristodemus corrects him and explains this as a frequent habit of Socrates (175a). When Socrates tells Aristodemus that he (Socrates) has dressed well for a party at Agathon's

⁵⁷ Dover 1978, 15–16.

and invites Aristodemus to accompany him, Aristodemus' response further emphasizes his attentiveness of Socrates: "I'll do whatever you say," Aristodemus answers (174b, 459). Whereas Alcibiades, like Agathon, found Socrates' behavior strange, Aristodemus is unflustered. Whereas Alcibiades resisted Socrates' words like the Sirens' song, Aristodemus responds with pleasure.

These examples of other interlocutors have found favor in accounts of the new erotic practices entailed by Socrates' philosophy. Leo Strauss and Stanley Rosen both identify Aristodemus as a model Socratic philosopher. While they do not yet show evidence of fully embodying Socrates' philosophy,⁵⁸ Apollodorus and Aristodemus occupy lower rungs on *erōs*'s ladder, having committed to philosophy's practice and changed their lives accordingly. Further, Apollodorus and Aristodemus show no signs of antidemocratic animus. As Nichols has argued, Socrates' speech as Diotima does not exclude the possibility of political community but in fact develops it: The understanding of *erōs* undergirding Socrates' philosophic life supports a vision of political life as well because "the state between poverty and resources that accounts for the pursuit of wisdom ... also accounts for the ongoing human activities that keep political communities alive and flourishing."⁵⁹ Extending this reading, Socrates' new erotic practices might even lead to more vibrant democratic life.⁶⁰

Yet Apollodorus and Aristodemus' presence at the beginning of the *Symposium*, promising as it might seem, does not dispose of the problem. Socrates may well be their object of desire: Aristodemus desires to "do whatever Socrates commands" (174b1), following him around and failing to say a single word during the course of the symposium.⁶¹ Apollodorus merely repeats Socrates' conversations; according to Xenophon in his *Apology*, Apollodorus was "though powerfully attracted to Socrates in other respects a simpleton."⁶² Socrates wants to create a joint search, one perhaps resembling what we saw intimated in Plato's *Meno*, but his interlocutors seem incapable. Alcibiades may be "paranormal,"⁶³

⁵⁸ Strauss 2001, 29 and 66; Rosen 1999, 16. Harry Neuman does the same for Apollodorus: Neuman 1965, 289. Cf. Halperin 1986.

⁵⁹ Nichols 2009, 69.

⁶⁰ As suggested by, among others, Halperin 1986, 75 n. 48, and Mara 1997, 240.

⁶¹ As Sheffield notes, both Apollodorus and Aristodemus still approach Socrates as the object of their *erōs* rather than the good and the beautiful: Sheffield 2006a, 204.

⁶² Translation by Kremer 2006, 28.

⁶³ On Alcibiades as "paranormal," see the suggestions by Wohl 2002, 124–70.

but these more normal companions can't help falling in love with Socrates: philosophy becomes a kind of cult with Socrates at the center.

EMBODYING PHILOSOPHY

Socrates' clash with Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* has often stood as a synecdoche for the conflict between philosophy and the Athenian democracy more generally. Some scholars have viewed the conflict between Socrates and Alcibiades as irresolvable, arguing that the polarity of these two characters and of their erotic practices indicates an opposition between Socrates' philosophic life and Alcibiades' political one.⁶⁴ On this argument, Socrates' speech demands channeling everything that is human – from our most picayune desires to our greatest ambitions – to the higher *erōs* of philosophy. By reducing the diversity of human desires to a unity, Socrates' philosophy requires too much. The force of Alcibiades' character in Plato's *Symposium* as well as the historical resonances of subsequent Athenian catastrophes involving him suggests the impossibility of creating community on the basis of Socrates' erotic practice. Given Alcibiades' legacy as well as Socrates' later conviction on charges of, among other things, corrupting the youth, Socrates' subversion of Athenian erotic practices seems connected to Alcibiades' own exploits that, on this reading, incited the Athenians into the disastrous Sicilian expedition and the eventual loss of the Peloponnesian War.⁶⁵ Thus the self-sufficient Socrates cannot participate in a human society; his indifference to human complexity constitutes an antipathy toward political community.⁶⁶

The foregoing argument complicates this story. The problem lies not simply in an opposition between Socrates and Alcibiades but in a conflation – perhaps inevitable but not clearly necessary – between the new structure of desire enacted by Socrates' philosophy and Socrates himself as a replacement object for the subverted erotic practices of Athenian

⁶⁴ See, for example, Nussbaum 2001; Gagarin 1977; Saxonhouse 1992; and Lear 1995.

⁶⁵ As Richard Hunter writes: "The *Symposium* looks back to a remarkable period in Athenian history, shortly before the city undertook a major military expedition to Sicily which was to end in disaster and which, at least with hindsight, could be seen to have ushered in the era which culminated in catastrophic Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War": Hunter 2004, 3–4.

⁶⁶ Here Alan Bloom comments: "Almost all tragic conflict concerns this split (in man between love of the good and love of one's own), but Socrates is completely indifferent to it. He is a strange duck": Bloom 2001, 137–38.

democracy. The new structure of desire that emerges with Socrates' philosophy, while it might result in disastrous consequences for the likes of Alcibiades, also holds the potential to extend without destroying key aspects of the Athenian erotic imaginary. By subverting the traditional boundaries and exclusions upon which the imaginary rested, Socrates' philosophy opens up erotic practices to all comers. Appearing in the guise of a woman in Plato's *Symposium* and engaging diverse interlocutors in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates introduces a presumptively inclusive basis for his philosophy. The capaciousness of *erōs* in his account further underscores this idea: If *erōs* exceeds the masculine boundaries of *paiderastia*, women might partake in its higher mysteries, as did Diotima. Socrates' own pursuit of philosophic conversation with others further shows how the erotic practice of philosophy remains rooted in human relationships: While Socrates stands off to the side for a few hours before the action of Plato's *Symposium*, most other hours he pursues thinking together with diverse interlocutors. Socrates transforms the extant erotic practices of the Athenian democracy by integrating the tensions between competitive *erastai* and *homonoia*, raising them up to cooperative effort shared by all *erastai* in the pursuit of the wisdom.

Yet on the other hand, this transformation opens up the possibility of a new cult of Socrates at odds with the project of his philosophy. Just because this new structure of desire holds the promise of benefitting the Athenian democracy does not mean the extant regime can sustain it. Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* thus also reinforce the ambivalent status of Socrates' philosophy in the Athenian democracy. As Alcibiades' speech explosively demonstrates, philosophy can confound those it encounters, leaving them directionless and infuriated. Alcibiades cannot make sense of the contradictions of philosophy: its ostensible pursuit of beautiful bodies yet its declared intentions to transcend these bodies; its engagement of the things of this world yet its subordinating these same things to higher pursuits; its basis in a highly political passion yet its apparent insouciance about politics as conventionally conceived. Socrates' philosophy reconfigures democratic *erōs*, but it does so in strange and disturbing (*atopan*) ways. Alcibiades cannot embrace the emancipation it promises, feeling instead Socrates' challenge as a new form of slavery.

To return to the language of Butler, we could say that Socrates embodies philosophy – “giving an account” – in two ways. In one sense Socrates embodies philosophy by rooting it in the existing structure of desire of his political community. That is, philosophy connects to the

psychological self-understanding of the Athenian *polis*, taking up the erotic practices of the Athenian democracy and transforming these practices into the practice of philosophy. This promises a transformation of the underlying psychology of the community, that once aimed toward visible democratic excellences of reciprocity and *homonoia* would enlist these in a collective project of pursuing wisdom.

Yet on the other hand, Socrates comes to embody philosophy in a much more basic sense. For Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates is philosophy: its tangible manifestation, its incarnation. Such an understanding of (and reaction to) Socrates also emerges in the episodes we discussed from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Socrates becomes the new object of desire, replacing the differentiated objects that formed a "politics of looking" in the democratic polis. Socrates redirects the gaze on himself and his questioning becomes a new form of seduction.

This twofold sense of embodying philosophy raises questions for an appropriation of Socrates like Butler's. Would we be better off avoiding the example of Socrates' philosophy lest we fall for the man himself? Butler does not consider how the aspirations toward reciprocity may themselves point toward a transformed hierarchy, bent toward seduction, another logic of power that subjects one to another. When Socrates comes to embody the aspirations of philosophy he promotes and enacts, the perversions of "giving an account" appear ripe.

The ambivalence of this embodied philosophy also raises the question of its ultimate relation to the political community. Alcibiades' reaction points to the storm that Socrates caused in many of his interlocutors. As Jonathan Lear writes: "Socrates' fundamental question – how shall I live? – looks so innocent but is in fact traumatic."⁶⁷ Socrates' subversion of the erotics of Athenian democracy undercuts the most basic account of desire and need with which the Athenians organized their lives; his subordination of *pederastia* to a low rung on a ladder stretching far beyond the Athenian polis meant eliminating another constitutive feature of Athenian political life; the like-mindedness (*homonoia*) and reciprocity of the Athenian imagination must find new nonpolitical expression. For someone like Alcibiades, attached to his way of life, in part because he excelled at it, Lear puts it right: "Socrates is a traumatizing seducer; he is guilty of the repetitive introjection into life of a message that life cannot contain."⁶⁸ The Athenians react to this trauma by killing its source.

⁶⁷ Lear 2000, 102.

⁶⁸ Lear 2000, 103.

Yet Socrates does still embody philosophy in the first sense, as we have seen: Socrates' philosophy becomes embodied through its appropriation and transformation of Athenian erotic practices; "giving an account" becomes part of a transfiguration of the basic psychology of desire. Separating Socrates himself from the philosophy he undertakes with others appears very difficult, but not impossible. The promise we saw in the *Meno* has further elaboration in Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Even if neither of these works provide representatives of well-adjusted and eager interlocutors and fellow philosophers, they cue us to what such types might resemble: erotically motivated, preferring dialogue to debate, attracted not to Socrates but to the objects of their inquiry, to questions held in common.

Fearless speech in democracy: Radicalizing frank speaking

In an argument against a “scientific” approach to political rule, Bruno Latour has contended that Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias* introduces a fearful dilemma by pitting “Reason” against “Force,” and that this began the enduring conflict between philosophy as the seat of rationality and politics as the realm of the unthinking masses. For Latour, Socrates in the *Gorgias* embodies the “true scientist”; as Socrates tells Callicles: “You’ve failed to notice *how much power geometrical equality has among gods and men*, and this neglect of geometry has led you to believe that one should try to gain a *disproportionate* share of things.”¹ According to Latour, Socrates tries to create a politics of philosophy in the *Gorgias*, a politics tied exclusively to the mast of Reason that defines itself against a politics without philosophy, the pure power politics Socrates associates with the tyrant.² Socrates’ Reason faces Callicles’ Force. Callicles, “an expert at disproportion,” in Latour’s words, declares in contrast to Socrates: “we only have to look at nature to find evidence that it is right for better to have a greater share than worse . . . The superior person shall dominate the inferior person and have more than him [*sic*]” (483c-d). On the one hand stands Callicles and politics, on the other Socrates and philosophy.

¹ Latour 1999, 11 (emphasis in original). I quote here from the translation of the *Gorgias* used by Latour, Robin Waterfield’s Oxford edition. Nussbaum offers another version of Latour’s argument, but through a reading of the *Protagoras*: Nussbaum 2001, 89–121.

² According to Latour, this opposition still persists today: “If Reason cannot prevail, then Might will take over!” Latour repeats an oft-heard cry of despair. As Latour quotes Steven Weinberg: “Our civilization has been powerfully affected by the discovery that nature is strictly governed by impersonal laws . . . We will need to confirm and strengthen the vision of a rationally understandable world if we are to protect ourselves from the irrational tendencies that still beset humanity”: Latour 1999, 216.

While we have already seen the unfortunate simplification upon which a sharp contrast between Socrates' activities and those of his fellow Athenian citizens rests, Latour's reading of the polarities within the *Gorgias* finds ample support from other readers of the dialogue.³ From its beginning, the *Gorgias* presents itself as a struggle between Socrates and his interlocutors.⁴ As Arlene Saxonhouse notes, war remains an "unspoken" but omnipresent theme in the dialogue.⁵ The dialogue's namesake, Gorgias, had distinguished himself as a teacher of rhetoric, and thus one involved in political conflict at one remove, just like his student Polus, also a rhetorician; Callicles, a wealthy, young, Athenian gentleman, appears as under the influence of Gorgias and intent on seeking political power.⁶ All three, then, come associated with the pursuit of power in the conventional political arena, drawing a contrast with Socrates: between Socrates' dialectical arts and the rhetorical skill proffered by Gorgias and Polus and pursued by Callicles; between two different kinds of power seekers; between politics and philosophy.

This reading of the dialogue underscores the very real oppositions the dialogue presents, yet the polarized contrast between Socrates' philosophy and the practice of politics offered by Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles renders the dynamic complexity of Athenian political life too black and white. As we have seen in previous chapters, democratic life in the Athenian polis consisted of widespread participation by all citizens at levels ranging from neighborhood to the Athens-wide Assembly. Most political officials were selected by lot, and anyone could attend the Assembly, "carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, or low-born – it doesn't matter ..." as

³ Latour's comments are also echoed (or anticipated by) Wolin 1990 and Rancière 1999. For a pair of starkly contrasting readings on these issues, see Euben 1996 and Barber 1996.

⁴ As Christopher Rocco puts it: "Socrates' conversations with Gorgias and Polus reveal a fundamental antagonism between Athenian political practice and Socratic dialectic, an antagonism that culminates in Callicles' prediction of Socrates' death and Socrates' assumption of the mantle of Athenian statesmanship": Rocco, 1997, 78. Rocco thus identifies the same polarity between "Athenian political practice and Socratic dialectic" as Latour. In the following two sections, I show the limitations of such an interpretative lens.

⁵ Saxonhouse 1983. Indeed, the theme speaks from the dialogue's first words: *polemou kai machēs*, meaning "of war and conflict." See *Gorgias*, 447a1 and Liddell and Scott 1995, 1085 and 1432–3.

⁶ As E. R. Dodds notes, "Gorgias's teaching is the seed of which the Calliclean way of life is the poisonous fruit": Dodds 1959, 15.

Socrates says in Plato's *Protagoras*.⁷ A Council (*boulē*) of five hundred citizens chosen by lot set the agenda for the Assembly meetings. Large panels of these chosen citizens served on juries that reviewed many of the laws passed by the Assembly. In other words, "the demos [the people], its will expressed in both the Assembly and in court rulings, was master of Athens."⁸ The dominance of the people in Athens also changed the power and influence of political leadership. As A. M. H. Jones puts it, the people demanded "informed advice," not "mere eloquence" from their leaders, and they "saw to it that they got it."⁹ In his study of Athenian demagogues, the leaders of the *dēmos*, M.I. Finley expands on Jones, detailing how leaders had "no respite," being constantly subject to the scrutiny of the people: Leaders' power depended on passage of their proposals in the Assembly and, lacking the supportive insulation of either party or bureaucracy, leaders were held directly accountable for their missteps. Institutional devices such as ostracism and *graphē paranomon* (which allowed a man to be indicted and tried for making an "illegal proposal" in the Assembly) further empowered the people to curb any leader's excess.¹⁰

The previous chapters elaborated Socrates' philosophy as it took up and transformed extant practices of accountability as well as the erotic practices that buttressed democratic life in ancient Athens. While I have noted the diversity and contestation within these practices, the high contrast between them and Socrates' philosophy has risked treating Athenian democratic life as much more homogeneous than it actually was. The reminder of the power of the *dēmos* and Finley's discussion of Athenian demagogues points to a primary tension within the Athenian polis, a tension between mass and elite, which deeply affected the stability and content of the Athenian political culture.¹¹ While the *dēmos* was master, the *dēmos* itself did not constitute a singular entity. More highly educated, wealthier, or better born than the majority of Athenians, elites

⁷ *Protagoras* 319d: Cooper, ed. 1997, 755–56. Quoted in Ober 1989, 8. As in the previous chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. 1997 English translation in the text (unless otherwise indicated).

⁸ Ober 1989, 8. ⁹ Jones [1957] 1986, 133.

¹⁰ See Finley [1973] 1996, 25–27. On other institutions of accountability in Athens, see the general discussion by Roberts 1986.

¹¹ As Ober elaborates: "The political power of the group threatened the liberty of the individual and the property of the wealthy; the wealth, status, and abilities of the elites threatened both the non-elite individual and the masses collectively; intra-elite contests threatened to undermine the stability of the entire society": Ober 1989, 10.

often sought to govern or rule democratic Athens. The rest of the Athenians, the “mass,” in contrast, had political rights but remained otherwise ordinary.¹² While Athens was a directly democratic regime where every citizen could attend the assembly and vote on public business, elite orators – *rhētors* – possessed great influence over these deliberations. As Thucydides vividly shows us, speakers such as Pericles or Cleon or Alcibiades could sway the people to their side and thus *effectively* rule while the people *technically* held the power. In this vein, Thucydides refers to Pericles’ tenure as “rule of the first man” and Athens as “a democracy in name only” during this time. The *dēmos* had the power, but the *rhētors* led the people in its usage.¹³ Thus Athens was far from homogeneous: Political stability, if achieved, depended upon a fragile balance between divisive contenders for power.

In other words, Athenian democracy did not envision a bright line between a political class and the remainder of citizens, as Latour’s reading suggests.¹⁴ Indeed, the primary political tensions occurred between masses and elites, with each contending for power and influence while acknowledging the need for the other party. Yet Latour does usefully focus attention on the competition among elites for the favor (and thus for the power) of the *dēmos* in a way that calls attention to a distinctive facet of Socrates’ philosophy. As orators (*rhetorēs*) and their students, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles represent the elites, but Socrates presents a different kind of challenger. He does not counterpose an alternative elite nor, I will argue, does he attempt to control the *dēmos*

¹² Ober 1989, 11. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1291b14 – 30; Reeve, trans. 1998, 109–10, where Aristotle subdivides the polis into the mass of ordinary citizens, referred to as *dēmos*, and the elite (*gnōrimoi*).

¹³ There remains dispute about how much the *rhētors* actually controlled the people. Ober 1989 argues for the overwhelming power of the people, displayed through democratic ideology, while Yunis 1996 returns some of this power to the *rhētors*. For the purposes of this essay, the crucial question is not whether or not the *rhētors* or the *dēmos* had more or less agency but rather that the former threatened to control the latter. Whether or not this threat could have been successfully consummated would depend on the particular historical circumstances.

¹⁴ In fairness to Latour, he does recognize the elision of the *dēmos* entailed by his focus on the contrast between Socrates and Callicles. Both Callicles and Socrates, on Latour’s reading, stand opposed to the democratic power of Athens, and each seeks to nullify the force of “ten thousand fools” – the force of the *dēmos* – either by the power of rhetoric or by any other means necessary (Latour 1999, 12). Yet while allowing for the residual power of the *dēmos*, Latour errs when he takes Socrates as simply an elite pursuing power by other means. He also fails to recognize the specific ways in which Socrates’ philosophy takes up and transforms extant practices of Athenian democracy. I elaborate these points in the next three sections.

with “Reason” as Latour suggests. Instead, Socrates’ philosophy organizes arguments on behalf of the masses, the ordinary citizens often called *idiotai*.¹⁵ In more specific terms, Socrates takes up a democratic practice primarily used by elites, *parrhēsia*, and recasts it as part of the philosophy by making *parrhēsia* available to all comers. In democratic Athens, *parrhēsia* named not just a right of all citizens but a fundamental aspect of Athenian democracy.¹⁶ Literally meaning “saying everything,” *parrhēsia* supported democratic flourishing by empowering people to speak up, even if it meant disagreeing with the collective opinion. By encouraging dissent, *parrhēsia* improved deliberation by ensuring all possible voices and perspectives were heard. Moreover, *parrhēsia* buttressed the idea that anyone could participate in a public debate – an idea more formally instantiated by the Assembly, which was open to all citizens – while also encouraging the risks of speaking by creating a discourse of praise for those willing to rise and address the people assembled. *Parrhēsia* was explicitly contrasted to flattery: *Parrhēsia* encouraged not just speech but frank and truthful speech; by promising free and frank debate open to all, *parrhēsia* embodied the democratic commitment to deliberation and revision.

This context illuminates the basic differences between conventional political *parrhēsia* and Socrates’ *parrhēsia*, two distinct practices put in conflict in Plato’s *Gorgias*. While research on *parrhēsia* has extensively elaborated its relationship to various facets of Athenian democracy, this work has focused on *parrhēsia* within formal institutions such as the Assembly and the law courts and thus a *parrhēsia* practiced primarily by elite political actors.¹⁷ In what follows, I draw on Plato’s *Gorgias* to reconstruct how Socrates’ philosophy uses and changes *parrhēsia*. I suggest that Socrates in the *Gorgias* presents an alternative to the conventional *parrhēsia* praised (and practiced) by his interlocutors: Rather than exhibiting *parrhēsia* through long speeches, Socrates practices *parrhēsia* in the form of dialogue with others. By making *parrhēsia* dialogic and expanding it to include all citizens, Socrates incorporates *parrhēsia* into philosophy that takes place beyond conventional times and spaces of Athenian politics, where only those who spoke in the formal confines of the Assembly or the law courts practiced *parrhēsia*; Socrates,

¹⁵ Hansen 1983. Cf. Landauer 2014.

¹⁶ On *parrhēsia* see Momigliano 1973, Monoson 2000, Foucault 2001, Balot 2002, Saxonhouse 2003, Markovits 2008, Konstan 2012, and Landauer 2012.

¹⁷ With the exception of Henderson 1998, who treats comedy as a *parrhēsiastic* institution.

however, pushes *parrhēsia* into informal spaces (such as the private house where the *Gorgias* takes place) and opens its possibilities as well as its risks to everyone. This transformed *parrhēsia* thus takes on the appearance of atopia.

Strange as it is, Socrates' appropriation and modification of Athenian *parrhēsia* does not meet uniform approbation – nor does it develop in harmonious accord with the Athenian democracy. Moments in the *Gorgias* point to a deep tension between Socrates' philosophy, which transforms *parrhēsia*, and the conventional parameters of *parrhēsia*'s practice in Athens. As Aristophanes' *Clouds* satirically depicts it, the license of Socrates' *parrhēsia* appears to transgress the political and social consensus that stabilizes and bounds the inescapable political conflicts within and among different classes, generations, and genders in the Athenian democracy. Socrates' fearless speech – his *parrhēsia* – contains both democratic promise and democratic peril.

“PARRHĒSIASTIC” DIALOGUE

For Michel Foucault, the *Gorgias* displays the “first use . . . of the word *parrhēsia*” as part of what Foucault calls “the practice of spiritual direction.”¹⁸ Rather than employing *parrhēsia* in the “Periclean” sense, a *parrhēsia* that brings citizens together with the frank speech of their leader (and thus emphasizes an elite *parrhēsia*), this “philosophical *parrhēsia*” binds master and disciple together to create “a permanent test of the soul” through dialogue.¹⁹ Foucault locates this moment when Socrates exclaims his good luck at finding Callicles:

I realize that a person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test to see whether it lives rightly or not must have three qualities, all of which you have: knowledge, good will, and frankness [*epistēmēn te kai eunoian kai parrhēsia*] (486e–487a, 830).

As Foucault explains, the critique of rhetoric that fills the dialogue results in the conclusion that rhetoric can do nothing to help us avoid injustice; only through philosophical *parrhēsia*, combined with knowledge and goodwill, can one develop a touchstone for assessing the state of one's soul. As Socrates continues a few lines later, while Gorgias and Polus are wise and fond of him, they lack frankness (*parrhēsia*, 487b1).

¹⁸ Foucault [2008] 2010, 367. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 367 and 373

Yet Foucault's focus on this single passage leads him to miss some of the important dimensions of *parrhēsia* as it appears throughout the *Gorgias*; indeed, the four other instances where *parrhēsia* explicitly appears challenge his interpretation of *parrhēsia*.²⁰ First, and farther along in the same exchange between Socrates and Callicles, Socrates connects *parrhēsia* to shame. Socrates refers to Callicles' being about to "speak frankly and without shame" (*parrhēsiazesthai kain mē aischunesthai*, 487d), a point Socrates reemphasizes a few lines later by commenting that Callicles would never concede a point through lack of wisdom or lack of shame (487e). Socrates also explicitly links *parrhēsia* with fearlessness. As Socrates and Callicles debate the happiness of the man who indulges his every appetite, Callicles affirms that he speaks with *parrhēsia*, declaring that "wantonness, lack of discipline, and freedom ... are excellence and happiness" (492c). By speaking with *parrhēsia*, Socrates comments, Callicles says what others are thinking but unwilling to say (492d). Socrates begs Callicles not to relent in his argument. Whereas Gorgias and Polus might be shocked or ashamed, Callicles will not retreat. "You're a brave man" (*andreios*, 494d) Socrates tells him. To speak with *parrhēsia*, Socrates later tells Callicles, is to speak what is on his mind, not shirking from the apparent truth that comes of it (521a). Practicing *parrhēsia* will allow for an open dialogue about the most important things, namely how one can live the best life possible.

Returning to the dialogue as a whole, these further nuances to *parrhēsia* in the *Gorgias* shift our understanding of its potential meaning in the dialogue. Foucault rightly draws attention to the substitution of dialogue for formal deliberation in the Assembly or law courts as a test of truth, but while *parrhēsia* does focus the relationship between Socrates and Callicles, it also relates this relationship to the broader structure of democratic Athens. Socrates takes up and transforms the extant practice of *parrhēsia* by incorporating it into philosophy. This becomes apparent first of all in the contrast between Socrates' preferred mode of speech in the dialogue – the back-and-forth exchange – and those of his interlocutors. When enlisted in philosophy, *parrhēsia* supports the kind of dialogue Socrates envisions as necessary for pursuing a radical and unremitting

²⁰ Luxon 2013 notes that Foucault's project with respect to *parrhēsia* consists not in developing an account of its historical content – i.e. "what Socrates did" – but opening possibilities for the present. Here I suggest that developing an account of what Socrates did can also open possibilities for the present by interrupting contemporary receptions and appropriations of Socrates.

examination of self and others; fearless speech is thus made necessary for philosophy. Yet this entails transposing and modifying *parrhēsia* from its traditional medium of speeches to that of dialogue.

