

DEMOCRACY AND JUDGMENT IN ANCIENT GREEK POLITICAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Joshua Preston Miller: Democracy and Judgment in Ancient Greek Political Thought
(Under the Direction of Susan Bickford)

This dissertation examines practical and ethical dimensions of democratic political judgment in the works of Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle. Despite their philosophical and methodological differences, each of these thinkers raised similar doubts about the wisdom of fifth- and fourth-century Athenian decision-making. Arguing that Athenian policy debates tended to privilege short-term gains over longer-term interests, they suggested that moral reflection might guide political judgments toward more ethically sustainable ends. By showing how Greek political philosophy developed in response to real-world political problems, I demonstrate a dialectical relationship between theory and practice that is often overlooked in the scholarship surrounding these figures. This project also contributes to ongoing debates that depict political judgment as a practice open to radically democratic debate, on one hand, or reserved for the rarified talents of experts, on the other. In my view, sound political judgment emerges from careful considerations that all citizens are capable of, provided they commit themselves to engaging in continuous reflection.

For Mom, Dad, and Katie

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	9
References.....	23
CHAPTER 1: HATING FRIENDS AND LOVING ENEMIES.....	25
1.1 The Periclean Paradigm.....	40
1.2 Justice versus Interests: The Mytilenean Debate	56
1.3 Tyrannical Calculus: The Sicilian Expedition.....	68
1.4 Brasidas' Better Judgment.....	80
1.5 Conclusion.....	92
References.....	94
CHAPTER 2: THE MIDWIFE ON TRIAL.....	102
2.1 Plato's Critique of Athenian Judgment in the <i>Apology</i>	110
2.2 Epistemology and Judgment in the <i>Theaetetus</i>	126
2.3 Hedonism and the Measure of Judgment in the Protagoras.....	151
2.4 Conclusion.....	169
References.....	172
CHAPTER 3. JUSTICE, EXPERIENCE, AND JUDGMENT IN PLATO'S <i>REPUBLIC</i>	181
3.1 Political and Philosophical Context.....	185
3.2 Alternative Justice, Alternative Judgment.....	214
3.3 Platonic Political Judgment.....	245
3.4 Conclusion.....	255

References.....	257
CHAPTER 4. THE WISDOM OF A CERTAIN MULTITUDE.....	263
4.1 Democracy and the Demagogic Challenge.....	272
4.2 Practical Wisdom in <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> VI.....	285
4.3 The Wisdom of a Certain Multitude.....	294
4.4 Conclusion.....	302
References.....	304
CONCLUSION.....	310
References.....	314

INTRODUCTION

On October 8, 2016, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump met for a town hall-style debate at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Days earlier, an audio recording from 2005 was released in which Trump bragged about sexually assaulting women. Eager to deflect attention from his comments, Trump attacked his opponent's foreign policy judgment. "Yes, I'm very embarrassed by it," he replied when asked about the tape, "But it's locker room talk, and it's one of those things. [But] I will knock the hell out of ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]. We're going to defeat ISIS. ISIS happened a number of years ago in a vacuum that was left because of bad judgment." He later expanded on this charge, "[Clinton] has made bad judgments not only on taxes, she's made bad judgments on Libya, on Syria, on Iraq." Trump was not the first to criticize the former Secretary of State on these terms. In April, Senator Bernie Sanders questioned Clinton's judgment during a bruising primary campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. "In many respects, she may have the experience to be president of the United States," he conceded during an interview on NBC's *Meet the Press*. "But," he continued, "in terms of her judgment, something is clearly lacking."

Questioning a political rival's judgment strikes to the heart of a quality that most people think their leaders should have. In a series of public opinion polls taken between 1995 and 2003, the Pew Research Center found that voters ranked *sound judgment* as the most important quality a presidential hopeful should possess, followed closely by *high ethical standards*.¹ Attacking an

¹ Pew Research Center (2003: 12).

opponent's judgment has the added benefit of vagueness. What do voters mean when they praise a leader's sound judgment? Is *sound judgment* equivalent to effective decision-making? If so, effective to what end? Moreover, what relevant features distinguish good judgment from bad? In many respects, these questions are difficult to answer because judgment is so pervasive. As Albert Camus succinctly put it in *The Rebel*, "To breathe is to judge."² A life devoid of choices was, for him, unimaginable. Ronald Beiner makes a similar observation in his groundbreaking work, *Political Judgment*. "We are constantly forming judgments," he writes, "Every perception, every observation, every situation of ourselves in the world, the very awareness of our own subjectivity, involves judgment. The exercise of this faculty encompasses every aspect of our experience."³ "In judging," he writes later, "we as judging subjects attempt to determine, as best we may, who we are, what we want, and how we realize our ends."⁴ Understood this way, explaining judgment is akin to explaining water to a fish. It becomes, in Leslie Paul Thiele's words, an "integrative and admittedly mysterious skill."⁵

Judgment resists easy theorization in part because it appears to include varying parts rational calculation, practical experience, and ethical reflection. As Isaiah Berlin put it, judging well requires "weaving together" these disparate and often conflicting components such that considered action becomes possible.⁶ It is also a concept with many names. Scholars often refer to the same quality as "judgment," "prudence," "political judgment," "practical judgment,"

² Camus (1956: 8).

³ Beiner (1983: 6).

⁴ Beiner (1983: 145).

⁵ Thiele (2006: 5).

⁶ Berlin (1997: 31).

“practical wisdom,” “decision-making,” and “choosing,” often, as here, interchangeably. For many contemporary democratic theorists, Aristotle’s notion of *phronēsis* captures the quality best. This may be understood as an action- and goal-oriented activity of the mind that, while guided by character virtues and rational considerations, “takes place in the absence of formal rules and methods.”⁷ *Phronēsis* as “practical wisdom” also nicely captures the relationship between moral judgments about right and wrong, political judgments about justice and expedience, and practical judgments about feasibility that are often bundled together into the same activity.

More ambitious writers than I have attempted to fully account for judgment in a single work. As I explain in greater detail below, some historians of political thought like Beiner and Peter Steinberger trace the concept’s development from Aristotle through Hannah Arendt. Others have recognized how questions of judgment traverse disciplinary lines. For example, Thiele’s excellent study, *The Heart of Judgment*, combines insights from the history of political thought with contemporary findings in neuroscience to better understand how narrative shapes cognition and decision-making.⁸ My aims are slightly more modest in this dissertation. I examine the ethical and practical dimensions of judgment in three ancient Greek thinkers – Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle – each of whom developed different but, I argue, complementary accounts of judgment. I frame these thinkers’ political works as partial response to deficiencies that each identified in fifth and fourth century Athenian political judgment. All three figures, despite their differences, thought that ethical considerations would improve Athenian decision-making.

⁷ Markovits (2008: 9).

⁸ Theile (2006).

Though different theories of justice, leadership, and politics divide them, all three share an interest in seeing ethical theory applied to practical life through judgment.

Like us, the Greeks had a rich vocabulary to describe judgment. In addition to Aristotle's *phronēsis* – which Plato sometimes uses differently – they also used *gnomē*, which could mean “thought” or “foresight,” *euboulia*, which could mean “deliberating well” but is often translated as “good judgment,” *doxa*, which translates as “belief” or “common opinion” but also correlates to “judgment” as opposed to *epistēmē*, or “knowledge.” As we shall see in chapter 4, Aristotle also reserved the word *politikē* to describe “legislative science” as a subset of *phronēsis*. Each of these terms refers to an act of thinking or deciding in the absence of certainty. The thinkers I consider here each thought that careful considerations of virtue, particularly justice, could help to orient Athenian judgments about a variety of pressing political concerns ranging from foreign policy to leadership selection. By making decisions on the basis of how well a given policy or leader would maximize justice, judgments would remain uncertain but aim toward the proper target.

Before elaborating further on my argument, I believe it will be useful to situate my project within the broader literature concerning judgment. Even when confined to questions of politics, the subject of judgment remains vast. If we follow Beiner, who insists that “every contact we have with the political world” activates our capacity for judgment, we see that judging is what we do when we read the newspaper, discuss politics, or watch presidential debates.⁹ Precisely because it constitutes so much of our social activity, the subject has attracted attention from political scientists interested in an array of fields from foreign policy to social

⁹ Beiner (1983: 8).

psychology. Writing on foreign-policy, for example, the social scientist Perri 6 presents us with a dense catalogue of instances in which leaders rely on their political judgment:

Political judgment...describes the weighted mix of thought styles through which politicians and their advisers determine whether they face a condition or a problem; understand and misunderstand their allies and opponents, classify their problems, options (if any) and conflicting imperatives; understand circumstance, causation, constraint or opportunity; recognize possible instruments; select analogies; construe risks; become willing to bear some risks but not others; conceive linkages between issues; relate reasons for action to goals for policy; and do or do not risk medium- or long-range anticipation, and in detail or only in outline.¹⁰

For 6, political judgment is an essentially cognitive task that improves or declines depending on how accurately decision-makers perceive their reality and consider the choices available to them. As his case-study of the Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates, however, an individual's access to that information is, at best, sharply delimited by incomplete information about how other actors perceive the same events. This assessment accords with what Arie Kruglanski, a social psychologist, calls the "lay epistemic model" of political judgment, according to which "hypotheses are constructed from the individual's available world knowledge."¹¹ Because the relevant information comprising the "world knowledge" upon which judgments are made is always incomplete, Kruglanski encourages decision-makers to remain open to the possibility that their judgments will be subject to later revision as more information becomes known.

By acknowledging that political judgments are limited by the information that decision-makers have at their disposal, 6 and Kruglanski raise the question of how we might fairly judge another person's judgment. As Kruglanski notes, we often assess judgments based on external criteria – such as the decision's consequences – that were not available to decision-makers at the moment they took action. Because judging a judgment with the benefit of hindsight is not

¹⁰ 6 (2011: 2).

¹¹ Kruglanski (1992: 459).

especially fair, he suggests that we assess judgments based on the information decision-makers had when they chose to act, as well as upon the decision-maker's competence, intentions, and state of mind.¹² Other social psychologists, most notably Philip Tetlock, share this perspective. In his empirical study of expert political judgment, Tetlock suggests that good judges should pass two types of tests: "correspondence tests" might assess how well private beliefs map on to the publicly observable world, and "coherence tests" might measure the internal consistency of beliefs.¹³ Following his framework, decision-makers can improve their judgment by frequently comparing their perceptions of the world with new information as it becomes available. As he puts it,

Good judges are good belief updaters who follow through on the logical implications of reputational bets that pit their favorite explanations against alternatives: if I declare that x is .2 likely if my 'theory' is right and .8 likely if yours is right, and x occurs, I 'owe' some belief change.¹⁴

Like Kruglanski, Tetlock encourages decision-makers to cultivate a strong sense of humility when making policy choices. Their humility should extend to an awareness of how affective factors like temperament, mood, and stress can influence their judgment. A wealth of research into how emotions shape perceptions of reality suggests that anger and stress encourage us to weigh recently acquired information more heavily in our judgments than other long-standing

¹² Kruglanski (1992: 465).

¹³ Tetlock (2005: 6-15). Through a crowdsourcing venture he calls the *Good Judgment Project*, Tetlock has tested his theory by asking participants to predict the outcome of world events along with measures of confidence and written explanations that justify their predictions. Though I find that Tetlock often conflates *judgment* with *prediction*, his effort to understand the reasons that support predictions alerts us to a relevant distinction between wise decision-makers and their lucky counterparts.

¹⁴ Tetlock (2005: 17). Also see Tetlock and Gardner (2015: 191).

beliefs, regardless of the new information's accuracy.¹⁵ In moments of crisis, the last voice, not necessarily the wisest, often rings the loudest.

These inquiries helpfully underscore the value of social scientific research for political practice. Such efforts are especially important for democracies, which (ideally) empower citizens to thoughtfully and meaningfully make decisions about public policy. To the extent that all democratic citizens are invited to participate in political judgment, all should share an equal interest in improving their ability to do so. Yet by focusing on how decision-making might be more or less cognitively taxing, the studies described above remain largely silent on ethical questions (e.g. Is this goal just? Is this right thing to do?) that I consider relevant to the distinction between good and bad political judgment. Turning toward political theory and philosophy can provide insights into how we might negotiate such questions.

Thanks in part to Beiner's own work, contemporary students of judgment may no longer agree with his claim that there is "strictly speaking, no 'literature' on the concept of political judgment."¹⁶ As many have noted, and as I argue in this dissertation, questions of judgment have been relevant for political theorists and philosophers since the Peloponnesian War. Most theorists who are interested in judgment trace the history of the concept primarily through the works of three major thinkers: Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and Hannah Arendt. With a slight nod to Plato, contemporary scholars like Beiner, Theile, Steinberger, and Bryan Garsten, all of whom have written eloquently on judgment, begin their studies with careful attention to Aristotle's account of *phronēsis*. I take up Aristotle's notion of *phronēsis* toward the end of this dissertation

¹⁵ See, e.g., Etheredge (1992); Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen (2000); Neuman, et al (2007).

¹⁶ Beiner (1983: 5).

in chapter 4. Before elaborating on his work and its relation to Plato and Thucydides, I turn briefly to Kant and Arendt.

In the first section of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant defines judgment as an *a priori* legislative faculty of the mind. It is, in other words, the cognitive faculty that allows us to make sense of the world and to act freely within it. Kant then distinguishes between two varieties of judgment:

The power of judgment in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of judgment, which subsumes the particular under it...is determining. If however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely reflecting.¹⁷

Unlike determining judgments, for which universal rules or principles are already given, reflective judgments resemble aesthetic judgments of taste. When I encounter a particular object for which I have no prior concept (e.g. an attractive bowl) but for which I would like to have a universal concept not given by experience (e.g. beauty), I must consider the element within the particular bowl that gives me pleasure before arriving at the judgment, “*This bowl is beautiful.*” That is, I judge a particular bowl as beautiful despite not having a prior, universally recognized conception of beauty. Steinberger describes this reflective process as an “adventure in free thinking,” explaining that such judgments do not “rely on a rationally grounded and explicitly justified calculus or method.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, when I declare that the bowl is beautiful I still expect others to agree with me. My expectation that others will share my appreciation for the bowl is only possible, however, if I also recognize that a common or communal sense (*sensus communis*) is also possible:

¹⁷ Kant (2000: 66).

¹⁸ Steinberger (1993: 282).

By “*sensus communis*,” however, must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment. Now this happens by one holding his judgment up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgments of others, and putting himself into the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that contingently attach to our own judgment; which is in turn accomplished by leaving out as far as is possible everything in one’s representational state that is matter, i.e., sensation, and attending solely to the formal peculiarities of his representation or his representational state.¹⁹

Appeals to common sense are appeals to shared judgments. If my judgment of the bowl’s beauty rests entirely on the sentimental fact that my friend Gaines made it for me, I should not expect others to agree with my assessment of its beauty for that reason alone. Yet by imagining myself viewing the bowl from another’s perspective – perhaps from the standpoint of someone who does not know my potter friend Gaines – I form a judgment of its beauty that I can explain to others and expect them to understand and accept. In other words, I am rendering the kinds of judgments that, by virtue of common sense, I should expect others to validate. No longer understood as merely subjective expressions of individual taste, the conclusions reached through reflective judgment are reasonable and, importantly, socially shared. By practicing reflective judgment in this way, I cultivate what Kant calls an “enlarged mentality,” or a critical capacity for considering other actual and possible viewpoints when judging particulars for which no universal law or category is given.²⁰

Kant’s insights into the communal quality of reflective judgment gain more explicitly political force through Arendt’s interpretation of his work. According to her reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant’s notion of the enlarged mentality and its role in

¹⁹ Kant ([1790] 2000: 173-174).

²⁰ Kant ([1790] 2000: 175).

judgment amounted to the discovery of “an entirely new human faculty” that made inter-subjective judgment possible.²¹ Noting that none of Kant’s three primary philosophical questions – What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? – were addressed in his expressly political works, she turned to his account of reflective judgment as a model for political deliberation. Much as Kant’s aesthetic judge might imagine multiple perspectives or opinions of a particular bowl before declaring it beautiful, Arendt’s deliberative actor considers a matter of public policy from the perspectives of others in her community. This is not a practice of empathy, nor does considering other viewpoints demand that the judge abandon her own perspective.²² It is, instead, a critical practice through which she learns to think beyond the prejudices and doctrines she has inherited. For Arendt, the goal of such political discourse, unlike philosophical argument, is not to arrive at *truth* but rather to persuade one’s peers that one’s judgments are sound and should be shared.²³ By persuading others and being persuaded in turn, we enlarge our mentalities in politically relevant ways.

Arendt thought political judgment was challenging yet possible for everyone. As she put it in her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” “If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be.”²⁴ For her, Adolf Eichmann was capable of treating others inhumanely because he refused to seriously reflect on the immorality of the Holocaust and to fully comprehend his role within it. Recalling Kant’s quip, “Stupidity leads to a wicked heart,” Arendt closes the essay with

²¹ Arendt (1982: 10).

²² Arendt (1982: 43).

²³ Arendt (1982: 42-43). See Beiner (1983: 17); Zerilli (2005: 170).

²⁴ Arendt (2003: 164).

a study of Socrates, a figure who shielded others from the dangers of refusing to think. Though I sometimes depart from Arendt's interpretation of Plato, I find her egalitarian notion that all people are capable of thoughtful judgment compelling. I also share her sense that we all need periodic reminders to take our judgments seriously.

Arendt provides a rich account of political judgment that remains attractive to democratic decision-making today. In this project, however, I follow her interest in Socrates by turning to the accounts of judgment developed by Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. There are several good reasons for doing so. Though we are far removed in time and space from the direct democracy of fifth and fourth-century Athens, each of these three raised questions about the quality of democratic judgment that continue to resonate. Though none were as hostile to democracy as is often alleged, all criticized the Athenians for too often pursuing short-term material gains at the expense of thoughtful and ethical policy goals. From the beginning of the Peloponnesian War through to the radical democracy of Aristotle's day, the Athenians consistently allowed their insatiable desire for greater wealth, glory, and influence (*pleonexia*) to drive their private and political decision-making. Doing so undermined their city first by stoking unsustainable imperial expansion and later by rendering the city's population susceptible to demagoguery and class conflict. I argue that restoring Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle's political works to this historical context reveals ways in which their ethical thought developed in reaction to this persistent problem.

Studying decision-making in ancient Greece also helps us reflect on the challenges that arise from the account of judgment I described at the beginning of this introduction. Understanding political judgment as a balance between practical considerations and justice raises a host of political and philosophical questions that each of these thinkers explore across a variety

of genres. Thucydides' historical narrative of the Peloponnesian War dramatizes the difficult choices that political actors make when confronted with privation, civil conflict, and the erosion of ethical norms. Plato's Socratic dialogues likewise capture moments of despair and frustration as young men struggle to define a just way of life. Aristotle's works clarify the many dangers that unjust income inequality and the rhetorical manipulation of judgment. In short, studying judgment through these thinkers, unlike through Kant, allows us frequent glimpses into the practical and ethical challenges of judging well in the real world.

Finally, for all their differences, Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle understood political theory as inseparable from political practice. Just as the behavioral studies described above could improve political judgment by suggesting ways of optimizing cognitive resources, political theory can improve democratic decision-making by offering insights into how we decide between competing goals. Ethical reflection can improve judgment in two ways. First, a thoughtful account of justice can provide a more stable standard against which to judge a given policy or leader. Other considerations like expedience or advantage are largely determined by luck and tend to present themselves as short-term gains. Striving for justice, by contrast, is a longer-term goal, the consideration of which encourages citizens to cultivate other qualities like moderation and foresight. Second, ethical principles can direct judgment by setting parameters against unacceptable behavior. As I show in chapter 1, Athenian foreign policy abandoned the norms that structured Greek foreign affairs, alarming rivals and subject cities alike. Had the city tempered her expansionist impulses and respected the conventional notion of justice Thucydides endorses, Periclean Athens may have avoided war with Sparta. My treatments of Plato and Aristotle also highlight their efforts to align Athenian material interests with ethical principles.

The remainder of the dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 1 explores competing models of political judgment in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* by comparing Athenian decision-making to that of the Spartan commander Brasidas. I argue that the so-called Athenian Thesis disregarded justice as a relevant consideration in foreign policymaking, leading the city to pursue a strategy of unrestrained expansion that alienated her allies. By contrast, Brasidas pursues strategies that, while imperfect in their own right, hew more closely to traditional Greek values. By treating enemies as potential friends, he not only undermines Athenian strategy but demonstrates the instrumental value of taking ethics seriously in political judgment. Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters on Plato's approach to judgment. Through readings of the *Apology*, *Theaetetus*, and *Protagoras* dialogues, the chapter traces two lines of criticism against Athenian democratic judgment. Plato worries that the democratic assembly reduces decision-making to a series of unstable hedonic calculations of short-term pleasure and pain while abandoning longer-term concerns for virtue. He also criticizes the influence of sophistry among the city's elite. Taken together, Plato depicts Athenian decision-making as a haphazard and irrational process that has come unmoored from normative values that might guide public deliberation. Chapter 3 follows the last by concentrating on the relationship between justice, experience, and judgment in Plato's *Republic*. Here, Plato offers a model of judgment that replaces hedonism with justice – understood as psychic harmony – as its guiding end, thereby rationalizing decision-making. Contrary to most interpretations of the philosopher-statesman model as “hyper-rational” and hopelessly idealistic, I argue that Plato includes experience with actual political practice in the guardians' pedagogy in order to enhance their own welfare and the wellbeing of the *kallipolis*. By joining virtue with experience, his philosopher-statesman practices a more just political judgment than the Athenians of Plato's day.

My final chapter turns to Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* develop an account of practical wisdom combining virtues of character with a grasp of both universal *eudaimonia* and sensitivity to particulars in the exercise of deliberative decision-making. Noting Aristotle's concern with the threat that factional demagogues posed to democratic regimes, I argue that Aristotle prescribes institutional measures that both ameliorate the underlying material sources of *stasis* and cultivate citizen *phronēsis*. While few citizens will ever achieve the manifold qualities of the *politikos*, the majority can nevertheless play an important role in the selection and assessment of officials. By incorporating the average citizen's judgment in these decisions, Aristotle cultivates their rational faculties while establishing a bulwark against demagogic rhetoric. I conclude with some brief reflections on the value of reading these thinkers together through the lens of judgment.

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CHAPTER 1: HATING FRIENDS AND LOVING ENEMIES

Thucydides was exiled from Athens after losing Amphipolis to the Spartan commander Brasidas in 423 BCE. He made good use of his time abroad. By spending the first seven years of the Peloponnesian War serving Athens and the next twenty among her enemies, he was uniquely positioned to document the conflict from multiple perspectives. Thucydides began composing his *History* as soon as the war began with the expectation that his narrative would teach future generations about lasting features of political behavior.¹ Yet because the *History*'s lessons are more often subtle than explicit – rendered as art rather than treatise – contemporary readers continue to ask themselves what, exactly, we are to learn from it. In this chapter, I argue that Thucydides provides an account of political judgment that gives good instrumental and strategic reasons for taking justice seriously. By setting parameters around acceptable and unacceptable action, considerations of justice guide strategic choices toward more sustainable ends. We also see, through his depiction of Brasidas, how concerns for justice are balanced against practical limitations amid the uncertainty of war.

My emphasis on the balance between justice and expedience in Thucydides' account of judgment is not universally shared. Classical realists instead interpret the *History* as an amoral

¹ Though I adopt the conventional title *History*, all citations are from Jeremy Mynott's translation of *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* throughout unless otherwise noted. Thucydides expected the war between the Athenians and the Spartans to exceed the violence of the Persian Wars for two reasons: first, all of the major belligerents were at the acme of their powers "in a full state of military readiness"; second, he recognized early on that the complex alliance structures between the major combatants had bifurcated the "the rest of the Greek world" into opposing camps (1.1.3).

account of power in the high politics of war.² From their perspective, reflective deliberation and considerations of justice were luxuries that imperial Athens simply could not afford in 431. The upshot of this “Athenian thesis” is that while justice might be important for domestic politics, states nevertheless subordinate ethics to necessity in foreign affairs.³ This position is best summarized by the Athenians in the Melian Dialogue:

You understand as well as we do that in the human sphere judgments about justice are relevant only between those with an equal power to enforce it, and that the possibilities are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept. (4.89)

Hans J. Morgenthau alludes to this sentiment when ranking Thucydides among the first rational students of political behavior.⁴ J.B. Bury concurs, telling us that the *History* is “written from a purely intellectual standpoint, unencumbered with platitudes and moral judgments,” while G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, contrasting Thucydides with the patriotic idealists of his day, describes him as a “complete and ruthless realist.”⁵ For George Cawkwell, Thucydides’ rationalist worldview and ardent imperialism deeply informed his theory of political judgment.⁶ Noting the historian’s obituary for Themistocles, whose judgment Thucydides praises, Cawkwell deduces a sharply delimited range of decisions that individual statesmen can make:

[He] commended Themistocles’ judgment, his very great ability quickly to decide what had to be done (*ta deonta*). That is the tell-tale phrase; there is nothing about his purposes

² See, e.g., Kagan (1969); Meiggs (1972); de Romilly (1979).

³ The Athenian envoy to Sparta is the first to articulate the thesis, e.g. 1.75.3-5, 1.76.5. It is repeated with slight variation by both Pericles (2.63) and Cleon (3.37) in their addresses before the assembly. As Orwin (1986: 77-78) puts it, “The justice that cities invoke is spurious, precisely because each invokes it only against the others...Justice is praiseworthy, and particularly so in rulers. The impeccably just city, however, would abstain from ruling other cities. On these two points the Athenians think as others do. Where they differ is in asserting that cities labor under three natural compulsions to rule to the limits of their strength...To be praised are those who exercise their unjust rule as justly as possible; to refrain from exercising it is not possible.”

⁴ Morgenthau (1954: 8). For thorough reviews of realist interpretations of Thucydides, see Doyle (1990); Rahe (1995); Freyberg-Inan (2004: 19-35).

⁵ Bury (1975: 252); de Ste. Croix (1972: 12).

⁶ Cawkwell (1997: 6, 96). Cf. Podoksik (2006).

and his choice of ends, but simply his ability to decide on the necessary steps. That is, for Thucydides, there is only one course open and the best statesman is the man who best discerns it. Consistently with this, in the speeches in the *Histories*, it is never the balancing of justice and advantage, always purely the calculation of advantage. That is how he thinks statesmen really think.⁷

Like others who read Thucydides as a strict realist, Cawkwell dismisses appeals to ethical norms as mere window-dressing for the zero-sum power politics depicted in the *History*. In essence, Thucydidean judgments are concerned exclusively with “how wisely or unwisely statesmen might be supposed really to think about the maintaining and extending of power.”⁸ “Behind all the rhetoric and fine pretensions,” Cawkwell concludes, “states ‘have no friends, only interests’ and statesmen are good and bad in so far as they reckon on those interests well or badly.”⁹

Contemporary neorealists, most notably Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin, turn attention to how the international system’s anarchic structure informs the behavior of state actors.¹⁰ For them, the Peloponnesian War’s “truest pretext” (*alēthestatēn prophasin*) – Spartan fear of Athenian ambition – speaks to the international system’s anarchic nature and the struggles for hegemony it precipitates.¹¹ Political morality is not only weak in their view, but altogether irrelevant to understanding political behavior. Instead, Gilpin encourages us to consult the *History* for insights into how power transitions from declining leaders to rising upstarts unsettles fragile interstate stability. Ascribing a systemic theory of international relations to the historian,

⁷ Cawkwell (1997: 5).

⁸ Cawkwell (1997: 19). Pouncey (1980: 11) is more generous, arguing that, for Thucydides, “the real test of the great statesman, as of the great general, is how he keeps his people together under pressure.” This standard allows for a finer grained distinction between laudable statesmen like Pericles, a paragon of selflessness, and Alcibiades, the brilliant but self-interested general.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Waltz (1979); Gilpin (1986, 1988); Jervis (1988); Copeland (2000: 210-211).

¹¹ *History* 1.23.6

Gilpin writes, “Thucydides believed that he had found the true causes of the Peloponnesian War, and by implication of systemic change, in the phenomenon of the uneven growth of power among the dominant states in the system.”¹² Neorealists praise Thucydides above all for his parsimonious explanation of an apparently complex phenomenon. By pathologizing war and diagnosing conflict as a symptom of structural fluctuations in the distribution of power, Thucydides imparts a theoretical framework through which we can understand as much about the Cold War as about the Peloponnesian War. Arthur Eckstein challenges these conclusions on the basis that most are grounded in English translations of 1.23.5-6 that, upon closer examination of the Greek, do not support the neorealist assertion as strongly as they claim.¹³ Sparta was not threatened by Athenian power (*dunamis*) or desire for empire (*archē*), but was instead compelled (*anankasai*) by the Athenians to wage war. For all of his criticism of Gilpin, however, Eckstein nevertheless arrives at much the same conclusion. Unlike other Greek and Roman historians, “who usually privileged human psychology as the crucial causative variable” of political change, Eckstein insists that Thucydides was primarily interested in the “interstate structure of power as the crucial causative variable” of war.¹⁴ Though he grants that Thucydides’ consideration of

¹² Gilpin (1988: 596).

¹³ Eckstein (2003: 759-760). Eckstein prefers Sealy’s translation (1975: 92), which reads:

As to why they broke the treaty, I have written down first the complaints and the disputes, so that no one may ever inquire whence so great a war arose among the Greeks. Now the most genuine cause, though least spoken of, was this: it was the Athenians, in my opinion, as they were growing great and furnishing an occasion of fear to the Lacedaemonians, who compelled the latter to go to war. But the complaints of each side, spoken of openly, were the following, complaints which led the parties to break the treaty and enter a state of war.

Unlike the Warner (1972) or Crawley-Wick (1982) translations, Sealy emphasizes fear (*phobos*) and compulsion (*anankē*) as the causes of war. Mynott’s translation of the relevant text reads: “I consider the truest cause, though the one least openly stated, to be this: the Athenians were becoming powerful and inspired fear (*phobon*) in the Spartans and so forced them into war (*anankasai es to polemein*).”

¹⁴ Eckstein (2003: 772, 774). Cf. Westlake (1968: 7), who contends that Thucydides “takes care to impress upon his readers that the character of a leading figure might influence events very profoundly.” Westlake’s reference to character explicitly speaks more to military capacity than to moral behavior.

individual decision-making and human psychology present a more richly complex narrative than Gilpin's emphasis on elegance might have us believe, Thucydides was ultimately a systems-level thinker.

Critics complain that by situating the *History* within the logic of *Realpolitik*, realists and neorealists alike are either methodologically anachronistic or too quick to dismiss its author's ethical concerns.¹⁵ Noticing tensions between language (*logos*) and action (*praxis*), many instead frame the work as a commentary on the erosion of traditional polis ethics. James Boyd White, for example, depicts a deteriorating "culture of argument" in Greece throughout the war, showing how Athenian military ambitions fomented political disruptions that "the language of this community could not contain or manage."¹⁶ He identifies a two-fold challenge to traditional linkages between normative principles and political behavior throughout the *History*. On an interstate level, the conventional language of diplomacy – emphasizing nominal equality and autonomy among cities – could not restrain the boundless ambitions of an imperial power whose growth subordinated neighboring cities to her will.¹⁷ On a domestic level, White suggests that Athens abandoned meaningful democratic discourse once she rejected a traditional normative vocabulary with which to articulate her policies. "The problem is not that Athens is self-interested," he writes, "but that she is unwilling, or unable, to speak the language of justification that constitutes her community."¹⁸ In other words, once the Athenians reject ethical norms in

¹⁵ For methodological critiques, see, e.g., Garst (1989); Bagby (1994); Welch (2003); Monten (2006). On neorealism's inattention to morality, see Ahrens Dorf (1997); Williams (1998).

¹⁶ White (1984: 84).

¹⁷ This point is well supported by the Nottingham Oath Project, which records 269 oaths (*horkoi*) in the *History*, few of which successfully bound participants to the norms they pronounced. Insofar as these oaths articulated the language of the inter-polis community White identifies, their weakening influence over policy indicates a disjuncture between promise and action. See Lateiner (2012: 174).

¹⁸ White (1984: 88).

their foreign policy decisions they simultaneously deny themselves the normative resources that might help them justify their strategic choices even to themselves.¹⁹ White's reading foregrounds the erosion of ethical norms as a central theme of Thucydidean political thought. If such norms were as unimportant as many realists claim, their distortion would not likely have featured so prominently throughout the work.²⁰ White also approaches the realist depiction of Thucydidean political judgment from a different angle. For him, Thucydides is lamenting, not praising, the Athenian neglect of ethical claims in decision-making, suggesting that political judgment *ought* to have reflected respect for conventional norms.

Similar critics examine tensions between justice (*dikaiosynē*) and necessity (*anagkaion*) in the *History* as a means of charting the "limits of political life."²¹ In one study of the text, Martin Ostwald attempts to steer a middle course between those who read Thucydides as a "hard-nosed exponent of *Realpolitik*" and those who find him "a compassionate observer of the human condition and the forces to which it is exposed."²² Conceding the difficulty of ascribing a particular moral or political theory to Thucydides, Ostwald nevertheless maintains that he gestures toward a model of "morally desirable conduct in relations between states" that reveals his conservative attitude toward polis life.²³ To the extent that the *History* is a tragedy, Ostwald

¹⁹ For similar arguments see, e.g., Edmunds (1975a); Saxonhouse (1978); Williams (1998); Kokaz (2001).

²⁰ See Rahe (1995) for a similar argument.

²¹ Orwin (1994: 5).

²² Ostwald (1988: 56).

²³ Ostwald (1988: 53-61) argues that evidence of Thucydides' moralism is best gleaned through examples in which actors are sufficiently free from the pressures of *ananke* to make choices that reflect considered beliefs about choiceworthy lives. Through negative examples, such as the Corcyraean *stasis*, Thucydides dramatizes the moral breakdown of civil life in vivid detail in order to make a point about free choices and those made by necessity: while many choices are made under apparently free conditions, the consequences of those decisions may generate dire conditions which make ethical practice nearly impossible. Also see Edmunds (1975b: 74, 82).

contends that it is so only because Thucydides recognizes that necessity (*anankē*) “will always ride roughshod over human judgments of right and wrong.”²⁴ Clifford Orwin is unsatisfied with Ostwald’s conclusion. He maintains that the Athenian thesis Ostwald builds his analysis upon is but one argument among many comprising the broader conversation of the text, and we should not mistake it for one that its author found wholly convincing. For Orwin, Thucydides does not set morality and necessity in opposition to each other so much as he presents a view of humanity striving – though ultimately failing – to reconcile each with the other, all the while finding itself hopelessly subjected to the whims of fortune (*tuchē*).²⁵ The *History* is not tragic because necessity overwhelms virtue, but rather because fortune overwhelms all human planning on a scale that none of its main actors can accept.²⁶

Despite their differences, each of these interpretations conclude that Thucydides took a rather dim view of human agency. Whether he thought that our choices are constrained by our resources and talents, determined by needs that we must satisfy, dictated by the decisions of others, or contingent upon the whims of an ominous unknown, all seem to agree that Thucydides tells a deterministic story of individual lives brought low by forces beyond their control or comprehension. Thucydides may have rejected Homer’s gods, but not his view of man. As Peter Pouncey puts it, “For Thucydides, to moralize about human nature is to be pessimistic about it.”²⁷ Insofar as ethical and moral theory presuppose a degree of human agency, both to make

²⁴ Ostwald (1988: 61).

²⁵ Orwin (1994: 203). Cf. Edmunds (1975a).

²⁶ Orwin (1994: 194). Also see Burns (2011: 515), who demonstrates not only that the Spartans were more constrained by internal and foreign pressures but also that Brasidas, a most uncharacteristically active Spartan, best represents the regime through his self-delusions regarding his own justice and manifest hypocrisy.

²⁷ Pouncey (1980: 22).

free decisions about how to live as well as to act on those decisions with meaningful efficacy, one might consider Thucydides a poor source for considerations of political judgments that take ethics seriously. I challenge that conclusion in this chapter by insisting that ethical reflection was not only important for Thucydidean political thought but central to the historian's account of good political judgment.

Thucydides worried that his fellow Athenians were poorly equipped to make sound judgments prior to and during the Peloponnesian War.²⁸ Following Thomas Hobbes, many commentators attribute poor Athenian judgment to the city's democratic constitution:

For his opinion touching the government of the state [Athens], it is manifest that he least of all liked the democracy. And upon divers occasions he noteth the emulation and contention of the demagogues for reputation and glory of wit; with their crossing of each other's counsels, to the damage of the public; the inconsistency of resolutions, caused by the diversity of ends and power of rhetoric in the orators; and the desperate actions undertaken upon the flattering advice of such as desired to attain, or to hold what they had attained, of authority and sway amongst the common people.²⁹

Whether because of democrats' capriciousness, zeal, or gullibility, Hobbes considered Athenians incapable of consistently rational decision-making. His remarks contribute to a long-standing consensus that post-Periclean Athenian democracy was misled by statesmen of inferior judgment.³⁰ For Thucydides, the Hobbesian argument goes, democracies are as likely to punish

²⁸ This theme has been prominent in the secondary literature. See, e.g., Strauss (1964); de Romilly (1979); Orwin (1989); Cawkwell (1997); Reeve (1999); Frank (2007); Zumbrunnen (2008).

²⁹ Hobbes (1723: xvi-xvii). He adds that while individual Athenians may have been chastened by fear, the assembly was never capable of admitting any unease about the city's strength. "By this means," he continues, "it came to pass amongst the Athenians, who thought they were able to do anything, that wicked men and flatterers drave them headlong into those actions that were to ruin them; and the good men either durst not oppose, or if they did, undid themselves" (xvi).

³⁰ Leo Strauss (1964: 153) extends this argument, stressing that Athenian democracy relied upon the wise and honest counsel of statesmen like Themistocles and Pericles, without which it was likely to err. He concludes that even the Periclean regime was inferior to its Spartan counterpart insofar as it was only as great as its "first man." Josiah Ober (1998: 78) concurs, arguing that Thucydides' "implicit lesson" is thus that "democratic knowledge does not provide an adequate grounding for assessing the truth-value of rhetorical discourse." By extrapolating from the idiosyncratic Athenian case, Ober overstates the degree to which we ought to regard Thucydides as a critic of democracy as such. According to Strauss's reading, moreover, Periclean Athens functioned less as a democracy and more as a kingship

as praise wise counsel because citizens cannot distinguish between wisdom and folly. The Athenians' democratic empire functioned best when it functioned least as a democracy and most as an empire.

Hobbes is certainly right to note Thucydides' criticism of the creeping selfishness and myopic factionalism that took hold of post-Periclean Athens. Yet while critiques of democracy echo throughout the *History* (2.65.5-10), I argue that elitist depictions of Thucydides are nevertheless exaggerated. Whatever the historian's attitude toward the democracy that exiled him, regime type alone does not explain the Athenians' poor judgment. After all, theirs was not the only polis to make decisions via assembly, and their democratic counterparts in Syracuse fared well at the end of the war. Moreover, we should resist the urge to lay all blame for Athenian failure at the feet of Cleon and others like him. Doing so not only renders a complex argument too facile, but also overlooks the point that Athens did not merely lose the war but that others won crucial victories of their own. The *History* offers a master course in poor political judgment, but it also delivers examples of better judgment in the process. In short, Hobbes may have been more pessimistic about political life than was Thucydides.³¹

Rather than ascribing the failure of Athenian political judgment to a congenital defect of democracy, I follow White by locating the city's poor decision-making in the assembly's disregard for ethical norms.³² Like other fifth-century Greeks in the wake of the Persian Wars,

with nominally democratic undertones. This position stands in marked contrast to the same period Aristotle describes in the *Constitution of Athens* (1984 [1920]: §27), which insists that Periclean Athens "became still more democratic" by limiting some privileges of the Areopagus Council and turning "the policy of the state in the direction of sea power, which caused the masses to acquire confidence in themselves and consequently to take the constitution more and more into their own hands."

³¹ Cf. Pouncey (1980: 151-158).

³² This is not to suggest that Athens' opponents were paragons of moral excellence. One of the great values of Thucydides' narrative is that he resists reducing politics to contests between the good and the evil, the wise and the

the Athenians tirelessly extolled their autonomy and gravely feared domination.³³ On Themistocles' advice they established a thalassocracy, or naval empire, over the Aegean in a bid to protect their own freedom at the expense of their coastal and island neighbors (1.18).³⁴ Crucially, they consistently justified their imperial policy in the name of necessity born of freedom, sustained through victory, and driven by fear.³⁵ Though quick to congratulate themselves for their moderate treatment of subject states, *justice* never figured into their imperial calculations. Justice was no more relevant to their decision to maintain the empire than it was to their decision to defend themselves against invasion; indeed, Pericles often treated them as one in the same (1.143.5, 2.62.3).³⁶ As he succinctly described their position in his final address to the city, Athens held her empire "like a tyranny, which it [seemed] unjust to take (*labeîn mēn adīkon*) but dangerous to let go of" (2.63.2). Yet by reducing political life to a zero-sum confrontation between the empire and the world, the language of necessity proved incapable of

foolish, etc. Though much of my argument departs from Heilke's (2004: 121-123) reading, I think he correctly praises the value of narrative for its capacity to relate a complex image of politics resistant to nomothetic theorization.

³³ The democratic ethos of Athenian politics surely contributed to the city's strong attachment to freedom. As Aristotle would later observe, freedom (*eleutheria*) constitutes the end of democratic government (*Pol.* 1290b1-5, 1294a11). For Thucydides, the moderate imperialism under Pericles also boasted of enough wealth and stability that external threats were less worrisome than internal miscalculations (1.144.1). The more extreme democratic factions that took hold of the city after Pericles' death, led by Cleon, made external threats a staple of the rhetoric Thucydides records.

³⁴ The Athenians were not alone in ruling other Greeks, but Thucydides is clear that the vigor with which they expanded their reach had no historic parallel. Far from considering imperialism a shameful enterprise, however, the Athenians thought it perfectly natural. As the city's envoy to Sparta put it before the war, "there is nothing remarkable or contrary to normal human behavior in what we have done, just because we accepted an empire when one was offered and then declined to let it go, overcome by these strongest of all motives – honor, fear and self-interest" (1.76.2). Moreover, they point out, the Spartans maintain hegemonic influence over the Peloponnesus and would, if similarly situated, treat their subjects equally harshly. Indeed, as their envoy to Melos puts it, the Athenians would look enticingly weak and fearful to their opponents if they did not continually expand (5.97).

³⁵ Though de Romilly (1979: 69, 251-253) attributes Athenian imperialism more to the city's desire for glory than to fear of conquest, she also recognizes that the city's thalassocratic strategy and dependence on external trade rendered Athens vulnerable.

³⁶ Besides, no other city "ever let that consideration stop them getting an advantage when presented with an opportunity to gain something by force" (1.76.2).

articulating an evaluative framework by which free decision-making was possible. The assembly did not judge policies based on whether they thought them good or bad, right or wrong, but exclusively based on whether they seemed immediately necessary or expedient. Exclusive focus on expedience weakened Athenian political judgment in at least two related ways. First, decision-makers were deprived of any normative ends – apart from glory and survival – toward which they could direct policies and against which they could assess them. Second, by failing to define or limit the concept of *advantage*, the language of expedience was unable to contain tendencies toward hubristic over-reaching (*pleonexia*) that eventually defined the fifth-century empire. In short, Athenian political judgment lacked direction and clarity because the city rejected the premise that justice mattered in foreign policy.

Like the philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle discussed in later chapters, Thucydides' *History* critiques the Athenian approach to political judgment. The work's corrective wisdom suggests an alternative account of judgment that balances moral reflection with practical experience and affective intelligence.³⁷ As noted above, good judgment for Thucydides emerges when considerations of justice establish parameters within which strategic decisions are made about an uncertain future. Like Ostwald, I do not read Thucydides as a strictly "compassionate observer of the human condition," but rather as a thinker who, contra Cawkwell's interpretation, investigates the difficult balance between moral and practical demands on political life. I argue that his depiction of Brasidas captures this balance by offering good instrumental and strategic reasons for taking justice seriously. Realists who interpret the *History* as a description of power politics overlook this insight into moral reflection as a practical

³⁷ I define "affective intelligence" as a sensitivity to the ways in which emotions inform how we interpret the decision before us as well as to how emotions motivate action. See Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000).

exercise.³⁸ Likewise, critics who emphasize Thucydides' ethical concerns risk presenting his work as a requiem for the intrinsic worth of justice without paying sufficient attention to its instrumental value. By examining morality as a material feature of good judgment, then, the historian teaches his audience a lesson in practical ethics.

As will become clearer in later chapters, Thucydides also demonstrates the limits of traditional virtues for guiding political behavior in an increasingly volatile state of affairs. Polis-centric conceptions of courage, piety, moderation, and justice greatly valued self-sacrifice as a means of engendering trust among members of shared communities. The Peloponnesian War, marked more by the normalization of factional conflict (*stasis*) than by the heroic sort captured in Herodotus' account of the Persian Wars or in the Homeric poetry that set the aristocratic tone for Greek value judgments, signaled a collapse of that system.³⁹ The political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle emerges as a rehabilitation of ethical practice in the wake of the crisis Thucydides documents. In other words, ancient Greek political philosophy emerged, in part, as an effort to provide new foundations for political morality in a world that had violently renounced its traditions.