Socrates' commitment to dialogue in contrast to speeches appears throughout the *Gorgias*. The discussion begins with an immediate contrast between Gorgias' speechifying and Socrates' questioning when Socrates enters *in medias res*, right after Gorgias has finished a long speech. Socrates comes from the *agora*, the Athenian marketplace and hub of informal political discussion; Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles identify themselves repeatedly with the Assembly and the law courts, where long and declarative speeches rule the day. Socrates seeks to bring clarity to the discussion rather than to win it (457e). Socrates frequently contrasts his own way of speaking to that of his interlocutors: Polus might try to compel Socrates by producing witnesses, as would an expert speaker in the law courts, but Socrates only wishes to persuade the person with whom he speaks (472b). Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles concern themselves most with victory and competition; Socrates wishes to ask and be asked questions (462a). As if to encapsulate the contrast, Socrates responds to Polus by asserting: "I'm not one of your politicians" (*ouk eimi tōn politikōn*, 473e, 817).

An exchange between Gorgias and Socrates early in the dialogue further illuminates this contrast. Socrates and Gorgias have been discussing the difference between persuasion and teaching and Socrates has marveled at how *rhētors* can exert such power without actually instructing their listeners. What explains the power of rhetoric? asks Socrates. Gorgias responds with a long and self-adulating speech (456a – 457c). Rhetoric, Gorgias argues, works like a "competitive skill" (456d) and victory for the *rhētor* lies in winning the other side over to his own. Gorgias brags that when a doctor could not persuade his patient to accept a treatment, Gorgias stepped forward and persuaded him. This shows how rhetoric "embraces virtually all powers" (456a): "the *rhētor* has the *power* to speak against anyone, and about anything, in a way which makes him more persuasive among large crowds about . . . anything he pleases" (457a-b, 802).

Gorgias has not answered the question but rather sought to stifle Socrates with a blanket of words. Gorgias has tried to beat Socrates, to prevail in their competitive discussion. In contrast, Socrates proposes proceeding in a different way. As he tells Gorgias:

I'm afraid to pursue my examination of you, for fear that you should take me to be speaking with eagerness to win against you, rather than to have our subject become clear. (457e, 802)

Yet Socrates is not afraid; as he will later praise Callicles for fearless speech, Socrates notes the possibility of being afraid but perseveres instead. Socrates thus counterposes his approach of question and answer – “asking and being asked questions,” as he later puts it (462a) – to Gorgias’ characteristic verbal bullying while connecting his own speech with *parhēsia*. Rather than seeking false witnesses, as the clever Polus later proposes, Socrates commits himself to frank and fearless speech as necessary if one wishes most of all to discover the truth through one-on-one discussion (472b).

This mode of argument builds from a broader critique of rhetoric (and thus *parhēsia*) as practiced by the likes of Gorgias. One of the failings of Athenian democracy, according to Socrates, lies in the people’s susceptibility to rhetorical manipulation most often achieved by flattery, the opposite of *parhēsia*. While Gorgias asserts that he knows justice, he cannot say what it is. Why, Socrates then asks, should Gorgias have disproportionate influence on the people’s decisions? The *rhētors* take advantage of large gatherings; one cannot have a conversation with a jury numbering five hundred or an assembly of thousands. *Rhētors* give long speeches, speak declaratively, and seek most of all to sway the mass to their side (454b). Socrates, in contrast, takes up Athenian *parhēsia* in a different way: not just to speak at length but also for the back-and-forth of dialogue (461a). Both entail risks of offending or giving advice that turns out to be wrong, but Socrates’ *parhēsia* differs by rejecting the medium of speechifying and instead encouraging responsiveness and accountability among his listeners. As Foucault points out, only in an intimate conversation can one receive the kind of correction that makes a difference for one’s beliefs. The long presentations of the *rhētors* declare positions whereas the open-ended discussions Socrates pursues create the possibility of being proven right or wrong (458a). Socrates thus not only criticizes the extant practice of democratic politics in his native Athens; he also contrasts his own practice of dialogue to the dominant model of rhetoric and the *rhētors*.

The contrast between rhetoric in the Assembly or law courts and Socrates’ *parhēsiastic* dialogue does not, however, mean to suggest that Socrates’ dialogic speech lacks a rhetorical valence.²¹ As we have seen in previous chapters, Socrates’ philosophy does not restrict itself solely to

²¹ To suggest that Socrates’ speech is uniformly dialogic – that is, intentioned toward reaching consensus at all times – or that dialogic speech lacks a rhetorical valence misses the point in the *Gorgias*. Here see Rocco 1997, Michelini 1998, and Markovits 2008.

the focused argumentation of the “elenchus,” narrowly conceived. Here, as in those discussions, Socrates uses vivid examples and stories both to illustrate the topics under discussion and to elicit commitment and sympathy from his interlocutors – to bring them into the discursive association that constitutes the practice of philosophy. To begin with, Socrates employs long speeches: His mythic tale at the end counts as the longest speech in the dialogue, and besides Callicles’ tirade when he enters the dialogue (482c), the next three longest speeches are all Socrates’ as well (507a, 511d, 517b). In a sense, Socrates thus retains an aspect of the conventional practice of *parrhēsia*. Yet considered in terms of the overarching purpose of dialogue – to elicit participation and accountability from his interlocutors – Socrates’ detours from strict question and answer can be explained as working in the service of preserving the dialogue. Support for this reading appears strikingly in an exchange with Gorgias when Socrates and Gorgias have reached an impasse in their discussion. Gorgias has delivered a long speech defending teachers of rhetoric and Socrates pauses to comment on the nature of their conversation. In discussions about these things, says Socrates, “it’s not easy for the participants to define jointly what they’re undertaking to discuss, and so, having learned from and taught each other, to conclude their session” (457d, 802). Often people become angry, thinking one speaks out of spite or wishing to win instead of investigate. Socrates detects a contradiction between Gorgias’ statement and something he said earlier, but he fears to provoke just such a response. Socrates seeks to find common ground with Gorgias to avoid derailing the discussion:

For my part, I’d be pleased to continue questioning you if you’re the same kind of man I am, otherwise I would drop it. And what kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn’t be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. . . . So if you say you’re this kind of man, too, let’s continue the discussion; but if you think we should drop it, let’s be done with it and break it off. (458a – b, 802)

This commentary on the conversation itself does not pursue truth but rather acts in the service of the pursuit it describes. Socrates invokes an image of a man that Gorgias seemingly cannot refuse; this image then binds Gorgias and Socrates to a mutual enterprise. One must continue the dialogue as a precondition for any discovery of truth; without a commitment to the partnership of discourse, the investigation necessarily stalls.

Socrates' longest speech, the story – *logos* and *mythos* – he tells at the end of the dialogue, also supports this reading of the use of rhetorical elements in the dialogue's pursuit of common inquiry. The story depicts naked souls inspected in the afterlife, their deeds and misdeeds judged, and their punishments allotted. Souls out of order receive disciplining that will rehabilitate them; those souls that shine with justice ascend to heaven. As Christina Tarnopolsky has suggested, the myth illustrates important elements of Socrates' philosophy. It reorients the listener "away from the concern with mere life toward the concern with the best life."²² The nakedness of the person standing trial represents the experience of being interrogated and having to give an account for one's life, corresponding to the focus on the person himself characteristic of Socrates' philosophy. Finally, "the judge's examination of the whip scars, festering sores of injustice, and false oaths corresponds to Socrates' exposure of contradictions in the views of his interlocutors."²³ The myth thus recapitulates in its content what Socrates pursues in the action of the dialogue itself.

Yet in addition to its translation of the action of the dialogue into a new language of images, the telling of the myth comes framed by a desire to sustain the conversation, functioning as part of the commitment to continuing dialogue characteristic of Socrates' philosophy. Socrates describes the story as "a very fine account" (*kalou logou*, 523a), although he also admits the unlikelihood of this story's meaning much, saying that Callicles will think it merely a myth (*muthon*, 523a2). Still, Socrates reiterates his belief in the story's power *for the interlocutors present*.²⁴ After recounting the story, Socrates again addresses Callicles directly:

For my part, Callicles, I'm convinced by these accounts, and I think about how I'll reveal to the judge a soul that's as healthy as it can be. So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of the people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can – and you especially I call on in response to your call – to this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life. (526d-e, 868)

Callicles may view this myth as "an old wife's tale" and condemn it (527a), but neither Gorgias nor Polus nor Callicles, Socrates asserts, can prove "there's any other life one should live than the one which will

²² Tarnopolsky 2010, 120. ²³ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁴ This reading thus contrasts with Tarnopolsky's suggestions that the myth is Plato's device in contrast to Socrates' uncivil speech: Tarnopolsky 2010.

clearly turn out to be advantageous in that world too" (527b2). One must guard most against doing injustice, Socrates continues, and not merely seem just but *be* just both in private and public life – one ought to use "rhetoric and every other activity" on behalf of this cause.

These assertions stand unchallenged as the dialogue ends, but that hardly makes them dogmatic. Reiterating the discussion, Socrates repeatedly attempts to connect to Callicles in an effort to raise questions directly, even when Callicles has visibly withdrawn from the conversation. With his peroration Socrates strikes personal notes, reaching toward a lost intimacy that had allowed the conversation between himself and Gorgias to continue. "Listen to me," Socrates says, "and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates" (527c, 86g). As Socrates finishes the dialogue, he exhorts them again, speaking in first person plurals and again addressing Callicles directly:

And then, after we've practiced it together, then at last, if we think we should, we'll turn to politics, or then we'll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we're better at deliberating than we are now. For it's a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present – when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that – to sound off as though we're somebodies. That's how far behind in education we've fallen. So let's use the account that has now been disclosed to us as our guide, one that indicates to us that this way of life is the best, to practice justice and the rest of excellence both in life and in death. Let us follow, then, and call on others to do so, too, and let's not follow the one that you believe in and call on me to follow. For that one is worthless, Callicles. (527d2 – e7, 86g)

Rather than reiterating the differences between Socrates and his interlocutors, as Latour and others read them, Socrates' final words seek to redraw the connections, to establish a common space for continued dialogue. In doing so, Socrates draws attention away from conventional practices of *parhēsia* – the politics of the Assembly, of rhetors, and of long, declarative speeches – and toward the renovation of these practices with philosophy, a practice that proceeds with a commitment to conversation and an openness to all comers.

DECENTERING "PARRHĒSIA"

The contrast between Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Gorgias* in terms of the medium of *parhēsia* calls attention to a second dimension of

contrast: the spaces of *parrhēsia*. In contrast to Periclean *parrhēsia*, Socrates in the *Gorgias* transforms *parrhēsia* into a practice that empowers citizens and noncitizens outside the typical confines of the Assembly and the law courts. We can understand this shift as responding to a peculiar feature of *parrhēsia* in Athens of Socrates' times. While *parrhēsia* in theory described the ability of *everyone to say anything*, in practice only a few exercised this right. Addressing the potential imbalances between mass and elites, *parrhēsia* consisted of the right "to advise, to criticize, admonish, or abuse anyone, individually or collective, by telling the truth as one saw it."²⁵ However, while *parrhēsia* as part of the democratic ideology served to check bad judgment, fostered a critical attitude and intellectual autonomy in the citizenry, and was often invoked as contributing to the Athenian democracy's military prowess, in reality, two practical elements deterred its free and open exercise: first, speaking was not often practiced by the many, but more often utilized only by the class of elites; and second, speaking up "took a good deal of courage": "one risked not only his political standing but his social position and personal life as well, since these were now open to competitive scrutiny and legal accountability."²⁶ Thus although being claimed as foundational for democratic flourishing, *parrhēsia* often functioned to serve mostly elites, excluding many citizens as well as the majority of the population entirely denied the exercise of *parrhēsia*: women, children, metics, and slaves. These two obstacles to *parrhēsia*'s free and open exercise – the domination of elites and the courage needed to speak frankly in the first place – help us to understand how Socrates' philosophy takes up and transforms the conventional practices.

By pursuing dialogue against the discourse of the *rhētors*, Socrates incorporates *parrhēsia* into philosophy while broadening its scope. Whereas Gorgias seeks to compel his listeners through persuasion, Socrates encourages spirited debate in a way that implicitly respects the *dēmos* and its need to choose wisely. While Socrates employs long speeches much like Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, his speeches remain subservient to the ongoing dialogue: noting, as Socrates does in the speech at the end of the *Gorgias*, that they remain open to interpretation; emphasizing the speeches' function to elicit response not silence it; and using his knowledge of the interlocutors to enlist them further in the dialogue itself. Socrates' radical examination, understood in the capacious way

²⁵ Henderson 1998, 256. Cf. Balot 2002.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

described in the previous chapters, appears as a broadening of the participants in *parrhēsia*: not just citizens but even noncitizens can now criticize those in power as well as aspects of democratic ideology, developing themselves as empowered participants in the democracy. Moreover, the enactment of this radical examination creates new spaces for the practice of *parrhēsia*, opening new areas for political participation (such as the very location of the dialogue Plato's *Gorgias* records).

The transformed *parrhēsia* of Socrates' philosophy thus presupposes not only intellectual egalitarianism but the political power of individuals to judge and act for themselves as well. In Plato's *Apology*, as Josiah Ober has pointed out,²⁷ Socrates seeks to bring the jurors to judge for themselves rather than succumb to the rumors that swirl around them. Socrates begins, then, from a baseline of respect for the conditions of democratic life where the people have authority to decide. As the discussion in the *Gorgias* develops, it becomes clear that *rhētors* do not respect this authority but rather envision rhetoric as a means to their own strategic use of power, often in contravention of the desires of the people. Just as *rhētors* used *parrhēsia* for elite ends, here *rhētors* speak for the elites. In contrast, Socrates' philosophy not only expands the ambit of *parrhēsia* to include all people but also concerns itself most with empowering these *idiotai* against the blandishments and manipulation that the *rhētors* seek to deploy. While not explicitly promising that Athenian democracy will benefit, Socrates' *parrhēsia* holds potential for empowering and activating the *dēmos* to realize the best collective life possible.

This second moment of contrast between Socrates and the elite *rhētors* appears most visibly in Socrates' conversation with Polus, Gorgias' student. Socrates has befuddled Gorgias by questioning how the teacher of rhetoric can possibly prevent its unjust deployment if he himself does not know justice. Polus leaps in to contest Socrates' provisional conclusion. On Polus' prodding, Socrates defines rhetoric as "sycophancy, sucking up to people" (463b).²⁸ Rhetoric flatters its listeners in order to persuade them, yet this also means that, by Socrates' judgment, *rhētors* have very little power: *Rhētors* depend on the whims of the people for what power they do possess and they also must always tack close to the prevailing public opinion. "Of the people in the city," Socrates says, "I think the *rhētors* have the least power of any in the city" (466b, 810).

²⁷ Ober 1998.

²⁸ Here I use the translation by Tom Griffith: Schofield, ed. 2009. The Cooper, ed. reads: "flattery, basically."

This assertion infuriates Polus and in a telling way: “What?” he responds to Socrates: “Aren’t they like tyrants? Don’t they put to death anyone they will, confiscate property, and banish from their cities anyone they please?” Polus cannot imagine any impotent *rhētor*, although Socrates will try to convince him. Even more important for the contrast with Socrates’ practice, Polus imagines the purpose of rhetoric, a rhetoric that instrumentalizes the Athenian practice of *parhēsia*, as fundamentally antidemocratic: the *rhētor* aspires to possess tyrannical power over the *dēmos*. Gorgias had added the caveat that the *rhētor* does the work of justice, but after some questioning this faith appeared groundless. Now, however, Polus has said it straight: *Rhetors* want power not for the sake of the people or the city but for themselves.

Polus’ claim exhibits a peculiar pathology that Socrates’ approach highlights. Polus wishes to benefit himself by making use of the polis, but he also requires the polis to flourish in order to benefit from it; being tyrant of a crumbling city would bring him no great fame. Socrates’ admission that he pursues not only what is good for the polis but what is also good for himself contrasts with Polus’s self-defeating desire. As Socrates tells Gorgias: “I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good for oneself to be delivered from the worst thing there is than to deliver someone else from it” (458a, 802). However, as we have seen, this pursuit of refutation requires dialogue with others: Socrates seeks it, in this instance, in conversation with Gorgias. In the *Meno*, Socrates insisted on pursuing an inquiry into excellence together with Meno, Meno’s slave, and even the antagonistic Anytus. In the myth at the end of the *Gorgias* Socrates reiterates the collective nature of his pursuits with the repeated use of the first person plural.²⁹ It seems clear, then, that philosophy pursues a course presumed beneficial for itself as well as for others. Socrates begins from a commitment to equality, both intellectual and political, one that envisions the possibility of mutually beneficial practice. Polus’ view of rhetoric, in contrast, seeks to aggrandize himself to the city’s detriment.

Criticizing this position and attempting to bring Polus to recognize the harms of doing injustice, Socrates heightens the contrast between his transformed practice of *parhēsia* and Polus’. While Polus (and, in a much more dramatic way, Callicles after him) proposes a vision of democratic rule as a structure best used as a means to his own power,

²⁹ In [Chapter 5](#), I scrutinize Plato’s *Theaetetus* to demonstrate why the company of others proves necessary for Socrates’ pursuit of “refuting and being refuted.”

Socrates' questioning begins from the presumption that *parrhēsia* can serve to improve the existing institutions of democratic Athens. If *parrhēsia* is a "remedial practice,"³⁰ then Socrates' *parrhēsia* seeks to remediate the original practice's insufficiencies. Socrates criticizes rhetoric as flattery, but his argument derides the flatterer while upholding the innocence of the flattered: the *rhētors*, not the people, deserve the blame. The people have been tricked. Thus while Socrates acknowledges the people's dangerous impressionability, he does not criticize them for it. Moreover, Socrates' own attempts to converse with Athenians outside the strictures of the Assembly and the law courts demonstrate respect for the people as well as a desire to improve the lives of those around him. Gorgias gives epideictic speeches for money; Socrates cannot help but converse with anyone who will stop to talk.

In effect, then, Socrates' philosophy decenters *parrhēsia* from the formal institutions where flattery is facilitated (if not encouraged) to the ad hoc sites of *parrhēsiastic* dialogue that can enlist the attention and energy of citizens and noncitizens in fearless discourse with one another. This suggests a different interpretation of one famous passage in the *Gorgias* where Socrates contrasts his own activities to those of the normal politicians (from whom he earlier excluded himself: 473e) yet frames his activity as working within the extant practices of democracy:

I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians – so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries – to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best. They don't aim at what's most pleasant. And because I'm not willing to do those clever things you recommend, I won't know what to say in court... For I'll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him. Think about what a man like that, taken captive among these people, could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him and say, "Children, this man has worked many great evils on you, yes, on you. He destroys the youngest among you by cutting and burning them, and by slimming them down and choking them he confuses them. He gives them the most bitter potions to drink and forces hunger and thirst on them. He doesn't feast you on a great variety of sweets the way I do!" What do you think a doctor, caught in such an evil predicament, could say? Or if he should tell them the truth and say, "Yes, children, I was doing all those things in the interest of health," how big an uproar do you think such "judges" would make? Wouldn't it be a loud one? (521d – 522a, 864)

³⁰ Landauer 2012.

Comparing himself to a doctor rendered unpopular in contrast to the palate-flattery of a chef, Socrates does not blame the people for their response. They are like children – naive and innocent – duped by a disingenuous snake oil salesman. Socrates speaks in the name of health, of improving the democratic body and weening it from its dependence on sweet-talking *rhētors*. These *rhētors* only vitiate the people in order to control them. Socrates' prescriptions require the assent of the patient.

The analogy from medicine also calls attention to an important and often overlooked facet of how Socrates' philosophy takes up and modifies the extant practices of *parrhēsia*. Gorgias had earlier invoked himself as the mediator between knowing doctor and ignorant patient, but here Socrates changes the relationship: Socrates describes his position as analogous to the doctor's; like the doctor, Socrates has sought to take up a craft intent on improving its objects. Unlike Gorgias, who uses *parrhēsia* to acquire glory or possessions in exchange for compelling a patient to follow a doctor's advice, Socrates puts himself in the position of the doctor himself: Socrates' speeches, like the doctor's, embody *parrhēsia* by aiming at what is best for the patient. Readings such as Latour's interpret this passage as evidence of Socrates' desire to control the *dēmos* with his political art,³¹ but this ignores the significance of the analogy. As Gorgias' example highlights, the doctor, just like Socrates, depends upon the patient's acceptance of his advice. Doctors need the likes of Gorgias; Socrates has no rhetoric but his own, the *parrhēsia* of a nonelite citizen. Socrates, not the *rhētors*, allows the children to decide for themselves. Socrates' image here resembles the exchange with Meno's slave in Plato's *Meno*: Socrates shows how ordinary people can take their health into their own hands. Doctors may offer guidelines and even principles to their listeners, but they leave it to the people to agree or not. Gorgias, on the contrary, brags that he can compel any listener with his speeches: rhetoric produces persuasion (453a).³² Socrates'

³¹ Latour 1999 and Klosko 1983.

³² Brooke Holmes notes that "despite the 'democratization' of health theoretically supported by regimen, practices of care have the potential to resignify the relationship, conventionally guaranteed by the gods, between prosperity and well-being": Holmes 2010, 180. Holmes further points out how both Plato and the Hippocratic author of *On Regimen* imply that the wealthy have time to learn about their natures and manage their care. Yet whether or not people have the resources to take up Socrates' challenges, they have a choice that Gorgias (and rhetoric generally) does not appear to allow.

philosophy relies instead on the judgment of the participants and listeners and transforms *parhēsia* to empower their participation.³³

THE RISKS OF FEARLESS SPEECH

Thus far, this chapter has argued that Socrates in the *Gorgias* takes up *parhēsia* on behalf of ordinary people, contrasting his own commitments to dialogue and the empowerment of ordinary citizens (the *idiotai*) with the speechifying and tyrannical impulses of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. But my emphasis on Socrates' alignment with the mass of citizens (and noncitizens) against elite *rhētors* risks overstating the hegemony of the latter. As I discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the elite leaders of the Athenian democracy were highly susceptible to harsh penalties at the hands of the people. In contrast to the elites, the masses often appeared as unaccountable tyrants.³⁴ Indeed, Josiah Ober has exhaustively shown the degree to which democratic ideology possessed hegemony in Athens and that as a result leaders were forced to shape their words and deeds in ways that pleased the *dēmos*.³⁵ Socrates accuses Callicles of loving the *dēmos* with good reason: To win any sort of power, a rhetor always had to appear to have the best interest of the *dēmos* in mind. The conventional practice of *parhēsia* thus carried great risks: If the *dēmos* had a change of heart, an orator could easily find himself fined or ostracized or worse.³⁶

The contrast drawn by Finley between the susceptibility of elites and mass to political prosecution thus highlights a persistent inequality in their respective power, one largely overlooked by Ober: A lack of accountability, and therefore of vulnerability, among the *idiotai* not only symbolized powerlessness but treated them as such. That is, as Matthew Landauer has shown, the unaccountability and invulnerability of *idiotai* marked an ambivalence about the reality of their power.³⁷ As I discussed in [Chapter 2](#), Athens created and sustained its own sophisticated

³³ As Christopher Rocco puts it: "Implicit in Socrates' transfer of political authority to himself and dialectical examination is the claim that if the Athenians were to follow this Socratic practice in their political deliberations, the city would be healthy rather than bloated ... As partners in a dialogue share a mutual commitment to the argument (logos), so too would deliberating citizens be united by a commitment to the good of the city": Rocco 1997, 84. Rocco does not see this as the end of the *Gorgias* and, much as I do in the follow section, suggests that the *Gorgias* "leaves us with an ambivalent message" (85) more than this passage seems to indicate.

³⁴ Konstan 2012 and Landauer 2014. See also the collected articles in Morgan, ed. 2009.

³⁵ Ober 1998. ³⁶ Forsdyke 2009 and Forsdyke 2005. ³⁷ Landauer 2014.

institutions and practices of accountability, which included trials when public officials entered and exited office, the ability of any citizen to bring another to court with accusations of undermining the polis, and ostracism, in which citizens that appeared to threaten the democracy could be banished for a length of time.³⁸ Yet while scholars have claimed that a “culture of accountability” pervaded every level of Athenian society, they have focused for the most part on elite political actors. The *idiotai* remained outside the circle of accountability practices.³⁹ Still, although these formal accountability institutions did not apply to non-elite citizens, I suggested that Socrates’ philosophy took up and transformed extant practices of accountability, incorporating these into philosophy. That transformed accountability appears to have led to Socrates’ trial and execution (judging by Anytus’ reaction), including the charges of insolence (*hubris*) named by Alcibiades in Plato’s *Symposium* (as well as noted by Xenophon in his *Apology*), further points to how Socrates became accountable for his deeds, even if *idiotai* typically stood apart from Athens’s formal institutions of accountability.

This connection between Socrates’ philosophy and vulnerability points to the third aspect of how philosophy takes up and transforms the practices of *parrhēsia* in the *Gorgias*: the vulnerability of Socrates himself. If *idiotai* remained unsusceptible to accountability because of their lack of political importance, Socrates demonstrates how philosophy makes him (and those who practice it) vulnerable. By speaking freely, Socrates brings *idiotai* into a dynamic but dangerous space where they must now account for their lives and be held responsible for the power they claim. Practicing accountability is one thing; provoking it with fearless speech is another. Fearless speech promises a revitalized role for nonelites in democratic life, but it also comes with the peril of great risk, a peril symbolized by Socrates himself.

As Jones and Finley described at the beginning of this chapter, the vulnerability of political leaders consisted most of all in being subject to public scrutiny of their lives. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates models what it would look like for ordinary citizens to be susceptible to such scrutiny, speaking as one whose commitment to the fearless speech of *parrhēsia* opens him to the criticism and condemnation of others. In other words,

³⁸ For an overview of accountability procedures as well as scholarship, see [Chapter 2](#).

³⁹ For claims about the “culture of accountability,” see Markovits 2008, 51–61. I owe this criticism to Matthew Landauer.

Socrates does not make his arguments simply to make arguments; his questions concern the most vital question imaginable. Socrates' oppositional questioning thus stems from a desire to find support for his commitment to inquiry amidst the many opinions circulating in the public realm. His agonistic encounters with the Athenians – as opposed to Callicles' flattery of them – begins with this most personal question. Socrates has staked his life on philosophy.

In his exchange with Socrates, Callicles recognizes the stakes of their discussion. Interrupting Socrates and Polus, Callicles asks Socrates if he is joking, saying: "If you *are* in earnest, and these things you're saying are really true, won't this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won't everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?" (481b – c, 826). Callicles cannot believe that Socrates would not only *say* these things, but that he would *act* according to them. Talking about philosophy is one thing, but continuing to practice it, especially as a full grown man, is shameful and ridiculous (484d). Callicles declares that Socrates ought better to give up philosophy and embrace the world, to enter the conventional spaces of political action and leave behind the *agora*, and to seek fortune and influence rather than truth. In response to Callicles' tirade, Socrates calls for reciprocity in their conversation, but he also recognizes the stark contrast between their ways of life. Callicles uses words for the sake of domination, loving the *dēmos* as a means to amassing influence; Socrates, however, uses words for the sake of philosophy, loving its practice as an end in itself. They begin to investigate the validity of Callicles' claims, seeking to discover which way of life appears best, but Callicles' outrage anticipates a potential limit to Socrates' *parrhēsiastic* practice.

The ensuing contrast between Socrates and Callicles illuminates vulnerability as a crucial element of Socrates' philosophy. As the discussion continues, Callicles refuses to defend his original argument, unwilling to give reasons for any of his positions. Yet Socrates, by his own admission, cannot cease talking. Without any certainty about the way to live, how could one stop asking questions? Without interrogating one's way of life, how can one be sure it is the right one? Socrates' relentless questioning begins from the premise that one should strive to have words and deeds aligned. As he famously tells Callicles:

I think it's better to have my lyre or a chorus that I might lead out of tune and dissonant, and have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I'm only one person. (482c-d, 827)

Interpreters have often read this passage as further indication of Socrates' antipathy toward "the mass" and their unthinking disharmony,⁴⁰ but Socrates does not reject seeking agreement and noncontradiction with "the vast majority of men." Rather, he prioritizes being *symphonic* – in the Greek, he wishes to be neither *asymphōnon*, discordant, nor *enantia*, opposed – with himself. He must speak what he believes rather than seek his judgments in the opinions of others. As we have seen, Socrates' philosophy may provoke atopic dissonance but this does mean it opposes the Athenian democracy. Moreover, this commitment to seeking harmony of one's beliefs does not lead Socrates into withdrawal – instead we see Callicles withdrawing, refusing to inquire about the value of his way of life as opposed to Socrates', while Socrates pushes forward in conversation with others. Socrates remains indefatigable in "refuting and being refuted," but his activity stems not from mere contrarianism but from the desire to pursue philosophy as a way toward the best possible life as well as from the recognition that any confidence in his way of life can only come through investigating his agreements with and differences from others. Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all act with knowingness about their lives; Socrates' questioning is born of an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the conventional status quo.

Socrates' vulnerability also takes on a chilling aspect with his admission that he may take philosophy to the grave. With vulnerability comes fragility; because Socrates questions the authorities of Athens while seeking to find the best way of life for himself and for Athens, Socrates risks perturbing the established powers. As his self-description of the doctor on trial indicated, the childlike people may prefer the blandishments of the chef to the cuts and purges of the doctor. Foreshadowing his subsequent fate – of trial and execution at the hands of the Athenians for, among other things, "corrupting the youth" – Socrates tells Callicles:

But if I came to my end because of a deficiency in flattering rhetoric, I know that you'd see me bear my death with ease. For no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust is what he's afraid of. . . If you like, I'm willing to give you an account showing that this is so. (522d – e, 865)⁴¹

⁴⁰ Villa 2001.

⁴¹ I have modified the Cooper, ed. translation by translating *rhētorikes* (at 522d) as "rhetoric" instead of "oratory."

Callicles had earlier maintained that by refusing to practice the seductive speech of the *rhētor*, Socrates may find himself “carted off to prison” and without recourse against any accuser: “if he chose to demand the death penalty for you, you’d be put to death” (486b). As every reader of the *Gorgias* knows, Socrates would subsequently suffer just this fate. The connection between Socrates’ fearless speech – philosophy’s transformation of *parrhēsia* – and Socrates’ vulnerability appears starkest in Aristophanes’ satire of Socrates, *Clouds*.

SOCRATES IN ARISTOPHANES’ “CLOUDS”

Clouds begins with Strepsiades’ moans and groans: The war prevents him from punishing his snoring slaves but even worse he’s bitten and nagged with expenses incurred by his profligate son. Not bedbugs but deme officials nip Strepsiades as they seek to collect interest owed. While Strepsiades lies sleepless, his son murmurs with dreams about chariot races, the principal cause of Strepsiades’ ills. Lamenting the loss of his simpler, rustic way of life, Strepsiades appears without recourse. And yet, as we know, Strepsiades soon hits upon a solution: to have Pheidippides, his son, enter the “Thinkery,” where Socrates will teach him to carry the day in argument, whether his cause be just or unjust. Pheidippides refuses and eventually Strepsiades resolves to enter the Thinkery himself. While Pheidippides will eventually receive the training Strepsiades seeks for him, it comes with unexpected and destructive consequences: The play ends with Pheidippides’ first beating, then justifying the beating of, his father, and then with Strepsiades’ burning the Thinkery to the ground, ostensibly with all its adherents (Socrates included) inside.

The figure of Socrates, not to mention associates like Strepsiades and Pheidippides, in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* may seem fantastically distant from the images we have encountered thus far from Plato and Xenophon, yet the Socrates of *Clouds* presents a singular character. As Martha Nussbaum has argued, while the sophists probably shared some of the Aristophanes’ Socrates’ insistence on a pupil’s ignorance and the latter’s need to become aware of it, Aristophanes’ Socrates seems to pursue this toward new levels of discomfort.⁴² The sophists would have feared lest they lose a potentially remunerative client; this does not present a problem for Socrates. Moreover, the content of Aristophanes’ Socrates’ teachings

⁴² Nussbaum 1980.

diverges from that of many sophists. While Protagoras and others appear to have shared Socrates' moral interests, none seemed to combine this with an assault on traditional methods of moral education, especially the emphasis on precision or achieving genuine moral knowledge. While neither Plato nor Xenophon depicts a building such as the Thinkery where Socrates conducts his inquiries, the charge that both recount in each *Apology* that Socrates "corrupted the youth" resonates with the story of corruption in *Clouds*. Socrates' allusion to Aristophanes in Plato's *Apology* – that comic poets have stoked false rumors about him – also seems to indicate that while Aristophanes may not have been entirely correct, the charges against Socrates did resemble reality enough that they could lead the Athenians to try, convict, and execute Socrates. In other words, we cannot simply discount Aristophanes' Socrates as a work of fiction.⁴³

Given this chapter's emphasis on *parhēsia* and the transformation of *parhēsia* with its incorporation into philosophy, Aristophanes could also hardly provide a better interlocutor. Comedy was part of *parhēsiastic* discourse and was especially attentive to its boundaries. The comic poet needed to please the *dēmos* but also wanted to exhort it; attacks on elites were acceptable but treatments of the *dēmos* had to proceed more carefully. As Jeffrey Henderson notes, "the comic vantage point is essentially idiotic (in the Athenian sense)." "There, onstage, is a rather likable person . . . This person is in the same fix as most of us and it is pleasant to see someone like that in the spotlight for once."⁴⁴ As John Zumbrennen has argued, Aristophanes' comedies portray ordinary citizens calling elites to account, speaking frankly against entrenched elites.⁴⁵ In other words, these comedies depict a *parhēsia* for the people not unlike Socrates'.⁴⁶

Aristophanes' *Clouds* also calls our attention to a particular and important facet of Athenian democracy during much of the life of Socrates:

⁴³ See similar comments by Strauss 1966 as well as Zumbrennen 2012.

⁴⁴ Henderson 1998, 309. Quoted in Zumbrennen 2009, 230. While I agree with Zumbrennen (following Henderson) that one ought to view the play as fundamentally about Strepsiades, an ordinary citizen, I disagree with his characterization of Socrates as "a kind of self-proclaimed Athenian intellectual elite" (*Ibid.*, 236). While Zumbrennen moderates this claim in a footnote, it still seems to overemphasize the potential power of a "Socratic teaching" when ultimately, in my view, the play concerns the potential, but unrealized, power of the *demos*, of which Strepsiades is a representative member.

⁴⁵ Zumbrennen 2012.

⁴⁶ See also Euben 1997, 109–38, on the closeness between Aristophanes and Socrates.

Athens was in the midst of war.⁴⁷ First produced in 423 BCE., *Clouds* spoke to an audience of Athenians who had endured invasions into Attica nearly every summer since the beginnings of hostilities with the Peloponnesians, an audience that had survived two plagues, the death of its great leader, Pericles, and the recent alarming fall of Amphipolis. In short, Athens trembled on the brink of catastrophe. While the world-historical events of the Peloponnesian War may seem distant from “real life,” as so many wars and plagues continue to seem today, Aristophanes’ *Clouds* represents the ordinary citizen’s response to disasters around him: Strepsiades feels bitten by anxiety, plagued by a loss of control, disturbed by the dissolution of the hierarchies between slave, son, and father that once explained his life. Now Strepsiades resolves to “enjoy life a little,” or at least try to find a way to do so. Enter Socrates.

At a loss for addressing the conflict with his son, Strepsiades turns to Socrates in hopes of learning ways to escape his unbearable situation. This proposed solution appears immediately ridiculous as Strepsiades interrupts Socrates in the middle of measuring how far fleas can jump, inspired because one had jumped off Socrates’ head and bitten Chaerephon’s eyebrow. Unknowingly, Strepsiades seems to have run from one set of flea bites – the nips of his lenders – to another – the spark of curiosity that sends Socrates off to melt wax to make flea-sized boots in order to assess the distance of their leaps (152).⁴⁸ As Socrates’ student explains, Socrates has lately pursued ideas about gnats who hum through their mouths or rumps (158) and the paths and revolutions of the moon – until a gecko shat on him as he stared open-mouth at the sky (173).

In contrast to Strepsiades’ very worldly concerns, the undertakings of the Thinkery have an immediately otherworldly cast. As Socrates enters, he appears *ex machina*, suspended overhead in a basket and calling down to Strepsiades as a “creature of the day” (223). Strepsiades seeks an argument that will allow him to escape his debts, but Socrates instead admonishes him for swearing by the gods, offering an argument for why not Zeus but the “celestial vortex” (379) reigns the heavens. Yet as the chorus of the *Clouds* eggs him on, Strepsiades seems intent on becoming the best speaker in the Greek world, one who can twist justice for his own benefit while also giving his creditors the slip. On the chasm between

⁴⁷ For more on how this context should affect our reading of Plato, see Frank 2007.

⁴⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all citations to *Clouds* refer to the line numbers and translation by Henderson 1998.

Socrates and Strepsiades, Euben writes: “Socrates seems to be everything that Strepsiades is not. Where the latter is all body, Socrates is all mind; while Strepsiades has no lofty thoughts, Socrates seems to have nothing but; where he seems stupid and gullible, Socrates seems sophisticated and smart.”⁴⁹

Most striking in this first encounter between Strepsiades and Socrates, then, is the sheer distance between them. Strepsiades approaches Socrates with a set of very practical concerns and neither Socrates nor his students gives any sign of even acknowledging them. When Strepsiades inquires about the use of geometry, a student answers “for measuring land.” Seeking to clarify, Strepsiades asks: “You mean land for cleruchs?” “No, land generally,” the student answers (203). Strepsiades seeks particular knowledge to improve his situation; the Thinkery deals in abstractions. The Thinkery asserts a general authority about the order of nature around the political community, but it remains distant from the urgent concerns that drew Strepsiades there in the first place. When Strepsiades first meets Socrates he implores Socrates to teach him the argument that never pays its debts, swearing by the gods that he will pay whatever Socrates needs. But rather than address his concern, Socrates immediately questions Strepsiades’ oath; they do not credit the gods in the Thinkery but commune and converse with the Clouds (253).

Yet while emphasizing the distance between them, *Clouds* also shows how Socrates and Strepsiades both practice a kind of *parhēsia*. As Arlene Saxonhouse has suggested,⁵⁰ the frank speech of *parhēsia* exists in tension with shame; while fearless speech proceeds as if it were shameless, shame supports the political community by representing shared taboos and social codes. Both Socrates and Strepsiades violate the codes of Athens: Socrates with his impious questioning of the gods and ridiculous scientific undertakings (made more ridiculous considering the political context of the play, taking place during a devastating war) and Strepsiades with his attempt to shirk his obligations. In just this brief section of the play, then, *Clouds* calls our attention to a particular problem characteristic of *parhēsia* and thus of Socrates’ philosophy. While the play does not treat the problem with the specific language of *parhēsia*, it depicts how speech that does not fear the boundaries of convention – shame, reciprocity, and other aspects of democratic life – risks destabilizing the democracy itself. On this reading, then, *Clouds*

⁴⁹ Euben 1997, 121. ⁵⁰ Saxonhouse 2003.

appears as a very dark play indeed: *parrhēsia* leaves the Thinkery in flames and Strepsiades still pursued by his lenders. As Nussbaum puts it, “the play ends on a note, not of Hegelian reconciliation and *Grundwohlsein*, but of anguish.”⁵¹ Similarly, while Euben finds that the play’s caricatures of each side create a “middle ground” for political critique, *Clouds* is “at one and the same time rude and offensive *and* fertile and productive.”⁵² *Clouds* leaves us with a paradox: a critique of *parrhēsiastic* practice for citizens and noncitizens that seems to deny the possibility of any better way.⁵³

FEARLESS SPEECH IN DEMOCRACY

Aristophanes’ *Clouds* illuminates Latour’s criticisms within the context of Athenian democracy. Contrary to the reading I have advanced in the first three sections of this chapter, Aristophanes’ Socrates asserts another authority, one that ordinary citizens ultimately need to reject; Socrates attempts to impose “Reason,” albeit in highly satirized form, which effectively shuts down the judgment of his “students.” In this sense, as John Zumbrunnen has argued, Aristophanes calls ordinary people to their obligations as citizens, obligations with which Socrates interferes.⁵⁴ Philosophy offers only a way of avoiding the burdens of citizenship; its dialogue forestalls necessary decisions; and its decentering flees from the important spaces for these decisions. *Clouds* also leads us to question the kind of accountability Socrates’ philosophy practices, echoing concerns from the previous chapter about Socrates’ making himself an object of desire.

Yet while testifying to the dangers (to the Athenian democracy) of Socrates’ philosophy, the play also gives further evidence of Socrates’ engagement with nonelite citizens and the dialogic nature of this engagement. Socrates proceeds through a satirized question-and-answer; he is known and attractive to ordinary citizens like Strepsiades. Moreover, we

⁵¹ Nussbaum 1980, 78–9.

⁵² Euben 1997, 137–8. See also the open-ended reading of *Ecclesiazusae* suggested by Saxonhouse 1992, 1–19.

⁵³ Notably, Strauss 1966 does not see the play as ending in questions, as his book seeks to reformulate Aristophanes as a political philosopher challenging Socrates. I disagree with this argument on a number of points, most notably because it exaggerates the importance of Aristophanes’ “Socrates” in the play and thus systematically underestimates the importance of Strepsiades as an “ordinary citizen” seeking some improvement to his life.

⁵⁴ Zumbrunnen 2012.

can at least partially exonerate the Socrates of Aristophanes' *Clouds* by allowing that while Socrates appears as a threat, Pheidippides (like Alcibiades in the previous chapter) represents an exceptional example. From the beginning of the play, we learn that Pheidippides is already corrupted by the new culture of horse-racing and fancy clothes, on the path to destruction much as Alcibiades was. Socrates may serve as a vehicle, but the driver himself appears more blameworthy.

Viewed in the broader context of the contest between mass and elites (and returning to Plato's *Gorgias*), the Socrates of Aristophanes' *Clouds* underscores the degree of challenge Socrates' philosophy presents to the Athenian status quo. By transforming the practice of *parrhēsia* in inclusive directions, Socrates appears at first glance to undertake unquestionable "good work" from the perspective of democracy. *Clouds*, however, purports to depict philosophy from the perspective of the citizens themselves. Here philosophy becomes a conduit for citizens' shamelessness: their least admirable desires as well as their most deplorable proclivities.

Aristophanes might also serve to highlight the danger of associating these practices too much with Socrates. That is, the problem with Strepsiades and Pheidippides may lie not in their questioning of Athenian traditions and norms but rather in their doing so in an unthinking manner as indoctrinated disciples of Socrates. Were ordinary Athenians more attentive to the burdens of judgment and more self-reflective participants in the political process, Aristophanes would not have had Socrates to blame. Indeed, as other readers have emphasized, Aristophanes' dramatic art seems to demand much the same from his spectators as Socrates on my account (and not on Aristophanes') did of his interlocutors.⁵⁵ That is, both carry forward potentially democratizing practices that involve challenging all citizens (as well as noncitizens) to think for themselves.

These broad similarities notwithstanding, the vision of Socrates' appropriation of *parrhēsia* in the *Gorgias* also calls attention to its distinctiveness. By replacing the speechifying of elites with dialogue among ordinary citizens, Socrates' philosophy differs from the *parrhēsiastic* comedy of Aristophanes by actually carrying out speech with others rather than simply depicting it (or hoping to elicit it from the audience). Moreover, by decentering these *parrhēsiastic* conversations, Socrates' philosophy

⁵⁵ Cf. Euben 1997 and Zumbrunnen 2012.

proves institutionally innovative (and thus potentially destabilizing) in ways that drama, in its traditional venue, does not. Finally, Socrates' philosophy entails a new level of vulnerability unmatched by playwrights. Socrates collapses the distance between the art object and its creator by making philosophy a way of life. Only in this way does fearless speech reach the most basic choices about how one should live and thus a profound responsibility for one's way of life. By enacting a dialogic and decentered *parrhēsia*, Socrates therefore extends this democratic practice in ways potentially beneficial to the Athenian democracy but also radically unsettling for those who accept its conventions unreflectively.

Midwifing Athens: Socratic associations

In addition to the practices detailed in the previous chapters – accountability, erotic practices of democratic subject formation, and *parrhēsia* – the Athenian democracy developed important practices of democratic decision making. These practices entailed a commitment to a kind of democratic epistemology, that is, to the idea that knowledge was not the purview of experts and specialists but rather best arrived at by democratic means. A central tenet of democratic ideology consisted in the epistemic superiority of the judging *dēmos*. Put bluntly, for the Athenians, “the people were never wrong.”¹ As Josiah Ober writes, for most Athenians “the shocking ‘postmodern’ conclusion that ‘all knowledge is political’ was simply a truism; neither the possibility nor the normative desirability of genuinely apolitical forms of knowledge about society or its members ever entered the ordinary Athenian’s head.”² Athenians were committed to the knowledge that democratic institutions could create: the decisions of juries, the deliberations of the Assembly and Council, and the results of inquiries into the records and acts of officials all formed knowledge that Athenians trusted.³ By creating a foundational belief in the decisions of democratic bodies, these formal institutions worked in tandem with democratic ideology to support the Athenians’ vibrant democracy.⁴

¹ As Mogens Hansen writes in his discussion of *graphē paranōmon*: “there seems something absurd about punishing a political leader for a proposal that the people had accepted, possibly unanimously. The philosophy behind the penalty was, however, that the people are never wrong, and will indubitably reach the right decision if a matter is properly put to them, but they can be misled by cunning and corrupt orators and make erroneous decisions against their better judgment”: Hansen 1999, 207.

² Ober 1998, 159. ³ Ober 2008a.

⁴ Athenian democracy worked under the assumption that each person’s opinion, or *doxa*, counted toward the construction of knowledge, and the democratic regime constituted

Yet the Athenian practices dedicated to the construction of knowledge could provide only so much insurance that the decisions they reached would prove effective and beneficial, and critics of Athenian democracy frequently lamented, as critics of democracies today lament, the shortcomings in judgment of the citizens who undertook these practices.⁵ Moreover, these criticisms were not limited to entrenched elites. As we saw in Plato's *Gorgias* in the last chapter, Socrates implies that Athenian citizens would likely prefer the regimen of the pastry chef to that of the doctor. While Socrates seeks to bring ordinary citizens and noncitizens into philosophy, still open is the question of what might come from the expanded and intensified participation of all citizens – whether or not they might just seek out philosophy as an instrument to evade their debts or shirk other obligations, as Aristophanes' *Clouds* suggests, or become totally unmoored from the conventions of Athens once they recognize their conventional status, as the example of Alcibiades might indicate. Thus despite building on extant democratic practices, Socrates' philosophy nonetheless raised questions current in the Athenian political consciousness. If philosophy emancipates those who practice it, how will they know how to use this freedom? How does philosophy affect the judgment of those who pursue it and thus their ability to participate effectively in democratic institutions? What consequences await for a democracy revitalized by critical and interrogative participation?

This chapter turns to Plato's *Theaetetus* to show how Socrates' philosophy addresses these questions. Building on the multifaceted account of philosophy we have seen thus far, the depiction of Socrates in the *Theaetetus* offers an opportunity to reflect on how best to pursue correct opinion through dialogue. Picking up where the radical revision of Athens's erotic practices in Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* left off, the *Theaetetus* also shows how Socrates transforms one practice devoted to knowledge production, the *sunousia*, into a site for philosophical discourse. And just as in Aristophanes' *Clouds* and Plato's *Gorgias* Socrates appropriates and transforms extant democratic practices of *parhēsia*, the *Theaetetus* continues this development by placing *parhēsia* in the context of discursive associations dedicated to pursuing truth through the eliciting and testing of opinion.

its knowledge by democratic procedures such as trials, votes, examinations and cross-examinations, and other forms of deliberations in order to create what Josiah Ober has called “democratic knowledge” (Ober 2008a).

⁵ Ober 1998.

If the previous chapters have mostly highlighted the negative and critical side of Socrates' philosophy vis-à-vis the extant practices of democratic Athens, this chapter locates these activities in the *associations* constitutive of philosophy. The *Theaetetus* shows how the constructive side of philosophy engages in a project of improving the judgment of participants, actively supporting and not just undermining Athenian political life. While most readings of the *Theaetetus* have focused on the details of its philosophical investigations to the exclusion of understanding the political significance of Socrates' philosophy as a practice, I argue that the conversation of the dialogue itself enacts a kind of discursive association, one defined both by its differences from conventional political practices and by its intimate critique of them. This discursive association is rooted in the traditional Athenian *sunousia* but reorients this *sunousia* toward empowering participants in the philosophical conversation. In the *Theaetetus*, we witness this empowerment as Socrates brings the young Athenian Theaetetus into practices of questioning conventional Athenian wisdom as well as his own views, becoming reflective and self-critical while also committing to dialogue with others as the best way to reach truth. By invigorating and developing these basic political capabilities, philosophy can serve to midwife democracy.

THE MIDWIFE

This argument about Socrates' role as a midwife to democracy echoes some pregnant suggestions of Hannah Arendt.⁶ In "Socrates,"⁷ Arendt traces the diremption of philosophy and politics, which began with the death of Socrates and provoked Plato, according to Arendt's reading, into deep distrust of persuasion and opinion.⁸ Philosophy, threatened by

⁶ On Arendt and Socrates, see Canovan 1990, Dolan, 2000, Villa 1999, and Villa 2001.

⁷ Arendt 2004 (previously published as "Philosophy and Politics": Arendt 1990). While this lecture remained unpublished until after her death, it contains seeds of later published work on Socrates – ideas we find especially in *Thinking* (Arendt 1978) but also in "Thinking and Moral Considerations," an essay that appeared in *Social Research* in 1971 (Arendt 1971). Cf. Arendt 1972, where she invokes Socrates during her discussion of civil disobedience. I will not attempt to adjudicate which Socrates constitutes Arendt's authentic Socrates, nor how one version might inform our understanding of her thought in general.

⁸ I would, of course, contest this reading of Plato, as have many scholars. Arendt seems to draw the inspiration for her arguments from Plato's *Seventh Letter*, but given the letter's questionable authorship as well as its relative brevity in comparison to the long and deep political engagements – whether democratic or not – of other dialogues, I would resist allowing the *Letter* to govern all interpretations (as Monoson 2001 has also suggested, among others).

the “storm and dust” of political life,⁹ withdrew from it; as Frederic Dolan puts it: “Between philosophical ideas and political reality, Arendt sensed, lies an abyss.”¹⁰ Yet for Arendt (and on my argument), Socrates inhabited this abyss. In contrast to what Latour calls Plato’s designed “tyranny of truth,” Socrates did not claim wisdom, and this led him to engage his fellow citizens. Socrates understood that “as soon as the philosopher submitted his truth, the reflection of the eternal, to the polis, it became immediately an opinion among opinions” (78).¹¹ In other words, Socrates saw himself as a citizen among citizens, and this recognition of the conditions of plurality in the public sphere led Socrates to question and investigate the opinions of his fellow citizens (and noncitizens) with the understanding that each opinion represented a unique perspective on the world as it appeared to someone.

Arendt locates Socrates’ philosophy in what Socrates called *maieusis*, the work of the midwife. Maieusis formed the art by which Socrates sought to “help others give birth to what they themselves thought anyhow, to find the truth in their *doxa*” (2004, 81). The method of doing this, Arendt explains, is talking something through, a dialectic that does not destroy opinion but instead “reveals *doxa* in its own truthfulness” (ibid.). This activity did not consist in education so much as collective improvement; Socrates began by “making sure of the other’s position in the common world” and then “talked through” the other’s opinion, working under the implicit assumption that “nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion” (ibid.).