I focus my analysis in this chapter on political judgments pertaining to friendship and enmity. For the Greeks' deeply polarized culture, the friend/enemy distinction was, as P.J. Rhodes puts it, "a basic moral principle of determining behavior."⁴⁰ We see, for instance, that the

³⁸ Cf. Burns (2011: 510) who distinguishes his study of Brasidas from Heilke's and other realists by taking issue with their distinction between actions motivated by self-interest, on the one hand, and those motivated by virtue on the other. I think both Burns and Heilke are mistaken insofar as Thucydides is interested in how the teleological conception of excellence required of ancient Greek ethics ought to shape what actors consider self-interest.

³⁹ On Homer's role in framing the main issues that emerge in Greek ethics, particularly the tension between heroic excellence (*aretē*) and human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), see Smith (2001).

⁴⁰ Rhodes (1996: 11). Rhodes further notes that the domestic debates between competing advisors (e.g., Nicias and Alcibiades) frequently exhibit a personal as well as political dimension (22-25). Polemarchus' definition of justice

Corcyraeans appeal to friendship duties alongside promises of material gain in their diplomatic appeals for Athenian military aid prior to the war. The Egestans cleverly spin the same arguments with equal effect when they seduce the Athenians into waging the Sicilian expedition more than fifteen years later. The Corinthians in turn use similar language, albeit without the promise of material advantage, to galvanize Sparta against Athens.⁴¹ The edict to help friends and harm enemies constituted an operable, if under-theorized, principle of justice throughout the war that motivated some actions while prohibiting others. Political judgments therefore ought to have taken seriously questions about what a city owed to her allies and how best to resist her enemies. Most importantly, this definition of justice provided those who took it seriously with a normative goal toward which they could direct policy decisions. Unlike the Athenians, who were motivated by a pleonectic desire for greater glory and influence for its own sake, actors who applied this understanding of justice to strategic judgments produced more prudent and coherent policies.⁴²

as “benefiting one’s friends and harming one’s enemies” in Plato’s *Republic* (334b-d) articulates an ethical position with which Thucydides’ contemporaries would have been familiar. Though the historian never formulates the principle in exactly those words, it is prevalent throughout his text. See Finley (1983); Ober (1989); Frank (2007); Cartledge (2009).

⁴¹ When appealing for aid in their conflict with Corinth, the Corcyraean delegation claims that Athens will not only benefit militarily by securing a well-armed and grateful ally, but firstly “because [they] will be helping those who are being treated unjustly” (1.33.1). They clarify their definition of justice by anticipating Corinthian resistance: “And if they say it is not right of you to receive their colonies as allies, they ought to know that every colony honors the mother city when it is treated properly but is alienated when treated unjustly; *colonists are not sent out to be the slaves of those who stay behind but their equals*” (1.34.1). The Corinthians also define genuine alliances in terms of equality, saying first that justice cannot regulate relations between cities when one has an advantage over the other (1.39.1).

⁴² On the role that *pleonexia*, the irrational and insatiable desire for greater wealth and glory, played in Athenian decision-making, see Frank (2007). As I argue below, the Corcyraean and Egestan envoys to Athens really do use the language of justice as rhetorical pretensions of the kind Cawkwell describes. I also argue, however, that envoys to Sparta and characters like Brasidas are more earnest in their commitments to justice, and that this is a defining feature of their judgment.

Readers might dismiss this definition of justice for its inadequacies, citing Socrates' exchange with Polemarchus in Plato's *Republic* for evidence of its difficult application and potentially perverse outcomes.⁴³ I share those reservations. Indeed, the *History* is dense with examples of friends failing to recognize each other, actors unwittingly helping their adversaries, and atrocious violence perpetrated in the name of honor by actors on all sides. Its narrow focus generates some of the most theoretically rich contradictions in the text. How, for example, can Thucydides praise Brasidas for his justice while admitting that the Spartan won converts through "seductive but misleading assertions" about his military effectiveness and popularity (4.108.5)? A second potential criticism is that, *pace* realist interpretations of the text, none of the purportedly ethical actors in the narrative were actually motivated by moral commitments. One might object, for example, that the Spartans limited the scope of their imperial ambitions only because they worried that stretching their fighting force too thinly would invite helot revolts at home. Indeed, Thucydides documents episodes of Spartan brutality that should disabuse readers of any notion that Lacedaemonian conduct was milder or more humane than that of the Athenians. Yet the historian also presents the Spartans – at least in this period – as a community whose conservative piety rendered them more sensitive to shame than their Athenian counterparts. Allies like Corinth and leaders like Sthenelaidas successfully appealed to Spartan conceptions of justice and honor as they shamed them into action (see esp. 1.68.3, 1.71.1-6, 1.86; cf. 7.89-93). Similar efforts to persuade Athenian judgment relied more heavily on appeals to material interest and were framed more in terms of expedience than in the language of duty or obligation.⁴⁴ In sum, though we certainly see exceptions on all sides, Athenians were on balance

⁴³ See Chapter 3 for my own treatment of this exchange.

⁴⁴ Though I think Malcolm Heath (1990) overstates his case when he insists that the Athenians were the *only* ones to consistently reject normative demands in their decision-making, I agree that the Athenian position is startling not so

less concerned with observing conventional notions of justice than were their adversaries precisely because they did not consider such notions appropriate for foreign policy decisions.

By demonstrating how good judgments must combine elements of idealism and realism, practical experience and theoretical guidance, Thucydides offers a vision of political ethics that not only challenged fifth-century Athenian tyranny but which also remains useful today. My aim is to highlight that vein in his work. I do so by reading the specific named characters in the narrative as figures who model different styles of judgment for Thucydides' readers.⁴⁵ Insofar as Thucydides' immediate audience were fellow Athenians, I suggest that these figures serve to mirror or challenge the democratic assembly's own decision-making procedures.⁴⁶ Though any audience of would-be decision-makers could surely benefit from studying Thucydides' narrative, I argue that it was of particular importance to the democracy. No other regime type so fully embraced individual judgments about collective welfare as fourth century Athenian democracy. Challenging the people (*hoi polloi*) to effectively discern better from worse policies was and remains of great political urgency. By developing this claim, I am not suggesting that Thucydides espouses a systematic account of good political judgment such as we might hope to find in Aristotle's work. Previous studies of his narrative style convincingly suggest, however,

much for its silence on questions of justice but more for its explicit rejection of all considerations of justice in deliberations.

⁴⁵ I should stress that while characters model certain attitudes, they are not themselves *models* as such. It would be too facile, for example, to flatten Pericles into a stand-in for imperialism or to regard Brasidas as a selfless liberator of Greece. The *History* is not, in my view, an allegory.

⁴⁶ Hornblower (1995) argues that, while Thucydides was never as popular as Herodotus with fourth century audiences, his influence was nevertheless strongly felt among Athenians who were sufficiently educated to follow his comparatively difficult and pessimistic prose.

that his depictions of different characters and their interactions can yield insights into his theoretical project.⁴⁷ I adopt that approach here.

In the following sections I contrast Athenian political judgments with those made by the Spartan general Brasidas. By demonstrating their differences with respect to friendship and enmity as both ethical and strategic categories, I highlight Thucydides' distinction between better and worse judgment. I begin by offering a treatment of Periclean judgment as an approach to decision-making based on imperial maintenance and control. The following sections focus on the Mytilenean and Sicilian debates, two episodes that establish a pattern of systematic misjudgment on the part of the Athenian assembly. Each of these episodes depict more extreme variants of imperialism whose emphasis on expansion break from the Periclean model in the degree of their ambition, but are not of an altogether different kind. The fourth section turns to an example of better judgment in the characterization of Brasidas. His example suggests that an ethical attitude toward potential enemies and allies has a material impact on the course of the war. Most importantly, Brasidas demonstrates that taking justice seriously can free decision-makers from the sense of fear and necessity that blinkered the Athenian assembly and ultimately undid the empire. I conclude with thoughts on how Thucydides' study can help contemporary thinkers and practitioners understand good political judgment.

1.1 The Periclean Paradigm

Pericles occupies a preeminent position in the first two books of the *History*. Thucydides credits him with establishing the halcyon period before the war as well as with crafting Athenian

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Pearson (1947); Orwin (1989); Heilke (2004). Whereas Strauss (1964) and de Romilly (1979) attempt to recover Thucydides' political philosophy from the judgments he makes in his own name, I locate it in the examples he provides throughout the text.

strategy for the conflict once he deemed it imminent (2.65.5). He was well regarded for his confident judgment (*gnomē*), his moderate temper (*sophrosynē*) and especially for his rhetorical talents.⁴⁸ His commanding oratory was well suited to fifth century democratic Athens, where a talent for speaking persuasively, and clearly, to as many as six-thousand opinionated peers was central to the effective performance of statesmanship.⁴⁹ This was no coincidence. As a *stratēgos*, Pericles advanced policies that limited the elite Areopagus Council's political influence, instituted provisions for jury pay, and promoted a culture of participatory citizenship. Through these populist revisions to the Athenian constitution, Pericles himself empowered the very institutions that were most responsive to his style of politics while blocking avenues through which aristocratic rivals might challenge his authority. The democratic assembly may have been able to limit the policymaking power of a single individual, but any individual who could consistently win it over could also exaggerate his influence over the city's decisions; Pericles was such an individual. He further burnished his democratic bona fides through apparently selfless gestures that seemed to prove his incorruptibility and commitment to the polis.⁵⁰ By

⁴⁸ Though aware of his natural talents, Plutarch (2012: 8.1-8.5) attributes these qualities to the instruction he received from the sophist Anaxagoras, whose lessons in natural sciences and rhetoric gave his otherwise shy student the confidence to address the assembly. It is worth noting, however, that confident judgments are not always good judgments.

⁴⁹ See 2.60.2; 3.37-38; 3.42-43. In the *Athenian Constitution*, Aristotle notes that Pericles enhanced democratic features of the constitution by limiting the privileges of the Areopagus Council and instituting pay for "service in the law-courts, as a bid for popular favor to counterbalance the wealth of Cimon," thereby breaking the patronage network of his wealthier rival (§27). Aristotle's account raises a question about Pericles' motives, as a more cynical observer might interpret his apparently selfless gestures as mere tactics for winning popular support, thereby securing his place in the assembly. Thucydides' own remarks suggest that Pericles was certainly savvy in this regard.

⁵⁰ Pericles was related to the Alcmaeonids on his mother's side. Unlike political rivals such as Cimon, Pericles was not especially wealthy but used what fortunes he had for public benefit. He was a *choregos* for Aeschylus' *Persians* during the festival of Dionysus in 472, the success of which positioned him to begin his military career. He continued that pattern during the war as well when the Spartans invaded Attica. Pericles was a guest-friend (*xēnos*) of the Spartan king Archidamos, who led the first Peloponnesian invasion of Attica in the summer of 431. Because of his personal connection with the Spartan, Pericles "became concerned that Archidamos...might perhaps pass by his own fields without wasting them" (2.13.1). Pericles divulged his personal connections to Archidamos in the assembly, promising to donate any spared property to the public. Both of these examples underscore Pericles'

contrast, Thucydides laments that his successors, “being more on a level with each other and in competition each to be first,” were so consumed with private ambition that Athens fell into “factional turmoil” without him to guide the city (2.65.10-11).

Many have taken Thucydides’ favorable comparison between Pericles and his successors to suggest that Pericles ought to stand as a paradigm of good judgment in the *History*.⁵¹ H.D. Westlake asserts that persuading readers to accept Thucydides’ praise for Pericles’ far-sighted leadership and integrity was among the work’s major aims.⁵² As Mary Nichols puts it, “Thucydides presents Pericles as a model of statesmanship, even of leadership within a democracy.”⁵³ To the extent that Thucydides exposes weaknesses in that paradigm – the general’s sometimes negligent foresight and failures to countenance contingency, for instance – Nichols insists that such episodes are not criticisms of Pericles per se, but are rather demonstrations of the limits of democratic leadership more broadly. Donald Kagan likewise describes Pericles as a uniquely democratic visionary who admirably espoused a theory of citizenship opposed to both the radical individualism of Homeric heroism and the similarly radical equality inculcated by the Spartan regime. “He intended,” Kagan argues, “to create a quality of life never before known, one that would allow men to pursue their private interests but also enable them to seek the highest goals by placing their interests at the service of a city that

commitment to conventionally noble virtues, as it was expected that political elites would parlay material wealth into political capital through contributions to the polis.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Kateb (1964), Beiner (1983: 108), Kagan (1991), Yunis (1997), Cawkwell (1997), Freedman (2013: 36-37); cf. Foster (2010: esp. 184-190). Themistocles is the only figure whose judgment Thucydides praises without qualification (1.138.4). Nevertheless, his cursory description of Themistocles’ character, decision-making, and influence is too brief for contemporary readers to draw as much interpretive significance from him as we might like.

⁵² Westlake (1968: 23, 31, 41-42).

⁵³ Nichols (2015: 26).

fostered and relied upon reason for its guidance.”⁵⁴ While Kagan concedes that the speeches Thucydides records focus “chiefly [on] the empire and military glory,” he speculates that “if we had access to Pericles’ inner thoughts...we would possibly discover that he took no less pride in the Athenians’ peaceful achievement of mind and spirit.”⁵⁵ Contemporary citizens and politicians alike should therefore look to Pericles as a well-rounded paradigm of democratic practice with reason, rather than coercion, at its core.

I disagree with these assessments of Pericles’ leadership and political judgment. Like other critics of Pericles, I argue that the general’s judgment was animated more by his uncritical imperialism than by his purportedly democratic virtues.⁵⁶ A full-throated champion of the Athenian thesis, Pericles seduced, stoked, and mobilized a city ready to hear her talents catalogued and her victories assured. Much to his credit, the Athenians were not defeated by a better equipped or braver force during his lifetime. Yet as Plato would later have Socrates posit in his *Gorgias*, Pericles ultimately misled the *demos* by excising justice as a feature of their political judgment (515c-516d, 517b-c). Pericles never asked the assembly to assess policies on the basis of how well they would maximize justice or honor the terms of their Delian alliance; rather, he asked his fellow citizens to make their judgments on the basis of what was necessary to efficiently maintain their empire. In short, by making necessity and expedience the core

⁵⁴ Kagan (1991: 137).

⁵⁵ Ibid, 149.

⁵⁶ This aspect of my argument contributes to skepticism about Pericles’ vaunted place within Thucydides’ narrative. Palmer (1982a) questions the wisdom of Pericles’ advice to withdraw behind the Long Walls and rely on the navy because it demanded more moderation of the Athenians than they were willing to muster. Pericles’ strategy was, for Palmer, a reflection of how poorly he judged the Athenian people. Also see Westlake (1968: 2) In slight contrast, Monoson and Loriaux (1998: 290) read him as an intelligent but overconfident leader who resisted the “restraint provided by moral norms.” Foster (2010: 121) concurs, declaring that Pericles’ ambition and response to the acme of Athenian power “makes him symbolic for the tragedy of Athens and his age.” My argument adds to these by emphasizing both the restraining and motivating aspects of moral commitments.

standards of their political judgments, Pericles made the Athenians more vulnerable to the very contingency (*tuchē*) he thought their wealth and navy protected them from.

The Periclean approach to political judgment nevertheless warrants careful study because it sets the tone for Athenian decision-making throughout the war. Its defining feature is the primacy it awards to natural exceptionalism. Pericles was, to borrow Kagan's phrase, a "freakish" exception to the normal constraints of democratic politics: Thucydides does not record a single challenge to any of his policy proposals in a forum otherwise crowded with dissenting views.⁵⁷ Yet his leadership sat as uneasily with Athenian democratic ideals of political equality as the city's thalassocracy sat with Hellenic principles of autonomy and Delian League agreements of nominal equality between allies. Just as Pericles saw his influence as evidence of his unique political gifts, the Athenians regarded their empire as the reward for their natural superiority over those within their dominion to whom they also owed no explanation.⁵⁸ Their allies disagreed, consistently describing Athenian ambitions in the same language of enslavement (*katadoulosis*) otherwise reserved for the barbarians from whom Athens was supposed to protect them.⁵⁹ These contradictions threatened the tenability of democratic imperialism, yet were

⁵⁷ De Romilly (1979: 128, 141, 155) relies on the absence of vocal opposition to argue that Thucydides endorsed Pericles' moderate imperialism. While Thucydides clearly admired certain aspects of Pericles' personality, especially in the final years of his life, his decision to exclude dissenting voices hardly amounts to a fervent defense of Periclean ideals. It is also not quite right to say, as Monoson and Loriaux (1998: 286) put it, that Pericles is the "only speaker of the *History* whose words are never disputed by those of an adversary." Brasidas' address to the Akanthians (4.85-87) is received without question, as is Hermocrates' appeal for peace between the Kamarianaians and the Geloans (4.59-64). Rather, Pericles is the only *Athenian* speaker whose addresses are not contested. Even this claim deserves qualification, for Thucydides references, but does not reproduce, opposing viewpoints. It seems just as likely that Thucydides paid less attention to Pericles' dissenters because they simply had no material impact on Athenian political decisions.

⁵⁸ Pericles grounds his authority in his talents for judgment and persuasiveness within the assembly (2.60.7). Likewise, the Athenian assembly in Sparta defends their empire in terms of natural right and necessity, insisting that their superior strength frees them from legal constraints forced on subjects (1.74-75; 1.76.2; 1.77.2). Cf. 1.76.2, 2.41.3, 5.89, 6.83.2.

⁵⁹ See Strasburger (2009: 205).

simply rejected by Athens rather than resolved. Such resistance to critical reflection upon the choiceworthiness of their own political project plagued Athenian judgment throughout the war. Pericles was largely responsible for this condition.

Thucydides situates Pericles within the Athenian imperial project by introducing him during the *Pentakontaetia*.⁶⁰ The Athenians assumed control of the Delian League at the behest of smaller cities worried about the growing violence and ambition of Pausanias, the Spartan commander charged with patrolling the Persian border and repelling the Mede after the Persian War. Athenian hegemony was premised on the city's commitment to protecting her allies from barbarian or Hellenic threats in exchange for funding and ships (1.96).⁶¹ Almost as soon as he outlines the terms of this agreement, Thucydides reports that the Athenians routinely conflated military actions against the Mede and Peloponnesians with counter-revolutionary measures taken against allies chaffing under their dominion. Ostensibly attempting to protect their interests, the Athenians immediately perceived themselves as nascent imperialists besieged by enemies. Pericles is likewise shown as an enthusiastic enforcer of that imperial project, waging battles against the Sikyonians and Oiniadai in Akarnania (1.111). He also leads efforts to suppress rebellions in Euboea and Samos (1.114-1.115).

Despite his reputation for persuasiveness, Pericles does not attempt to resolve tensions within the League by means of diplomacy or reason. He instead becomes the face of Athenian aggression against the city's enemies and allies alike. As Edith Foster observes, Thucydides'

⁶⁰ The *Pentakontaetia* (1.89-118) – Thucydides' account of the fifty-year span between the conclusion of the Persian Wars and the beginning of the First Peloponnesian War – describes the formation the Delian League and the eventual tensions among its members.

⁶¹ The Delian treaty was premature. Spartan officials recalled Pausanias on charges of Median corruption shortly after it was agreed upon (1.95).

cursory review of Pericles' pre-war military record foreshadows the policies he advances in the assembly once the war has begun. "[Just] as the Athenians gave no quarter at Euboia and Samos," she writes, "and just as they discovered during the Euboian revolt that the Spartans were plotting against them, so (he will argue) they should give no quarter now, and should remember that the Spartans are the enemies of their empire."⁶² These remarks expose a contradiction between the forceful means by which Pericles holds the Delian League together and the way he perceives Athens' relationship with her allies. Whereas Pericles praises the city for her generosity among friends, Thucydides shows us that, in deed, Periclean Athens ruled her subject allies with greater violence than even Pausanias could muster.

Nowhere is the division between Pericles' ideal and actual Athens wider than in his funeral oration. Many contemporary theorists have read the oration as a statement of democratic values, a treatise on public mourning, a description of the relationship between citizen and polis, and as a piece of rhetoric so stirring that it inspired the Athenians to "[stiffen] their resolve to carry on" with a war effort that was not yielding conspicuously impressive results.⁶³ To one degree or another, it is all of these. A broad defense of Athenian exceptionalism, it is certainly the best known of Pericles' three main speeches in the text. Here it is especially noteworthy for its comments on judgment and the dynamic between Athens and her allies.

⁶² Foster (2010: 127).

⁶³ Kagan (2003: 74). On the democratic appeal of the speech, see Harris (1992); Andrews (2004). For a reflection on the speech's function as a declaration of public mourning, see Stow (2007). On the erotic relationship between citizen and polis, see Monoson (1994). Nicole Loraux (1986), who provides the most comprehensive analysis of the speech that I am aware of, argues that Pericles weaves all of these elements into the speech. Kagan's remarks instructively remind us of how important emotional priming was to Periclean rhetoric, especially in light of how conservatively – some might have thought inadequately – Athens performed in the first year of the war. See Bosworth (2000: 8-9).

After some preliminary remarks on the difficulty of adequately praising the city's fallen without inviting envy among the living, Pericles lists a number of virtues that set Athens apart from her neighbors. Among these he notes the citizenry's natural capacity for political judgment:

With us...people combine an interest in public and private matters, and those who are more involved in business are still well enough aware of political issues. In fact, we alone regard the person who fails to participate in public affairs not just as harmless but as positively useless; we are all personally involved either in actual political decisions or in deliberation about them, in the belief that it is not words which thwart effective action but rather the failure to inform action with discussion in advance. Indeed, in this too we are distinguished from others. We bring our ventures a very high degree of both daring and analysis, whereas for others their boldness comes from ignorance and analysis means paralysis. The bravest spirits are rightly judged to be those who see clearly just what perils and pleasures await them but do not on that account flinch from danger. (2.40.2-3)

The Athenians were known for appraising everything from poetry to military matters as the war progressed.⁶⁴ Contemporary historians speculate that the citizens assembled on the Pnyx would have had at least some combat experience upon which to base their decisions about the war.⁶⁵ Indeed, questions about logistical support or tactical arrangements might lend themselves to a hoplite's hard-earned intuitions, if not to a rower's. Those who experienced combat understood its dangers, moreover, and we might expect their judgments about whether or not to go to war to reflect that experience.⁶⁶ But the veracity of statements about the city's goals and reasons for fighting could not be judged by experience alone. Instead, these questions would demand

⁶⁴ Thucydides was critical of dramatic competitions as a means of ethical reflection, considering the "patriotic stories" of poets more distracting than educational (1.22). Cf. Rhodes (2003). This passage does, however, highlight political judgment as a practice of democratic citizenship that was every bit as important as willingness for self-sacrifice. In his first speech, Pericles emboldened the Athenians by depicting their victory over Persia as a victory of cunning and wise planning over sheer might: "By dint of good judgment rather than good fortune and through their courage rather than the might of power, they beat back the barbarian and brought us to our present state" (1.44.4).

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Hanson (2005). Thucydides' description of the city's younger population who, in their inexperience with war were eager to fight, disputes some of this claim. Given the number of citizens required to man the oars of the city's navy, along with the preparations taken to train them for combat, it is fair to assume that a great many of those voting for war would have to fight in it. This proportion is strikingly different from the current United States Congress in which roughly twenty percent of those elected are veterans. See Ornstein, et al. (2013).

⁶⁶ This was certainly Archidamos' justification for Spartan caution in matters of war (1.84). Though "wise and warlike," the Spartans did not rashly wage war for the opportunity to die nobly on the battlefield. Pericles distinguishes Athens from Sparta by denying any trade-offs between dynamic action and patient deliberation.

reflective deliberation about what Athens ought to represent, what her interests entailed, and how she ought to pursue her goals. At this point in the *History*, however, we have seen no such debate. The fact that no Athenian challenges Pericles' vision of the city suggests that the level of critical deliberation necessary to form such judgments was lacking during his tenure as the leading *stratēgos*.⁶⁷

Pericles next lauds the city for fighting as a single unit rather than relying on allies in combat. Unlike the Spartans, who invade Attica with their Peloponnesian allies, Athenians attack other lands by themselves and, though “fighting on the soil of others and against people defending their own homes,” usually conquer with ease (2.39.2). Instead of depending on friends for support, Pericles portrays Athens as a generous benefactor:

Our idea of doing good is unusual, too. We make our friends not by receiving favors but by conferring them. The benefactor is the stronger partner, as the one who through his favors maintains the debt of gratitude in the recipient, while the one who incurs the obligation has a weaker motive, knowing that he will repay the service not to win a favor but to return a debt. Finally, we alone have the courage to be benefactors not from a calculation of advantage but in the confidence of our freedom. (2.40.4-5)

This passage is significant for three reasons. First, it ignores the extent to which the city relied on her Delian allies to provide the material advantages Pericles first identified as the basis of Athenian naval supremacy.⁶⁸ The city's wealth, not her navy alone, was the source of her advantage and this was not possible without contributing allies. Second, Pericles characterizes the relationship between Athens and her allies as one secured through gratitude. Even for an audience prepared to hear themselves lionized by a great orator, this claim must have struck an

⁶⁷ It is noteworthy that while Thucydides reports of dissenting views, he does not record them. This suggests that while there was certainly some dissent during Pericles' tenure, none of the obstacles had a material impact – at least not in Thucydides' estimation – on the course of the war.

⁶⁸ As Pericles put it in his speech urging the Athenians to war: “Capital is what sustains a war rather than forced contributions... The main point, however, is that [the Spartans] will be hampered by their lack of money, since they are slow to generate it and are therefore subject to delays” (1.141.2, 1.142.1).

odd chord. For had the city's allies been comfortable with their alliance, Pericles' military service, consisting as it did in the suppression of anti-Athenian revolts, would not have been required. Finally, Pericles forecloses on the possibility of ethical or material equality between Athens and her allies. Greek conventions recognized equality as a vital feature of genuine friendship and moral standing. By casting Athens as a city that does not need such friends, and whose hegemony may even be threatened by them, he also renounces the normative demands that these relationships would place upon her.

Though Pericles often speaks of Athenian obedience to law, his funeral speech never mentions justice *per se*.⁶⁹ It is the law that ensures contracts and regulates public behavior (2.37), not justice.⁷⁰ This conspicuous omission underscores the extent to which imperial Athens, even in her most stylized rendering, does not take justice seriously as a factor in political judgment with respect to foreign affairs. With decision-making stripped of normative demands, political judgments are reduced to fickle assessments of vaguely defined material interests. Never again shall statesmen like Diodotus or Nicias appeal to justice as they caution the assembly against rash decisions. Likewise, Cleon and Alcibiades will be free to contort the concept of justice to

⁶⁹ Heath (1990: 388) notes that the only time Pericles ever mentions justice (1.144.2), it is only in reference to Athens' treaty with Sparta, and even there carries a legalistic – rather than normative – tone.

⁷⁰ More specifically, Athenian obedience to law is not derived from any intrinsic value that citizens place in it, nor even from a rational expectation of instrumental benefits that follow from law-and-order governance. Instead, Athenians obey the law out of fear of public censure or respect for authority: "A spirit of freedom governs our conduct, not only in public affairs but also in managing the small tensions of everyday life, where we show no animosity at our neighbors' choice of pleasures, nor cast aspersions that may hurt even if they do no harm. Although we associate as individuals in this tolerant spirit, in public affairs fear (*deos*) makes us the most severely law-abiding of people, obedient to whoever is in authority and to the laws, especially those established to help the victims of injustice and those laws which, though unwritten, carry the sanction of public disgrace" (2.37.2-3). As we see in Thucydides' description of the plague following Pericles' speech, public commitment to the law dissolves once fears of official punishment or social censure are removed.

suit their own ends, unmoored as the principle was from any clear definition. It was Pericles who, in his most shining moment, gave them license to do so.

Thucydides highlights the fragility of law and policy without justice by immediately following Pericles' funeral oration with an account of the Athenian plague. While some citizens unfairly blamed Pericles for the plague itself, most were right that his policies exacerbated its toll on the city. Taking his earlier advice, the Athenians began the war by recalling their rural population behind the safety of fortifications surrounding the city's urban centers. The evacuees, few of whom would have had much prior contact with their urban peers, spent the first two years of the war living as refugees in the cramped quarters of an unfamiliar city while watching Peloponnesian raiders burn their homes and crops.⁷¹ When the plague came it spread quickly throughout the congested city, defying all human efforts (*anthrōpīa technai*) to assuage its symptoms or predict its patterns.⁷² Thucydides catalogues its gruesome effects, observing that "the most terrible thing of all about this affliction...was the sense of despair (*athūmia*) when someone realized that they were suffering from it; for then they immediately decided in their own minds that the outcome was hopeless (*anelpīste*) and they were much more likely to give themselves up to it rather than resist" (2.51.4).⁷³ Though survivors were made more

⁷¹ As Bosworth (2000: 7) describes it, "For them the city was unwelcoming, profoundly uncomfortable, and a constant reminder that they were suffering out of all proportion if compared with the population normally resident in or around Athens." Thucydides reports that the rural population was indeed the worst afflicted because of especially poor housing and sanitation (2.52.2.). Yet Pericles was apparently blind to the importance of property to Athenian public and private life. His strategy cautioned against Athenians acquiring new territory during the war while renouncing the importance of personal possessions to the point of ruining their own landholdings in a show of resolve (1.143.5).

⁷² Thucydides' description of the plague, much like his purpose for writing the *History* more broadly, is intended to "enable anyone investigating any future outbreak to have some prior knowledge and recognize it" (2.48.3). Symptoms manifested themselves differently in each patient (2.50.1, 2.51.1), treatments that helped some harmed others (2.51.2), and no one's constitution proved more or less resistant to it (2.49.2).

⁷³ On the complex importance of hope to Athenian political psychology, see Schlosser (2013). Though baseless hope often feeds the pleonexia that ultimately undoes the Athenian war-effort, Schlosser also notes, especially with

compassionate by their experience, the general malaise hanging about the plague-stricken city soon gave way to “other forms of lawlessness” (*anoumīa*) (2.53.1) as citizens, suddenly aware of their mortality, indulged in immediate pleasures. As Thucydides describes it:

They therefore resolved to exploit these opportunities for enjoyment quickly, regarding their lives and their property as equally ephemeral... Whatever gave immediate pleasure or in any way facilitated it became the standard of what was good and useful. Neither fear of the gods nor law of man was any restraint: they judged (*krinontes*) it made no difference whether or not they showed them respect, seeing that everyone died just the same; on the contrary, no one expected to live long enough to go on trial and pay the penalty, feeling that a far worse sentence had already been passed and was hanging over their heads, and that it was only reasonable to get some enjoyment from life before it finally fell on them. (2.53.2-4)⁷⁴

Leo Strauss reads the scene as Thucydides’ effort to subvert the funeral oration’s vision of immortal Athenian glory by juxtaposing it with a vivid account of corporeal human suffering.⁷⁵

Orwin extends Strauss’s argument in his comparative analysis of the Corcyraean *stasis* and the plague narrative, proposing that “political life depends on hopes and fears of the future, and therefore on the expectation of one.”⁷⁶ By cutting even strong lives short, the plague cast doubt on whether anyone would live long enough to accomplish praiseworthy goals, thereby removing incentives to perform them.

Strauss and Orwin are correct to highlight the corporeal themes captured in the plague narrative, but their interpretation is limited and slightly misplaced. As Orwin puts it, “The plague displays the abyss that yawns when men can no longer see the city for their bodies. The prospect of imminent death spurs men to live in and for the moment; but the moment inevitably eclipses

respect to the Sicilian campaign’s bloody conclusion, that hope (*elpis*) fortifies people against despair. Losing hope indicates both a shift in Athenian character as well as a depressive distortion of the city’s political judgment.

⁷⁴ Following Orwin (1988) it is useful to compare Thucydides’ account with the language used in his description of the Corcyraean civil war (3.82-83), esp. 3.82.2, 3.82.4-6.

⁷⁵ Strauss (1964: 194-5).

⁷⁶ Orwin (1988: 844).

the city.”⁷⁷ Here, Orwin understands the narrative as Thucydides’ critique of materialistic Athenians who failed to embody Homeric qualities of self-sacrifice such as we see in figures like Hector. Yet the plague does not offer the prospect of death any more imminently than battle; instead, it offers the prospect of meaningless, pointless death.⁷⁸ Thucydides does not report Athenians fearing bloody diarrhea or amputated fingers but rather the random likelihood of survival. Orwin is therefore closer to the mark when he uses the plague and *stasis* narratives as examples of how subject to chance and contingency human plans ultimately are.⁷⁹ Yet even here, the two episodes make different thematic points. If, as noted above, the Corcyrean *stasis* altered polis life by reversing “the usual values in the application of words to actions” (3.82.4), the plague stripped meaning from words altogether: “Indeed, the form (*eidos*) of the disease is an occurrence (*genomenon*) greater (*kreisson*) than any account (*logou*)” (2.50.1). Seeing that virtue made no appreciable difference in the morbidity rate (2.51.4), and that lawlessness would go unpunished, many simply adopted a hedonic standard against which to judge an action’s value. In doing so, the Athenians revealed how weakly they regarded virtue when stripped of its immediate instrumental benefits while simultaneously abandoning any of the long-term interests Pericles had praised them for understanding so naturally. In other words, the plague scene does

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting that the plague persists unabated for two more years and recurs throughout the *History*. Athenians continue to fight, of course, suggesting that if this moment does indeed “eclipse the city” it only does so for a short while to the degree Thucydides describes it.

⁷⁹ Orwin’s emphasis on chance and contingency neglects the extent to which Periclean policies were responsible for much of the plague’s devastation. Again, had Pericles not concentrated so much of the city’s population within the city, far fewer would have died when the plague finally came. Rather than teaching readers a lesson in the frailty of human planning, as Orwin suggests, we might do better to see the plague as a consequence of poor political and strategic decision-making on the part of Pericles.

not introduce materialism into Periclean politics; it reveals that materialism was all that Periclean politics ever amounted to. Pericles severely misjudged his fellow citizens in this regard.

Depleted and exhausted, the *demos* began to criticize Pericles for having persuaded them to wage war in the first place. Pericles predicted such a turn of events in his first speech.⁸⁰ When he calls a meeting of the assembly, then, he announces his intention “to administer some reminders to [his audience] and take [them] to task for any misplaced resentment against [himself] or any undue weakening in the face of difficulties” (2.60.1). We have come to expect this from Pericles. On one hand, he is savvy enough to the emotional temperament of the populace to recognize when and how to address them. He appreciates how the devastation of the plague has colored the Athenians’ judgment just as he appreciated how their material superiority prior to the war – which his first speech only sought to reinforce – rendered them overly optimistic. His sensitivity bears the mark of a populist statesman who acknowledges that his political influence is rooted in the support of the citizenry.⁸¹ On the other hand, his speech fails to address the most damning effect of the plague, namely its erosion of the civic trust holding the polis together.

Pericles’ final speech is an argument about persuasion, responsibility, and democratic decision-making. He begins by repeating his earlier sketch of the citizens’ relationship to the polis, insisting that individual pursuits are only meaningful when understood within a communal context. A man can suffer private failings provided his community endures; likewise, a man can enjoy private success, “but if his country is destroyed he nonetheless falls with her” (2.60.3; cf.

⁸⁰ See 1.40.1.

⁸¹ Pericles is also sensitive to the *demos*’ desire for a scapegoat upon whom they can focus their wrath. Remarkably, despite his profound influence, Pericles was never ostracized from Athens. This prompted Cratinus (frag. 73; cf. Plutarch 2012:13.9) to joke that Pericles was the man whom “the *ostrakon* has passed over” Perhaps ironically, at this moment Pericles finds himself in much the same position that Socrates finds himself in during his *apologia*.

2.43.1). Unlike the forebears he praised in his previous speech, men who “gave their lives to the common cause” (2.43.2), the Athenians he now addresses have, under the pressures of “domestic misfortunes,” sacrificed their “common security” (2.60.4).⁸² Though Pericles is the object of collective derision, he insists that the city should ultimately bear the blame for these misfortunes: “If you were persuaded by me to go to war because you believed me to be at least to some degree better qualified than others in [offering loyal advice], then I cannot reasonably now be blamed for anything like misconduct” (2.60.7). These remarks raise troubling questions about leadership and responsibility. Thucydides gives no evidence that Pericles willfully mislead the assembly, yet his faith in capital as the deciding factor in war wrongly diminished fortune’s part in shaping such matters.⁸³ Whether because of hubris or ignorance, Pericles’ judgment had failed. But do the shortcomings of the city’s “first man” absolve the city herself of blame for their misfortunes?

Thucydides seems not to think so for reasons that become clearer in later episodes. He reports that Pericles was punished with a fine but subsequently reelected as *stratēgos* despite lasting hardships. In a warm appraisal of Pericles’ service, Thucydides opines that “under him [Athens] reached the height of her greatness,” contending that “after the war broke out he then too showed himself a far-sighted judge of the city’s strengths” (2.65.5).⁸⁴ Posterity would also validate his conservative strategy which, Thucydides thinks but does not explain, would have

⁸² The latter is a reference to efforts by some to negotiate peace settlements with Sparta (2.59.2).

⁸³ This is a point of contrast between Pericles, who thought Athenian resources and ingenuity could overcome all contingencies, and Archidamos, who was perhaps too sensitive to luck in combat.

⁸⁴ Notice, however, that he does not here credit Pericles with accurately assessing the city’s weaknesses. Thucydides suggests in the following lines that Pericles was aware of Athenian ambitions for expansion and so cautioned them against extending their reach during the war.

brought victory had it been followed.⁸⁵ “But they did just the opposite of this in every way,” he writes, “and in other respects apparently unconnected with the war they were led by private ambition and personal greed to pursue policies that proved harmful both to themselves and to their allies” (2.65.7). Again, unlike later statesmen who had to compete not only against each other but also for the attention of the assembly, Pericles could “through his personal ability, his judgment and his evident integrity...freely restrain the masses” (2.65.8). Contra Plato, Thucydides insists that Pericles led the *demos* more than he was led by them: “That is, he did not say things just to please them in an unseemly pursuit of power, but owed his influence to his personal distinction and so could face their anger and contradict them” (2.65.8; Cf. *Gorgias* 503c-d, 517b-c). “What was in name a democracy,” he concludes, “was in practice government by the foremost man” (2.65.9). Taken together, we are to understand that Pericles’ personal integrity and strategic instincts were such that the Athenian empire could have survived even without – and perhaps at the expense of – democratic deliberation. It was only when the *demos* strayed from Pericles’ course that they found themselves in trouble.⁸⁶

Thucydides’ encomium to Pericles is the strongest evidence of the historian’s partiality toward the general. I do not doubt that the sentiments expressed therein are genuine. However, I stress that the qualities that Thucydides praises in Pericles the man should count against the model of Periclean judgment. I have argued that Periclean policy was vaguely envisioned and imperfectly executed; yet even if one takes a more favorable view of Pericles’ strategy, his model of exceptional judgment remains deeply flawed within a democracy. Thucydides blames

⁸⁵ Mynott (2013: 130, fn. 2) complains that “one would have like examples to explain the judgments here and at 65.10 and .11” noting the fifteen-year gap between Pericles’ death and the disastrous Sicilian expedition that most obviously flouted Pericles’ advice.

⁸⁶ In this, Thucydides may be read to confirm Plato’s Socrates, who insists that Pericles – like Themistocles and Cimon – excelled at giving the Athenians dockyards and public works, but failed to improve their souls or decision-making ability. See *Gorgias* 516a-517c.

Athenian failures on the selfish designs of less exceptional politicians who struggled with one another to assert their exceptionalism. Put simply, Pericles' successors failed Athens because they were pursuing Periclean status – “government by the foremost man” – rather than a vision of collective virtue. Pericles contributed to that state of affairs in two ways. First, he weakened institutional checks on the power of the popular assembly, making eloquence a precondition for politics in the process. Second, he failed to cultivate a climate of critical inquiry as a priority of democratic leadership, taking for granted that most Athenians were naturally capable of making sound decisions about complex matters. The combination of these steps resulted in an empowered but uncritical citizenry vulnerable to demagoguery.

1.2 Justice versus Interests: The Mytilenean Debate

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguishes forensic from deliberative oratory by observing that the two styles aim at different ends. While forensic oratory aims at justice, the deliberative orator assesses a policy on the basis of expedience: “if he urges its acceptance, he does so on the ground that it will do good; if he urges its rejection, he does so on the ground that it will do harm; and all other points, such as whether the proposal is just or unjust...he brings in as subsidiary and relative to this main consideration” (*Rhet.* 1358b21-25). Though Aristotle does not clearly endorse this distinction, Thucydides indicates that there was precedent for it in the Athens of his own day.⁸⁷ The Athenian thesis treats justice and material advantage as discrete categories of political judgment, reserving the former for domestic politics while privileging the latter in foreign relations. That distinction is only intelligible if we assume a cleavage between what is ethically choiceworthy and what is materially advantageous. As I argue in later chapters, Plato's Socrates challenges that assumption by insisting that material interests are only

⁸⁷ For rhetorical distinctions, see Connor (1984: 84).

choiceworthy insofar as they accord with robust principles of justice. I shall also argue that Aristotle's account of *phronēsis* arrives at the same conclusion. In the next two sections of this chapter, I propose that we look to the *History* for examples of how decoupling morality from advantage can result in poorly reasoned decisions with potentially disastrous consequences

One such example is the debate between Cleon and Diodotus over the fate of Mytilene in 428. The second of two discussions over how Athens ought to punish her rebellious ally, the Mytilenean debate features two extreme views competing for democratic approval. On one hand, Cleon's impassioned appeal to what David Cohen describes as "primitive criminal justice" encourages the assembly to ruthlessly exterminate Mytilene in a muscular show of imperial vengeance.⁸⁸ Diodotus, on the other hand, discourages the assembly from rash judgments. He urges them to spare those Mytileneans who did not participate in the revolt on the grounds that doing so advances Athenian interests: Athens should demonstrate compassion, but only because it will play well to her allies and strengthen her hand within the empire. Diodotus (barely) wins the day, but Cleon will go on to greater dominance within the assembly by supporting increasingly violent policies. The Mytilenean debate does not, therefore, capture a moment in which deliberation won out against demagogic calls for vindictive justice so much as a moment in which considerations of justice and interests permanently diverge in Athenian deliberations and political judgments. If Gomme is right to remark that the contest between Cleon and Diodotus is "as much about how to conduct debate in the *ekklesia* as it is about the fate of Mytilene," then this is a moment with devastating ramifications.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Cohen (1984: 46).

⁸⁹ Gomme (1956: 315).

Thucydides reports that the Mytilenean revolt surprised many in Athens, as the Lesbian city had enjoyed greater autonomy than most other Delian allies. Despite their relative autonomy, many in Mytilene resented Athenian influence even before the war, and soon looked to Sparta for help with an uprising as the Peloponnesian War spread throughout Greece.⁹⁰ The Mytilenean envoy's speech at Sparta is sensitive to how unseemly their timing might appear: "when men revolt in wartime and desert their previous alliance, those who receive them view them favorably to the extent that they are of service but think less of them for being traitors to their former friends" (3.9.1).⁹¹ The envoys frame their rebellion as an act of principle rather than of opportunity. Instead of emphasizing their practical utility to Sparta's war effort, they offer a speech about justice and friendship:

[Neither] friendships between individuals nor collaboration between states can be in any way well-founded unless the relationship is based on an assumption of good faith (*dokouses arētes*) on both sides... We did not become allies of the Athenians for the enslavement of the Greeks, but we became allies of the Greeks for their liberation from the Persians. As long as they exercised their leadership on a basis of equality we were very willing followers; but when we saw them relaxing their efforts against the Persians and becoming bent on the subjection of their allies we began to lose confidence... We no longer thought of the Athenians as trusted leaders, since it seemed unlikely that men who had subjugated our fellow allies, protected though we all were by treaty, would not deal with the rest of us the same way if they ever had the power to do so... If we had all of us remained independent we would have felt more assurance that they would do nothing to force a change in the relationship ... Equivalence in the balance of fear is the only basis for trust in an alliance; for then the part that wants to break faith in some way is deterred from doing so by not having the advantage for any aggression. (3.10.1-11.2)

⁹⁰ The parallels between their appeal and the Corcyraeans' proposed alliance with Athens before the war are striking. Cf. 3.9.1 with 1.32-41.

⁹¹ It is worth comparing the Mytilenean speech with Alcibiades' address to the Spartans in the winter of 415/414, especially for its justification of defection. Like the Mytileneans, Alcibiades justifies his defection by arguing that the Athenians drove him away by distrusting his loyalty: "The worse enemies are not those like you [Spartans] who do their enemies some harm, but those who force their friends to become enemies. My loyalty is not to a city where I am being wronged but to one in which I was secure in my role as a citizen" (6.92.3-4).

It was not the Mytileneans but the Athenians who violated the treaty when they enslaved their allies and ruled through coercion rather than justice, thereby freeing their subjects to preemptively defect in the name of autonomy.⁹² Because the Mytileneans could not trust the Athenians as friends, they could not trust them as leaders who would preserve their freedom. Furthermore, the asymmetry between Mytilenean and Athenian military powers disturbed the material equality necessary for mutual respect between the two cities, hardening differences over the nature of their alliance into a fixed antagonism. By couching their appeal in this language, the Mytileneans ally themselves in spirit with the Peloponnesian League. They give the impression that Athens has abrogated her moral and material commitments and has disrupted the status quo in the process. The Spartans agree, but to no avail. They delay sending support for the rebelling Mytileneans, who, blockaded by an Athenian fleet, subsequently surrender to the Athenians who angrily condemn their city to destruction.