To put it bluntly (and in Arendt’s words), “maieusis was a *political activity*”: “a give and take, fundamentally on the basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth” (2004, 81; emphasis added). The “truthful dialogue” that arose from Socrates’ maieusis established a common world of friends; “politically speaking, Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens’s citizens” and thus lessen the tensions inherent in Athens’s agonistic democracy (2004, 82–83). This dialogue also helped to develop the valuable political insight of “understanding the greatest

⁹ As Socrates describes the philosopher in Plato’s *Republic*, Book VI.

¹⁰ Dolan 2000, 262.

¹¹ As her readers surely know, Arendt employs masculine pronouns exclusively (to my knowledge) in her examples and descriptions. I will leave these as she has written but try to avoid mimicking her exclusions in my own language by varying the genders.

possible number and variety of realities ... [and] in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions so that the commonness of this world becomes apparent" (2004, 84). Socrates saw his political function as facilitating the establishment of a common world, one built on such an understanding of friendship where rulership would be unnecessary.

The Socrates we encounter in the *Theaetetus* echoes many of Arendt's observations. The dialogue begins, as many dialogues, with a "typical" Socratic question: what is knowledge?¹² Socrates meets the mathematician Theodorus and, shortly thereafter, his student, the young Athenian Theaetetus. Seeking to test Theodorus' assertion that Theaetetus is among the best of the Athenians, Socrates asks Theaetetus how he knows what he thinks he knows. Socrates confesses ignorance about the subject and implores Theaetetus and his teacher Theodorus to help him explain "what on earth knowledge really is" (*epistēmē hoti pote tugchanei on*, 145e-146a, 162).¹³ Socrates has already become perplexed and experienced *aporia* (145e). Can they create an account together? Socrates asks. All of the elements and questions of "Socratic dialogue" seem present,¹⁴ and the dialogue consists of a series of definitions arrived at and interrogated together.

Yet the introduction and use of the image of the midwife in Plato's *Theaetetus* add some crucial elements to Arendt's influential account. Shortly after they begin their search for an account of knowledge, Socrates and Theaetetus reach an impasse. After Theaetetus has tried to answer Socrates' questions, Theaetetus confesses he cannot continue. Anxiety racks young Theaetetus. He knows what Socrates wants – or at least he thinks he does – but he cannot persuade himself that his answer merits consideration. Theaetetus' perplexity threatens to abort the dialogue just as it has commenced. Theaetetus has even prepared for this conversation, having "often tried to think this out" in terms of

¹² The dialogue actually begins with an elaborate framing device, setting up the dialogue as a recorded conversation of two philosophers, Euclides and Terpsion, remembering Socrates and asking a slave to read the text aloud to them as they relax. The contrast between the written manuscript used by Euclides and Terpsion and the active practice of philosophy carried out by Socrates highlights the distinctiveness of each.

¹³ As in the previous chapters, I will give the Stephanus page number from the Oxford Classical Text and the corresponding page of the Cooper, ed. 1997 English translation in the text (unless otherwise indicated)

¹⁴ As David Sedley notes, the *Theaetetus* "possesses all the hallmarks" of so-called "Socratic dialogues": Sedley 2004, 1.

Socrates' questions – even using Socrates' language of *skeptein*. Now Theaetetus finds himself paralyzed: unable to persuade himself that he can answer these questions but equally incapable of freeing himself (*apallagēnai*) from concern (*melein*). In response, Socrates describes himself as a midwife.¹⁵

Theaetetus' suffering, Socrates explains, comes from his labor pains – you “suffer the pains of childbirth,” Socrates tells him – that stem from Theaetetus' being pregnant (148e). Fortunately, Socrates practices the same art of maieusis that his mother practiced, and this promises Theaetetus some relief. Theaetetus has not ever heard of this fact, but Socrates insists that this aspect of his activity explains Socrates' reputation for strangeness, being “most strange” (*atopōtatos*) in a way that “perplexes” (*aporein*) those who encounter him. This response comes from his art of maieusis, although most people do not know this as the cause.

The midwife practices a “highly important” art, Socrates continues, but not as important as his own practice (150a). While conventional midwives deliver only infants, Socrates as midwife sometimes delivers phantoms (*edōla*) and sometimes realities (*alēthina*, 150b1). Thus Socrates' art of maieusis differs in at least one important respect from his mother's: in addition to attending men, not women, “the most important thing” about his art consists in distinguishing among “children”:

Now my art of midwifery is just like theirs in most respects. The difference is that . . . I watch over the labor of their souls, not of their bodies. The most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth. (150b6 – c3, 167)

Here Socrates uses the language of his elenchus – *episkopein* – to describe how he assays these intellectual “offspring,” offering the midwife both as an image to describe his philosophy more generally as well as a way of interpreting the conversation of *Theaetetus* itself in what follows. Moreover, like ordinary midwives who no longer bear children themselves, Socrates continues, “I myself am barren of wisdom” (150b, 167).

¹⁵ Myles Burnyeat questions the historicity of the image, concluding that Plato invented the “midwife” to describe Socrates as part of his philosophical project: Burnyeat 1977. Julius Tomin disagrees, finding evidence in Xenophon and Aristophanes that associates the image with the historical Socrates: Tomin 1987. Tomin's examples give important evidence of this image's usefulness for my reconstruction of Socrates. See, however, the caveats discussed by Tarrant 1988 concerning Aristophanes' apparent allusion to Socrates' midwifery in his *Clouds*.

The process of maieusis, then, brings opinions or ideas into the world for collective evaluation – via the expansive elenchus of Socrates’ philosophy – without a predetermined standard of truth or knowledge by which to judge. They discover the truthfulness of a “child” by “running it around the hearth,” as Socrates describes it a little later in the dialogue: by talking it through, as the dialogue itself demonstrates, while seeking to give an account of knowledge.

“The god” has ordered Socrates to practice maieusis while forbidding Socrates from giving birth himself – not that it matters, says Socrates, since his barrenness means he cannot claim any discovery worth wisdom’s name (150d). Instead, Socrates attends the travail of others, although with varying results:

But whoever associates with me some appear at first as even very foolish, but all – whomever the god allows – as the association [*sunousias*, d4] advances, make an amazing lot of progress. It’s their own opinion and everyone else’s too. And this too is as plain as day, that they never learnt anything from me, but they on their own from themselves found and gave birth to many beautiful things.¹⁶ (150d, 167)

The development of an interlocutor, and the development of his ideas, depends not on Socrates’ own learning but on working together with Socrates. Proof of this, Socrates asserts, lies in those who have abandoned his company too abruptly and then failed to care well for their “offspring”: taking all the credit upon themselves they have neglected these “children” Socrates helped them to bear and lost them by setting more value on lies and phantoms than on truth. While many have changed their minds and returned, it often happened too late and the “child” was lost. Suspecting that Theaetetus is indeed in labor, Socrates promises to allay his pains and examine what he says so that they together might see if it be mirage or truth. While often people have reacted negatively (as witnessed in the previous chapters) when Socrates has disposed of their nonsense, Socrates insists that Theaetetus should believe that Socrates practices his art with “good will”; Socrates can neither accept nontruth over truth nor can the god who compels Socrates’ activity.

From this description of the midwife, then, three new elements emerge to supplement Arendt’s provocative account. First, the image itself functions to sustain dialogue, highlighting the benefits that come

¹⁶ Seth Benardete’s translation: Benardete 2007, I.13.

from working through ideas in discussion with others, discussions marked by playfulness, iteration, and open-endedness. Second, the image's strangeness dovetails with the strange innovations that Socrates introduces for the Athenian *sunousia*, bringing into relief the transformations of these associations, spatially and temporally, as the basis for Socrates' philosophical, discursive associations. With these emphases on discussion and association in the dialogue, a way of understanding the interrelation of Socrates' philosophy as *maieusis* and democracy comes into view. Thus third, the dialogue enacts Socrates' *maieutic* philosophy in a way that underscores its direct and important contributions to democracy and the tensions around democracy and knowledge. These three elements – of gentling the Athenians through playful dialogue, appropriating and transforming the *sunousia*, and building a world through speech – help to specify the political function Arendt identifies in Socrates' *maieusis* and thus deepen our account of how these practices emerge from the democratic habitus of Athens.

GENTLING THE ATHENIANS

The image of the midwife serves first of all to connect Theaetetus and Socrates in a collective endeavor, grounding the discussion that proceeds. Finishing his self-description, Socrates initiates their investigations anew and Theaetetus responds vigorously, encouraged by Socrates' explanation. The image of the midwife seems to elicit the dialogue that follows and the birth pangs disappear.¹⁷ Socrates repeatedly refers to the midwifing process during the ensuing conversation, reiterating the activity they share as a way of reminding Theaetetus of their common commitment.¹⁸ At the dialogue's end, Socrates confirms that they have been engaged in *maieutic* activity all along. Their series of definitions of knowledge, Socrates asks Theaetetus, haven't they all shown themselves as "wind eggs," unfertilized eggs unfit for further development? While this means acknowledging that not one of his ideas has withstood their collective scrutiny, Theaetetus agrees.

¹⁷ I owe this point to Ronald M. Polansky, who enthusiastically puts it this way: "The midwife image thus appears as itself an instance of Socrates' *maieutic* activity! Hastening the onset of Theaetetus's labor, the image serves both as an image of Socrates' lack and an instance of its performance": Polansky 1992, 59.

¹⁸ This occurs at the following places: 151e, 157c – d, 160e – 161b, 184b, and 210b.

After Socrates has introduced his role as a midwife, he continues to refer to the image as the dialogue proceeds as a way of reiterating the shared nature of their endeavor and the need for a systematic approach to their conversation. Immediately after his description, the image has the effect of encouraging Theaetetus to try again: Socrates asks Theaetetus to “begin again... and try to say what knowledge is” (151d3–4, 168) and Theaetetus responds excitedly that “after such encouragement from you [Socrates],” he must continue (151d7, 168). Much like the story of recollection in the *Meno*, the image of the midwife encourages continued investigation, even when Theaetetus feels dispirited. Socrates recalls the image again after Theaetetus has offered his first new definition, using the image to spur the conversation to continue, and suggesting to Theaetetus that they examine his first definition that knowledge is perception (151e).

There’s a good frank answer, my son. That’s the way to speak one’s mind. But come now, let us look at this thing together, and see whether what we have here is really fertile or a mere wind-egg. (151e3–6, 168)

Proposing that they “look at this thing together” (*skepsōmetha*, 151e5) – that is, whether Theaetetus’ proposal proves fertile or not – Socrates repeats the language of collective inquiry we saw in previous chapters. Moreover, accepting the definition Theaetetus has just offered, Socrates’ willingness to pursue the investigation rests on his commitment that they might benefit from working through Theaetetus’ own ideas.

Later in the dialogue, the image of the midwife recurs when Socrates and Theaetetus resolve again to work together to bring Theaetetus’ opinion to light. Theaetetus complains that he cannot see if Socrates means what he says or if he is just “trying [Theaetetus] out” with these continued questions and objections. Socrates responds by reminding Theaetetus of Socrates’ own barrenness, a qualification of the midwife because the midwife must always focus on the thoughts of the pregnant one:

Theaetetus: I really don’t know, Socrates. I can’t even quite see what you’re getting at – whether the things you are saying are what you think yourself, or whether you are just trying me out.

Socrates: You are forgetting, my friend. I don’t know anything about this kind of thing myself, and I don’t claim any of it as my own. I am barren of theories; my business is to attend you in your labor. So I chant incantations over you and offer you little tidbits from each of the wise till I succeed in assisting you to bring your own belief forth into the light.

Theaetetus: All right, go on with the questions. (157c-d, 175)

This exchange reiterates the friendly dynamic of *maieusis*: the conversation does not consist in a trial but rather in sharing the work of bringing opinions to light. Theaetetus' encouraged response evidences the effectiveness of *maieusis*; they continue to investigate.¹⁹

As the conversation continues, Socrates and Theaetetus agree that knowledge is perception and that this definition stems both from Heraclitean and Protagorean sources. Now, Socrates asks, "shall we say we have here your first-born child due to my *maieusis*?" (160e2–3, 179).²⁰ Socrates continues:

This, then, it appears, is what our efforts have at last brought forth – whatever it really is. And now that it has been born, we must perform the rite of running around the hearth with it [*tōi logōi*]; we must make it in good earnest go the round of discussion [*skopoumenous*, e8–9] . . . What do you say? Is it your opinion that your child ought in any case be brought up and not exposed to die? Can you bear to see it found fault with [*elenchomenon*, 161a2–3], and not get into a rage if your first born is stolen away from you? (160e – 161a, 179)²¹

Theaetetus and Socrates have produced a *logos* (*tōi logōi*) that they must now inspect (*skopoumenous*); we see here the language of the *elenchus* return integrated into the image of the midwife, appearing even more explicitly in Socrates' final question to Theaetetus when he asks if Theaetetus could bear seeing his *logos* subjected to *elenchic* evaluation (*elenchomenon*). From perceiving something in Theaetetus' pains – some significance worth investigating – now Socrates and Theaetetus turn to examining what has come of his "birth," judging its truth or falsity.

¹⁹ While they examine Theaetetus' opinion (and while they begin to find flaws), a connection in the argument to Parmenides briefly distracts them. Socrates invokes the midwife once again to remind Theaetetus that they must focus exclusively on his ideas and on bringing them to bear (184b). Throughout the *maieutic* process, then, Theaetetus' opinion – and not the truth or a pragmatic solution or anything else – remains the conversation's *cynosure*. *Maieusis* never swerves from the object of its ministrations; the "child" before it consumes all attention.

²⁰ Translation emended.

²¹ This translation might confuse the reader a little bit. A more literal version comes in Benardete: "Well this, it seems, we have at last generated with difficulty, what in fact it is. But after its birth, on its name-day, it truly has to be run around in a circle by the speech, as we examine it, lest, without our being aware of it, that which is coming to be be unworthy of rearing but be a wind-egg and a falsehood. Or do you believe that in any case, regardless, you must rear that which is your own just because it is yours and you must not expose it, or will you in fact put up with seeing its being tested, and will you not be vehemently distressed if someone slips it away from you though you are giving birth for the first time?": Benardete 2007, I.25.

All Socrates knows, he reminds Theaetetus, is “how to take an argument from someone else – someone who is wise – and give it a fair reception” (161b, 179). Having fully elicited Theaetetus’ opinion concerning knowledge – i.e., that it consists of perception – they proceed to assay it, testing it in the open air. (Note again the use of first personal plurals: Theaetetus and Socrates undertake this *together*.) Now they must discover if truth resides in Theaetetus’ opinion.

Within the first part of the dialogue, then, a rough outline of maieutic activity emerges. First, Socrates’ use of the image encourages Theaetetus, exhorting him to continue the conversation, and in good humor; second, maieusis focuses on eliciting something unique from Theaetetus through the asking of questions and refusing to detour from examining these opinions; third, maieusis requires an account of Theaetetus’ opinion, testing it (*elenchomenon*, 161a2–3) after it seems to have appeared fully in the course of their conversation. Socrates summarizes all of this at the dialogue’s end, surmising that while the entire dialogue has produced only wind-eggs – and Theaetetus confesses that Socrates has made him say “far more” than he imagined possible – that it has nonetheless proved worthwhile. Socrates continues:

And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving others, they will be better ones as the result of this inquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome [*hēmerōteros sōphronōs*, *ibid.*], not thinking that you know what you do not know. (210b11–c4, 233–4)²²

While Theaetetus may always remain barren, he will have improved: his associations with others (*tois sunousi*, the language of the *sunousia* that I treat below) will become less wild and more moderate because of his commitment to inquiry (*exetasin*, the same word Socrates uses repeatedly to describe his questioning of poets, politicians, and craftsmen in Plato’s *Apology*).²³ Socrates has initiated Theaetetus into philosophy through associations, helping him to shed constraining opinions and explore ideas through open dialogue. Moreover, pursuing philosophy will have a beneficial effect, making Theaetetus and Socrates “gentler and less tiresome.”²⁴

²² Translation modified. ²³ See, e.g., *Apology* 22e7, and later in Chapter 6.

²⁴ As Kenneth Sayre describes the midwife: “What is important in this description is not so much the metaphor of birthing itself, which seems to have been invented for the particular occasion, but rather the dynamics of interaction – the *sunousia* – between Socrates and the young people who seek his company in hopes of philosophical advancement”: Sayre 1995, 17.

Lest any doubt remain, the suggestion that what has occurred in the *Theaetetus* resembles Socrates' philosophy becomes more pronounced as Socrates continues in the final lines of the dialogue: "This is all my art can achieve," Socrates says, "and nothing more" (210b):

I do not know any of the things that other men know – the great and inspired men of today and yesterday. But this art of midwifery my mother and I had allotted to us by god; she to deliver women, I to deliver men that are young and generous of spirit, all that have any beauty. (210c-d, 234)

Just like Theaetetus, Socrates knows what he does not know. He does not teach, dispensing wisdom in exchange for payment. Instead, Socrates practices philosophy as *maieusis*, incorporating this new art into Athens's practices of democratic knowledge formation. Socrates' art comes as the gift of the god, and no other explanation seems necessary to him. However, as I will argue in the section that follows, the dialogue as a whole dramatizes the claims about knowledge and inquiry broached by the image of the midwife; the *Theaetetus*, in other words, both displays and theorizes Socrates as midwife.²⁵

SOCRATES' "SUNOUSIAI"

While serving as an inspiration and explanation for the action of the dialogue as a whole, Socrates' description of himself as a midwife would also probably have struck Theaetetus and Theodorus as remarkably strange. While we know very little about the midwife in ancient Athens, it clearly differed from doctoring and any "professionalized" expertise in medicine by being traditionally a woman's role, not systematized in texts, and not a source of social status.²⁶ By calling himself a midwife,

²⁵ Thus I offer an approach that differs from readings of the *Theaetetus* focused on its doctrine as well as from those readings that try to distinguish the *Theaetetus* in a strong way from earlier "aporetic" dialogues like the *Meno*. Representing this second group, Eugenio Benitez and Livia Guimares note that "Socrates' attitude about the apparent failure of his conversation with Theaetetus is markedly distinct from his express attitude (ironic or not) in those early dialogues with which the *Theaetetus* is compared. Whereas early dialogues conclude with self-deprecation and exhortation to continue the question, the *Theaetetus* concludes in satisfaction indifferent to the possibility of further study": Benitez and Guimares 1993, 297–8.

²⁶ See Younger 2005, 81 on midwives during this general period and Hanson 1990 on the role of women. Holmes 2010 details the development of medical knowledge through the Hippocratic writings. I put "professional" in quotes because of the lack of such a vocabulary at this time in Athens.

then, Socrates implicates himself in a lower status occupation than would conventionally befit an Athenian male citizen, reiterating a theme apparent in the previous chapters' discussions of foreigners, slaves, women, and even the *idiotai*, or nonelite citizens. Through his use of the image, Socrates abjures the power of recognized expertise and instead embraces a shared practice among relatively powerless women. The midwife in Athenian society also did not possess a knowledge deemed capable of systemization, being omitted entirely from the Hippocratic corpus.²⁷ Almost certainly, only women practiced maieusis, forming a nonprofessional – in our modern sense – and somewhat marginal, if highly important, class of noncitizens. The knowledge that informed it was oral and experiential.²⁸ Midwives thus constituted part of what G.E.R. Lloyd calls “the pluralism of Greek medicine” beyond the Hippocratic traditions and cults of Asclepius (which themselves existed without disciplinary boundaries or any systematic coherence).²⁹ Thus by comparing his work to a traditionally female occupation, Socrates continues to link philosophy with the subversion of gender norms in the heavily masculine world of ancient Athens. Overturning traditional Athenian expectations through this unexpected image, Socrates might well have earned catcalls or simply been ignored as a lunatic or a madman, as Anytus, Alcibiades, and Callicles suggested in different ways.³⁰ Calling himself a midwife thus further explains Socrates' reputation for strangeness, his atopia.

The atopia of the image of the midwife puts in relief the transformation of another Athenian practice, the *sunousia*, that Socrates enacts. The *sunousia* formed the backbone of Athenian pedagogical practice and thus an important element of knowledge production.³¹ In an oral culture where education took place without textbooks and formal

²⁷ Younger 2005, 81.

²⁸ Theodore Cianfrani notes that “midwives received no special instruction; they depended on experience entirely”: Cianfrani 1960, 62–3. John Younger points out that the Greek writer Soranus gave midwives great respect, but that the systematizing writings of the Hippocratic corpus did not mention midwives at all: Younger 2005, 81.

²⁹ Lloyd 2004, 40–1.

³⁰ One could also compare this to the different reactions of Meno to Socrates as a stingray or Alcibiades to Socrates as *erōtikos*, a puzzling practitioner of the arts of *erōs*.

³¹ Josiah Ober warns against viewing the *sunousia* as the only important mode of Athenian education because it “risks assuming that Athenian culture is homogeneously aristocratic”: Ober 1998, 170 n. 30. However, we have seen Socrates already in *sunousia* with nonaristocrats such as Meno's slave boy and Aristodemus. How Socrates takes up and changes this originally aristocratic institution remains a question.

disciplines, “the habit, sedulously cultivated, of close daily association (*sunousia*) between adolescents and their elders who served as ‘guides, philosophers, and friends’” maintained a learned culture from generation to generation.³² In fifth century Athens, the *sunousia* continued this oral practice even while the population was “growing more literate by the decade.”³³ Although *sunousia* referred in a technical sense to “regular association with older, more accomplished men by younger men ... in need of formation and training, both social and civic” and thus often carried an erotic overtone, the *sunousia* also constituted an institution much like *xenia* (guest-friendship) and the *symposium* where the oral instruction and conversation that constituted traditional education found expression.³⁴

Not only does Socrates describe the work of the midwife in terms of the *sunousia*, but he, Theaetetus, and Theodorus participate in it as they speak – the dialogue constitutes its own *sunousia*.³⁵ The combination of the midwife and the *sunousia* thus expands on the associational aspect of Socrates’ philosophy; by speaking of *sunousia*, Socrates explicitly takes up a traditional practice of Athenian political culture, but by connecting the *sunousia* with the image of his activity as a kind of intellectual midwifing, Socrates also transforms these traditional practices toward the collective practice of philosophy that takes place in the dialogues. Maieusis characterizes the collective aspect of philosophy and the *sunousia* describes the associations that form through and by virtue of this practice. In other words, Socrates does not merely continue the oral and conversational Athenian education but rather transforms it by placing maieusis and a collective mode of inquiry at its center. This builds on the innovations of philosophy with respect to democratic practice that we have already seen by utilizing traditional practices while also transforming them as part of the practice of philosophy. Along these lines, the *Theaetetus* continues the patterns of spatial and temporal innovation characteristic of Socrates’ philosophy. Much like how Socrates transforms the erotic practices of the symposium toward more openness, here the *sunousia* becomes more porous, capable of admitting both old (Theodorus and Socrates) and young (Theaetetus). From the beginning

³² Havelock 1986, 4. In the last part of the quotation, Havelock quotes from “Why Was Socrates Tried,” in Havelock 1963, 100.

³³ Robb 1993, 83. ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 78–84.

³⁵ Kenneth Sayre usefully connects the discussions of the *sunousia* in the *Theaetetus* to its appearance in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*, arguing for Plato’s dialogues as “surrogates of dialogical conversation,” i.e., as forming their own kind of *sunousia*. Sayre 1995, 1–32.

of the dialogue, Socrates reverses the traditional power dynamics by humbling himself, confessing ignorance, and seeking enlightenment from his interlocutors. Socrates' discursive use of the *sunousia* has no temporal boundaries (172c) and yet it somehow succeeds without reaching any teaching or conclusion (210c – d).

Still, the critical appropriation of the *sunousia* also appears to work within a broader commitment to the development of the Athenian polis; Socrates' philosophy acts as a support and not just a threat. At the start of the conversation, Socrates shows great concern for Athens at the beginning of the *Theaetetus* when he tells Theodorus that he loves Athens better than Cyrene (Theodorus's home) and that he is "anxious to know which of our young men shows signs of turning out well" (143d, 159). Theaetetus may be unattractive, but Socrates focuses on his promise for the community.³⁶ The criticisms of democracy come couched in attempts to improve it: questioning the ability of juries to decide even while they investigate the conditions of judgment, for example (201c). This ambivalence captures the activity of the midwife as it appears in the dialogue as a whole, which dramatizes maieusis as both antagonistic and friendly toward Athenian democracy. Moreover, as we turn to the dialogue, its discussion of knowledge further illuminates the dynamics of maieusis and the politics of the maieutic *sunousia*. The different accounts of knowledge that the dialogue explores, I will argue, explain the stages of maieusis as Socrates describes it. The practice of maieusis thus incorporates the different provisional understandings of knowledge developed in the conversation among Socrates, Theaetetus, and Theodorus.³⁷ These accounts of knowledge and truth both build on Athenian practices of democratic knowledge formation while also holding the possibility of opening and expanding them through philosophy.

MIDWIFING DEMOCRACY

It might seem tempting to begin a reading of the *Theaetetus* by saying "what it is about" and that "the *Theaetetus* is about epistemology,"³⁸ but such

³⁶ Nails describes Theaetetus as being "in no danger of being anyone's beloved" both for his ugliness and for his lack of property: Nails 2002, 275.

³⁷ I thank Jill Frank for bringing me to this way of viewing the argument of the dialogue.

³⁸ So John Cooper calls the *Theaetetus* "a founding document of what has come to be known as 'epistemology'" and also asserts that "despite its lively and intellectually playful Socrates ... *Theaetetus* is a difficult work of abstract philosophical theory": Cooper, ed. 1997, 157–8.

a starting point risks missing how the conversation undermines and resists any stark definitions of knowledge. In a dialogue ostensibly about knowledge and expertise, the dialogue itself - and Socrates in particular - both undermine all claims to and arguments for knowledge. Thus while the dialogue's frame and participants seem to indicate its theme as not just knowledge but expert knowledge³⁹ - Euclides and Terpsion, Socratics from Megara, initiate the dialogue when they are reminded of Socrates' prediction that much would come of Theaetetus; and Theaetetus, Theodorus, and Socrates all come with claims to knowledge - as the dialogue proceeds, none of this expertise withstands questioning. Theaetetus' enthusiastic definition of knowledge as perception appears initially strong, but his claims to certainty diminish as these positions undergo scrutiny. Theodorus' reluctance to join the conversation implicates his pretenses to knowledge - in his role of teacher to Theaetetus - as mere posturing.

Rather than being solely about epistemology in the strict sense, the *Theaetetus* enacts its own claims about the provisional character of all knowledge. The image of the midwife presented by Socrates encapsulates this meaning. Only through the collective work of inquiry, moving from perceptions to opinions to arguments (*logoi*) that remain uncertain and subject to further scrutiny can truth and knowledge be approached.⁴⁰ Moreover, the unfolding argument presents a direct critique and response to the "epistemic superiority" asserted by democratic ideology in Athens. Socrates, Theaetetus, and Theodorus question the foundations of democratic practices of knowledge production as the dialogue unfolds in three key moments: first, by examining how knowledge comes to be formed through judgment; second, by theorizing how judgment might be improved; and third, by arriving at the inevitable circularity within all claims to certainty. A chastened and yet improved democratic

³⁹ Burnyeat comments that Plato places "dramatic emphasis" on the notion of expertise: Burnyeat 1990, 3.

⁴⁰ As G. E. R. Lloyd writes: "No doubt writers and audiences alike were well aware of the differences between the actual situation in a court of law and the polemical contexts of intellectual exchange. But perhaps the widespread experience of the former both encouraged that style of presentation of intellectual debates and provides a relevant background for their interpretation. . . The fundamental point remains, however, that much Greek philosophy and science presupposes an audience that prides itself on its ability in the evaluation of evidence and arguments; and if we ask where that ability came from, then the experience in law courts and political assemblies provides at least part of the answer": Lloyd 1992, 47.

epistemology results, as the foundation for philosophy and the kinds of self-critical associations that its transformed *sunousia* creates.

In the first moment of this argument, Socrates and Theaetetus question how any knowledge can be based upon judgment, the unscrutinized basis of all the Athenian democracy's practices of knowledge production. In Theaetetus' first attempt to answer the question – what is knowledge? – he opines that knowledge is perception (151e). Socrates immediately compares this account of knowledge to Protagoras' assertion that “man is the measure of all things” (152a), linking Theaetetus' answer to democratic ideology.⁴¹ As Socrates recounts the argument, since every person perceives the world in a different way, each person measures the world according to his or her own perceptions. Moreover, something exists in the sense that if knowledge is perception, what we perceive becomes known, and the known exists – it *is*. As Socrates puts it: “as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you – you and I each being a man” (152a, 169). This also means, Socrates continues, that nothing that is itself is just one thing. Because knowledge must correspond to what is and each person's perception of a thing constitutes knowledge, nothing can be the same; everything must be in motion, changing according to how it is perceived. The flux of the world in turn creates a flux in knowledge; since “all things become relatively to something” (157b, 174) we must abolish the verb “to be” and always speak only of things in motion (157c).

This argument would pose a problem for anyone who claims to teach knowledge and for expertise of any kind – it effectively *democratizes* knowing in a radical way. And yet it also threatens democratic life: If everyone knew what they perceived, then no one could assess another's experience better than another nor could anyone claim authority to examine another's judgment in order to determine its truth or falsity. In other words, no wisdom would exist in the world. This creates a paradox because political communities, and even democratic ones, also support the notion that some judgments are better than others. As Socrates says to Theodorus, who takes over the argument:

If whatever the individual judges by means of perception is true for him; if no man can assess another's experience better than he or can claim authority to

⁴¹ On the basis of the *Theaetetus* I agree with Cynthia Farrar's characterization of Protagoras as “democratic political theorist”: Farrar 1988, 77. However, I also agree with Ober's critique of Farrar (and others) that the possibility of democratic applications does not a democratic theorist make: Ober 1996, 123–39.

examine another man's opinion and see if it be right or wrong; if, as we have repeatedly said, only the individual can judge of his own world, and what he judges is always true and correct: how could it ever be, my friend, that Protagoras was a wise man, so wise to think himself fit to be the teacher of other men, and worth large fees; while we, in comparison with him the ignorant ones, needed to go and sit at his feet? (161d-2, 179-180)⁴²

Such an argument would not just refute Protagoras, but it would also render the dialogue among Theaetetus, Theodorus, and Socrates moot: "To examine and try to refute each other's appearances and judgments," Socrates avers, would simply be "an extremely tiresome piece of nonsense" (161e - 162a, 180). If this argument stands, examining and trying to refute (here again in the familiar language of *episkepein* and *elenchein*) others' judgments (*doxas*) would appear as laughable nonsense.⁴³

Seeing the inadequacy of this initial account of knowledge, the interlocutors redouble their efforts. Again emphasizing this first step as consonant with democratic ideology, Socrates suggests that Theaetetus listens too easily to the many and has accepted that "knowledge is perception" simply because of its ring of plausibility. But Protagoras could not have meant to deny the significance of his profession; obviously some people possess more expertise than others. (Socrates too claims a strange form of expertise in his role as midwife.) Moreover, just as this phase of the argument suggests that perception provides an insufficient basis for knowledge, so too Athenian democracy did not simply aggregate perceptions or accept the relativistic view of every perception's being equal and irrefragable. Rather, "epistemic institutions"⁴⁴ grounded in practices of

⁴² The Greek word *doxazein*, translated here as "judgment" presents some problems for translation. As John McDowell explains his translation of *doxa*: "I have used the translation 'judgment,' suggesting an act, rather than 'belief' or 'opinion,' suggesting a state . . . However, the Greek word (*doxa*) could equally well mean either; and in fact belief or opinion would be a better candidate to appear in a definition of knowledge than judgment. Plato shows no sign of having explicitly distinguished the act from the state" McDowell 1973, 193. I will indicate whenever *doxa* or its forms appear in order to remind readers of the ambiguity in meaning, whether translated "opinion" or "judgment" or otherwise.

⁴³ Callicles suggests exactly this. In a way, his argument represents the implicit view of politics that neither "Protagoras" nor Socrates will accept in the *Theaetetus*.

⁴⁴ Josiah Ober characterizes features of these institutions as follows: "institutionalized forums for participatory and deliberative decision making at multiple scales. . . ; systematic development of extensive social networks featuring both strong and weak parties; managing state business through 'real teams'; procedures for rendering social commitments credible; extensive publicity media for building common knowledge; public architecture maximizing intervisibility among participants; instruments and rules to drive down transaction costs by reducing information asymmetries among parties to

judgment, transparency, and legitimate dissent, functioned to aggregate, align, and codify knowledge.⁴⁵ Individual perceptions formed a baseline, but these perceptions became opinions and gained recognition of knowledge only in a dynamic process of exchange and development. Given that Theaetetus and Socrates, as Athenians, had participated in these very practices, one can imagine the obviousness of taking the argument's additional steps – the practices that supported democratic knowledge were not so different from the description of *maieusis* Socrates had given. Both begin with perceptions but then subject these perceptions to scrutiny, leading to the formation of opinions and judgments that can eventually be subjected to evaluation.

Both Socrates' discursive practices and democratic practices also rest on a commitment that some judgments can be better than others. Protagoras would argue, Socrates asserts, that political communities require leaders and advisors precisely because this ensures that better judgments follow. The education Protagoras and others offer changes the worse state to the better. As a teacher Protagoras can make people better by moving them away from the worse: the doctor does this by the use of drugs whereas the teacher (*sophistēs*) does it by use of words (*logois*, 167a, 185). Cities (*poleis*) need leaders, Socrates later adds, to inform their deliberations (170b, 189). Whatever view a polis takes on an issue becomes "truth and fact" for that city; to follow their best interests, they require advising (172).

In other words, political life, more than anything else, needs judgment among opinions; recognizing this need frees the interlocutors to investigate what makes some judgments better than others. Their investigation leads them to the second important moment in the argument. Now they return to the second definition of knowledge that Theaetetus had proposed, that "knowledge is true judgment" (200e). Good as this may sound as corroboration of the democracy's faith in itself, Socrates asserts that "a whole art" indicates that knowledge is not true judgment (201a) – the art of the "greatest representatives of wisdom," that of rhetoricians and lawyers. Such professions, Socrates argues, make an art of producing conviction, persuading or causing jurors to judge one

exchanges; incentives at various levels for productive innovations; sanctions against free riding; an abiding concern for rotation, transparency, and accountability; a cultural commitment to civic education that stopped well short of totalizing social institutions": Ober 2008a, 267.

⁴⁵ This language comes from Ober 2008a, 265.

thing or another. Yet jurors' opinions, whether correct or not, do not necessarily hinge on knowledge. Clearly jurors do not *know* – rhetoricians and lawyers rather persuade them that one thing has more plausibility than another. If true opinion were knowledge, Socrates asserts, even the best jurymen in the world could not form such an opinion without knowledge (201c).

This argument directly indicts one of the key practices for producing democratic knowledge. As I noted at this chapter's beginning, the Assembly and law courts – the very sites of persuasion Socrates now questions – provided models for democratic knowledge in ancient Athens. Yet just as Socrates' criticisms of the manipulative rhetoric of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* showed the susceptibility of the people to manipulation, so too were democratic jurors in danger of being duped. For as much as institutions could encourage the best possible judgments, they still depended on ordinary citizens to judge for themselves. Judgment needs something else.

The inadequacy of defining knowledge as "true judgment" leads to the crucial third moment in the dialogue. Theaetetus now supplements his second definition to form a third: knowledge consists of true judgment with an account, a *logos* (201c-d), Theaetetus says. This definition repeats the earlier formulation word for word, adding only "with an account."⁴⁶ Theaetetus explains that he heard a man say that "it is true judgment with an account that is knowledge; true judgment without an account falls outside of knowledge" (201c-d). Knowing something, under their provisional definition, means having "correct opinion about any one of the things that are" and grasping "in addition its difference from the rest" (208e).

But if correct opinion must concern itself with the differentness of what it is about (209d), then adding an account requires that one *get to know* the differentness, not merely judge it – a tautology. "This most splendid of our accounts of knowledge," Socrates says, "turns out to be a very amusing affair. For getting to know of course is acquiring knowledge" (210). Thus they have defined knowledge in terms of knowledge:

So it seems, the answer to the question "what is knowledge?" will be "correct judgment accompanied by knowledge of the differences" – for this is what we are asked to understand by the "addition of an account." (210a-b, 233)

⁴⁶ In addition to "with an account" (*meta logou*) the word *men* appears, but this does not affect the sense of the sentence taken by itself; rather, it forms a connection with the contrasting second half of the sentence.

The dialogue comes full circle: Knowledge is neither perception nor true judgment nor an account added to true judgment. Knowledge is knowledge, affiliated but not defined with these other concepts. Theaetetus' perceptions have come to naught – the opinions they formed appear to have led Socrates, Theodorus, and Theaetetus himself to another dead end.

And yet this *aporia* also become visible through the *logos* of the interlocutors themselves. While it hardly resolves the question of “knowledge,” the discussion that forms the *Theaetetus* does advance toward knowledge by identifying crucial elements – perception, judgment, truth, and being able to account for one's judgment – that while incomplete, provide a basis for a future conversation. Moreover, Socrates frequently compares the kind of “knowledge production” occurring in their conversation with the conventional practices of Athens. In contrast to the urgent dripping of the water clock that accompanies any trial, Theodorus and Socrates comment on the leisure they have to investigate these questions – “we have plenty of time [*scholēn*], haven't we, Socrates?” Theodorus asks as they pause in their conversation (172c). This trope returns throughout the dialogue, always drawing a contrast between the leisurely conversation the three interlocutors enjoy and the urgency of occurrences in the law courts.⁴⁷ Socrates and Theodorus also comment on the setting of their conversation as unlike that of conventionally occupied Athenians, for Socrates and Theodorus have no jury and no audience “sitting in control over us, ready to criticize and give orders” (173c, 192). The three take pleasure in their discussion, even if it seems to end without resolution. There's no need to produce judgment, as rhetors and lawyers must in juries (201b). Instead, any resolution lies in the dialogue itself, which has at least freed Theaetetus from confidence in his own judgment, making him much more willing to submit this judgment to collective scrutiny without simply succumbing to either his first impression or the general sentiment.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORLD

Arendt's image of Socrates as a midwife emphasizes how philosophy takes place in the world, that is, how it proceeds through dialogue with others and how this dialogue itself presupposes that “the world opens up

⁴⁷ See 187e and 201b.

differently to every man, according to his position in it.”⁴⁸ This in turn suggests how the midwife has a political function: by eliciting the opinions of others, the midwife both illuminates plurality as a condition of human life while also finding a shared basis of relating to the world amidst this plurality. The three elements of Socrates’ maieusis described thus far offer facets of this world-constructing activity as it takes form in Socrates’ democratic Athens: the image of the midwife inspires and inspires the conversation that follows; this conversation takes up and transforms the Athenian practice of the *sunousia* to create associations of maieutic activity; the transformed *sunousia* in turn incorporates the extant democratic practices of knowledge production, eliciting the participation and judgment of its citizens. Yet Arendt’s essay also contains a warning against political pitfalls resulting from Socrates’ maieusis. Philosophy, according to Arendt, can never escape its “necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs” (2004, 103). Socrates’ maieusis inevitably leads him into conflict with the polis: While dedicated to eliciting the truthfulness of opinions, the search for truth can also lead to the “catastrophic result that doxa is altogether destroyed, or that what had appeared is revealed as an illusion. . . Truth can therefore destroy doxa, it can destroy the specific political reality of citizens” (2004, 90). As if to anticipate Arendt’s suggestions, Plato’s *Theaetetus* ends with Socrates hurrying off to face the indictment brought by Meletus.

Not only do Arendt’s arguments hearken back to concerns raised in the previous chapters about Socrates’ dangers to the democratic polis, they also suggest the need to reevaluate a crucial moment in Plato’s *Theaetetus* – that of the famous “digression” concerning the difference between the philosopher and the politician. Commentators have often focused on this digression as key to understanding Socrates’ philosophy, yet this attention has not included an assessment of the relationship between this philosophy and the democratic polis where it transpires. Following Arendt’s suggestions, however, this context is crucial both for understanding Socrates’ philosophy and for understanding why it might have resulted in Socrates’ trial and execution.

In the digression, Socrates creates a stark contrast between philosophic and political types. Socrates explains that unlike philosophers, who enjoy “plenty of time” (*scholē*, 172d4), the men of the law courts hurry everywhere, always with an eye on the clock: “as a result of all

⁴⁸ Arendt 2004, 80.

this, they become sharp and shrewd, knowing how to cozen their master in speech and beguile him in deed, but they become small and not upright in their souls, for their enslavement since their youth on has deprived them of the possibility of growth, straightness, and liberality” (173a1–5).⁴⁹ For the philosopher, in contrast, Socrates offers this description:

The philosopher grows up without knowing the way to the market-place, 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, societal functions, dinners, parties with flute girls – such doings never enter his head even in a dream. . . . Because it is in reality only his body that lives and sleeps in the city. His mind, having come to the conclusion that all these things are of little or no account, spurns them and pursues its winged way . . . throughout the universe . . . (173c9 – e6, 192)

Socrates continues by telling the story of Thales, who gazed so intently at the heavens that he fell into a well. Philosophers do not know their neighbors; they are too busy asking “What is man?” Such a man appears clumsy and fatuous in the law courts and elsewhere (174c6). Praise of men of reputation sounds pointless to him and the philosopher regards such men without time for philosophy as “quite as coarse and uncultivated as the stock-farmer” (174d8–e1). In all of these cases, “the philosopher is the object of general derision, partly for what men take to be his superior manner, and partly for his constant ignorance and lack of resources in dealing with the obvious” (175b6). And yet when he draws someone “to a higher level” (175b9), asking questions about justice and happiness, the philosopher appears perfectly comfortable – a savant.

In other words, there are two human types: the philosopher brought up in true freedom and leisure who fails at the mundane jobs of daily life such as making a bed, sweetening a sauce, and delivering a flattering speech, for example (174e); and the practical man, who proves keen and smart at doing these jobs but “does not know how to strike up a song in his turn like a freeman or how to tune the strings of common speech to the fitting praise of the life of the gods and of the happy among men” (176a, 194–5). While Theodorus hopes that everyone will see the philosophers’ wisdom and that peace will follow, Socrates responds that the evils of life will never completely disappear. For this reason, Socrates says a man should become as godlike as possible, pursuing justice and purity

⁴⁹ Seth Benardete translation: Benardete 2007, I.39.

through understanding, the truth which seems far from everyday life (176b). Those who fail to see this may believe they possess qualities “necessary for survival in their community,” but they believe in ignorance of truth.

These two human types correspond, Socrates continues, to “two patterns set up in reality” (176e3):⁵⁰ “one is divine and supremely happy [*theiou eudaimoneutatos*, 176e4]; the other has nothing of god in it, and is the pattern of the deepest unhappiness” (*tou de atheou athliōtatos*, 176e4). The one who comes to know reality can live life in accordance with it, and thus live happily as if a god. The one who fails to perceive reality acts unjustly and “pays the penalty” (*tinousi dikēn*), becoming increasingly like the pattern of the deepest unhappiness (177a).

Yet Socrates also adds that “there is one accident to which the unjust man is liable,” an accident that might intimate a different way of life. If the unjust man attempts to give an account of the things he disparages – the things philosophers claim to know – a strange (*atopōs*, b4) thing happens. Such a man will see the insufficiencies of what he thinks he knows: “In the end the things he says do not satisfy even himself; that famous eloquence of his somehow dries up, and he is left looking [like] nothing more than a child” (177b). This seems to call for engaged, associative philosophy of the kind witnessed thus far in the action of the *Theaetetus*.

This digression from the substance of the conversation has an undeniable comic element. The ridiculous philosopher and the rushed man of the courts both echo Aristophanic satire.⁵¹ Yet coming on the heels of the discussion with “Protagoras,” the tendentious account of political life and the inordinate praise for philosophy strike an uncanny note. The practical man of the digression appears to cast aspersions on “Protagoras” and his politically oriented philosophy that lacked any commitment to truth; the philosopher of the digression in this sense does not sound so different from Heidegger’s “pure thinker” of “withdrawal.”⁵² On the one hand, the

⁵⁰ “In that which is” would translate “in reality” more literally.

⁵¹ As noted by Waymack 1985, 483.

⁵² As Heidegger writes in *What is Called Thinking?* (Heidegger 1968, 17): “Once we are so related and drawn to what withdraws, we are drawing into what withdraws, into the enigmatic and therefore mutable nearness of its appeal. Whenever man is properly drawing that way, he is thinking – even though he may still be far away from what withdraws, even though the withdrawal may remain as veiled as ever. All through his life and right into his death, Socrates did nothing else than place himself into this draft, this current, and maintain himself in it. This is why he is the purest thinker of the West.”

practical man views knowledge as instrumental, as useful for victory in the courts or pleasing a superior; the philosopher, on the other hand, wins only the ridicule of Thracian maids for his lack of common sense, not even knowing the location of the marketplace or the public assembly. The practical man inhabits the spaces and times of power and influence: the law courts, the Assembly, social functions – all regulated by the water clock that presides in trials. The philosopher, in contrast, defines himself by his *scholē*, his leisure and lack of rush.

Where is Socrates' philosophy between these two? Socrates does not explicitly identify with the description. When Socrates introduces the thought that in turn leads to the digression, he tells Theodorus that Theodorus' comment reminded him of a recurrent idea about why "those who study philosophy"⁵³ appear foolish in the law courts. Socrates does not, then, equate Theodorus, Theaetetus, or himself with the philosophers of the digression; Theodorus, however, immediately does so, accepting the description as identical to what the three of them undertake at that moment (173c). During the course of the digression, Theodorus never dissents once: he declares that what Socrates says is true (176b8); he asserts that everyone should be as persuaded as he is by Socrates (176a2–4); and he voices his regret that Socrates calls an end to their digression in order to return to the original inquiry (177c3–5).

Unlike Theodorus, Socrates neither accepts nor embodies the philosopher of the digression.⁵⁴ In contrast to the philosopher, Socrates shows concern for Athens and his fellow Athenians from the beginning of the dialogue, a concern for politeness and common sense, and for successful political life – Socrates has just digressed out of concern about the apparent need for expertise in politics so that people may live together well. When the idea for the digression occurs to him, Socrates declares that they (he and Theodorus) resemble the philosopher only in their leisure to begin a third new discussion, taking a newcomer if they prefer.

Wood 1999 advances a Heideggerian reading of the dialogue, concluding about "philosophy" in the dialogue: "What such philosophy shows are the eidetic features involved in the lifeworld as indicated by the characters and incidents in the dialogue. It provides a phenomenology of the lifeworld and thus illustrates Heidegger's claim that phenomenology is a return to Plato and Aristotle" (832).

⁵³ Benardete notes that the word used here, *philosophias*, is a hapax legomenon in Plato's work: Benardete 2007, 1.187. This would seem to indicate that Socrates does not mean the description that follows in any general sense.

⁵⁴ As Mark H. Waymack notes: "Though Theodorus may amiably agree to the character, it stands in striking contrast to the Socrates of the dialogue itself": Waymack 1985, 482.

“It does not matter to such men [those practicing philosophy] whether they talk for a day or a year, if only they may hit upon that which is,” Socrates says (172d). Yet Socrates cuts the digression short, despite Theodorus’ wishes otherwise, and, more dramatically, the ending of the *Theaetetus* shows Socrates’ own lack of leisure, having to hurry to face Meletus’s indictment (210d).

Although one might conclude that the “flying philosopher”⁵⁵ of the digression offers little more than a joke, this contrast between Theodorus’ and Socrates’ reactions actually emphasizes some similarities between Theodorus’ friend, Protagoras, and Socrates. Theodorus, as Socrates notes in the *Theaetetus*, had gained reputation for his geometrical proofs and teaching of mathematics. Yet what Theodorus has taught Theaetetus, as we see in the beginning of the dialogue, never leaves the abstract realm of number. Theaetetus can, as Myles Burnyeat characterizes it, “formulate a general definition of the important mathematical notion of linear incompleteness” (147d-148b)⁵⁶ but he cannot answer Socrates’ question about what it means to know these things – or anything. Theodorus, in other words, disseminates expert knowledge, but he does not teach his students how to translate this knowledge into action or even to discuss the assumptions upon which such knowledge bases itself. Theodorus cannot give an account, a *logon*, of what knowledge is (148d2). (Theaetetus will learn otherwise.)

In contrast to Theodorus, Socrates and Protagoras both attempt to give accounts that might receive broad understanding – they try to speak to publics, or to speak publics into being (as Socrates does by appropriating the *sunousia*). The sophist and the midwife both seek to improve the opinions of those they encounter, either by making them better by means of speech in the case of Protagoras or by helping others to “give birth” and then evaluating these offspring, in the case of Socrates. Neither Protagoras nor Socrates resembles the philosopher or the “practical man” of the digression; they inhabit the space between “philosophy” and “politics.”⁵⁷ Socrates does not come to political life out of “philosophic interest” but rather finds himself in political life – between

⁵⁵ As Harry Berger describes the philosopher of the digression, whom Berger distinguishes from Socrates: “Metaphorically, Theaetetus is flying . . . But if he is going to talk with Socrates he will have to sit, and not fly away – as Socrates chose to sit in prison”: Berger 1982, 406.

⁵⁶ See Burnyeat’s analysis of this in the context of Greek mathematics: Burnyeat 1978, 489.

⁵⁷ This highlights a difference between my account and Stern 2002. The quotation in the following sentence comes from Stern 2002, 276. Cf. Stern 2008 for a fuller treatment.

the caricatured extremes of the digression – and must work from within this situation. Philosophy is, as Arendt suggests, always already in political life.

Yet Socrates also retains the notion that better and worse accounts may become possible. Philosophy presupposes that one might find truth – that such a goal might prove possible. This assumption undergirds the practice of the midwife and its incorporation into (and transformation of) extant democratic practices. As the description of the image of the midwife intimates, Socrates sees his activity as testing and assaying the opinions of others through the discussion forming the *sunousia*. Such shared collective inquiry might lead to recognizing true reality or it might not – every “offspring” has the chance of being a mere phantom or the truth itself. But unlike Protagoras, Socrates animates these encounters with a hope for truth, even if Socrates never seems to reach it, as we come to see by the end of the *Theaetetus*. This hope for truth builds on the aspirations of Socrates’ fellow Athenians even as he implicitly criticizes extant practices aimed at achieving truth.

I would suggest, then, that we can take the digression not as a paean to the philosopher but rather as an elaboration of the stakes of choosing either side of the dilemma posed by the “Protagoras” of the dialogue – one can choose either expertise or opinion. Viewed in this way, the digression then clarifies what Socrates as a midwife attempts to do in the dialogue, giving substance to Arendt’s suggestions. By investigating knowledge without knowing in advance what knowledge is, Socrates finesses the same paradox we saw Meno propose, believing in the possibility of knowing without claiming certainty of knowledge. The truth may reveal itself, then, but never so completely as to end one’s searching. The subsequent investigations of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* elaborate the terms of this inquiry by rejecting true and false opinion as insufficient by themselves and settling on the circular but necessary definition of knowledge as correct opinion with an account. This account will itself become exemplified in the speech, the *logos*, that Theodorus, Theaetetus, and Socrates construct in common through their dialogue.