The public exchange we call the Mytilenean Debate takes place the day after the assembly initially voted in favor of eradicating its erstwhile ally. Thucydides reports that the Athenians awoke remorseful of their rash decision the day earlier and so convened to reconsider the sentence, which was slowly making its way to Paches in Lesbos. The assembly's initial decision was complicated by several factors. First, the war-weary and plague-stricken Athenians were at first reluctant to believe the earliest news of Mytilenean machinations, and Thucydides recalls that many dismissed the initial reports out of hand (3.3.1). As Josiah Ober insightfully notes, their early denial of the facts on the ground should remind readers that the assembly did not benefit from the historian's omniscient perspective; rather, the Athenians "interpreted what

⁹² "We did not ally ourselves with the Athenians for enslavement of the Hellenes, however, but with the Hellenes for freedom from the Medes...We no longer considered the Athenians leaders we trusted, going by the example of what had already happened; it was not likely that they would have subjugated those they had bound themselves to by treaty and not have done that to us if it had ever been within their power" (3.10.3, 5).

they heard according to their own self-interested preferences, and they rejected the truth-value of unpleasant news.”⁹³ By the time their navy moved to suppress the rebellion, Athens was already reacting to events rather than driving them. Their suppression of the uprising introduces a second set of complicating factors. Though the Athenian navy dwarfed its Mytilenean counterpart, Mytilene was still an imposing presence on Lesbos. Without Spartan assistance, of course, the Mytileneans had no reasonable hope of successful rebellion; yet their resistance could have proved costly to Athenians who would prefer to spend their resources elsewhere. Athens was spared this expense thanks mostly to Mytilenean democrats who – for reasons unrelated to Athens – turned on the rebellious oligarchs once they were armed. Thucydides does not clarify how many Athenians knew this, but we must not discount the role that anxiety and paranoia played in shaping the assembly’s political judgment four years in to an increasingly brutal and expensive war. Any speaker approaching his fellow citizens would have to remain sensitive to this affective dimension of their political judgment if he was to influence their decision.

Cleon speaks first. A notoriously hawkish and popular speaker, he thinks the assembly was justified in its initial decision to raze Mytilene.⁹⁴ Now that support for that brutal decision is flagging, he seeks to recommit the assemblymen to the death sentence he had earlier persuaded them to adopt (3.36.6). He begins by admonishing their wavering judgment, using it as evidence of the democracy’s inability to rule an empire.⁹⁵ “The most dire prospect of all,” he warns, “is if

⁹³ Ober (1998: 95).

⁹⁴ Thucydides’ contempt for Cleon is well documented in the secondary literature, leading many to question his impartiality. See, e.g., Woodhead (1960); Grote (2001). Here, Cleon had persuaded the Athenians to execute the entire male population of Mytilene as well as to enslave all of the women and children (3.36.2). Thucydides notes throughout his report that the Athenians were furious while making these decisions, writing that they questioned their judgment the very next day.

⁹⁵ The parallels between Cleon’s address and Pericles’ arguments in favor of war are well drawn. See, e.g., Marshall (1984); Cartwright (1997).

none of our decisions remain firm” (3.37.3). Consistency is important because Athens is besieged on all sides by potential threats, and even bad laws, when consistently enforced, serve the city better than good laws irregularly applied. He warns that the assemblymen’s domestic comfort deludes them into a state of false security; in reality, Athens is surrounded by would-be enemies bristling under her dominion. The assembly also faces domestic threats from undisciplined intellectuals who “always want to appear wiser than the laws and to outdo any proposals made in the public interest” (3.37.4). He asks the Athenians to protect themselves by behaving as good citizens who, doubtful of their own intelligence, content themselves with applying the laws regardless of what “perverse advice” orators might offer them (3.37.4-5).⁹⁶ This is a strange request to make of an assembly that Pericles had earlier praised for bringing courage and careful analysis to all of their foreign endeavors. This is also a braver argument than most commentators admit. Cleon is the first Athenian recorded in the *History* to raise doubts about his audience’s native intelligence, and is second only to Pericles in bluntly acknowledging his empire’s unpopularity. Yet his advice in the face of uncertainty is to double down on imperial brutality. For him, policies should be judged exclusively by how consistently they advance control, untroubled by questions about the wisdom of the ends to which they are set.

After accusing anyone who would like to reexamine the Mytilenean decision of corruption and berating the assembly for judging policy on the strength of good performances rather than good advice, Cleon finally arrives at his main thesis: Mytilene misjudged her own strength, broke her alliance with Athens, and now justly deserves punishment. There are good

⁹⁶ Cleon’s rhetoric evinces a strong anti-intellectual current throughout, but his criticism of the assembly’s love of epideictic rhetoric bears a kernel of prudence. As Edward Harris (2013) reminds us, epideictic was a competitive form of rhetoric in which speakers often demonstrated their wit by proving intentionally outrageous paradoxes. By urging them to act as judges (*kritai*) rather than spectators (*theatai*) he is also asking them to take a more active role in deciding public policy.

strategic reasons for destroying the entire city, as imposing the same penalty on those who willfully revolt as on those who are forced to do so by the enemy will reduce the likelihood of defection in both cases. Punishing Mytilene with destruction thus serves Athenian imperial interests while satisfying the demands of justice (3.40.4). Cleon supports the normative choiceworthiness of his position by distorting the conventional definition of justice to reflect Athens' tyrannical position among her neighbors. Conventions bidding Greeks to aid friends and harm enemies presuppose that one first has friends to help. Yet echoing the Mytilenean appeal to Sparta, he insists that hegemonic Athens can have no equals and thus no friends (3.37.2). She must consequently regard all outsiders as potential nemeses (*polemioi*) and treat them accordingly. By showing how Mytilene is, in fact, "the single city that has done [Athens] the most harm," Cleon hopes to persuade the assembly that its punishment is the most just and expedient policy.

Cleon finds enemies in all corners of the Athenian empire and beyond. Though perhaps paranoid, he may yet have a point. Again, Mytilene was granted the most freedom of any other city in the alliance and revolted just the same (3.40.4).⁹⁷ Cleon's argument therefore hinges on persuading the assembly that because they appeared to be allies, the Mytileneans are in fact the most dangerous kind of enemy. He extrapolates from this case a broader point that Athens can trust no one. His closing words underscore the point most forcefully:

Do not, therefore, be traitors to your own cause. Recall as closely as you can how you felt then and how you would have given anything then to beat them...Punish them as they deserve and give the other allies a clear warning that anyone who revolts is punished with death. If they come to realize this, you will be less distracted from your enemies by having to fight your own allies. (3.40.7)

⁹⁷ It is especially clear from this that Cleon's justice is essentially retributive. See Orwin (1984: 487).

Abstaining from punishment would be its own act of self-inflicted injustice insofar as the city had been gravely harmed and must therefore seek redress. If the assemblymen would only recall their previous emotional state of hurt and anger, they would recognize this harmony between their intuitions and expediency. If Cleon is persuasive, their judgments should reflect that consideration.

Cleon's is a strongly affective speech intended above all to animate the assembly. It is tempting to read his oratory as an example of the kind of enflamed demagoguery that Thucydides worried might threaten the democracy.⁹⁸ Indeed, to the extent that Thucydides portrays him as a sham Pericles, we might interpret Cleon's emotional but unreasonable speech as an example of debased Athenian rhetoric.⁹⁹ But Cleon is not appealing to emotion so much as he is trying to shape it; he shames the assemblymen for their pity while trying to rekindle their anger. He is, to paraphrase Aristotle, trying to warp the assembly's collective straightedge – its judgment – before asking it to decide the case.¹⁰⁰ From this perspective we see that Cleon takes emotion and commonsense no more seriously than he takes justice as measures of good political

⁹⁸ Writing on affective speech in the post-revolutionary American context, Jason Frank (2010: 78) eloquently describes it as “the element of communication that resonates with clusters of sub-representational and pre-cognitive forces in the body, though not with ‘natural’ or ‘instinctive’ forces somehow untouched by historicity or cultural organizations.” For commentary on Thucydides' apprehension about the effectiveness of affective rhetoric in the Mytilenean debate, see Andrewes (1962: 75-76).

⁹⁹ The rhetorical parallels between Pericles and Cleon are prominent and well-noted in the secondary literature. For instance, we can hear echoes of Pericles' emphasis on consistency at 1.140.1, 2.13.2 and especially at 2.61.2 in Cleon's insistence that he has not changed his mind about Mytilene at 3.38.1, where he borrows much of the same language. We find the same pattern in Cleon's depiction of the Athenian empire as an unjustly gotten tyranny that is nevertheless dangerous to lose (3.37.2, 3.40.4) that we initially found in Pericles' description of the Athenian imperial dilemma (2.63.2).

¹⁰⁰ *Rhetoric* (1354a25). Unlike Plato, who regarded all rhetorical practice as evidence of sophistry, Aristotle recognized that rhetoric had a place in political deliberation, but thought the high stakes of such discussions would mitigate the kind of grandstanding we see from Cleon.

judgment. Cleon manipulates all of these in order to commit the assembly quickly and firmly to a rash course of action into which he has invested much personal credibility.¹⁰¹

Whereas Cleon urges haste, Diodotus cautions restraint. “The two things I consider most prejudicial to good counsel are haste and high emotion,” he begins, “the later usually goes with folly, the former with crude and shallow judgment” (3.42.1). Diodotus finds Cleon’s marriage between justice and expediency incongruous. His counter-argument redirects the assembly’s attention to its own strictly material interests. Before turning to the substantive issue of Mytilene, however, he issues a broader critique of Athenian deliberation and judgment. Cleon has accused anyone wishing to reexamine the Mytilene question of having accepted bribes, a common tactic meant to bruise his opponents’ reputation and to sow seeds of distrust among the assembly.¹⁰² Diodotus implores his audience to see how that dynamic hinders the city’s political judgment:

The good citizen should want to prove the better speaker, not by intimidating his opponents but in a fair debate. In the same way, the prudent city should not keep conferring fresh honors on the person who regularly gives it good advice, but neither should it detract from those he already has; and the speaker who fails to win assent should not only not be punished but should not be held in any less respect either...Our actual practice is just the opposite of this...It has therefore come about that good advice honestly given has become as suspect as bad, and the result is that just as the person who wants to urge some dire proposal resorts to deceit to win over the people, so the person with better policies must lie to be credible. This is therefore the only city so clever that it is impossible to do good here openly and without deceit. (3.42.5, 43.1-3).

Conditions within the assembly are not conducive to honest deliberation. By rewarding persuasive speakers and punishing those who are less convincing, the Athenians have deprived themselves of two essential features of good decision-making: honest counsel and dissenting

¹⁰¹ It is difficult to read Cleon’s arguments in the Mytilenean debate free from the prejudice of Thucydides’ final judgment of the orator, whom he insists exacerbated the war in order to cover up his nefarious slander and misdeeds (5.16.1).

¹⁰² I shall return to relationship between a speaker’s reputation and his persuasiveness in Chapter 4.

opinion. Any speaker wishing to give his best advice must be cagey about it, and this diminishes the full array of policy options available to the assembly's appraisal.¹⁰³ Taken in context, Diodotus is of course rebutting Cleon's effort to smear him; yet the passage also supports Cleon's earlier criticism of the assembly as a gathering of theatergoers rather than of serious-minded citizens.¹⁰⁴ Worse still, the assembly will punish even the most persuasive speaker if his advice turns out to have been wrong. Echoing Pericles' final speech, Diodotus concludes his opening on a critical note: "when things go wrong you punish the single judgment of your adviser, not the multiple judgments on all your own parts that were implicated in the same error" (3.43.5).¹⁰⁵ Here, Diodotus departs from Cleon by reminding the assembly of its civic role and the responsibility it ought to bear for decisions made in its name while providing, as Arlene Saxonhouse describes it, a "vision of a city" where pretenses to deception are not necessary.¹⁰⁶

Having established the difficult task before him, Diodotus posits advantage as the single criterion by which the assembly should decide on the Mytilene question. "The debate, if we are sensible," he says, "is not about their guilt but about the right planning for ourselves" (3.44.1).¹⁰⁷ He advises the city to consider more carefully who among the Mytileneans should be punished and who spared. Once armed, after all, the city's democratic sympathizers turned on the

¹⁰³ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1354b22-24).

¹⁰⁴ We shall see a similar argument from Plato's Socrates in Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁵ For further discussion on this point, see Gomme (1956: 313) and Ostwald (1979: 9).

¹⁰⁶ Saxonhouse (2006: 157).

¹⁰⁷ It is useful to compare Diodotus' language with Hermocrates' effort to persuade Sicily to unite against Athens: "If we are sensible (*kaitoi gnōnai*), we should recognize that our conference will not be concerned only with our separate interests (*idiōn monon*), but with whether we can still secure the safety of Sicily as a whole" (4.60.1). Connor (1984: 84) argues that because Diodotus does not feel that he can appeal to a competing formulation of right and wrong (*to dikaion*), he instead appeals to advantage (*to xympheron*) and manipulates the deliberative setting to justify his approach.

rebellious oligarchs.¹⁰⁸ Punishing these friends as though they were enemies would suggest that there was no value in remaining loyal to Athens. He says it would be disadvantageous to treat them harshly; he does not say that it would be unjust. In fact, Diodotus does not contest Cleon's retributive notion of justice at all in his counter-argument, suggesting that his milder proposal is motivated by a commitment to realist conceptions of material advantage rather than by the tacit normative principles many have attributed to him.¹⁰⁹

Diodotus persuades the assembly to spare most of the city, but his manner of doing so is less than satisfying. Following Connor, and mindful of Diodotus' prologue, we might attribute our dissatisfaction to his blatant misrepresentation of the case.¹¹⁰ Diodotus does not so much persuade the assembly as deceive it. The counter-revolutionary democrats who prevented the uprising were not acting on Athenian sympathies, as he suggests, but rather on their own interests. Diodotus also ignores the question of why the assembly regretted its decision in the first place. Surely the first ship was not "sailing without urgency for its horrible business" because it worried about harming Athenian interests alone (3.49.3). Instead, Thucydides indicates that the assembly recognized something intuitively disgraceful in its rash decision, thereby alerting us to a constructive affective aspect of judgment. Cleon criticized the Athenians for allowing their emotions to cloud their judgment; yet Diodotus might have challenged that point by insisting that their regret should motivate them question the wisdom of their initial judgment. By not pressing upon what this reflexive moment might suggest about the city's

¹⁰⁸ Diodotus misstates the facts in this depiction of the case, perhaps intentionally. The "democratic" mob used the threat of defection to Athens as leverage against the city's oligarchs in order to get grain, not because they were particularly sympathetic to Athens.

¹⁰⁹ See Heath (1990: 387).

¹¹⁰ Connor (1984: 88-89).

character, Diodotus leaves unaltered Cleon's portrait of Athens as a tyrant whose judgment is clouded by fear of friends as enemies. He thus provides it with no basis from which to correct future misjudgments. As if to underscore the point, Book Three closes on the Athenian decision to send an exploratory force to Sicily, thinking that war there would conclude quickly and serve as practice for the navy.

The Mytilenean debate is the first set of speeches following Pericles' death. Its placement within the narrative recalls Thucydides' eulogy for the statesman, lamenting Athenian decline at the hands of orators who "were more on an equal level with one another" and who were therefore inclined to compete for personal influence rather than to promote the city's best interests (2.65.5-10). This indictment, coupled with the uneasy resolution to the Mytilenean affair, would seem to confirm the impression of Thucydides as chiefly critical of Athens' democratic constitution. However, if I am right to suggest that even its purportedly wisest advisor, Pericles, was unable to teach the assembly how to judge better, we see that fault lies partly with the likes of Diodotus. Cleon's advice is objectionable on moral grounds: the problem with Athens is not that it is an ineffective tyrant, but that the city is beginning to act as a tyrant of any stripe. By failing to contest the wisdom of tyrannical foreign policy, Diodotus' advice actually serves to make it more tyrannical by clarifying its interests.¹¹¹ At best, he teaches Athens to think as a more prudent tyrant than as a reflective democracy. Even this lesson would be lost.

¹¹¹ In this way my interpretation departs from Saxonhouse (1996: 61), who reads Diodotus as the "real democratic theorist of Thucydides' history" because as he grapples with historical divisions within the city.

1.3. Tyrannical Calculus: The Sicilian Expedition

Twelve years after the Mytilenean debate, Athens was enjoying a tenuous peace with Sparta and sought to expand her empire westward. We know from Book One that the Corcyraean alliance was partly predicated on that city's coastal proximity to Sicily, indicating that Athens had eyed the island for some time (1.44). Yet despite an earlier series of campaigns (427-424 BCE), most Athenians knew ominously little of the place. Thucydides darkly recalls that most were unfamiliar with the island's size or its population "and were unaware that they were taking on a war almost on the same scale as the one against the Peloponnesians" (6.1.1).¹¹²

Foreshadowed since Book Two, the campaign's collapse in the summer of 413 – the narrative of the Sicilian defeat is surely among the worst slaughters recounted in any military history – appears, with the historian's hindsight, to have been inevitable. But the expedition's fate was not at all clear to the men who voted for it in 415. When an Egestan envoy approached Athens that year, the city felt more secure in her empire than at any time since the war with the Peloponnesians began. The further promise of Egestan wealth gave every impression that war in Sicily would provide an affordable opportunity for greater honor and imperial control. In short, the Sicilian expedition seemed, to those who decided on it, as sure a bet as any in the city's imperial history. Understanding how the Athenians arrived at their decision and explaining why it was wrongheaded is, I argue, one of the *History's* primary aims. It is perhaps curious, then, that Thucydides is not of a single mind on the subject.

¹¹² Thucydides underscores Athenian ignorance of Sicily by opening Book Six with a digression dedicated to the island's history that is similar to the archaeology of Book One (6.1.2-6.5). He describes Sicily as a large island – taking merchant ships took nearly eight days to circumnavigate – populated by barbarians as well as Greeks who settled there in Doric and Ionian waves. Though prone to earlier territorial disputes, it was more unified by 416 than this brief anthropological sketch might suggest.

In one sense, Thucydides considers the Sicilian expedition a misjudgment rooted in the careless adventurism of a willfully ignorant *demos*.¹¹³ Sicily was not only larger and more densely populated than most Athenians realized, but also unified under Syracusan hegemony. This should not have been news to Athens. As noted, the city dispatched twenty ships to Sicily to support a Leontine war against Syracuse in 427. Thucydides explains that Athens sent the ships to halt Sicilian grain shipments to the Peloponnesians and to test the possibility of “bringing affairs in Sicily under their control” (3.86.4). A series of bare reports scattered across three books tell of marginal victories, embarrassing setbacks and shifting political alliances (3.86, 88, 90, 99, 103, 115; 4.1-2, 24-25, 46, 48.6; 5.4-5).¹¹⁴ In the end, these early efforts only consolidated Syracusan hegemony when the Sicilians made peace amongst themselves in 424 (4.65.1).¹¹⁵ At a minimum, however, these events should have provided Athens with more than a passing familiarity with the island and its readiness for war. If Thucydides is right that the assembly had either forgotten about these earlier episodes or, especially of its younger members, never knew of them at all, then the Sicilian expedition exemplifies a category of misjudgments born of ignorance.

For opponents of imperialism, using the Sicilian expedition as shorthand for ignorant foreign policy remains attractive. Yet Thucydides also attributes the expedition’s failure to dysfunctional domestic politics. In Book Two, he writes that the expedition “was not so much a

¹¹³ For those who maintain that the decision to sail on Sicily itself was the greatest Athenian misjudgment of the war, see Liebeschütz (1968: 299-306), Gomme (1970), de Romilly (1979: 200), Ober (1998: 114-115).

¹¹⁴ See Rutter (1986) and Bosworth (1992) for detailed commentaries on the significance of these reports and their corroboration by other sources.

¹¹⁵ The generals who were then in charge of the Athenian contingent – Pythodorus, Sophocles and Eurymedon – were punished for failing to bring the island to heel. Thucydides suggests that the charges of bribery brought against the hapless generals were motivated by the city’s unreasonable expectation for easy victory (4.65.4). These charges contributed to Nicias’ own concern for his safety if he returned to Athens empty-handed (7.15.4, 48.4), and recall Diodotus’ worry that the assembly holds public men to unfair standards.

mistake of judgment about the enemy [Athens was] attacking as a failure on the part of those sending the men abroad to follow up this decision with further support for them” (2.65.11).¹¹⁶ “Instead,” he continues, “they engaged in personal intrigues over the leadership of the people and so blunted the effectiveness of the forces in the field and for the first time embroiled the city at home in factional turmoil.” This passage likely refers to the recall of Alcibiades, suggesting that the daring and inventive general could have capitalized on the expedition. Thucydides reinforces that impression in Book Seven, where he appears to agree with Demosthenes’ assessment that Nicias acted too cautiously at Syracuse and allowed the Spartans time to reinforce their Sicilian allies (7.42.3).¹¹⁷ On this view, the decision to sail may have been sound, but the judgments about its leaders may have been misplaced. That is, the Athenians may have been right to attack Sicily but were wrong about who they sent to do the attacking. Conversely, the Athenians may have been imprudent to sail on Sicily and even less wise in their choice of leadership. Thucydides’ wavering assessments of Nicias and Alcibiades – a complexity we do not see in his characterization of earlier figures – lend support for both hypotheses, adding a wrinkle to the narrative not captured in the Mytilenean debate.¹¹⁸

In a final sense, the problem was more normative than strategic in that it reflected the kind of pleonectic foreign policy that Thucydides uniformly critiques throughout the narrative.

¹¹⁶ This might seem surprising given the immense size of the initial fleet – 100 triremes, provisions to pay each sailor one drachma per day, sixty unmanned warships, forty transport ships, excellent staffs and the city’s best infantrymen (6.31.3), and an eventual force of 134 triremes, 5,100 hoplites, 700 slingers (all from Rhodes), 120 light-armed troops from Megara, and a horse-transport carrying thirty cavalry (6.43) – as well as initial reinforcements that included ten Athenian ships and 120 talents of silver in 414, plus an additional sixty Athenian ships, five more from Chios, and 1,200 Athenian hoplites under the command of Demosthenes the following spring.

¹¹⁷ See de Romilly (1979: 208). Syracuse had fallen into despair before Gyllipus arrives, as the Athenian force was recruiting more successfully and drawing on more reliable supply networks (6.103.2-3). Indeed, Gyllipus was operating under the assumption that Sicily had already fallen when he arrived (6.104).