Thus while the argument of the *Theaetetus* taken by itself appears without a conclusion, if we rethink the conversation that has taken place in terms of the midwife, the conversation reflects on the activity of the midwife, highlighting the elements of *maieusis* in the enactment of the dialogue. At one level, the argument offers three starting points for understanding knowledge: perception, judgment, and an account

or argument. None of these satisfies a definition of knowledge, but such a lack of knowledge by the end of the dialogue aligns with the image of midwife as barren of wisdom and always in pursuit of something true and beautiful, even if these truths always remain unfound. Moreover, the successive definitions align with steps in the process of maieusis: beginning with perception (recognizing “pregnancy”), developing opinions (i.e., the “birth”), and attempting to give an account (the testing, “running the child around the hearth”). This process does not define or achieve knowledge, but it moves toward some knowledge by illuminating what we do not know. At this level of the argument, the aporetic ending demands continuing inquiry; knowing what one does not know – that one cannot even define knowledge – incites further questioning.

At another level, the midwife also offers an alternative to the polarity set up by the “practical man” and the philosopher of Socrates’ digression. The “practical man,” as we saw, flitted from opinion to opinion, pandering and pleasing without the compass of true knowledge, a dispensation only from gods. The philosopher of the digression, in contrast, oriented all his pursuits around the paradigm of the good and the true, which gave him an almost otherworldly aura, being so preoccupied with the realm of truth that he presented a laughable and ridiculous figure. Yet the midwife as enacted in the dialogue worked through perceptions to form opinions, beginning with the position of the practical man and moving toward that of the “flying philosopher.” Unlike Protagoras, the midwife pushed beyond manipulating opinions in different ways. Yet unlike the philosopher, the midwife insisted on appearances around him – the opinions of his fellow citizens. Yet given the dialogue’s aporetic ending and Socrates’ repeated claims of ignorance, we cannot say the midwife ever reaches truth. Instead, the activity of maieusis continues without end among the citizens of Athens.

At a third level, we could say that while the dialogue ends without any definition for knowledge, the conversation in fact creates an account or argument, a *logos*, that puts its readers on the way toward knowledge. As Socrates reminds Theaetetus at the end of the dialogue, one is better off knowing what one does not know than remaining in ignorance. In this sense, one comes closer to knowledge as one also recognizes one’s ignorance. Questions about one’s own knowledge, we might say, start the dialogue within oneself that Socrates calls “thinking” (*Theaetetus* 189e6): “a talk which the soul has with itself about the objects under its consideration.” The dialogue of the *Theaetetus* raises questions that make this talk possible.

But perhaps most importantly, Socrates' own art of *maieusis* does not withstand the demands of knowledge that the dialogue proposes. Whereas the dialogue ends by asking that all knowledge must consist in "true judgment with an account" – a definition that while rejected remains by far the most developed in the conversation – Socrates' art of midwifery brooks no such accounting. Socrates tells a story of how he acquired this knowledge rather than offering arguments for its truth: he learned this art not by investigation, judgment, and giving an account of its principles but through his mother and by virtue of the god's compulsion. Socrates' only proof that he knows something lies in the activities of his life (the story I have been in effect retelling) – that he has a reputation for strangeness based on his philosophic hectoring of people around him (remember the anticipation of Plato's *Apology* in Socrates' description of the "inquiry" [*exestasin*] he and Theaetetus have just undertaken). Yet Socrates' ultimate claim, that he benefits those with whom he consorts, belies the only tangible proof he seems to offer – that more often than not Socrates makes others "ready to bite," angry and vindictive like Anytus (in the *Meno*) and Meletus (in the *Apology*). Here an additional irony presents itself: we know Socrates will be executed at the hands of many vengeful Athenians, a fact presaged by the *Theaetetus*' end.

Socrates' atopia revisited

In his book, *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West names James Baldwin as the “black American Socrates.” “A blues-inflected, jazz-saturated democrat,” Baldwin exercises “a powerful and poignant self-examination – always on the brink of despair, yet holding on to a tragicomic hope,” bespeaking “a rare intellectual integrity and personal anguish.”¹ Like Socrates, Baldwin infects others with perplexity, forcing his readers to grapple with the difficulties of “trying to be a decent human being and thinking person in the face of the pervasive mendacity and hypocrisy of the American empire” (80). For West, then, Baldwin takes up Socrates by articulating and undertaking a philosophy very similar to the philosophy described thus far: the interrogation of self and world to recognize the delusions and blindness that contribute to persistent structures of oppression and to affirm the value of the examined life. By confronting reality through radical and fearless questioning, Baldwin focuses his readers’ attention on the destructive reality of the “racial contract,” as Charles Mills puts it, in its epistemological form, rejecting the ideological coercion propagated by a liberal democracy that insists on denying a racialized past.² As a “black American Socrates,” Baldwin carries forward the provocative work of the gadfly by confronting the ignorance of those around him, seeking to bring his interlocutors to more truthful and just collective life through examination.

The link between Baldwin and Socrates calls attention to a consequence of both of their practices: strangeness. “Trying to be a decent human being and a thinking person,” writes West, involves standing against the grain of society: against the conventional politics of Athens, for Socrates; against

¹ West 2004, 79. Page numbers in this paragraph refer to West 2004. This and the following paragraph draw on Schlosser 2013.

² Mills 1997, 18 and 88.

the denied racialized past and present in twentieth-century America, for Baldwin. The crucial elements of Socrates' philosophy – its transformation of Athenian practices of accountability, erotic practices of democratic subject formation, *parrhēsia*, and the educational practices of the *sunousia* – all involve making a familiar practice of the Athenian habitus strange; similarly for Baldwin, rejecting the status quo and liberal innocence disturbs and disrupts the conventional order of things. Baldwin helps us to recognize dislocation, destabilization, and disruption as integral to what Socrates did. As the previous chapters have shown, atopia returns again and again as the best description of Socrates' philosophy. Summoning the different moments of atopia in the previous chapters helps to show how these work together to capture Socrates' practice within the context of democratic Athens.

Yet Baldwin's example also raises the question of Socrates' own motivations. Baldwin's explicit motivations – in West's words, “to try to be a decent human being and a thinking person” – contrast with Socrates' own enigmatic statements about why he undertakes the work of examination. After returning briefly to some of the dialogues treated thus far, this chapter turns to the two defenses given for and by Socrates at his trial – Plato's *Apology* and Xenophon's *Apology* – to revisit the question. Seeing Socrates' philosophy as atopic casts Socrates' own trial and execution in a different light by focusing us on the unknowability of Socrates' motivations. Yet while we can only speculate about why Socrates did what he did, comprehending the significance of his philosophy as atopic helps us to recognize the consequences he provoked and thus returns us to the uncomfortable dissonance between the desire to make something of Socrates and the difficulties of ever answering definitively what Socrates would do.

MAPPING ATOPIA

As we have seen, Socrates' strangeness appears most markedly around instances of the Greek word *atopos* or *atopia*, which is usually translated as “strange” or “strangeness.” This word thus offers a starting point for returning to the meanings of atopia and its usefulness for describing (if not understanding) Socrates' philosophy; moreover, the word's multiple senses illuminate the different dimensions of this strangeness as well as its political valences.³ Atopia in its literal sense denotes being out of

³ Tormod Eide notes that “*atopia* is the quality of being *atopos*, a favourite adjective in Plato, around 230 instances (including the verb *atopōs*) being found in his works. It is not too

place or out of the way, but its meaning also extends to unwantedness, extraordinariness, and absurdity.⁴ Given the limits of “irony,” we can use *atopia* to revisit many of the moments of Socrates’ philosophy we have discussed thus far and map Socrates’ disruption of Athenian practices along the lines of his being out of place, his unwantedness, the absurdity of his images and arguments, and the extraordinariness of his figure. As noted in [Chapter 1](#), *atopia* captures the phenomenon that irony seeks to shroud in mysterious (yet meaningful) silence. Mapping *atopia* illuminates the sites of dissonance and disruption crucial to understanding what Socrates did and thus positions us for considering what Socrates would do today.

First of all, and perhaps most innocuously, part of what makes Socrates’ philosophy appear atopic lies in the strange examples and arguments Socrates makes, arguments that strike his interlocutors as bizarre and out of place given the conventional expectations of extant democratic practices in Athens. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates calls attention to how his arguments might appear strange in a telling context during the argument with Polus when he suggests that rhetoric forms the counterpart in the soul to pastry baking, its counterpart in the body. “Perhaps I’ve done an absurd thing [*atopon*]” (465e), Socrates confesses, having given such a long speech. Socrates’ strangeness lies both in the bizarre metaphor – to liken rhetoric to pastry baking – as well as the apparent incongruence of doing so at such length when he had just warned against long-windedness. As if to emphasize that the strangeness lies more in Socrates’ examples and arguments, Polus calls Socrates’ arguments atopic twice during their short conversation: first objecting to the idea that a man who acts unjustly becomes more miserable if he does not receive just punishment (473a1) and second when Socrates suggests that they should enlist rhetoric in

much to say that Plato established the use of *atopos* in Greek literature, and it may seem strange that this important term has received so little attention”: Eide 1996, 59–60. In terms of Socrates in particular, Ruby Blondell comments that *atopia* “is closely associated with Socrates throughout Plato, especially with the peculiar mode of discourse and the aporia or bewilderment it engenders”: Blondell 2002, 73. I focus here on *atopia* in Plato’s dialogues I have discussed already in this book – *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, *Gorgias*, and *Apology* – but *atopia* plays an important role in at least two other Platonic dialogues: the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*. On the *Phaedrus*, see Makowski 1994 and on the *Phaedo*, see Plass 1964.

⁴ As Gregory Vlastos describes translating *atopia* as “strangeness”: “The Greek is stronger; ‘strangeness’ picks it up at the lower end of its intensity-range. At the higher end ‘outrageousness’ or even ‘absurdity’ would be required to match its force”: Vlastos 1991, 1 n. 1.

order to ensure just punishment rather than escape it (480e1). Socrates later confesses the strangeness of his examples more directly when Callicles calls Socrates' image of the leaky jar (meant to describe the soul dedicated to consumption) as "on the whole a bit strange" (*taut' epieikōs men estin hupo ti atopa*, 493c3–4), which Callicles shortly thereafter confirms, saying: "How strange you are, Socrates! And simply a crowd-pleaser" (*hōs atopos ei, ō Sōkrates, kai atechnōs dēmēgoros*, 494d1).⁵

These direct associations of atopia with Socrates' philosophy connect with the particular imagery that Socrates uses to describe the reputation garnered by these activities. Again, not only does philosophy appear atopic in terms of its arguments but so too does its chief practitioner. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates describes philosophy with the image of the gadfly, calling the metaphor itself ridiculous or laughable (*geloioteron*, 30e3).⁶ Similarly, Socrates mentions his reputation for atopia in the *Theaetetus* on the heels of describing himself as a midwife. Socrates begins this description by reminding Theaetetus that people call Socrates "a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties" (*hoti de atopōtatos eimi kai poiō tous anthrōpous aporein*, 149a8–9, 166). As we saw earlier, Socrates explains this reputation by describing the origins and practice of his maieusis.

Yet atopia does not merely attach to the words and images that Athenians and Socrates use to describe how philosophy appears. At a deeper level, atopia also describes how Socrates' philosophy displaces the space and time of Athenian democracy. This begins in the *Apology*, where Socrates publicly admits his reputation for atopia:

It may seem strange [*doxeien atopon einai*, 31c4] that while I go around and give this advice privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city. (31c4–5, 29)

While this invocation of atopia could appear innocuously similar to many Athenian observations that "such and such may seem to you," two elements about Socrates' atopia appear here that prove important: First, Socrates describes this as an appearance or an opinion about his atopia.

⁵ My translation. The Cooper, ed. 1997 translation reads as follows: "What nonsense, Socrates. You're a regular crowd pleaser" (837). Socrates had earlier accused Callicles of being atopic for not being able to oppose what his lovers propose (481e7), so perhaps Callicles means to echo this insult here.

⁶ In fact, *geloios* (the adjective here) offers a sub-theme of the atopic Socrates and frequently appears as a kind of stand-in for atopia. One could say the same for Socrates' association with "nonsense," *phluaria*, which appears frequently in the *Gorgias*.

He continues to explain that his divine sign has warned him from political involvement while he has already described his interpretation of the Delphic Oracle's order for him to philosophize – a command he perceives as coming from the god (i.e., Apollo). Socrates recognizes that his presence in these private spaces upsets the conventional spatial arrangements of Athenian democracy. By admitting as much, Socrates seeks to reassure his fellow citizens. Similarly, Socrates confides to Theaetetus that his reputation for *atopia* comes from “people talking” about his strange appearance:

... They do say that I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficulties [*hoti de atopōtatos eimi kai poiō tous anthrōpous aporein*]. You must have heard that, surely? (149a – b, 166)

“Yes, I have,” Theaetetus responds. Socrates has just described his work as an intellectual midwife, and after Theaetetus sees that Socrates means well, the dialogue can continue. As we saw in the previous chapter, while we know very little about midwifing in ancient Athens, it clearly differed from doctoring and any “professionalized” expertise in medicine in being traditionally a woman's role, not systematized in texts, and not a source of social status. By calling himself a midwife, then, Socrates implicates himself in a lower status occupation than would conventionally befit an Athenian male citizen – a startling connection of the private, female world with the public, masculine one. We can take these two instances of *atopia*, then, as illuminating how Socrates departs from the traditional arrangement of space and time according to gender and activity.

The spatial disruption described by *atopia* comes with Socrates' meddlesome interference in what the Athenians deemed private affairs: demanding accountability outside the spaces and roles where it traditionally occurred; overturning the erotic practices of citizen formation; bringing a philosophic *parrhēsia* to the people. Transforming extant democratic practices elicits the appellation of *atopos*. These aspects of philosophy all displace politics from public spaces such as the Assembly and the theater to the agora, private homes, and even gatherings of Megarians outside of Athens.⁷ Socrates does not limit his discussions to matters or spaces deemed political but meddles beyond these bounds. While the agora provided a space for political life, as “a place of words and

⁷ As Socrates describes in the *Apology* and as we see in the *Meno* (the home of Anytus) or *Symposium* (the home of Agathon) and the *Theaetetus* (somewhere in Megara).

of debate on the communal affairs of the assembled group,”⁸ Socrates puts priority on this less formal space, decentering the Athenian democracy as we saw in our discussion of the *Gorgias*. The atopia of philosophy thus describes disordering of the conventional architecture of the Athenian democracy.

This spatial aspect of atopia also has a temporal dimension that appears in Plato’s *Apology*. When Socrates describes why he cannot participate in public affairs nor even maintain his own, he declares that he has no leisure, *scholē*, to do so:

Because of this occupation [*tēs ascholias*, b8, viz. continuing the investigation as the god bade him] I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent [*oute ti tōn tes poleōs praxai moi scholē gegonen*, b8–9] nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty because of my service to the god. (23b8–9, 22)

Here Socrates denies having any leisure, and yet a little later in the *Apology*, after the jury has convicted Socrates, he implies the opposite and rhetorically asks what punishment he might deserve:

What is suitable for a poor benefactor who needs leisure to exhort you? Nothing is more suitable, gentlemen, than for such a man to be fed in the Prytaneum, much more suitable for him than any one of you who has won a victory at Olympia with a pair or a team of horses. (36d, 32)

We can now see how Socrates redefines *scholē*: He does not have the leisure for conventional activities in democratic Athens such as seeking political success and supporting his family. Yet he does have leisure for the activities left ungoverned by the water clock: digressive discussions (as in the *Theaetetus*) or standing off to the side before Agathon’s party (in Plato’s *Symposium*) or even continuing to discourse while the hemlock enters his body (as he does in the *Phaedo*). Indeed, Socrates believes he needs yet *more* leisure for his philosophy. As if to reiterate this shift and challenge of Athenian time, in the *Apology* Socrates even suggests that another day of his trial would have allowed him to convince the jurors.

Socrates’ temporal disruptiveness may seem minor, but just as there were formal spaces for political life, regulation of time played an important role in Athenian politics. As it became a democracy, Athens created temporal orders and a primary temporal vocabulary; the development of

⁸ Detienne 2001, 45.

these gave political shape to the way of life of all Athenians.⁹ The political allotment of time allowed for the Athenian democracy to assert its power of self-formation. Thus as Danielle Allen has put it, Athenian time measurements appeared “tightly involved with the political.” Philosophy disturbs this; *atopia* describes further displacement of the conventional practices of Athenian democratic life in terms of both time and space.¹⁰

Yet while *atopia* names the strange language and images attached to philosophy as well as its disruptive or displacing effects, it also underscores the upset and confusion often provoked by philosophy's practice. The transformation of the spaces of Athenian political life by philosophy upsets the status quo and it also agitates the Athenians. Here *atopia* possesses the sense of unwantedness in that Socrates provokes unwanted reflection and response that often proves painful and discomfiting. Socrates appears as a pest; philosophy is a nuisance. This disturbing quality of *atopia* comes most frequently with the experience of *aporia*, often translated as “perplexity.”¹¹ As the *Theaetetus* passage quoted earlier shows, Socrates' reputation for *atopia* stemmed in part from troubling others with perplexities (*aporiai*). In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades' experience of *aporia* “runs parallel” to Socrates' *atopia* in his entire speech; Socrates' *atopia* provokes Alcibiades' perplexity (*aporia*) throughout it.¹² To take another example, while the word *atopia* and its variants do not appear in the *Meno*, the description there of Socrates as a stingray who perplexes all whom he touches (80a-b) connects this startling image and the consequences that normally follow from encountering *atopia*. After Meno calls Socrates a torpedo fish for befuddling him with

⁹ Allen 1996, 162. On time and the Athenian democracy, compare the discussion by Castoriadis in his chapter “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy” in Castoriadis 1991, 81–123.

¹⁰ Allen 1996, 160. Allen also writes that “the democratic nature of the Athenian distribution of time and judgment did not lie primarily in the equality of the portions of water but rather in the acceptance of fallibility” (*Ibid.*, 159). In his comment that the jury would have reached the right decision if he had had another day, Socrates questions this democratic commitment to accepting the costs of fallibility.

¹¹ This experience of dislocation, of being at a loss, or of perplexity – all potential translations of the Greek – often results from conversations with Socrates. See Liddell and Scott 1995, 215. Tormod Eide has also highlighted how the connection between *atopia* and *aporia* appeared in Greek mathematics as well as in Plato's dialogues: Eide 1996, 63.

¹² The language comes from Tormod Eide, who continues: “This causal connection between *atopia* and *aporia* shows that *atopia* is something more and different than that which strikes us as extraordinary or astonishing; it causes bewilderment and perplexity”: Eide 1996, 64.

perplexities, Socrates reiterates Meno's image later in the dialogue to describe the beneficial effects on Meno's slave boy from being numbed and led to *aporia* (84b7–9). Neither Meno nor Socrates say this directly, but Meno's bizarre image of the torpedo fish, which marks the only appearance of this image in Plato, appears as strange regardless.¹³

These three axes of atopia – along the lines of language and image, displacement of space and time, and disturbing of interlocutors – culminate in Plato's *Symposium*.¹⁴ While the word and its variants occur only three times, each time it directly refers to particular aspects of Socrates' philosophy while also illuminating the spatial and temporal disruptions that this practice creates and the personal crises (namely, in Alcibiades) it might provoke. Plato's *Symposium* thus shows how we can capture the multiple ramifications of Socrates' philosophy with the lens of atopia. A close look at these passages also underscores how atopia describes the shifts and consequences produced by Socrates' transformation of extant democratic practices.

Alcibiades' speech about Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* not only directly calls Socrates' activities atopic, but it also shows how atopia links with the use of images to describe philosophy, thus connecting atopia as a description for this practice to its aptness in characterizing the responses it provokes.¹⁵ Here is Alcibiades' first use of the term,¹⁶ at the very beginning of his speech, addressing Socrates:

It is no easy task for one in my condition to give a smooth and orderly account of your bizarreness [*tēn sēn atopian*, 215a3]. I'll try to praise Socrates, my friends, but I'll have to use an image [*di' eikonōn*, a5–6]. And though he

¹³ Sarah Kofman connects the image of the torpedo fish to Socrates' atopia, suggesting, as I have, that its effects mimic those that follow atopia in its other manifestations: Kofman 1998, 26.

¹⁴ For this reason, despite atopia's only appearing three times in the dialogue, the *Symposium* has elicited the most comment on the atopic Socrates. As Diskin Clay put it in his discussion of the *Symposium*: "[Socrates] is – literally – out of place (*atopos*) and therefore difficult to place in the game of comparisons fashionable at the time": Clay 2000, 53. For other discussions of Socrates' atopia in the *Symposium*, see Hadot 2002, 147–78, and Kofman 1998.

¹⁵ Gregory Vlastos remarks that Socrates' atopia is "the keynote of Alcibiades' speech": Vlastos 1991, 1.

¹⁶ Tormod Eide usefully surveys translations of atopia in Alcibiades' speech as follows: "This is a selection of translations and interpretations: 'your oddities' (Lamb); 'nature deroutante' (Robin); 'deine Wunderlichkeiten' (Schleiermacher); 'Originalität, Eigenart' (Schmelzer); 'your extraordinary nature' (Waterfield); 'out-of-the-way character, a walking conundrum' (Bury)." As Eide concludes: "This variety is in itself an indication that a closer look at the term might be of some use": Eide, 1996, 59.

may think I'm trying to make fun of him, I assure you my image is no joke. Look at him! Isn't he just like a statue of Silenus? (215a3–8, 497)

Here Alcibiades calls Socrates *atopic* out of sheer frustration for lack of an appropriate vocabulary – one cannot pin down Socrates or his philosophy with any other words. Hence rather than attempt to describe him in prose, Alcibiades uses multiple images: an image of the Silenus here, but also one of the satyr Marsyas (215b4) and one of Chinese doll-like statuettes of excellence (*algamata*, 222a4). Alcibiades can attempt to compare Socrates to Achilles or Brasidas, Pericles or Nestor or Anteor or other great *rhētors*, but these comparisons all fail:

There is a parallel for everyone – everyone else, that is. But this man here is so bizarre [*hoios de houtosi gegone tēn atopian hanthrōpos*, 221d2–3], his ways and his ideas are so unusual, that, search as you might, you'll never find anyone else, alive or dead, who's even remotely like him. The best you can do is not to compare him to anything human, but to liken him, as I do, to Silenus and the satyrs, and the same goes for his ideas and arguments. (221d1–6, 503)¹⁷

Atopia is the only name for the inexplicable strangeness that Alcibiades finds in Socrates – one cannot even find a proper comparison. This passage again underscores how the *atopia* generated by Socrates' philosophy defies easy description and thus requires images: first because this practice leaves others at a loss to describe it (another sign of *aporia*, we could say); and second because no words or comparisons will suffice to describe the *atopic* results. Socrates' strangeness frenzies Alcibiades as a result – he does not know what to do with this man.

Alcibiades' characterizations of Socrates' *atopic* appearance collect many of the previous instances of *atopia* and cast them in new light. By invoking strange imagery for Socrates, Alcibiades' description of the *atopia* of Socrates' philosophy resonates with Socrates' bizarre descriptions of his activity in the *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, and *Apology*. Because no words suffice for Socrates, one requires images, but these images must always appear strange and peculiar. Not only, then, does Socrates' philosophy

¹⁷ The translation by Christopher Rowe captures the literal meaning of this passage a little better than the Cooper edition: "But as for the sort of man *this* one is, so strange is he, both in himself and in the things he says, one wouldn't come even close to finding anyone like him if one looked, whether among people now or among those in the past, unless perhaps if one were to compare him to the figures I'm talking about, not to anyone human, but to silenuses and satyrs – both him and what he says": Rowe 1998, 121.

provoke and disrupt those around him – always rousing and persuading and reproaching, as he describes it in Plato’s *Apology* (31a-b) – but the images themselves function in the same way: associating this practice with beasts and occupations that would have appeared strange and disreputable in democratic Athens. The unwanted atopia of philosophy spawns these unwanted and lowly images, separating its practitioners from normal political life.

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), part of Alcibiades’ disoriented reaction to Socrates’ activities comes from the rejection of the conventional erotic relationship Alcibiades seeks. Socrates, Alcibiades explains, makes Alcibiades into the lover (*erastēs*) instead of the beloved (*erōnomos*), reversing Alcibiades’ expectations. Moreover, Socrates attempts to displace Alcibiades’ political ambitions by turning them toward philosophy; Alcibiades’ comparison of Socrates to other political founders and *rhētors* contrasts Socrates’ activities that occur in private to their public deeds. Socrates challenges Alcibiades to repurpose private spaces for examination with others rather than flaunt his riches or crassly exhibit the fruits of his desires for honor and glory.¹⁸ Thus as in the *Gorgias* and Plato’s *Apology*, we can see that Alcibiades too views Socrates’ atopia in terms of its spatial and temporal disturbances and the political consequences of both.

Yet the core of this spatial and temporal disruption comes through the physical embodiment of philosophy. Not Socrates’ strange ideas but rather his strange existence, the strangeness of his living, breathing self, disturbs Alcibiades the most. As we see in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates intrudes into the private affairs of his fellow citizens, meddling (*polupragmōn*) where Athenians preferred to let things lie. In the *Meno*, Meno compares Socrates’ provocations to the physical touch of the torpedo fish while also evoking his snub-nosed qualities with the comparison. The *Theaetetus* calls attention to Socrates’ appearance and physical strangeness by describing Theaetetus as resembling Socrates – as unhandsome but brilliant, a disturbing contradiction to most Athenians. But Alcibiades’ notoriety as one of the great beauties of Athens accentuates these corporeal disturbances even more. When he realizes that Socrates sits next to him at the *Symposium*, Alcibiades reacts viscerally: “What!?! By Herakles it’s you, Socrates!” (213c). Socrates’ physical interposition into Alcibiades’ life finds expression in Alcibiades’ own descriptions of

¹⁸ A dialogue whose authenticity has come under question, *Alcibiades I*, intimates this theme.

how he sought to flee from Socrates, to escape his sight, to maneuver out of Socrates' grasp (216a). In the middle of Alcibiades' speech Alcibiades describes his failure to conquer Socrates physically, and this seems to have piqued Alcibiades the most. Socrates affects Alcibiades' physical senses: Socrates' words resemble music that makes Alcibiades feel drunk (215c-d); the sight of Socrates drives Alcibiades wild; and Socrates' seductions have the bite of a snake (218a). Alcibiades cannot escape the draw of Socrates' presence: "his powers are really extraordinary," Alcibiades says (216d).

As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), Alcibiades' reaction may actually express his own confusion of philosophy with the man Socrates; if this were the case, Alcibiades would not be alone, as Xenophon's *Memorabilia* attests. Yet Alcibiades' descriptions, which Socrates does not interrupt, attest to the agitation that atopia captures. Socrates' disturbances are not merely theoretical, his provocations are not limited to intriguing questions. Rather, because philosophy comes instantiated in the life of the practitioner, because Socrates embodies his philosophy, it (and he) instigate physical, bodily distress. Alcibiades is actually disturbed – maddened, irritated to the point of insanity – by Socrates' philosophy. Perhaps Anytus, in Plato's *Meno*, was on his way to feeling the same. Meletus in Plato's *Apology* also does not seem far from such a state.

TWO APOLOGIES FOR THE ATOPIC SOCRATES

These reactions to Socrates' disturbances, however, exist in tension with the conventional descriptions of Socrates we saw in [Chapter 1](#). The contrast here between Plato and Xenophon's *Apologies* offers a useful approach to the question of what might stand behind the appearance of atopia. The fact that Athens tried, convicted, and executed Socrates seems to confirm the negative reactions to his apparent strangeness; these facts do not, however, necessitate a judgment against philosophy entirely.¹⁹ In Plato's account, while Socrates admits how his philosophy appears strange, he also seeks to disabuse his audience of the discomfort the atopia of his practice might cause them. It would be a mistake to confuse this strangeness with malign intentions, Socrates implies; atopia is simply a consequence of philosophy. In contrast, Xenophon's

¹⁹ Even I.F. Stone will not take his indictment of Socrates this far, as he admits that Socrates' supporters had some grounds: Stone 1988. Cf. Waterfield 2009.

account emphasizes Socrates' desire to end his life – that Socrates' arrogant boasting²⁰ on the occasion of his trial must be understood as a death wish. Moreover, Xenophon focuses the conflict that Plato presents as between Socrates and Athens (which, in turn, serves as synecdoche for “philosophy” and “politics” for many readers) as between Socrates and Hermogenes. Translated to the language with which this chapter began, if Plato's *Apology* questions to what degree democracies like Athens can sustain the disruptions provoked by philosophy, Xenophon tries to suggest a deeper agreement between Socrates and Athens, a “connected criticism” before its time that Socrates' fellow Athenians simply failed to recognize. Plato's *Apology* thus points to an abyss between philosophy and democracy, an ineliminable dissonance; Xenophon's to a basic coherence, a possible harmony.²¹

In Plato's *Apology*, we encounter Socrates on trial, defending himself against charges of corrupting the Athenian youth, not believing in the gods of Athens, and introducing new gods. In response, Socrates depicts himself as an ordinary man committed to improving the lives of his fellow Athenians. Yet Socrates' service to the city also involves transforming extant democratic practices. For one (and as we have seen again and again), Socrates' philosophy precludes him from adopting the way of life conventionally appropriate for someone committed, as Socrates says he is, to making his fellow citizens and his polis better. The unconventionality of Socrates' philosophy appears especially with its inflection of space and time. In terms of space, with its transformation of extant Athenian practices, Socrates' philosophy rejects the priority of spaces such as the Assembly and the law courts, where the demos assembled as a whole. Instead, Socrates approaches the people individually, speaking with them in their places of employment and around the Athenian marketplace, the *agora*. Socrates does participate when called upon, serving as a hoplite and on the Athenian Council, the *Boulē*, yet his devotion to persuading

²⁰ Xenophon describes this as *megalegoria*. See the discussion in Kremer 2006, 29.

²¹ I should note that the other works of Plato do not emphasize Socrates' dissonance with the Athenian democracy to the same degree as does the *Apology*. Plato's *Republic*, for instance, might be read as a second apology, one that shows Socrates' support for the conventional wisdom on justice (as Euben 1990 remarks). My point here, however, is not to claim that we have explained all of the words attributed to Socrates (by Plato or by Xenophon or by others) with this reconstruction of his philosophy as a practice but rather that *atopia* best describes the appearance of Socrates' philosophy to most (although not all) Athenians and provides a worthwhile basis for “interrupting,” in Bonnie Honig's term (Honig 2013), receptions and appropriations of Socrates today.

and reproaching his fellow citizens all day long and everywhere he finds himself in their company seems strange to the Athenians (31c). Socrates goes even farther by denying that he would have survived so many years had he pursued his philosophy in the conventional spaces of Athenian politics (32e). Yet Socrates insists that his philosophy performs a great service for the Athenians (30a); he simply transposes the space of this activity from traditional, "public," sites to less heralded, "private," ones.²²

Alongside these spatial innovations, Socrates' philosophy challenges the temporal strategies of democratic practice, as we noted already. Socrates cannot participate in public affairs nor even maintain his own to satisfactory standards because he has no leisure, *scholē*, to do so. His occupation of examining himself and others, which he interprets the Delphic Oracle to have mandated, makes him *ascholia*, without leisure, and thus unable to pursue a political career. Yet at the same time as Socrates declares his lack of leisure, he insists on the importance of another kind of leisure for the philosophical discussions he wishes to undertake. After being convicted, Socrates proposes that for punishment he receive free meals in the Prytaneum, a public service traditionally reserved for Olympic victors. "What is more suitable for a poor benefactor," Socrates asks, "who needs leisure [*scholē*] to exhort you?" (36d, 32). Socrates does not have time for the generally recognized public activities expected in Athens, yet he does have leisure – and requires more of it – for those activities left ungoverned by the water clock, the ubiquitous fixture of Athenian courts: the interrogations and discussions he describes in the *Apology*, the request for an extra day of proceedings to persuade the jurors of his innocence, or the many, many other conversations recounted in the previous chapters.

In addition to displacing (by transforming) the spatial and temporal arrangements of extant Athenian democratic practices, Socrates' philosophy directly confronts certain other *de facto* hierarchies in Athenian political culture and challenges them with the egalitarian implications of philosophy.²³ At the beginning of his speech, Socrates admits he cannot speak like an expert litigator, but will instead sound like those in the marketplace. Socrates thus immediately aligns philosophy with citizens

²² This is not to deny the *political* importance of these "private" spaces. On the contrary, Socrates here contrasts the public (*ta dēmosia*) with the private (*ta idiai*), both of which have political significance. Cf. Stephen Salkever's description of Socrates in Plato's *Menexenus*: "Socrates' place . . . is not at the front of the assembly or the Bouleterion but by the edge of the agora, weaving sense into the language of political deliberation": Salkever 1993, 141.

unaccustomed to making speeches (or paying others to write them) even while his speech reinforces the importance of dikastic modes of knowledge production. As the speech continues, Socrates appeals to the jury's individual judgment rather than their collective prejudices, refusing to beg and supplicate with tears or to evoke pity by bringing forward his wife and sons; instead, Socrates insists that the jury evaluate his claims according to the laws (35c). Even while Socrates refuses the standard tropes of jury trials, then, Socrates respects the jury's judgment, imploring its members to judge wisely and without prejudice. Such a request implies a basic intellectual egalitarianism consonant with Athenian democracy: Socrates believes that everyone is capable of judging the truth for themselves and rejects the subversion of this process by "hired guns" such as speech writers.²⁴ In this sense, Socrates' philosophy builds on one practice while subverting another.

Hand in hand with its basic intellectual egalitarianism, Socrates' philosophy seeks to disturb the complacency of his fellow citizens and non-citizens by demanding their judgment and subjecting these judgments to scrutiny. Socrates' philosophy thus challenges and develops the capacities of the very people upon whom the Athenian democracy depended while also expanding the participants in these deliberations beyond conventional boundaries. Famously describing his philosophy as akin to a gadfly's vexing sting, Socrates declares: "I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long everywhere I find myself in your company" (30e – 31a, 28). Such dedication leads Socrates to neglect his own affairs while instead constantly seeking the company of others, going to citizens in private to attempt to show them to care for themselves and the city itself and trying to persuade them to concern themselves with excellence (31b, 36c). When addressing the jury, Socrates calls upon each of them as witnesses who ought to account for what they have seen and heard of Socrates' philosophy: rather than deferring to rumor or collective dogma, each juror's own investigation should stand for itself; if they have experience, they should educate and show others (19d). This echoes Socrates' own description of his philosophy in response to the Delphic Oracle: while Socrates acquired a name for "some kind of wisdom" (20d), Socrates

²³ This aspect of Socrates' philosophy also works in tandem with the transformation of Athenian spatial and temporal practice, in particular with respect to the symposium and *sunousia*, as I argued in [Chapters 3 and 5](#).

²⁴ "Intellectual egalitarianism" comes from Rowe 1998, 245.

repeatedly asserts that this knowledge neither amounts to much nor ought to trump other claims to knowledge. The pronouncement that "no one is wiser" than Socrates did not declare Socrates the wisest (21a). Rather, no one *exceeds* Socrates in wisdom, Socrates reports. Socrates' philosophy begins, then, from the supposition that everyone *could* equal Socrates (or anyone else) in wisdom or ignorance; Socrates' conversations with politicians, poets, and craftsmen that follow proceed from this assumption. While implying that each person does not know, then, Socrates' philosophy pursues the possibility of everyone's knowing – and holds the promise of a concomitant improvement of democracy that could follow.

In these ways – enacting spatial and temporal changes in democratic practice, reorienting Athenian political culture in more inclusive ways, and disturbing the complacency of citizens and noncitizens by demanding their judgment – we can see how Socrates' philosophy takes up and transforms extant democratic practices while also developing them in potentially beneficial directions. But the depiction of Socrates' philosophy in Plato's *Apology* also shows another consequence of these innovations that suggests a fundamental dissonance between the promise of Socrates' philosophy and the actualization of this promise: the pain and rancor provoked by philosophy's questions, provocations, and transformations of democratic practices. Atopia does not feel comfortable; people do not always enjoy the perplexity (*aporia*) that Socrates' questions often painfully induce: the bite of the gadfly stings, and the examination that alone makes life worth living can just as often make life unbearable.²⁵ Socrates offends the politicians and poets by questioning their self-assured wisdom. The craftsmen, while having knowledge of things that Socrates lacks, also exaggerate their claims to wisdom, which Socrates scrutinizes. In all, despite his claims to be motivated by love of the polis and concern for its citizens, Socrates' philosophy repulses and angers more citizens than it attracts. Of the total jurors at his trial, 220 voted to acquit Socrates of the charges against him, but 281 found him guilty.²⁶

²⁵ As Jonathan Lear writes: "If we consider the confusion, anxiety, and anger that Socrates generated, there is little doubt that the Athenian citizens had, in Socrates' time, no way to think about the question he was asking. Indeed, Socrates regularly confused himself": Lear 2000, 8.

²⁶ Some dispute about these numbers continues, but it seems generally accepted. For discussion, see Brickhouse and Smith, 1990.

This paradox present in Plato's *Apology* – that Socrates' philosophy seems to promise a better Athenian democracy yet one that the extant Athenian democracy will not countenance – contrasts with the constitutive paradox of Xenophon's *Apology*.²⁷ For Xenophon, Socrates' beneficial effects are so obvious that it seems incomprehensible that any observer would have missed them. Socrates *wanted* to die, as Xenophon presents it in his version, and this only testifies to his wisdom, his exemplary virtue, and the obtuseness of his Athenian accusers. Yet a paradox persists in Xenophon's Socrates: this Socrates insists that he benefits all he approaches, yet his pedagogy is fundamentally opposed to the regime that made his philosophy possible: without the question-and-answer approach evident in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates asserts an unquestionable authority with no debts to the extant practices of the Athenian democracy; moreover, Xenophon defends Socrates' manipulation of the jury, which effectively undermines this essential aspect of Athenian democratic practice.

Xenophon's *Apology* begins by disabusing readers who simply find Socrates' *megalēgoria*, his arrogant boasting, inexplicable. Socrates' reputation for this kind of speech in his defense stems from his desire to die. Rather than plead with the jury for life, Xenophon explains, Socrates sought to make an example of his virtue and thus bring envy on himself to ensure his execution. Moreover, Xenophon recounts a conversation between Socrates and Hermogenes, a gentleman with whom we see Socrates speaking frequently in Xenophon's *Symposium*. Here, Socrates explains how while he tried to think about how to defend himself, his *daimonion* thwarted him. Eventually Socrates realized that the god's actions had good reason: it is better to have lived his whole life in "holiness and justly [*hosiōs . . . kai dikaiōs*]" and end this life at such a stage than to suffer deterioration and begin to reproach himself (§5).²⁸ In other words, Socrates believes that the god was intent on preparing a release from life for him to escape the disgrace and disagreeableness of aging. Socrates thus decides not to plead his case but instead to incense the judges by insisting on his own noble example (§9).

²⁷ On Xenophon's approach to Socrates, see the contrasting readings of Strauss [1972] 1998 and Gray 1998. I have also benefitted from material in Reeve 2002 and Kremer 2006.

²⁸ Greek citations refer to the Oxford Classical Text: Marchant 1922. English translations are Kremer 2006 unless otherwise indicated.

Socrates' speech to the jurors offers a paean to Socrates himself. Socrates insists on his superiority, on his exceptional commitment to truth and holiness, on himself as a model of being least susceptible to desires, and on how his moderate behavior only serves to moderate his fellow Athenians. Even the Delphic Oracle offers more expansive praise of Socrates in Xenophon's account than in Plato's: whereas for Plato, the Oracle enigmatically suggested that "nobody was wiser" than Socrates, leaving open the possibility that everyone, including Socrates, was equally ignorant, in Xenophon's account Socrates recounts, "Apollo ordained in response that no human was freer, more just, or more moderate than I" (§14). Socrates leaves no question that this apothegm implies his own superiority, interpreting the Oracle as saying that while Apollo did pronounce greater things about Lycurgus, the great Spartan lawgiver, he nonetheless did select Socrates "for being superior to many human beings" (§15). "Who do you know," Socrates continues, "that is less of a slave to their bodily desires?" (§16).

Lest his reader think Socrates insolent (as the Athenian jurors did), Xenophon closes his *Apology* of Socrates by detailing his (Xenophon's) own estimation of Socrates. Xenophon does not recount everything pertaining to the trial; instead Xenophon states his intention simply to make clear that while Socrates wanted to deny having acted impiously, he also refused to plead earnestly to avoid death, instead believing it a proper time to die (§22). Whereas Plato's *Apology* leaves Socrates' strangeness intact, Xenophon has an interpretation he does not hesitate to share:

And truly, when I reflect on the wisdom and the inborn nobility of the man, I can neither fail to remember him, nor to remember him without praising him. If, however, anyone among those striving for virtue has been with someone more advantageous than Socrates, I believe that man is most worthy of blessedness. (§34)

Xenophon's faith in Socrates' virtues appears boundless; his portrait of Socrates depicts an unimpeachable human being.

Yet Xenophon's Socrates does not seem fit for the Athenian democracy. Indeed, his explicit manipulation of the jury – not presenting evidence but rather provoking them into envy and thus an unreflective judgment – marks one point of opposition between Socrates and the polis of his birth. Xenophon's *Apology* also lacks any evidence of the dialogic engagement – the basic building block of Socrates' philosophy – that took up and transformed extant accountability practices. Comparing himself

to Palamedes (§22), Socrates further distances himself from Athens, unlike in Plato's *Apology* where he requests a treatment similar to Athenian heroes. Socrates does not leave open the question of who makes the Athenians better, as he does in the exchange with Meletus depicted in Plato's *Apology* (or in many of the dialogues discussed thus far) but instead insists that he "gratuitously benefitted those conversing with me, by teaching whatever good was in my power" (§26). All sense of provisionality has disappeared as Socrates becomes the exemplary teacher, but this also erases yet another aspect where Socrates' philosophy seemed to complement, while criticizing and radicalizing, the Athenian democracy.

With its ethically superior yet politically questionable Socrates, Xenophon's *Apology* underscores one way of explaining away Socrates' atopia: Atopia (and irony with it) is but a mistaken impression, a failure to see the preferability of the gentlemanly virtues that Socrates embodies and gratuitously teaches. On Xenophon's account, Socratic wisdom is no mystery and Socratic philosophy is hardly strange: the one encompasses knowledge of the cardinal virtues (justice, courage, moderation, and wisdom itself); the other is the means of acquiring these virtues. Xenophon's Socrates may seem distant from the Athenian democracy where he practiced philosophy, but ostensibly any political regime would benefit from a teacher such as Socrates (as Xenophon himself asserts at the end of his *Apology*).

Yet for all of his insistence on Socrates' exemplarity, when probed, the wisdom of Xenophon's Socrates reveals itself as awfully conventional. The scattered references within Xenophon's *Apology* testify to this: Socrates congratulates himself on superiority for resisting desire yet does not offer an alternative; Socrates defends his piety without articulating how it differs from the Athenians' piety; Socrates' proclaimed benefits are vaguely characterized as "moderation," without any account of how this involves transformation of his fellow citizens. As Gregory Vlastos has argued, the philosophic depth apparent in Plato's depictions of Socrates does not appear in Xenophon's.²⁹ Xenophon's approach to Socrates appears to stem not from a desire to unfurl Socrates' philosophy so much as to extract useful lessons for gentlemen and politicians.³⁰ While we cannot ultimately know whether Xenophon's account captured some element of Socrates' philosophy,

²⁹ See Vlastos's "The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy" in Vlastos 1994, 87–98.

³⁰ On Xenophon as a writer of so-called "wisdom literature," see Gray 1998 and O'Connor 2011.

the level of generality makes it difficult to speak with much specificity about what Socrates did. Perhaps because Xenophon removes Socrates from the context of democratic Athens he misses the specific ways in which philosophy takes up (and takes off from) the existing cultural repertoire of accountability, erotic practices of democratic subject formation, fearless speech, and so forth. Perhaps the desire to make something of Socrates – as a figure of wisdom literature – led Xenophon to shape his portrait of Socrates according to an already existing model, much like today's proponents of "Socratic citizenship" or the "Socratic method."

Still, Xenophon's Socrates provides a useful reminder of what might result from denying or explaining away Socrates' strangeness, the atopia that appears a necessary consequence of his philosophy. Not only does philosophy proceed by questioning the constitutive assumptions of its political community, it also proceeds by taking up and transforming extant practices of this community. As we have seen, Socrates' philosophy required democratic Athens; Athens provided the point of departure, the practices and broader habitus that offered the substance of criticism and for the development of the act of criticism itself. The Socrates of Xenophon's *Apology* leaves us with a kind of empty formalism about the necessity of the virtues embodied by Socrates. As we have seen thus far, however, a fuller portrait of Socrates reconstructed through his specific engagements with extant practices of the Athenian democracy can give shape to the virtues repurposed for philosophy: a justice of intellectual egalitarianism, a moderation that involves transforming the erotics of Athenian democracy, a courage to speak fearlessly, and a wisdom of relentless and collective inquiry.

SOCRATES "INFELIX"

In the epilogue to his *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, titled "Socrates Felix," Gregory Vlastos returns to a passage from Plato's *Apology* that he writes "answers to romanticism in Greek antiquity." Defending himself against the accusation that he might be ashamed to practice philosophy when threatened with death, Socrates compares himself to Achilles:

You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man. According to your view, all the heroes who died at

Troy were inferior people, especially the son of Thetis who was so contemptuous of danger compared with disgrace ... Do you think he gave thought to death and danger? (28b-d, 26–27)

Vlastos summons this passage to assert an essential difference between Socrates and the son of Thetis: While each subordinated everything to a particular value (honor for Achilles, virtue [*aretē*] for Socrates), Socrates, unlike Achilles, does not die grief stricken. As Vlastos puts it: “Achilles gambles happiness for honor, prepared to lose. And lose he does ... But not Socrates.”³¹

Echoing Xenophon’s account of Socrates, then, Vlastos finds Socrates’ self-confidence about the examined life as evidence for Socrates’ happy fortune. Socrates, in Vlastos’s words, “tells the court how happy he has been plying daily his thankless elenctic task, expecting them to think what he tells them too good to be believed”.³²

If I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss excellence [*aretē*] every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is unworthy of living for human beings, you will believe me even less. (38a, 33)

Socrates’ apparent felicity at drinking the hemlock combined with this assurance about the importance of philosophy as the only path of a worthwhile life convince Vlastos of Socrates’ good fortune. “Socrates is a winner. He has to be. Desiring the kind of happiness he does, he can’t lose.”³³

But what has Socrates won? For Vlastos, beneath Socrates’ strange appearance lies some deeper contentment about the pleasures of his chosen life, but this overlooks the measurable pains around him. Beneath his serene appearance, Socrates may or may not be bedeviled by anxiety; we cannot ultimately know. Jonathan Lear has argued that Socrates’ contemplative moments bespeak an “ironic experience” – different from the irony at issue in interpreting the dialogues – of uncanniness internalized. Born an Athenian, Socrates could not but feel the internal expectations of its extant practices; outer dissonance usually entails inner dissonance as well. “Coming to experience what has been familiar as utterly unfamiliar is a sign that one no longer knows one’s way about,” Lear explains. “The experience of uncanniness is enhanced dramatically when what is returning to me as unfamiliar is what, until

³¹ Vlastos 1991, 234. ³² *Ibid.* ³³ *Ibid.*, 235.

now, I have taken to be my practical identity.”³⁴ Vlastos suggests that if Socrates' talk “is for real, not just talk,” then we would not wonder that “the loss of everything else for virtue's sake leaves you light-hearted, cheerful.”³⁵ Yet Lear suggests the opposite: Real talk about the very foundations of one's existence – the basis of one's practical identity – can provoke anxiety and dislocation.³⁶ Philosophy may be the greatest good for all human beings without escaping the conflict that we have traced thus far between Socrates' philosophy and the Athenian democracy. It seems difficult to imagine that such a conflict would promote happiness of the kind Vlastos envisions.

Vlastos, like Xenophon, may want to reassure us about the desirability of the life of Socrates, but he overlooks phenomenal evidence to the contrary. As we have seen, at the level of appearances, it would be much more accurate to describe Socrates not as *felix* but rather *infelix*: not merely unhappy or unfortunate but also causing misfortune, ruinous, and ill-omened.³⁷ *Atopia* captures the infelicities of philosophy: the taking up and transformation of extant practices provokes painful dissonance; we are left with an apparently unfruitful search. Most of Socrates' interlocutors respond to him with disbelief or incomprehension. The understanding apparently reached between Socrates and Theaetetus, for example, is immediately followed by Socrates' reporting to the scene of his trial and eventual conviction. Even those apparently committed to practicing philosophy, such as Apollodorus, remain undeveloped and inconclusive. Socrates does not enjoy the conventional pleasures of Athenian life; rather, he feasts on arguments that provoke his trial and execution.

Vlastos's sure-handedness about the state of Socrates behind his appearance of *atopia* also fails to speak to the peculiarity of today's interpretive position vis-a-vis Socrates. We face a myriad of “Socrateses”; we cannot but be aware, in a way Vlastos seems to deny, that every “Socrates” is but one “Socrates,” that is, that we are in no place to assert a definitive Socrates, let alone a definitive teaching from that Socrates. Moreover, such a state of things seems to follow precisely from the *atopia* of Socrates that Vlastos effaces. As Sarah Kofman has suggested, every “Socrates” has sought in some way to settle the case of Socrates, to

³⁴ Lear 2011, 15. ³⁵ Vlastos 1991, 235.

³⁶ See, e.g., Plato's *Phaedrus* 230a. I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for this reference.

³⁷ Traupman 1995, 216.

pin down what Socrates means in order to escape the dissonance of his questions.³⁸ Vlastos's self-evidently happy Socrates cannot explain the proliferation of different "Socrateses" that followed; atopia, however, does.

James Baldwin offers one such "Socrates," albeit a "Socrates in a different key."³⁹ While Baldwin was not executed at the hands of his fellow citizens, his flight and self-imposed exile suggest a sense of persecution and struggle provoked by the strangeness of his radical questioning.⁴⁰ While the execution of Socrates has often led interpreters to find a fundamental antagonism between "philosophy" and "politics," we have seen how Socrates' philosophy actually emerged from practices of the Athenian democracy that it transformed in potentially democratizing yet also deeply unsettling ways. Still, the imbrication of Socrates' philosophy and the extant practices of Athenian democracy seems to have produced the conditions of mistrust and resentment that led to Socrates' death: The innovations to democratic practice that Socrates' philosophy enacted required painful self-scrutiny by citizens individually as well as the polis as a whole; *Socrates infelix* reminds us of the unfortunate consequences born of his philosophy. Xenophon and Vlastos point to the enduring desire to make something of Socrates, to find in him a path toward happiness and a solace for the disaffected, yet these intuitions must also come to terms with the legacies of atopia. We can find comfort in Socrates' words to the jury about the essential goodness of the examined life yet we also must acknowledge these words' dissonance with the examined life of Socrates as we have reconstructed it.

Baldwin's example and the case of Socrates thus raise the question of what degree of dissonance a political regime – in the United States of the twenty and twenty-first centuries or in Athens twenty-five hundred years earlier – can sustain. Does Xenophon's flattening of Socrates' critique (in Xenophon's *Apology*) reflect a necessary step to make philosophy amenable to politics? Or does Socrates' long life practicing philosophy

³⁸ Kofman 1998, 245: "If the problem of Socrates has caused so much ink to flow, in the final analysis, is it not because behind the 'case' of this atypical and atypical monster, each interpreter is trying as best he can to 'settle' his own 'case,' to carry out his reading in such a way that all his own certitudes will not collapse with Socrates, that his own equilibrium and that of his 'system' – even if there is nothing systematic about it – will not be too seriously threatened?"

³⁹ Schlosser 2013.