¹¹⁸ Westlake (1968: 15) notes that Thucydides’ characterizations become more complex in later stages of the narrative, suggesting that this is a very late change to the historian’s style. See also de Romilly (1979).

We find evidence for this interpretation in the historian's estimation of why the Athenians wanted to sail on Sicily in the first place. For outside observers, the Athenians ostensibly campaigned in order to protect their distant kinsmen, the Egestans, from Syracusan hostility.¹¹⁹ In addition to recalling their earlier alliance, the Egestan envoy that approach Athens in 415 warned that an unchecked Syracuse would soon join with Sparta and revive the Peloponnesian War (6.6.2). The Egestans gave compelling arguments, but Thucydides is quick to disabuse his reader of the impression that supporting a distant ally was the campaign's "truest cause" (*alethestate prophasis*). He reports that Athens was "bent on campaigning" and that her "desire for complete conquest" really motivated her expedition (6.6.1). Alcibiades confirms this plan in a later speech to the Spartans, where he informs the world that Sicily was intended as the first target in a much larger effort to control Italy and Carthage before doubling back on the Peloponnesus in an imperial march toward Mediterranean conquest (6.90.2-4). Taken from this perspective, the expedition not only reflected the Athenians' imperial pleonexia but also demonstrated a pronounced break from Periclean strategic moderation.

Thucydides' analysis of the expedition's "truest cause" combines the analytical theme of Book One with the study of Athenian pleonexia established in the first five books of the *History*. Here, Thucydides wants his audience to understand the Sicilian campaign as a manifestation of extreme post-Periclean imperialism. Indeed, his description of everyone in the city as having "fallen in in love" (*kai erōs enepese*) with the voyage recalls the erotic language Pericles employed in his funeral oration, when he called upon the citizens to become lovers (*erastai*) of

¹¹⁹ The status of this alliance is somewhat shaky, as it refers both to the Athenian alliance with Leontini during Athens' first invasion of Sicily in 427, as well as to an ethnic Ionian affiliation that Thucydides explains only by attributing the foundation of Leontini to invaders from Naxos (6.3.3). See Bolmarcich (2011: 58-59) and Fragoulaki (2013: 298-9).

the city (6.24.3-4, 2.43.1).¹²⁰ Fourteen years after Pericles' death, the Athenians had gone from aspirational lovers of the city and her common good to lovers of themselves and their private interests. The decision to sail therefore typifies, among other things, the Athenian tendency to privilege private interests over the public good in political decision-making in the second half of the war.¹²¹ As Ober puts it, "Given the context of lust, misinformation, selfish individual interest, false pretexts, outright lies, corrupt rhetoric, and suppression of dissent in which the decision was made, it would be a great stroke of luck...for all to go well."¹²² The debate between Nicias and Alcibiades over the prospects of the expedition's success reflects these themes.

The debate between Nicias and Alcibiades over the wisdom of the Sicilian campaign took place in the summer of 415, five days after the city initially committed to the expedition. They were supposed to deliberate about how they would conduct the expedition, not to debate the prudence of the expedition itself. Nicias, the well regarded general "chosen against his wishes" (6.8.4) to lead the campaign, thought the expedition unwise and sought to dissuade the assembly from undertaking it. In a striking similarity to Diodotus' speech, his advice would appeal to Athens' material interests. But unlike Diodotus, Nicias did not have the city's emotions on his side. Thucydides gives little indication that the city was anything but enthusiastic about the prospect of conquest. For a leader not known for his public speaking prowess, a difficult oratorical task lay before him. Nicias moreover faced a formidable opponent in Alcibiades, a

¹²⁰ See also Mynott (2013: 402, fn.1).

¹²¹ Hans-Peter Stahl (2012: 127) describes Athenian blindness to consequences in ethical terms by highlighting the greedy lust that overcame the assembly (see, esp., 6.24.3).

¹²² Orwin (1998: 119).

young and charismatic upstart who saw the campaign as a means of expanding on his growing influence within the democracy.¹²³

Nicias begins his address by briefly contesting Egestan claims to friendship and, implicitly, the demands of justice in their case. The conflict between the Egestans – whom he describes as non-Greek foreigners (*allophulois*) – and their rivals is of no concern to the Athenians, and the city is under no ethical or diplomatic obligation to support the Egestan cause (6.9.1). Acknowledging that his conservative reputation sets him at odds with the energetic Athenian ethos, Nicias next attempts to present himself as a simple soldier who is sacrificing his opportunity for greater glory in the name of the common good (6.9.2).¹²⁴ “I get personal honors from this kind of thing,” he says, “Nonetheless, I have never in the past sought preferment by speaking contrary to my real beliefs, no do I do so now” (6.9.2-3). He then frames his objection to the expedition in terms of public and private interests by inviting the assemblymen to consider how the peacetime prosperity the city currently enjoys benefits their private lives (6.9.3). This appears to be a savvy rhetorical move. More than any other people, the Athenians have been consistently persuaded by arguments that unite the public and the private while privileging the latter: the city’s reputation for daring and glory are good insofar as they benefit individual citizens’ perceptions of themselves. Nicias recognizes this and chooses not to appeal to self-sacrifice. He instead implores his fellow citizens to rationally weigh their potential political gains

¹²³ This was not the first time Nicias clashed with Alcibiades. In 420, they argued opposite positions on the question of whether to join an anti-Spartan Argive alliance (5.43-46). After an earthquake delayed the decision, the Athenians eventually sided with Nicias to maintain peace with Sparta.

¹²⁴ Nicias’ claim that he benefits most from daring actions is dubious. When negotiating his eponymous peace, Thucydides reports that he was principally motivated by a desire to secure his own reputation (5.16.1). Entrusted with large forces during the Archidamian War, he won his soldierly reputation more from avoiding losses than from daring victories. As Pouncey (1980:119) observes, Nicias’ conservative model of success invites comparison with Brasidas, “who is unquestionably the most successful Spartan general of the Archidamian War” remembered above all for his daring. See also Westlake (1968: 93).

against their potential private losses in an effort to introduce some caution into their strategic calculations.

The bulk of Nicias' speech turns to reminding the assembly of Athens' geopolitical position and the limits of her imperial reach. In words that echo Pericles, if not Cleon, he warns them that they are surrounded by enemies throughout the Aegean and cautions them against "spoiling to sail over [to Sicily] and bring back more here" (6.10.1). The previous winter's skirmishes in Argive territory betrayed the frailty of the Spartan peace that he had built and struggled to maintain. The assembly must remember that Corinth, Megara, and Boeotia never accepted the terms of the agreement because it was "forced on them by adverse circumstances" (6.10.2) and may therefore attack as soon as an opportunity presents itself. Any additional resources should go to securing borders and maintaining peace. Furthermore, he notes that Sicily is a distant and unknown island whose people will, he predicts, resist subjugation even in the event of initial conquest. Gains there will be even more difficult to sustain than those in the Aegean. Finally, he reminds them that luck is fickle and cannot be counted upon to deliver another victory. Whatever concessions Athens won from the Spartans were granted as much by luck as through their own strategy, and the assembly should not tempt fortune by inviting still more conflict.

For all his efforts, Nicias' appeal to prudence is still addressed to a tyrant-at-rest rather than to an assembly of wise and thoughtful citizens. Nicias realizes this and nearly says as much, yet proceeds with a politically tone-deaf speech that, in W.D. Westlake's words, gives "the unmistakable impression" of "carrying caution to excessive lengths."¹²⁵ He is, after all, a rarity: a

¹²⁵ Westlake (1968: 172).

pious and conservative Athenian who “subscribes to the justice of the gods, not,” as Orwin puts it, “to the Athenian thesis.”¹²⁶ So even though we know, with Thucydides’ hindsight, that he is likely correct about Sicilian expedition, we should not be surprised to find that his speech lacks the daring or affective verve that we might hear from a Themistocles or a Pericles trying to give the assembly unpopular advice. Indeed, Nicias exhibits the same wariness about the assembly’s fickle disposition that would resurface, albeit justifiably so, during his actual command (see, e.g., 7.48). Yet for all that we might ascribe to him an abiding sense of futile justice, he, like Diodotus, does not object to the expedition because it is unjust, but rather because it is unnecessary. He does not even raise the question of friendship except to reject its relevance to the discussion at hand. Athens is surrounded by enemies, he concludes, and the assembly should behave cautiously as a result.

But what if Athens were not beset by enemies? What if Sparta posed no threat and the Delian allies still contributed to her coffers? Would the assembly have any reason to forestall imperial expansion according to Periclean, Diodotean, or Nician logic? The answer, I think, is no. While Nicias does not subscribe to the Athenian thesis, then, he does not challenge the normative arguments underpinning it, either. This is not to say that Nicias is a coward or incompetent; rather, the failure of this most pious and virtuous of Athenians to publicly question his city’s overarching vision of the world speaks to the extent to which such a vision had entrenched itself as fact.

Nicias closes his speech with a miscalculated attack on Alcibiades’ reputation and character. According to Thucydides, the *ad hominem* attack may not even have been necessary.

¹²⁶ Orwin (1994: 137).

Thucydides reports that many in Athens were already wary of Alcibiades' extravagance, familiar with his youthful impulsiveness, and divided over his place in the city. Remarkably, Thucydides traces the city's eventual destruction to this tension:

For Alcibiades' status among the townspeople was such that he indulged his desires beyond his actual means in maintaining a stable of horses and in other extravagances, which was just the kind of thing that was largely responsible later for the destruction of Athens. The people were so apprehensive about the scale of his general lawlessness and the self-indulgence of his lifestyle and also about the ambitions behind every activity engaged in that they thought he craved a tyranny and became hostile toward him; and although in the public sphere he was excellent at managing the affairs of war, in private matters they were every one of them offended by his mode of life and so they put their trust in others and in no time at all brought about the downfall of the city. (6.15.3-4)

As Peter Pouncey rightly observes, this celebrated passage betrays "a trace of ambivalence on Thucydides' part" that we can follow back to the difficult question of why the Sicilian expedition reflected poor Athenian judgment.¹²⁷ The first part of the passage appears to confirm, in Thucydides' own voice, Nicias' attack on the young general as an impulsive and immature spendthrift whose advice could only damage the city. If this were all Thucydides wrote, we might be primed to regard Alcibiades as a wealthier version of Cleon: less a Periclean "first among equals" than a would-be tyrant among his subjects.¹²⁸ Yet this is not Thucydides' claim.¹²⁹ The second part of the passage instead shifts responsibility for the disaster away from Alcibiades and on to the *demos*. When read against 2.43.1, we see that the problem with the Sicilian expedition was not necessarily the decision to sail per se, but rather the choice of leadership. Concerns about Alcibiades' private life undermined his credibility with the *demos*,

¹²⁷ Pouncey (1980: 106).

¹²⁸ As de Romilly (1979: 203) observes, Thucydides invites this comparison not only with editorializing but also with his use of *enēge* (lead on) with both Alcibiades and Cleon (6.15.2; cf. 4.21.3). Nicias, it follows, appears to embody rational but unpopular argument that has the benefit of being correct. Westlake (1968: 9-10, 15) posits that the first part of the passage was likely added much later in the *History*'s composition than the rest of Book 6.

¹²⁹ See Strauss (1964: 192-195, 204); Pouncey (1980: 108).

leading first to a failed vote for ostracism and later to his recall under suspicions related to the mutilation of the Herms (6.53.1-2).¹³⁰ Thucydides' later digression into the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton' assassination of Hipparchus – the so-called tyrannicides – suggests that these worries were exaggerated. By choosing the wrong leadership for an already risky endeavor, the assembly, in de Romilly's words "failed even more seriously to follow the principles of *euboulia* and committed an even worse mistake."¹³¹ Understood this way, Thucydides' introduction of Alcibiades prepares us to notice how the *demos* misjudges the qualities necessary for success in this particular expedition. I argue that he also gestures toward a further point that will become clearer in Chapter 4; namely, a speaker's reputation mattered in Athenian democracy. Alcibiades may have had the requisite talents to make the Sicilian expedition a success, and may have therefore been right to advocate on its behalf. But I depart from thinkers like Strauss and Pouncey when they use Alcibiades' recall as evidence of an irrational *demos*. Like David Gribble, I think it more plausible that Thucydides was conflicted about the young general and thus gives his readers good reasons for sharing his doubts.¹³²

Thucydides reproduces Alcibiades' speech as a rhetorical inversion of Nicias' address. Contra Nicias, Alcibiades claims a mantle of leadership precisely because his personal interests align with the political good of the city. He boasts that he has elevated the city's reputation by taking the same risks that Nicias found irresponsible (6.16.5), but worries that the city has a habit of castigating great men during their lifetimes and revering them in posterity (6.16.6). This observation yields two insights into Athenian psychology that eluded Nicias but prove important

¹³⁰ On efforts to ostracize Alcibiades, see Rhodes (2011: 42-43).

¹³¹ De Romilly (1979: 209).

¹³² Gribble (1999: 175-188).

for shaping the city's judgment. Alcibiades understands that leading a daring but capricious people entails unavoidable personal risk. The assembly will not take a conservative argument seriously, however sound, because by this point in the narrative conservative policies are un-Athenian. Alcibiades also challenges the Athenian's collective memory by recalling the persecution of great leaders like Themistocles.¹³³ By reminding his opponents of the assembly's previous prejudices, he temporarily wins their favor. His inability to see his own fate in the memory of such role-models as Themistocles, however, speaks to his own lack of wisdom. Yet this rhetorical move evinces a keen affective intelligence that proves invaluable to persuading audiences time and again. In a single stroke, he simultaneously disarms Nicias' assault while positioning himself to exploit his audience's prejudices.

Alcibiades proceeds from this self-defense to profoundly misstate the military conditions in Sicily, arguing that the island's cities are not only disunited but also poorly armed (6.17.4-6). In a noteworthy departure from Pericles' vision of Athens as the "school of Hellas" (2.41), he faults the Sicilians for tolerating diversity, insisting instead that their openness is a source of weakness. Like Cleon, Alcibiades internalizes a perception of difference as instability. For this reason, he contests Nicias' attempt to paint the Egestans as barbarians. "There is an obligation to support them," he says, "since that is the oath we swore...we did not make them associates to take their turn helping us here, but to harass our enemies there enough to keep them from attacking us" (6.18.2-3). These remarks are noteworthy for two reasons. First, they partly echo Pericles' comments regarding allies. Unlike Pericles, Alcibiades enlists a normative conception of friendship that for the first time places a moral demand upon the city.¹³⁴ But the statement also

¹³³ Themistocles' expulsion from Athens and eventual defection to Persia (1.135-138) foretells Alcibiades own experience after his recall.

¹³⁴ This is a conception of justice as *apo tou isou*, or "on fair terms" (1.77.3).

lends his argument an air of Cleonic paranoia: Athens is not only at war with the rest of Hellas, but also with Mediterranean enemies who will fall upon the city if given half a chance to do so.¹³⁵ Whereas Nicias warns the assembly not to pursue another war, Alcibiades insists that Athens is already embroiled in one.

The parallels between Pericles, Cleon, and Alcibiades become more pronounced when Alcibiades turns to discuss the empire and its security. As in the Mytilenean debate, Athens must expand if she is to resist subjugation:

It is not an option for us to set limits to the empire like accountants; on the contrary, since we are in this situation we are forced to take active initiatives against some cities and keep our grip on the rest, because there is a danger that if we do not take other into our empire we shall fall into theirs. You cannot take the same passive stance as other states might, that is unless you are also going to change your whole style of life to match theirs as well. (6.18.3)

By framing the rest of the world in threatening opposition to the city, Alcibiades supports and extends Cleon's perverse view that tyrannical Athens cannot tolerate friends or neutrals. He also echoes Pericles' final characterization of Athens as the seat of an empire that, however unjust, finds herself driven by necessity to expand in order to survive. Indeed, his view is more extreme than either of his predecessors' insofar as Syracuse, unlike Mytilene and Sparta, demonstrates no foreseeable threat to the city. In short, Alcibiades transforms Athens from a ship of state into a great shark that must swim and eat in order to live. Sharks do not choose to swim or eat; if they rest, they die. Likewise, Alcibiades does not treat the Sicilian expedition as a choice but rather as a necessity dictated by nature.

¹³⁵ Cf. Palmer (1982b); Cartwright (1984). On the parallel between Alcibiades and Cleon, see Conner (1984: 166); cf. Cartwright (1997: 234).

Many have decried Alcibiades as a morally repugnant would-be tyrant who stokes Athenian fear and warps the assembly's judgment. Alcibiades is, indeed, exceptional; and yet, as Steven Forde has argued, Alcibiades is also a product of the city at war.¹³⁶ For all that we are tempted to read him and Cleon as perversions of Pericles, it is worth remembering Socrates' charge in Plato's *Gorgias* that if more sympathetic statesmen like Nicias, Diodotus, and Pericles were truly great leaders they would have inured the assembly to their opponents' tyrannical rhetoric. Instead, they largely accept Athenian tyranny and adjust their arguments accordingly as the narrative continues. By looking to how these actors present judgments about the friend/enemy distinction, we can trace a clear line of Athenian decline. Cleon and Diodotus disagreed over whether or not Athens had any allies; by the time of the Sicilian debate, that is no longer a question. Nicias and Alcibiades agree on the fundamental fact that Athens is threatened on all sides. As such, the assembly's scope of judgment narrows from decisions about how to regard friends and enemies to simply how best to deal with enemies. In short, the moral content has dropped out of their political judgment.

1.4. Brasidas' Better Judgment

This chapter has traced a gradual decline in the quality of Athenian political judgment. By renouncing justice as a relevant factor in her foreign policymaking, Athens alienated her allies and antagonized her enemies as she sought to conquer Greece. Decoupling ethics from foreign policy not only permitted the more extreme version of post-Periclean imperialism that Jacqueline de Romilly has observed, but also stripped Athens of any normative language that might justify her imperial ambitions to others.¹³⁷ By emphasizing these points, my

¹³⁶ See Forde (1989).

¹³⁷ See de Romilly (1978: 60-62).

reading of the *History* departs from the traditional realist interpretation of the text as one that eschews morality's relevance to politics. As I read him, Thucydides was trying to teach his audience that political judgments devoid of ethical considerations were prone to *pleonexia* and manipulation. Yet I also resist interpretations of Thucydides that depict him as an idealistic moralist. Thucydides was interested in the ways in which morality could guide foreign policy, but he did not reduce political judgment to decisions about morality alone. In his view, virtues like moderation and justice ought to inform foreign policy decisions by setting justifiable goals, clarifying the distinction between friends and enemies, and setting some parameters on action; but actors must also consider realist questions related to material capabilities and strategic priorities. That is, good Thucydidean political judgment must aim at the good while doing so effectively under non-ideal circumstances. Moreover, by depicting judgment as an activity taken up by imperfect people confronting exceptional conditions, Thucydides lays bare the difficulties that any democratic readers would face as they struggled to make good decisions themselves.

Thucydides' depiction of the Spartan commander Brasidas provides a better model of political judgment than any we find in Athens. Thucydides esteems Brasidas, his most explicit opponent, as highly as any other figure in the *History*.¹³⁸ Contemporary readers have therefore searched Thucydides' characterization of the Spartan for clues to an otherwise inchoate account of excellence. Most focus on what Thomas Heilke describes as Brasidas' "realist wisdom," which combines Spartan virtues like moderation, valor, and self-sacrifice with Athenian qualities like daring, eloquence, and spontaneity.¹³⁹ Noting that Brasidas is the only character in the

¹³⁸ Connor (1984: 130-131) argues, somewhat tenuously, that Thucydides does not mean to praise Brasidas himself, but rather to capture his reputation among those who adored him. Cf. Orwin (1994: 79-81). Probably Thucydides' only genuine enemy in the *History* is Cleon, whom Kagan (2003: 176) notes was the historian's chief accuser following the loss of Amphipolis to Brasidas.

¹³⁹ Heilke (2004: 129).

History who makes a sacrifice to Athena, Strauss encourages us to see him as “the Athenian among the Spartans.”¹⁴⁰ “He surpasses the other Spartans not only by his intelligence, initiative, ability to speak, and justice but also by his mildness,” Strauss continues, “He is the only Thucydidean character praised by the author for his mildness.”¹⁴¹ Following Strauss, Steven Forde encourages us to see parallels between Brasidas as the most Athenian Spartan in the narrative and Nicias as the most Spartan Athenian.¹⁴² Yet whereas Nicias’s superstitious caution paralyzed him on the battlefield, Brasidas’ daring and eloquence, especially when moderated by Spartan virtues, earn him incredible success. These qualities are clearest when contrasted with Cleon during the Battle of Amphipolis in 422 (5.6-12).¹⁴³ Here, the violent and blundering Cleon appears out of his depth while Brasidas is remembered for his courage and decisiveness. The comparison with Cleon is more striking when we note, along with Orwin, that Brasidas is the only character whom Thucydides describes as *just* in the entire work.¹⁴⁴ Brasidas’ generosity toward would-be enemies and conciliatory diplomacy challenge the harshly retributive conception of justice Cleon applied to Mytilene. In short, Brasidas’ inversion of the Athenian thesis – i.e. treating opponents with moderation while aligning his own interests with the broader goal of Greek liberation – helps him garner friends while undermining his enemies. As I shall argue in this section, his focus on Greek liberation, combined with his characteristic moderation and justice, also give us insights into the qualities of good Thucydidean political judgment.

¹⁴⁰ Strauss (1964: 213).

¹⁴¹ Ibid. See 4.116.2.

¹⁴² Forde (1986: 434).

¹⁴³ For a more sustained discussion of the comparisons, see, Heilke (2004: 124); Burns (2011); cf. Wylie (1992).

¹⁴⁴ Orwin (1984: 79).

For all of Brasidas' noble qualities, however, Thucydides is never blind to the Spartan's flaws. As one commentator recently put it, "Thucydides' admiration was tempered by his recognition of a canny opportunism, stemming from Brasidas' failure to match his rhetoric to prevailing contingencies of power."¹⁴⁵ The same honey-tongued rhetoric that heralds Greek liberation also twists the truth, spins lies, and inflates the hopes of those who defect from Athens. "They felt there was no cause to fear," Thucydides writes of these cities, "though this later proved to be an underestimation of Athenian power... They preferred to make their judgments on the basis of wishful thinking rather than on prudent foresight, as men often do when they indulge in uncritical hope" (4.108.4).¹⁴⁶ While clear in his own thinking, Brasidas frequently manipulates the judgments of others as he campaigns through northern Greece, leaving contemporary critics like Timothy Burns skeptical of his virtue.¹⁴⁷ Insofar as virtue demands a measure of self-sacrifice and limitations on the means by which actors pursue their ends, Burns worries that Brasidas' virtue is, at best, instrumental. Though I contend that Thucydides does not adopt the same rigidly rule-based view of virtue that Burns ascribes to him, these criticisms are difficult to meet and impossible to simply dismiss. Brasidas' judgment is improved by his commitment to virtue, but he is not a uniformly truthful man. Even in his flaws, however, his example has much to teach us about political decision-making.

Some of the reasons that make Brasidas stand apart in the *History* may seem awkward for my argument. First, Thucydides' emphasis on Brasidas' blend of Athenian and Spartan qualities makes him appear to practice a *sui generis* model of decision-making. We can strengthen this

¹⁴⁵ Pazdernik (2000: 152).

¹⁴⁶ Schlosser (2012: 172) notes a parallel between the blindly hopeful cities defecting from Athens during Brasidas' campaign and the dangerous hopes that Athens herself exhibits at Pylos. See 4.17, 4.21.

¹⁴⁷ See Burns (2011: 510-514). Also, see Orwin (1994: 79-81). Cf. Heilke (2004).

claim by noting his relative autonomy from Sparta while on campaign, including the degree to which he promised potential allies services that Sparta was either unable or unwilling to provide.¹⁴⁸ As I detail below, his Thracian campaign employed few Spartan hoplites and his tactics depended as much on his quick wits (*mētis*, *sunesis*) as on his broader strategic judgment. Furthermore, Thucydides indicates that because Brasidas was the first Spartan “to go abroad and win a reputation for being in all respects a good man,” he left the impression among those whom he persuaded to defect from Athens that his countrymen would be just like him (4.81.3). (They were not.) All of this indicates that Brasidas was a man very much apart from his home city, and might therefore suggest that any praise accorded to him would remain his alone, not to be repeated. Yet Brasidas is not the only character possessing the unlikely qualities of his enemies. Again, Pericles – guest-friend (*proxenos*) to Sparta – and Nicias – *proxenos* to Syracuse – sometimes stand apart from Athens by tempering her native daring with a splash of Spartan caution. Likewise, the Syracusan Hermocrates demonstrates great strategic foresight and political insight while calling on Sicily to guard against Athenian invasion, all the while grounding his arguments in the language of the Athenian thesis.¹⁴⁹ These men are unique among their home

¹⁴⁸ Brasidas’ independence was largely responsible for his military successes. As Heilke (2004: 125) rightly observes, “Until his death...Brasidas suffers serious defeat only when he remains part of a larger Spartan contingent and cannot act independently.”

¹⁴⁹ See 4.61.4. Orwin (1994: 163-165) observes that Hermocrates is the only non-Athenian to articulate the Athenian thesis, deploying it “as the ground of a general political outlook.” Burns (2011: 519-20) favors Hermocrates as an exemplar of judgment “that stems from a sustained, serious reflection about human affairs.” In his view, Brasidas was either too delusional or naïve to recognize, as the Athenian thesis insists, that justice serves as little more than ex post justification for self-interested policy action: “Such reflection on the problematic nature of justice could have brought home to Brasidas the impossibility of sacrificing his own good in noble, virtuous actions.” I defend Brasidas against Burns’ critique by demonstrating not only the normative shortsightedness of the Athenian thesis but also the material and strategic advantages that come from rejecting it. I especially reject Burns’ claim that Hermocrates did greater damage to Athens than Brasidas simply because he rallied Sicily against Athens’ initial effort to take the island. He correctly reminds us, along with Cogan (1981: 80) that these events unfolded just as Brasidas was conducting his own campaigns; yet the difference between the failed Athenian invasion and Brasidas’ campaigns is that Athens, pursuing the imperial logic of the Athenian thesis, chose to mount the ill-fated campaign against Syracuse and her allies. While Brasidas would not likely have been successful if Athens’ allies enjoyed her rule, we should credit the Spartan for recognizing their weakness and exploiting it. As such, I argue that Burns’ example does not support the Athenian thesis as a method of judgment so much as it demonstrates its weaknesses.

polities. What sets Brasidas apart from even these figures, however, is that he takes conventional justice seriously.¹⁵⁰ By upholding traditional Greek values during a war pitting Greek against Greek, Brasidas not only reconciles disparate Spartan and Athenian qualities but does so according to a broadly inclusive principle of justice. If Westlake is correct to argue that Thucydides exaggerates Brasidas' role in the war, I suggest that his reason for doing so is to highlight this dimension of his character and the political judgments that follow from it.¹⁵¹

A second potential problem with looking to Brasidas as a model of judgment consistent with democracy is that he is not a democrat. As a Spartan soldier, Brasidas is largely free from engaging in political deliberations of the kind we hear in Athens, and we can only speculate about how he would fare in a forum like the Athenian assembly.¹⁵² Though I argue that his diplomatic exchanges display some qualities that democrats might hope to model, they are also rife with the kind of deception and false promises we found discomfiting about Diodotus' contribution to the Mytilenean debate. As I acknowledge below, Brasidas' deceptive speech should give us pause; yet we should not lose sight of what Thucydides found distinctive about his diplomacy. Brasidas' negotiations are successful because he is sensitive to the interests and concerns of those he is addressing, and his example teaches the strategic value of empathy. Unlike Diodotus, who implored the Athenians to make decisions that advanced their own interests at the expense of others, Brasidas encourages each city he encounters to understand

¹⁵⁰ This aspect of my argument departs from Heilke (2004: 131) who reads the account of Brasidas' Thracian campaign as a cautionary tale about boundless ambitions. Heilke rejects the notion that Brasidas actually took virtues seriously and only "appeared" to act justly and moderately. His final assessment is damning: "In any case, Brasidas' excellences were imperfect, the success they wrought was partial, and their ultimate outcome ambiguous and ironic" (133). If Brasidas' death teaches anything, according to Heilke, it is that virtue is limited.

¹⁵¹ Westlake (1968: 149).

¹⁵² Pazdernik (2000: 169) argues that, especially on his Thracian campaign, Brasidas essentially practiced his own foreign policy and was not accountable to anyone but himself.

their liberation within the broader context of Greek freedom. By teaching audiences to frame their arguments in terms of a normatively choiceworthy common good, then, Thucydides' Brasidas imparts lessons that any deliberative community could appreciate.

Thucydides does not turn sustained attention to Brasidas until his Thracian campaign in Book 4, but he introduces him several times earlier in the *History*.¹⁵³ Earlier episodes leave an impression of Brasidas' courage and valor, laying the groundwork for his northern campaign in 424. Brasidas finally began his march on Thracian territory after persuading the Spartan government to grant him seventeen hundred hoplites, six-hundred of whom were helots. His use of helots is noteworthy at a time when, as Kagan reminds us, the Athenians were encouraging their desertion and Sparta worried about a possible slave revolt.¹⁵⁴ By taking six-hundred of their bravest fighters, Brasidas alleviated a domestic political issue while serving his own ambitions. The campaign was risky. Sparta had few friends in the north and the residents there, while only nominally allied with Athens, were suspicious of anyone bringing an army through their fields without permission. With a diplomat's touch, demonstrative virtue, and cunning deception, however, Brasidas was successful:

He had the reputation in Sparta itself of a man who always got things done and when he went out he proved himself invaluable to the Spartans. In the present situation he caused many of the cities to revolt from Athens through the just and moderate (*dikaion kai metrion*) way he dealt with them, while other places he took with the help of betrayal (*prodosia*) from within, so that when the Spartans later wanted to negotiate, as in fact they did, they had places available to transact in mutual exchanges and there was some relief of pressure on the Peloponnese from the war. And later on in the war, after the events in Sicily, it was the character and intelligence (*aretē kai sunesis*) Brasidas showed at this time...that did most to inspire enthusiasm for the Spartan cause among those who were allies of the Athenians. As the first Spartan to go abroad and win a reputation for

¹⁵³ See 2.25.3, 2.90-92, 3.69, 4.12.2

¹⁵⁴ Kagan (2003: 171).

being in all respects a good man (*agathos*), he left behind a firm expectation that others too would be like him. (4.81.2).¹⁵⁵

Marching through Thrace and Chalkidia was a largely bloodless affair. Thucydides describes the campaign more as a recruitment opportunity than as an invasion, attributing much of Brasidas' military success to his political connections in the area. Upon arriving in Trachis he enlisted friends in Pharsalos and *proxenoi* in Chalkidia to escort his army through the territory. With the help of these escorts, he assuaged Thracian fears and gained easier access to otherwise blocked roads. When his army encountered opposition, Brasidas charmed his opponents:

Brasidas himself stated that he came as a friend to Thessaly...and was in arms against the Athenians, who were at war with him, not against them; although he knew of no hostility between Thessaly and the Lacedaemonians to prevent access to each other's land, he would not now proceed against their wishes. (4.78.4)

His deference bought him easier access to the territory than if he were to assault every blockade.

"In this way," Thucydides continues, "Brasidas hurried through Thessaly quickly enough to anticipate any preparation to stop him" (4.79.1). Through such accounts, Thucydides demonstrates the material benefits that come with affective intelligence and strong alliances. Persuasion is certainly cheaper than conflict, and one acquires allies besides.

Though reflecting good strategic judgment, Brasidas' strategy was not without political risks. As a member of a joint attack against Lynkos, he tested his friendship with the Macedonian king Perdikkas, who wished to employ him not as an arbitrator of his private quarrel with the Lynkestian king "but as the destroyer of those [Perdikkas] himself designated as enemies" (4.83.4-5). Rather than raze the city, Brasidas urged Perdikkas to allow him a counsel with the

¹⁵⁵ Jowett's (1998) translation of *paraschōn* suggests that Brasidas actively deceived these cities by saying that "At the time he gave an impression of justice," while Rhodes' (1998) translation suggests that "at the time" he was genuine. Though Tim Rood (1998: 71-74) references this passage to argue that Brasidas actively misled defecting cities not only about Spartan support for their cause but also about his own virtuousness, I agree with Burns (2011: 510) that there is simply not enough textual evidence to support that claim. Rather, copious references to Brasidas' actual deeds lend better support to my sense that the Spartan was consistently motivated by conventional norms that, it is worth noting, did not preclude the possibility of individual gain.

Lynkestians to persuade them to become Lacedaemonian allies. Perdikkas refused because Brasidas was wrong to prevent the attack. Brasidas nevertheless stood firm and, though he abandoned his arbitration effort, persuaded Perdikkas to spare the city. Attacking Lynkos would have been an easy but costly decision. Given that Perdikkas was financing half of the Thracian campaign at the time, Brasidas might have considered his options limited and his hands tied in the matter. He also had to consider his friendship with Perdikkas and the normative demands that came with it. Refusing to attack Lynkos, an ostensible enemy, might appear to violate the terms of justice and friendship. Yet for a commander with limited resources, the prospect of besieging a peripheral city in Macedon must have looked like a distraction that might cost him men and would certainly cost him time. Friendship obligations notwithstanding, attacking Lynkos would have imperiled his campaign and undermined his broader effort to spur defections from Athens. Moreover, though Lynkos was not a Greek city, Brasidas' success lay largely in his reputation for mildness; destroying Lynkos would make him appear more as a mercenary for Macedonian kings than as an emissary for peace as he approached neighboring cities.

Brasidas' handling of the Lynkos affair offers an important insight into how the Spartan balanced justice against expediency in his decision-making. Reasoning that he could part with Perdikkas' money easier than he could his reputation, Brasidas tried to negotiate a settlement between the Macedonians. He failed. Yet in doing so, his decision spared the city, preserved his army, and added to his reputation. Most importantly, Brasidas' stand against Perdikkas also asserted the Spartan's capacity to make an ethically informed decision despite considerable material restraints on his options, tacitly challenging the assumptions underpinning the Athenian thesis in the process.

Brasidas' political judgment is more problematically displayed in his capture of Akanthos. Thucydides reports that he arrived in the mid-summer "a little before the vintage" (4.84.1). The city was initially divided between Chalkidian sympathizers and the "common people" who were fearful of what a resentful Lacedaemonian army might do with their ripening fruit. This is the first occasion on which we hear Brasidas' "not unskilled" oratory (4.84.3). His address begins by declaring Lacedaemonian intentions to "go to war against the Athenians as liberators of Hellas" (4.85.1). If the city stands against him and "in the way of freedom" for themselves, this will poison the well for other cities throughout the north. Without Akanthian acceptance he will likely meet resistance in every other city (4.85.5-6). The reverse assumption holds as well: if he can persuade the Akanthians to defect from Athens, the rest of Thrace and Chalkidia will likely follow suit. His entire strategy depends on maintaining this momentum. Perhaps because of Akanthos' strategic significance, or perhaps because he is simply dishonest, Brasidas proceeds to deceive the besieged city into thinking that Athens is too timid to engage him in open combat. "It is not likely," he falsely surmises, "that they will actually send against you a maritime force equal in numbers to the one [at Nisaia]" which he had earlier repelled (4.85.7). This statement not only grossly exaggerates the events outside Megara, but conceals his assumption that the Athenians are in fact sending a fleet – lead by Cleon, no less – to intercept him at that moment. Furthermore, he closes with the warning that, should the Akanthians refuse his invitation, he would be compelled to scorch their crop.

Brasidas' dishonesty and veiled brutality in this episode raise several difficult questions about his character, his reputation, and his status as a model of political judgment. Many critics ask how genuine any of Brasidas' claims can be in light of the inconsistencies between his

purported mission and how he accomplishes it here.¹⁵⁶ I suggest that we can better understand Brasidas' tactics in this speech by comparing him with Diodotus from the Mytilenean debate. Both speakers deceive their audiences for what they take to be noble causes, and both are successful for doing so. They depart, however, in at least two ways. First, Diodotus encouraged the Athenian assembly to consider only their own interests when rendering their judgment on the Mytileneans. By contrast, Brasidas encourages his Akanthian audience to understand their situation primarily within a broader view of Greek liberation; private concerns for the vintage should be weighed more lightly. In this way, Brasidas appears more invested in virtue and the common good than his Athenian counterpart. This perception is undone, however, by the second way in which the two men differ, namely in the lies they tell. Diodotus lied to Athens about the partisan attachments of Mytilene's as a secondary appeal to pathos. Brasidas lies about Akanthian safety under Spartan protection. It is one thing to persuade a people to stand for freedom and to prepare them for possible sacrifice; it is quite another to tell a people that they can defect from a powerful empire without suffering any great consequence. Indeed, Brasidas' promises of protection were the primary factor in the Akanthian decision to defect (4.88.1). As we know, Sparta would soon abandon or brutalize the cities that defected to her during Brasidas' campaign, and the Akanthians were no exception (4.120, 5.32.1). How unspeakably tragic, then, that they based their decisions on false hopes.

Brasidas' lies and half-truths are a black mark on his record, yet they did not undermine his posthumous reputation, nor should they obscure positive lessons from his example. As he moved throughout the northern territories, his strategic judgment balanced individual and communal interests in three ways. First, by treating formal enemies as would-be friends, he

¹⁵⁶ See, e.g., Connor (1984); Orwin (1994); Heilke (2004); Burns (2011).

could spare his small army from heavy combat until the Battle of Amphipolis. His diplomatic policy not only bolstered his personal reputation for mild fairness, but also served to win more allies to the Lacedaemonian side than would a campaign of costly sieges and battles. Second, Brasidas' march through the north granted him great personal independence from Sparta while cutting the Athenian navy off from its timber supply. This was a stroke of strategic genius that does not appear to have readily occurred to his fellow Spartans. Finally, his attention to justice and the boundaries of conventional morality restrained his private ambition. The alliances he extended all included moderate terms explicating each city's autonomy as a free and equal member of the force against Athens upon their defection (4.86, 4.105, 4.121). Though he badly misjudged his fellow Spartans on their willingness to maintain those commitments, Thucydides gives no indication that he callously disregarded these cities' safety. His goal was not to conquer the north but to defeat Athens by the most effective means possible, and that meant targeting her tribute-paying subjects. Thucydides suggests that his brilliance lay in the revelation that Athens would be defeated not by siege but by defections from her tyranny. Indeed, the discord Brasidas fomented within the Athenian empire proved devastating. If his goal was to damage his enemy, Athens, and help his friends, Greece, then his judgment served him well until his death.

Brasidas' deceptions can also teach a valuable lesson in political judgment. As noted above, Thucydides thought the defecting cities foolishly hopeful for believing the Spartan's rhetoric. His seizure of Amphipolis from Thucydides himself seemed to confirm what Athens' subjects wanted to believe. "They were fired with thoughts of change," Thucydides writes, "and kept making representations to Brasidas, urging him to come and intervene, each of them wanting to be the first to secede" (4.108.3). This is hardly the description of a gullible people deceived by a charming charlatan. True, Brasidas misrepresented himself to these cities; yet

Thucydides writes as if they should have seen through is promises and reputation. In a word, they should have been more prudent, and that meant balancing their hopes for just liberation with the realistic expectation of Athenian counter-force. Joel Schlosser's conclusions about the Sicilian Expedition could apply here as well: "hopes thus inflated prove delusive."¹⁵⁷

1.5. Conclusion

Reading the *History* as a study in political judgment alerts us to the relationship between practical and moral considerations generated by war. Rather than opposing morality and necessity, as is so often claimed, I argue that Thucydides shows how actors' ethical judgments frame their perceptions of practical necessity. Athenian judgment faltered because it lacked appropriate considerations of how one understands the role of justice in regulating the friendship/enmity distinction. By regarding everyone as enemies, they effectively drove their allies into opposition. The pattern that began with Themistocles was repeated throughout the narrative to greater devastation for the embattled empire. In contrast, Thucydides uses Brasidas as an instructively imperfect exemplar of better political judgment. By combining moral reflection with affective intelligence, he is better able to clarify his interests than his pleonectic counterparts. Contra Cleon, Alcibiades, and Nicias, Brasidas sees himself surrounded by potential friends rather than enemies. By treating those with whom he meets as such, he wins alliances and demonstrates the strategic value of ethical political practice.

A general lesson that contemporary readers can take from the *History* is that strategic judgments informed by ethically justifiable principles are also more materially sustainable than those that are not. Rather than viewing justice in tension with necessity, we see from Brasidas'

¹⁵⁷ Schlosser (2014: 173).

example that how one negotiates necessity is deeply aided by a prior conception of just action. This is not to suggest that practical reason always recommends caution, and that better judgments are those that default to restraint. Far from it. Brasidas was as much a man of daring action as he was of cunning diplomacy. But his actions were oriented toward goal – liberation from Athens – that other Greeks could understand and be persuaded to accept. Meeting the demands of justice with arms alone was, and remains, an unwise strategy. Words can sometimes open doors that siege machines cannot.

To be sure, Brasidas operated according to a conception of justice that was, as Plato would later demonstrate, seriously flawed. Arguing, as Polemarchus might, that “helping friends and harming enemies” perfectly captures what we mean by *justice* suffers serious practical problems, not least of which is the difficulty of deciding who falls into which category. But deciding to treat our opponents as potential allies commits us to the political work of deliberation, persuasion, and diplomacy that most would prefer to warfare. Successfully converting a would-be opponent into an ally is both normatively and strategically sensible policy.

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CHAPTER 2: THE MIDWIFE ON TRIAL

The wounds they suffered during the Peloponnesian War were just scarring over when the Athenians brought Socrates to trial in 399 BCE. The war spared only a dozen triremes from a navy that once numbered in the hundreds, loosening Athens' grip on the Aegean and, with it, her imperial revenues.¹ Commercial traffic through the Piraeus slowed to a crawl while the Long Walls, symbols of the city's defiance, lay in ruins.² Flute players celebrated with hymns to the liberation of Greece as workers dismantled the defenses in 404. A Spartan-sponsored oligarchy briefly displaced the democracy that same year. Yet by the autumn of 399, the Athenians were speedily restoring agricultural production and resuming inter-Hellenic trade.³ They recovered their democracy four years earlier thanks to the populist general Thrasybulus and his Thracian allies. When Thrasybulus turned his attention to rebuilding the Long Walls and campaigned as far as the Hellespont in 401, it seemed that even the city's imperial ambitions had been rekindled.⁴ If Thucydides was right to describe war as a "bloody teacher," onlookers might have wondered what lessons the violence had taught Athens.

¹ Even after the disaster at Sicily, the Athenians had rebuilt their fleet to 200 triremes. On the cost of the war to Athens, see Xenophon (2.2.20); cf. Hale (2009), Gomme (1956: 18-46), French (1991).

² Garland (1987: 58-100).

³ See, e.g., Burke (1990: 7); French (1991).

⁴ See, e.g., Xenophon, *Hellenica* (4.8.25-26). On Thrasybulus' Thracian campaign, see Cawkwell (1976), Strauss (1986).

Plato addressed his Socratic dialogues to this apparently unchastened post-war Athenian audience. Rebuilding Athens required more than silver and timber; it demanded moral and political reflection on the part of her citizens.⁵ The reconstruction offered a prescient opportunity for the Athenians to reassess the methods of collective decision-making that their democracy relied upon. Plato's Socratic dialogues underscore the urgency of that effort. By positioning judgment at the center of civic participation in the Athenian democracy, Plato's work builds upon Thucydides' concerns with the assembly's capacity for consistently rational and ethical decision-making. Staging many of these works in the shadow of the Peloponnesian War, Plato invites us to interpret his dialogues' philosophical questions within the same political context in which we read Thucydides' *History*. With this in mind, we see that cultivating political judgment is as important to Plato's philosophical project as it was to Thucydides' historical work.

Thucydides defined wise judgments as decisions that are consistent with the demands of justice. His *History* showed how the Athenians failed to take those demands seriously as they plotted policies of imperial overreach, or *pleonexia*. Specifically, he worried that excluding justice from political deliberation encouraged the Athenians to pass policies that turned their foreign allies into enemies, thereby dismantling the alliance network they depended upon. Worse still, he was concerned that the *demos* lacked the wherewithal to distinguish between the better and worse policy proposals put before them. Conversely, Thucydides celebrated the Spartan Brasidas for his moral restraint and strategic foresight. By orienting his material aims according to a clear – albeit problematic – conception of justice (i.e. helping friends and harming enemies), Brasidas served as a better model of political judgment than did his Athenian counterparts.

⁵ On the importance of the Peloponnesian War as a background to Plato's work, see Frank (2007), Zuckert (2009).

Like Thucydides, Plato took a critical view of Athenian political judgment.⁶ He believed that the city's ambitious public men, each trained in sophistic rhetoric, relied more on dazzling speeches and flattery than on reason when counseling the assembly on political matters.⁷ The second half of the fifth century had seen the Pnyx transformed into a showcase of oracular skill where clever speakers made weak arguments appear strong. Plato located the problem in sophistry's influence over the young and condemned the movement for corrupting the men whom Athens would one day rely upon for political leadership.⁸ Yet sophists and politicians were only as influential as the assembly would allow. Plato also criticized the Athenians' themselves for passively relying on this vocal but ill-informed group to instruct them in policy decisions.⁹ Plato insisted that any assembly of legislators must envisage itself not as a pliant body seeking entertainment, nor as a collection of self-deluded experts, but as an active organ of prudent political decision-making.¹⁰

Plato's early and middle dialogues feature Socrates more prominently than any other figure, and it has become convention to assume that Socrates was more sympathetic to

⁶ See, e.g., *Apology* (20a); *Protagoras* (313a-d, 320a).