⁴⁰ See Baldwin's masterful essay "Stranger in the Village," published in 1953, in Baldwin 1998, 117–29.

testify to a possible détente, one that only disintegrated in the face of repeated oligarchic insurrections against the democracy (and then only actually destroyed by the close vote of 281 to 220)? The argument thus far has implicitly favored an affirmative for the second question rather than the first: that the agonism evident between Socrates' philosophy and the Athenian democracy does not deny but rather gives evidence of their coexistence and interdependence; and that, moreover, this coexistence held certain promise for improving the extant democratic regime even while radically challenging it. Baldwin suggests one way of translating Socrates' philosophy to American democracy of the last century. Just as this book began with the image of the Socrates Cafés, it now turns to another twenty-first century practice that could help us continue to elaborate how Socrates might speak to today's democratic times.

Conclusion: What would Socrates do?

By creating and sustaining the Clemente Courses in the Humanities[®], experimental schools teaching logic, poetry, philosophy, and art to poor people, Earl Shorris has modeled another way of considering the question of *What would Socrates do?*¹ From his experiences working with poor people across the United States and in Mexico, Shorris came to see that their challenges stemmed not from lack of training or motivation to work, but rather that they arose from a denial of the political education necessary for citizenship and the practice of politics. The humanities, Shorris surmised, offered the kind of education that could promote reflective thinking and thus help people escape from the conditions of impoverished political life that surrounded them. For Shorris, Socrates exemplified this kind of thinking and its promise for democracy.

Socrates' philosophy with its "midwifery of the mind," Shorris explains, begins the political life of a student by offering an example of self-reflection. This in turn allows a student to escape the constraints of force she or he endures by necessity as a member of the poor and excluded. Sparked by the questions of Socrates, reflective thinking begins the dialogue within oneself, preparing those involved for engaged political life and the dialogue of politics. This process spawns public, dialogical spaces and inculcates citizens with the autonomy and reflective capacities necessary for democratic citizenship.² Thus for Shorris and the other

¹ Shorris has three overlapping accounts of the Clemente Courses: Shorris 1997a, Shorris 2000a, and Shorris 2013. The first two books actually began as one book, *New American Blues* (Shorris 1997a), which was revised and changed for its paperback edition into *Riches for the Poor* (Shorris 2000b). Shorris 2013 significantly expands on the accounts in the earlier books and surveys the creation of Clemente Courses around the world.

² As Shorris explains: "The political life and the life of the mind followed a similar course and used a similar method: politics is always dialogue; it cannot ever be done alone. Like

teachers and students in the Clemente Course, engaging Socrates holds the promise of active and inclusive democracy.

The classes and community that the Clemente Courses offer, Shorris argues, begin a process of transformation in each of their students from disempowered, apolitical, impoverished inhabitant to powerful, community-oriented, rich-with-reflection citizen. Socrates stands at the beginning of this process. As Shorris describes his first class meeting:

It was the beginning of a love affair, the first moment of their infatuation with Socrates. If it is true that he was the first one to bring philosophy down to earth, it is also true that he was the first one to raise these students up to seriousness. Once he told them that the answer, the truth, was inside them and had only to be brought forth through dialogue, they were never again to see themselves in the same way. The humanities became a mirror in which they saw their human worth, and, like all lovers, they were transformed by love.³

Socrates “raises these students up” not so much as an agent of change but through his empowering image, one that gives their thoughts, “brought forth through dialogue,” the value and attention they deserve. As Abel Lomas, homeless and a budding Kantian, told Shorris later, “it was the first time anyone had ever paid attention to their opinions.” Shorris adds this: “Keeping to metaphor Socrates preferred, they were born.”⁴

For Shorris, the birth of reflective capacities in these students allows them to become fully political. As Shorris explains: “The problem in America is that the vast majority are not political and have no means of entrance into the public life, the *vita activa* of a political person. Legitimate power, which validates the person as fully human, is not available to the poor.”⁵ A conversation with Viniece Walker, a prisoner at the Bedford Hills maximum security prison in New York state, originally led Shorris to the ideas behind the program as a way to address the denial of political life. As Shorris narrates:

dialogue, politics does not happen within a person, but in the free space between persons, the political space. There cannot ever be a private life of politics, since politics takes place between persons, in a public way, not public in the sense of broadcast or crowds but as the opposite of private”: Shorris 2000a, 29.

³ Shorris 2000a, 138. ⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Shorris 2000b, 48. Shorris expanded on this point in his cover story for *Harper's Magazine*. Shorris 1997b. This article offers a useful overview of the inspiration, purpose, and successes of the Clemente Program as it has grown across the United States and in Mexico. Shorris 2013 elaborates his account to include programs around the world.

- Viniece: You've got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children.
 And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown
 to plays, museums, concerts, lectures, where they can learn
 the moral life of downtown.
- Earl: (I smiled at her, misunderstanding, thinking I was indulging her.)
 And then they won't be poor anymore.
 (She read every nuance of my response, and answered angrily):
- Viniece: And they won't be poor *no more*.
- Earl: What you mean is . . . "
- Viniece: What I mean is what I said, a moral alternative to the street.⁶

This "moral alternative" comes in the process initiated by the content of Shorris's Clemente Courses: great books that stimulate reflective thinking and develop political judgment. Yet for Shorris, the particular content of the courses seems less important than the method of education that occurs in the Clemente Course classroom and extends beyond it. Shorris emphasizes that paid professors teach courses, that they require of their students the same if not more than they require in their own institutions, and that they teach "Socratically," demanding the opinions and judgments of students while withholding their own. Shorris includes details about each curriculum used, but the curricula also vary depending on the context: In Mexico or in American Indian reservations, for example, courses use indigenous texts; Socrates, however, remains present in all courses – either in Plato's dialogues or as a pedagogical inspiration. The Clemente Courses, so named because they began in the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in the Bronx, NY, now take place across the world in all sorts of venues, including prisons as well as more typical academic settings. There are Clemente Courses in inner city Chicago as well as the rural Olympic Peninsula in Washington State; in the Darfur region of Sudan as well as Chiapas, Mexico; in suburban Australia and urban South Korea.⁷

Like Phillips's Socrates Cafés, Shorris's Clemente Courses seek to translate Socrates' philosophy to the particular challenges faced by liberal democracies today: the persistence of inequalities and disproportions

⁶ Shorris 2000a, 97.

⁷ This names only a few of the sites covered by Shorris 2013, which is essential reading for understanding the uniqueness of each Clemente Course as it developed through the leadership and participation of local communities. While Shorris founded the Clemente Courses, he claims (and is granted) little responsibility over the courses themselves as they have arisen and sustained themselves around the world.

of power that threaten equality of influence; the lack of accountability among elected (and nonelected officials); and deficits of attention and energy among citizens and noncitizens. For both Phillips and Shorris, the example of Socrates inspires innovative new institutions, a degree of fearlessness, empowering intellectual egalitarianism, and dialogic inquiry in the service of democratic knowledge construction. Yet as founders articulating the ideals of their organizations, both Phillips and Shorris capture only one part of what these organizations have become. Turning to accounts of the Cafés and Clemente Courses by others illuminates how participants – practitioners of Socrates’ philosophy, we might say – have made these organizations their own, translating Socrates into the twenty-first century.

SELF-EXAMINATION AND SOCRATIC ASSOCIATIONS

Both the Socrates Cafés and the Clemente Courses translate Socrates’ collective self-examination into new institutions of collective inquiry: Groups of people meet in public and semi-public spaces to develop their reflective capacities in dialogue with others. Similar to what we have seen with Socrates, philosophical activity takes place in such a community of fellow inquirers. Just as we most often witness Socrates in the midst of conversation with others, so too the Socrates Cafés and the Clemente Courses open spaces further and make self-examination a collective undertaking.

Reporting on the Socrates Cafés, for example, emphasizes the wide-ranging discussions and diverse participants. “When is violence necessary?” “What is a well-lived life?” While Phillips describes the Cafés as examples of grass-roots democracy, a *Time* profile of the Cafés observes that “the mood, tone and topic of discussion for each café vary greatly, depending on participants.”⁸ At a New York City Socrates Café held inside the glass atrium at Sony Plaza in midtown Manhattan, participants try to objectively infer an ethical principle; at Deborah’s Place, a Chicago homeless shelter for women, the discussion probes the role of courage in love; at El Diablo, a coffee shop in Seattle’s Queen Anne neighborhood, the participants ask whether or not nation-states with greater power have a greater responsibility to act ethically. Participants bring their questions and then come to see the depth and breadth of possible responses to

⁸ Hamilton 2004.

these questions, showing the benefits of making self-examination collective. Records of these conversations in Phillips's books and elsewhere illustrate how the particular experiences and perspectives of participants inform a developing discussion; people come to see the insights of others and that the standards for evaluation – whether or not a given idea or conclusion is taken as right or rational – emerges from the discussion itself.⁹ A philosopher who helps to facilitate Cafés in Canada notes that “the effect of this kind of discussion extends beyond the purely personal and requires that the participants engage *with each other* in true dialogue.”¹⁰

The reconstructed Socrates helps us to identify an underlying logic of the Cafés in terms of the intellectual egalitarianism of philosophic dialogue. Intellectual egalitarianism describes the resolute openness characteristic of Socrates' philosophy. Given that we cannot have tried every argument nor heard every possible challenge, we require others (and the viewpoints and experiences of others) if any advance closer to truth can be possible. We see intellectual egalitarianism in action when Socrates engages foreigners like Meno or *hetairai* like Theodote – not to mention Meno's slave. Moreover, taking up and transforming the Athenian democracy's practices of accountability and *parrhēsia*, philosophy incorporates these practices while pushing them beyond the pale of citizenship, showing that the contingent boundaries of the polis cannot limit philosophical investigation. By designating a space for reflection to take place with others, the Cafés take up and transform conventional social spaces for philosophy, by moving these spaces to more open settings, the Cafés also build on the intellectual egalitarianism of Socrates' philosophy.

The reconstructed Socrates also highlights some potential for mis-translation of Socrates; Socrates' atopia entails a potential for disturbance and destabilization that lies just below the surface in Cafés yet also needs articulating. As we have seen, there are real risks to Socrates' philosophy – not just to himself but to the democratic polis. On Aristophanes' account, Socrates leads ordinary citizens astray by removing all possible sources of authority. In Plato's *Gorgias*, we witness how Socrates' renovation of *parrhēsia* destabilizes the fragile balance between mass and elite. Socrates' philosophy threatens to fragment and undermine

⁹ This becomes clear in Phillips's own recordings of the conversations as well as video footage of other Cafés available on YouTube.

¹⁰ Sisson 2003.

democratic traditions that were still fragile and tenuous in his day. Despite Socrates' apparent modeling of good citizenship (as recounted by Plato in dialogues such as *Gorgias* and *Crito* and by Xenophon across his works), the radical edge of his philosophy did not sit easily with many of his fellow citizens. Moreover, this radical edge was an essential feature: Given its commitment to continuous, unremitting inquiry Socrates could not stop at the basic presuppositions of the Athenian polis. As the starting point for all philosophical conversation, the status quo had to come into question; otherwise one would make philosophy a meaningless pursuit.

The reconstructed Socrates helps us to discern the radical potential within the Socrates Cafés. While Phillips's talk of realizing democracy through the "full," "free," and "egalitarian" communication of the Cafés may strike some as fanciful,¹¹ it highlights the twenty-first century version of the transformed *sunousia* that the Cafés seek to bring into being. These discussions may take place in Starbucks® or other corporate chains but they form part of "an enterprise that, despite its name, has little to do with bohemian poseurs knocking back ice-blended mochas."¹² The reconstructed Socrates reminds us of the radical challenge underlying self-examination that has become collective: by asking and investigating questions with others we may well see the illogic of our current arrangements; by taking up and transforming extant practices of political life we effectively change the status quo. In Bourdieu's language, the Socrates Cafés improvise on the consumption model of most commodified forms of self-examination by creating spaces for this to become a political practice.

Granted, neither the Clemente Courses nor the Cafés promises total social transformation. Criticisms of both have focused on the limits of these small organizations to challenge broader structures of inequality that prevent deeper transformations from taking place.¹³ Here the reconstructed Socrates can usefully provide ways to meet these objections. Collective examination must not stop at the limits of ideology. Indeed, we have seen Socrates again and again questioning the democratic ideology of his time – this is what makes Anytus and Alcibiades and Callicles and others so angry. Socrates' philosophy does not always align so snugly with the democracy around it. Not only does it jeopardize the stability and security of democratic ideology (and thus the democratic

¹¹ Phillips 2001, 48–9. ¹² Johnson 2002.

¹³ On the Clemente Courses, see Mattson 2002 and Marsh 2009. On the Socrates Cafés see Schlosser 2008.

regime), but philosophy sinks deep into the psychological foundations of democratic life entirely. “Socrates in drag” captures the radical critique of the erotic practices of democratic Athens embodied by Socrates’ philosophy: Practicing philosophy entails a transformation of needs whereby the honors and accolades foremost in polis life become secondary; philosophy thus challenges the order of desires that made the Athenian democracy work.

While founders Phillips and Shorris may not articulate the depths of these changes, studies of the Clemente Courses testify to the transformative effects of putting the individual search for meaning into a collective context of Socrates-inspired philosophizing. A report covering nearly ten years of Clemente Courses in Australia notes that participants develop not just study skills but confidence and feelings of competence.¹⁴ As social isolation and exclusion decrease, self-confidence and self-efficacy increase. Students see that they have choices and experience genuine personal agency in the context of the community of learners created in the Clemente Courses. Students come to see themselves as architects of the change process while identifying collectively as such: “We’re part of the help and part of our own solution,” one student tells the researchers.¹⁵

While the Cafés take place in diverse places and their objectives depend entirely on the participants, the Clemente Courses highlight the continued challenges to collective self-examination in today’s context. While these courses seek to create a bridge for participants toward education throughout their lives, these bridges must withstand the destructive forces of poverty, political powerlessness, structures of categorical oppression and exclusion, and disparities of health. The demographics of Australia’s Clemente program give a sense of the challenges faced by many participants in Clemente courses around the world: homelessness, chronic health problems, social isolation, and persistent financial difficulties. Collective self-examination is not easy in today’s unkind world.

Yet the example of the Clemente Courses helps us to identify the distinctiveness of today’s challenges to a philosophy after Socrates. The myths that accompany today’s political orders differ from those of ancient Athens. As subjects of desire, in Butler’s words, human beings in

¹⁴ Arc Linkage Grant Final Report 2012, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61. A report studying five years of Clemente Courses in Massachusetts reports similar findings: Rossi 2011.

the twenty-first century now see their very desires as problematic – as problems needing to be dealt with – in ways that ancient Athenians did not. Moreover, not only must participants in Socrates-inspired philosophy interrogate the *topoi* of their time, but they must also rehabilitate the more basic self-confidence and sense of efficacy that make philosophy possible. Participants must begin to feel their opinions matter in the way (or to the degree) we can imagine the Athenians' mattered. The Clemente Courses suggest how we must situate all translations of Socrates' philosophy in more complex understandings of the relationships of power in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: The unexamined beliefs needing questioning differ from those of Socrates' day but so too do the questioners themselves. Our examination of Socrates thus far has revealed to what degree his practice took up and transformed extant practices of the Athenian democracy; to translate Socrates more substantively and usefully to the present, we must similarly begin from a rich and contextual notion of ideology, tradition, and the structures of power today.¹⁶

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AFTER SOCRATES

Both the Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés decenter civic engagement by creating new institutions for self-examination inspired by Socrates. These organizations decenter engagement by creating sites of collective self-examination with political implications outside the formal political institutions most often associated with government: the legislature or the courthouse, the voting booth or the school board meeting. Instead, both the Clemente Courses and the Cafés offer collective practices open to all people – and in the case of the Clemente Courses, as we have seen, these practices actively recruit from marginalized groups of ordinary citizens and noncitizens alike – that mobilize cooperation around basic questions that might engage us all.¹⁷

By situating philosophy outside conventional institutions, the Clemente Courses and the Cafés follow an essential element of Socrates' own philosophy as we have reconstructed it. Socrates did not frequent the

¹⁶ Schlosser 2013 gives one potential direction, that of confronting and working through the legacy of racial oppression in the United States while doing so through relationships of trust and reciprocity.

¹⁷ Cf. Berger 2011 on the distinction between political and moral forms of civic engagement.

conventional halls of governance but rather created new sites of potential power with others outside formal spaces. Given the account of the reconstructed Socrates advanced thus far, Socrates' "method" can only dubiously proceed within the conventionally exclusive confines of the university; it requires, for its success, a diverse and willing community of interlocutors – and takes all comers – in ways today's institutions would limit. The Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés better capture this Socrates by further opening philosophy and seeking to enlist as many willing participants as possible, including those formally excluded from political life such as the incarcerated and the young. The Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés do not simply transpose Socrates' philosophy to civic life of the United States in the twenty-first century; they also push the boundaries of that civic life beyond the citizen–noncitizen distinction.

Seen from the perspective of civic engagement, the Clemente Courses and the Cafés thus also move beyond a potential limitation within the reconstructed Socrates, showing the necessity of a modified translation if Socrates is to speak to political life today. The judgment of the polis against Socrates as well as the well-known examples of élites influenced by his inquiries imply philosophy's axiom of equality only went so far. I. F. Stone's controversial *The Trial of Socrates* picked up this suggestion when he blamed Socrates' execution on his association with many of the same oligarchs who had twice overthrown the democracy.¹⁸ In Plato's and Aristophanes' accounts, Socrates does not obviously seek out a diverse group of interlocutors, and instead makes himself available for a few hours' conversation with whoever happens to show an interest – or invites him to a party (as in Plato's *Symposium*). Xenophon's presentation, with its emphasis on how Socrates improved those with whom he spoke, does present a more activist Socrates, but frequently the most significant conversations take place with élites such as Alcibiades and others.

By extending the intellectual egalitarianism of Socrates' philosophy to explicitly marginalized groups, however, the Clemente Courses and the Cafés translate Socrates in such a way that holds potential for civic engagement today. The promise of broad-based and open philosophy comes to fruition by empowering people to reflect on their lives; reflection carried out with others, moreover, deepens and expands collective

¹⁸ Stone 1988. Note criticism by Burnyeat 1988 and then discussion by Schofield 2002. Waterfield 2009 provides a recent argument that parallels Stone 1988.

experience: we can learn from one another how each of us sees the world; we can find common vocabularies that explain phenomena not just to ourselves but make them intelligible to all of us. Philosophy becomes not only a collaborative and cooperative enterprise that anyone can undertake but also a practice with beneficial effects when considered from the perspective of calls for civic engagement today.

In other words, by going beyond these limitations of the reconstructed Socrates offered here, the examples of the Clemente Courses and the Cafés further testify to how philosophy after Socrates might enlist people in common projects. These common projects, moreover, while not explicitly political, nonetheless concentrate on matters of public concern: not just how am I to live my life but how are we to live ours; not just what would be the right thing for you to do but what justice would consist of for all of us. Socrates' philosophy thus provides an alternative to "bowling alone" and the much-lamented decline in civic engagement in contemporary democracies. As Phillips puts it, one cannot "Socratize" in solitude.

Studies of the Clemente Courses provide more evidence of how Socrates-inspired philosophy can affect civic engagement. After completing the Clemente Course in Massachusetts, "I'm living a more political life," said one graduate.¹⁹ Being more political stems from the awakening provoked by engaging Socrates. Students comment that Clemente taught them "that is was good to question things," and this led to "a newfound ability to speak up and speak out about issues of importance or of concern to them in their families and communities."²⁰ Empowering people to reflect on their lives together not only leads to new ideas about collective self-organization; these ideas are also already actualized, in some form, by the ongoing practice of meeting and discussing that then translates to the world outside the Clemente Courses. In other words, the Clemente Courses function less like think tanks developing policies and platforms for others to adopt and enact and more like Tocquevillian schools of citizenship, sites for the arts of freedom to develop. Rather than concerning lessons in civics (or civic virtues), then, civic engagement takes place when one acts like a citizen: reflecting, discussing, judging, and participating with others in determining the fate of the collective. In Massachusetts, a majority of graduates attested to becoming "more actively engaged" in their communities "as a result of Clemente," especially "in their children's schools, in political campaigns, or in their workplaces."²¹

¹⁹ Rossi 2011, 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*

In two ways, then, the Clemente Courses and the Cafés suggest a line of response to criticisms of Socrates from thinkers such as Bruno Latour concerned with the antipolitical implications of Socrates' philosophy. First, these translations of Socrates avoid making Socrates a disciplinary source of reason, instead requiring of every participant his or her perspective and judgment. *What would Socrates do?* remains a question for each member of a Socrates Cafés or student in a Clemente Course to ponder and live with, to carry with them as a way of initiating the dialogue with themselves or a conversation with others. Second, whereas Latour worries that Socrates' philosophy effectively functions as just another mode of power and control, one not so different from Callicles' rhetoric, the Clemente Courses and the Cafés model how the radical, fearless, and intersubjective practices of collective examination can exist outside the long shadow of Socrates while still being inspired by his original practice. Both the Clemente Courses and the Cafés offer practices *after Socrates* in this sense: inspired by, but departing from, his example.

THE DISSONANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

"Being the gadfly is not the most popular profession," Christopher Phillips told a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*.²² By drawing out their implications and challenging their presuppositions, the reconstructed Socrates shows how the Socrates Cafés and Clemente Courses can help us to imagine new forms and modes of participation to revivify today's political life, yet assimilating these contemporary examples with what Socrates did risks missing an important difference. Phillips's comment reminds us of the enduring dissonance of Socrates' philosophy, its essential atopia. Translating Socrates' philosophy into the present can speak to ongoing concerns but it must also challenge the presuppositions of these concerns, it must make the *topoi* of today strange. In other words, the liberation promised by philosophy is not solely political, let alone democratic; Socrates' philosophy engages participants in an ambit of questions that point beyond any given political horizon even while they by necessity begin from one. Although these displacements might hold political promise, they do not, however, come without trauma. As we have seen in our reconstruction of Socrates, the commitment to relentless interrogation

²² Johnson 2002.

provokes continual dissonance. With its emphasis on Socrates' displacement of or distance from the *topoi* of conventional political life, atopia captures something essential about philosophy: its dissonance with the collective life around it, its basic nonconformity. This anticonventional appearance does not stem from a rebellious intent so much as an unflagging commitment to question the assumptions upon which the Athenian democracy rests.

Moreover, our reconstruction of Socrates gives reason to resist any easy appropriation of Socrates for the projects of the present. Not only does Socrates' philosophy provoke anger and protest (and worse) from many of his fellow citizens, but this practice resists the identification between philosophy and democracy that the Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés (or at least the writings of their founders) imply. To call Socrates' philosophy democratic says both too much and too little: too much because it suggests that philosophy intended democratic outcomes when we have both very little basis to assess the intent of Socrates and no evidence from our limited sources that democratic outcomes were achieved; too little because such an identification papers over a highly complicated, ambivalent relationship. Socrates *was* a democrat in the sense that he would not have qualified as being a "bad citizen" in democratic Athens;²³ on the other hand, Socrates' philosophy challenged the extant democracy from multiple directions. Asking questions and participating in collective self-examination does not lead to a determinate outcome; indeed, philosophy only displaces without fully replacing the extant practices, as we have seen. Participants in the Clemente Courses may subsequently "get involved like Socrates,"²⁴ but this can occur in any variety of forms.

Socrates' philosophy also transpired in a context of radical (and yet also radically limited) democracy distant from today's combination of mass enfranchisement and diminished participation. This markedly different context must affect any translation of Socrates' philosophy. While people in democratic Athens mattered to the function of democracy in ways they do not today, the exclusion of a large percentage of the population of Athens also meant certain people mattered more than others. Today, when fewer obstacles to formal political participation

²³ Socrates did not refuse or shirk his duties and indeed both Plato and Xenophon suggest he was an exemplary citizen in certain ways. On what the Athenians regarded as "bad citizenship," see Christ 2006.

²⁴ Rossi 2011, 34.

exist than in ancient Athens, a new set of problems and challenges has arisen. The Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés offer potential paths for translating Socrates to begin to address the new challenges presented by our situation; these remain experiments, essays of ideas through action in the spirit of Socrates. Yet the new scale and complexity of today's challenges seems to overshadow any promise of a revitalized democratic life.

Nonetheless, even if the uses Shorris and Phillips put to Socrates overlook the gap between Socrates' situation and our own, the actual practices of the Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés suggest the potentially productive transformations of Socrates' philosophy and the politics that might come from its practice. The intentions of the founders should not overshadow the messy realities of bringing Socrates-inspired philosophy into being; the Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés testify to the diversity of practices that can come from engaging Socrates. While dissonant politics presented a problem in the Athens of Socrates' day, such dissonance may well hold the promise of stirring up ours. By challenging the conventional practices of political life, Socrates' philosophy translated to today could open up new spaces and times for collective life to develop. Provoking interrogation could serve to challenge exclusions along the axes of race, class, gender, sex, and ethnicity (among other categorical exclusions); constructing a diverse associational life to sustain these interrogations and counter the dominant modes of knowledge production and subjectivation could improve the lives of us all. Socrates' philosophy envisions emancipation through collective activity; while coming with enduring dissonance, this emancipation could prove genuinely liberating and thus enabling for living the examined life.

In other words, keeping the spirit and vitality of Socrates alive in the form of dissonance may present the best possible path toward challenging and changing the present situation. We must avoid resolving the questions of Socrates, smoothing their edges to fit them into the conventional confines of political life today. The force of asking *What would Socrates do?* ultimately stems from its enduring question mark, the inability to answer definitively with anything but the continued activity of questioning: questioning not merely in an intellectual sense but in an embodied sense; taking up and transforming the extant practices of collective life to refocus them around associations of examination and interrogation. The Clemente Courses and the Socrates Cafés intimate how this question might inform an engagement with practices today,

yet they should not constrain future improvisations. Limiting ourselves to a particular example or instantiation of Socrates' philosophy, settling on an answer to the question of what Socrates would do, would mean ending the inquiry that Socrates initiates. We would then, in effect, be living the unexamined life. The hope of this book, however, is that it can encourage and sustain the contrary. To borrow from James Baldwin: everything must be re-examined. Let us begin.

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