⁷ See *Gorgias* (463a-c).

⁸ See *Protagoras* (313a-314c). One might object that Socrates is also guilty of corrupting the youth given his close association with Alcibiades. However, Alcibiades purportedly modeled himself much more in the likeness of Pericles – a point that Socrates raises in Plato's *Alcibiades* as Socrates chastises his young companion for his ignorance and premature venture into politics (118b-c). This resonates with Socrates' critique of Pericles in the *Gorgias* (517b-c) as well as in the *Protagoras* (320a-b).

⁹ See, e.g., *Protagoras* (319c-d); *Gorgias* (455b-d, 481b).

¹⁰ This claim follows Sheldon Wolin's argument that while Plato did not deny each community member an opportunity to contribute to, and benefit from, his society "what he did deny was that this contribution could be erected into a claim to share in political decision-making" (1960: 57). Wolin is also right to follow Aristotle in noting that Plato distrusted popular rule because the average person was not capable of the unrealistic precision he thought possible of political knowledge (59).

democracy than the comparatively blue-blooded Plato.¹¹ I resist that dichotomy. Plato has Socrates disparage democracy just as frequently as he has other characters, particularly Protagoras, advocate it. Unlike those who focus exclusively on Socrates' "negative rationality," I argue that Plato portrays the philosopher as a constructive member of Athenian political life who also models ways that democrats can improve their political decision-making.¹² With the previous chapter in mind, it is tempting to cast Socrates in the same light as Thucydides' Brasidas. Indeed, the two figures share several similarities: both men were excellent speakers, both were brave fighters, and their peers considered neither an ideal citizen. Moreover, they each took justice seriously as a guiding component of wise political judgment. But as Alcibiades' flattering speech in the *Symposium* suggests, Plato intended to set Socrates wholly apart from such comparison.¹³ His differences from Brasidas are indeed telling. Socrates rejects Brasidas' bellicose notion of justice in favor of a model promoting psychic harmony. He resists the Spartan's expansionist ambitions, restricting his travel as much as possible within his city's walls. His aims are also wider, his challenge to Athens more profound, than anything Brasidas demonstrates in Thucydides' narrative. While Brasidas wanted to liberate the Hellenic world from Athenian imperialism, Socrates attempted to liberate the Athenians from their own imperial mindset. He tried to free their judgment from their narrowly material focus by urging them to

¹¹ For an excellent review of this literature and debate, including arguments that Plato later supported Socrates' execution, see Rowe (2001).

¹² See, e.g., Arendt (1990); Villa (2001: 1-58).

¹³ As Alcibiades puts it, "As a whole, [Socrates] is unique; he is like no one else in the past and no one in the present—this is by far the most amazing thing about him. For we might be able to form an idea of what Achilles was like by comparing him to Brasidas or some other great warrior, or we might compare Pericles with Nestor...There is a parallel for everyone—everyone else, that is" (*Symposium* 221c-d).

reflect upon a richer conception of the good synonymous with justice. While Brasidas wanted his interlocutors to change their loyalties, Socrates wanted them to change their entire worldview.

In the next chapter, I develop a more positive conception of Platonic political judgment through an interpretation of the *Republic*. Before turning to that dialogue, however, we must first understand Plato's critique of fifth-century Athenian decision-making. For Plato, sound political judgment takes its direction from a rational understanding of human happiness, or *eudaimonia*. As we shall see again in chapter 4, *eudaimonia* was a central but contested feature of Greek ethics. Plato encourages us to align our understanding of *eudaimonia* with virtues like wisdom and temperance; in his view, the supremely happy life is above all supremely virtuous. He connects virtue to judgment by describing virtues as standards of behavior that imbue statements about praiseworthy or reprehensible action with meaning.¹⁴ He likewise locates the deepest source of civil discord (*stasis*) not in class tensions but in ethical disagreements between citizens.¹⁵ In his view, all ethico-political communities must grapple with the same challenge: on one hand, if citizens hold too tightly to their ethical beliefs, they grow close-minded and hostile to criticism; if, on the other hand, citizens hold too weakly to their ethical beliefs then virtue loses influence over action. Plato saw this problem in Athens. His fellow citizens were sometimes so confident in their moral beliefs that they brutally suppressed philosophical dissent. In other cases, they paid lip service to virtue publicly while pursuing every manner of venality in private. A third problem was more persistent – namely, the Athenians conventionally equated

¹⁴ For example, we cannot speak to a particular soldier's bravery or cowardice without a universal conception of *courage* to which we can compare his action. Because all members of an ethical community must share the same conceptions of each virtue, Plato resists the Protagorean theory of conventional morality in favor of a model similar to the doctrine of the forms. See *Cratylus* (386a-387e).

¹⁵ See, e.g., *Cratylus* (438d); *Euthyphro* (7d).

eudaimonia not to virtue but to *pleasure*. According to the popular view, all political judgments were merely hedonic calculations weighing anticipated pleasures against possible pains. It was this hedonic approach to political judgment that Plato attacked most vociferously throughout his Socratic dialogues.¹⁶

Plato's Socrates challenges conventional Athenian judgment through his elenctic method. Gregory Vlastos describes the standard elenctic procedure as follows: (1) the interlocutor asserts belief *p*, which Socrates considers false and aims to refute; (2) Socrates and his interlocutor agree to other premises which are logically independent of *p* but (3) inconsistent with *p*, whereupon (4) "Socrates claims that *p* has been proven false and *not-p* true."¹⁷ The consequent confusion terminates in a state of puzzlement, or *aporia*, in which interlocutors have good reason to question their previously confident value judgments. Now humbled, both philosopher and interlocutor are able to see the moral problem before them with fresh eyes, rejecting bad arguments while searching for those that are true.

Unlike eristic rhetoric, in which competing speakers try to negate each other's claims for the sake of amusement or competition, the Socratic elenchus is supposed to teach us something about virtue. Vlastos and others contend that Socrates does not mean to embarrass his companions so much as to uncover knowledge (*epistēmē*) of morality.¹⁸ C.D.C. Reeve observes that Socrates also guides the process toward certain positive theses, namely that wisdom is the only virtue and that no one ever intentionally acts contrarily to what they know is best.¹⁹ Yet

¹⁶ As we shall see in the next chapter, Plato replaces *pleasure* with *justice* as the coordinating principle of sound political judgment.

¹⁷ Vlastos (1982: 712).

¹⁸ See Vlastos (1982) and Rappe (1995).

¹⁹ Reeve (1988: 5).

even in these positive cases, Socrates rarely convinces his interlocutors that his beliefs about humanity's basic goodness are correct. It is one thing to find oneself unable to refute a doctrine, quite another to believe it. Rather than using the elenchus to uncover moral knowledge, I argue that Socrates uses the method to teach us two lessons about good judgment. First, the elenchus' aporetic effects teach us to be humble about how we define social goals. Through Socrates, Plato teaches us that any beliefs we maintain about what constitutes a just and good society are necessarily provisional and subject to reexamination, especially in light of new evidence and better arguments.²⁰ Remaining open to the possibility that we are wrong prevents the kind of close-minded policies we saw in Thucydides' account of the Sicilian Expedition. Second, the elenchus teaches us that there is a value to policy coherence and consistency. However provisional our beliefs about the principles that constitute social life, they nevertheless provide ends toward which we direct public policy. The elenchus might serve as a method by which we determine which policies advance or diminish those ends by comparing them with the original principles.

Unlike the politicians, poets, artisans, and other purportedly wise people whom he routinely encounters, Socrates does not present himself as an expert of virtue whose advice can set the city straight. He is not, in other words, an advisor of the Periclean stripe. He does not offer programmatic policy advice so much as he teaches an alternative method by which citizens might assess policy proposals and the goals they aim for. In this way, he portrays himself as a

²⁰ As he says in the *Cratylus*, "I have long been surprised at my own wisdom – and doubtful of it, too. That's why I think it's necessary to keep reinvestigating whatever I say, since self-deception is the worst thing of all. How could it not be terrible, indeed, when the deceiver never deserts you even for an instant but is always right there with you?" (428d).

fellow citizen-judge concerned with what is just and what is not.²¹ Insofar as he attempts to distinguish between coherent and discordant beliefs about justice, Socrates believes he is capable of judging between policies that will benefit the city and those that will harm it. When he announces to Callicles in the *Gorgias* that he is “one of the few Athenians ... to take up the true political craft (*politike technē*)” (521d) he partly means to distinguish his own method of judgment from popular alternatives. He offers this as a method that more philosophically inclined citizens can adopt within a democratic context. Though Socrates is certainly no populist, we can nevertheless understand him as a sympathetic critic of democracy.

I trace Plato’s critique of Athenian political judgment through three dialogues, beginning with the *Apology*. Socrates identifies two related problems with Athenian judgment. First, he finds that the assembly bases its judgments on prejudice rather than on critical reflection. In Socrates’ view, popular judgment is a passive exercise more akin to theatergoing than the rigorous examination of truth and falsehood.²² As the self-proclaimed “gadfly” upon the horse of the city, Socrates seeks to re-engage Athens’ citizen-judges through philosophical discourse. Second, he decries the influence of false experts on the citizens’ decision-making. His immediate accusers would not be inclined to drag an old man into court if it were not for his unpopularity among the upper echelons of Athenian social life (23e). Socrates’ trial is a reflection of the extent to which elites have corrupted the city’s youth and endangered its future. While these

²¹ I take this definition of good judgment from his opening words in the *Apology* in which he exhorts the jury “to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth” (18a). Just as he favors frank, truthful speech in this address – his only before so large a body – he aims, I shall argue, to discern just from unjust beliefs in his other conversations.

²² On the gullibility of the masses, see Protagoras’ position in *Protagoras* 317b. On the quality of citizen-judgments with respect to the quality of theatrical performance, see Revermann (2006). Partly because the recruitment necessary to perform in the choruses would have required a certain degree of democratization, Revermann insists that the average Athenian would have been more sophisticated interpreters of a dramatist’s authorial intent than their oligarchic critics might lead us to believe.

public men might make the Athenians think themselves happy through state-sponsored games and plays, Socrates thinks that he alone can “make [them] be happy” (36e), by encouraging them to re-examine their beliefs about *eudaimonia*. Though Socrates indulged in drinking and feasting as much as any of his younger companions, his enlightened view of happiness privileges care of the soul and psychic harmony above all else. Political decisions are better or worse depending on how well they direct collective action toward attaining that harmony.

Plato’s *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* dialogues envision a more positive conception of the philosopher’s political role within the democracy than much of the secondary literature recognizes.²³ As Peter Euben and others observe, these dialogues capture some of Socrates’ most difficult and enriching conversations with the ardent democrat Protagoras.²⁴ While these exchanges sometimes depict Socrates harshly criticizing democracy, he does not wholly dismiss collective decision-making as a means of self-governance.²⁵ But by analyzing democratic participation through the voice of Socrates, Plato clarifies the challenges that democrats must attend to if their method of government is to avoid future calamities similar to those of the Peloponnesian War.

2.1 Plato’s Critique of Athenian Judgment in the *Apology*

With few exceptions, contemporary readers roundly condemn Socrates’ execution as a gross miscarriage of justice. This consensus is striking given the controversy surrounding nearly

²³ See esp. Arendt (1990), Nehamas (1998: 40), Villa (2001).

²⁴ See Euben (1996). Though the *Gorgias* also explores similar themes, particularly in the exchange between Socrates and Callicles, I focus on the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* because Protagoras is more closely associated with democratic political judgment than Callicles. I nevertheless draw on the *Gorgias* where relevant to support my interpretation of the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*.

²⁵ For proponents of this view, see, e.g., Taylor (1933: 141); Wood (1974); Kraut (1984: 194, 199, 207-8); Roberts (1994: 48-70); Mackie (2003).

every other aspect of the philosopher's life and work. Commentators attribute his execution to his alleged hostility to popular rule, his unorthodox beliefs, his personal associations, and his open criticism of the assembly, as well as to his ascetic lifestyle and even his Spartan manner of dress.²⁶ My aim here is not to further speculation about the jury's attitude toward the old philosopher. Rather than ask why Athens executed Socrates, I ask why Plato and his companions thought the narrow majority was wrong to convict him in the first place.²⁷ I also examine what Plato meant to teach us about good judgment through this example of its opposite. In what follows, I argue that the jury's decision contradicted the city's long-term interests. Echoing Thucydides' critique of Athenian misjudgment, Plato uses Socrates' trial as an illustration not of democratic shortcomings per se, but of the Athenians' inability to link considerations of justice to their long-term civic interests.²⁸

The *Apology* dramatizes Plato's worry that because citizens based political decisions more on their collective prejudices and credulity than on well-reasoned beliefs, the city was uniquely susceptible to manipulation by statesmen and sophists alike. Underscoring the distinction Socrates draws between the elenchus and the sophistic rhetoric he criticizes at length in the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras*, I argue that he resists sophistic claims to moral expertise by questioning the epistemic foundations upon which such assertions rest. This argument has implications for how we might understand the Socratic formulation of virtue as knowledge in the

²⁶ The literature on each of these charges is immense. On Athenian perceptions of Socrates' oligarchic sympathies, see, e.g., Wood (1974); c.f. Vlastos (1983), Kraut (1984: 199-202). On Athenian attitudes toward his unorthodox beliefs and associations with sophistry, see, e.g., Ober (1998); Blanchard (2000). On his willingness to shamelessly criticize the democracy, see, e.g., Strauss (1983: 43); Blyth (2000: 14); Saxonhouse (2006: 110). Nehamas (1998). On his ascetic lifestyle and provocative manner of dress, see Brickhouse and Smith (1998: 13-24).

²⁷ To Socrates' surprise, a majority of only thirty votes convicted him (36b).

²⁸ Cf. Roberts (1994:73). Note that Socrates was as defiant of injustices under the democracy (32b) as he was under the rule of the Thirty (32c), suggesting that the root of Athens' misjudgment was not its regime type.

Protagoras, as well as for how we might interpret Socrates' notion of *politike technē* in that dialogue and in the *Republic*. By connecting philosophical reflection to political practice, I argue that the elenchus bridges the divide between theory and practice through an examination of popular belief.²⁹ The *Apology* is an especially fruitful text in this respect because it presents Socrates engaging the *demos* within an institution built for judgment.³⁰

Situating the trial within fifth and fourth century Athenian legal institutions highlights the political context in which its philosophical themes take shape. Readers of Thucydides' *History* will recall Diodotus' distinction between the assembly (*ekklesia*) as a space in which Athenians debated policy, and the lawcourt (*dikasterion*) where they meted out justice.³¹ As some historians have recently described it, the lawcourt was "partly judicial system, partly source of popular entertainment, partly economic redistribution mechanism ... it was in some ways Athens' most powerful political institution, even more powerful than the popular assembly."³² Legal proceedings were ritualized affairs governed by a series of oaths that are worth closer attention. Each juror (*dikastēs*) swore a dicastic oath to judge "according to the laws and decrees of the Athenian people," to resist tyranny and oligarchy, and to "give an equal hearing both to the

²⁹ By describing Socrates' defense speech as one meant to persuade the jury of his usefulness to the city, I mean to depart from Hannah Arendt's (1990: 74) distinction between philosophical and political speech.

²⁹ See Thucydides (3.44.7).

²⁹ Mirhady and Schwarz (2011: 744).

³⁰ Though I will refer to the men assembled in the *dikasterion* as "jurymen" and "judges" interchangeably, I take Ober's point that "The 501 Athenians who heard the case should be thought of as judges rather than jurors because they made substantive decisions about the meaning and applicability of law itself, rather than merely determining matters of fact" (2011: 139). My position is a qualification of Leo Strauss' observation (1983: 38) that the *Apology* pits Socrates against the entire *demos*.

³¹ See Thucydides (3.44.7).

³² Mirhady and Schwarz (2011: 744).

accuser and to the defendant.”³³ Prosecutors and defendants promised to give honest testimony, to refrain from speaking on matters beyond the immediate charges, and to abide by the jury’s final decision. In addition to these procedural demands, all participants were also reminded of their ephebic oaths. These rites of citizenship required obedience to the polis, defense of comrades in battle, and dutiful observation of the “ancestral religion.”³⁴ Socrates’ speech reflects many of these themes (18a, 28e, 32b-d, 35c). He insists on the Apollonian piety of his philosophical mission, and appeals to his military record in order to persuade the jury that he is, contra his accusers’ allegations, in fact a good Athenian who remains true to his word.³⁵ Conversely, Meletus, Anytus and Lycon’s charges of impiety (*graphē asebias*) and corruption of the youth mean to undermine Socrates’ status as a trustworthy observer of civil oaths. In their view, Socrates not only offends the city by denying its official gods but also endangers it by turning its young would-be citizens against their elders, thereby breaking his ephebic oath to protect the city.

Plato’s account of the trial bridges the division between political deliberation and justice Diodotus exploited in his Mytilene speech. Socrates’ references to both the dicastic and ephebic oaths invite us to read his trial as an instance not only of legal judgment but also of political

³³ The oaths were included in Solon’s reforms and became explicitly democratic features of Athenian criminal procedure. For a more complete reproduction of the dicastic oath, see Sommerstein and Bayliss (2012: 71-2). Some have speculated that because Socrates addresses the jury as “gentlemen” (*ho andres; ho andres Athenioi*) rather than as “jurymen” or “judges” (*andres dikastai*) he means to cheekily insult their prejudice against him. See Bonner (1908: 171); cf. Schanz (1893: 75).

³⁴ For a full account of the ephebic oath, see Lycurgus, 1.77. Cf. Taylor (1918: 499); Sommerstein and Bayliss (2012: 16).

³⁵ Socrates reminds the jurors of his distinguished service during the battles of Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium, during which he “remained at [his] post where those [Athens] had elected to command had ordered [him]” (28e). Plato occasionally alludes to his military service in later dialogues. See, e.g., *Symposium* (220d-221c). Several prominent commentators have speculated that Socrates could not possibly have served at Amphipolis. See, e.g., Burnet (1954: 120); Gomme (1956: 638). Cf. Calder (1961).

decision-making. The jurors were not merely examining a body of evidence and determining whether or not Socrates was guilty-as-charged. Instead, a number of legal and philosophical ambiguities complicated their task, not least of which was the nature of the charges against him. The formal indictment against Socrates fell under a type of Athenian criminal procedure known as an *agón timetós* that carried with it no codified penalty, but required a two-part hearing.³⁶ In the first phase, the jury voted to either absolve or convict the defendant. In this case, the jury voted to convict and the case proceeded to a sentencing phase in which the jury decided between two penalties (*tímesis*) proposed by the defendant and the prosecutor.³⁷ A third penalty was not available. The jurymen thus faced a two-fold series of questions: first, they had to ask what it meant for one to act impiously or to corrupt the youth – including an account of what evidence supported such charges – and, second, they would have to consider which of the two proposed penalties was justified by the nature of the offense. As there was no legal definition for *piety* or *corruption of youth*, their act of judgment could not be reduced to comparing evidence of Socrates' activities to a standardized model of the sort they swore to uphold in their dicastic oaths.³⁸ Rather, they faced a philosophical task of inquiring into the nature of piety, corruption, and justice. Determining punishment entailed additional considerations of the city's interests. After delivering a guilty verdict, they had to weigh the political and moral consequences of

³⁶ See Brickhouse and Smith (1988: 25). Ober (1998: 166) observes that this is a peculiar type of charge in Socrates' case because it was typically reserved for elites.

³⁷ The standard reading the *Apology* takes its structure from the legal outline of the charges, dividing Socrates' speech into the following order: the first stage includes the opening (17a-18a), the *prothesis* (18a-19a), the defense speech (19a-24b), the digression (28a-34b), the epilogue (34b-35d); the second stage entails the counter-penalty (35e-38b) and the closing address (38c-42a). See Brickhouse and Smith (1988: 24-37). Reeve (1989: 3) points out that this outline, though textually accurate, obscures an analytically fruitful tripartite structure in which we trace an arch from the "false" Socrates to a "true" rendition.

³⁸ Plato's *Euthyphro*, staged against the backdrop of Socrates' trial, illustrates the difficulty that even the city's supposed experts on piety had in defining the term.

executing him against levying a fine or, as Socrates thinks is truly fitting, lavishing him with publicly provided meals in their most honored dining hall for the rest of his life.

Socrates begins by defining judgment as a practice of distinguishing between justice and injustice. In his opening address, he implores the jurymen to “pay no attention to my manner of speech – be it better or worse – but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence (*arête*) of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth” (18a).³⁹ The conception of judging as an act of discerning between what is just or true and what is not, particularly when standards against which to measure either are provisional, recurs throughout much of the Platonic corpus.⁴⁰ In this context, it puts the onus of defining *justice* and *truth* on the jurymen, whose verdict of “guilty” or “not guilty” will belie what should be a complicated philosophical inquiry into the nature of justice. In order to meet Socrates’ challenge, each juror will need to reflect on his conception of justice and assess the philosopher’s testimony and alleged activity against it. Socrates acknowledges that the jury will have difficulty discerning truth from falsehood because his “first accusers” had already turned them against him. He fears these older enemies because:

[They] got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger. Those who spread that rumor, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers, for their hearers believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods. Moreover, these accusers are

³⁹ In the *prooimion* of his speech, Socrates warns the jury that, contra his accusers’ suggestions, he is not “an accomplished speaker at all” (17b). He explains that he has never before appeared in the lawcourt and is “therefore simply a stranger to the manner of speaking here” (17b-d). *Prima facie* we might think this ironic given the sophisticated speech we know he is about to give. His references to the shameful behavior others have exhibited before the court (34c) suggest familiarity with court norms. Socrates does not deny that he is a good speaker; he denies that he is an *accomplished* or *clever* speaker (*dēinou ontos legein*) with deceitful aims. *Pace* Aristophanes’ caricature in *The Clouds*, he must have expected his audience to expect clever speech. However, should his accusers “call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth” then he is glad to accept the charge (17b). “It would not be fitting,” he continues, “to toy with words when I appear before you” (17c). Cf. Reeve (1989: 6).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., *Cratylus* (386c-d, 385b, 438d); *Theaetetus* (161d-e, 200a-e); *Symposium* (202a-b); *Lysis* (219d); *Republic* (470c-e).

numerous, and have been at it a long time; also, they spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them, some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default, as there was no defense. (18b-c)

His first accusers included Aristophanes, whose popular comedy *Clouds* portrays a sophist named Socrates fancifully investigating natural phenomena – hypothesizing that gnats buzz from their anuses, for instance – while operating a think-tank (*phrontistērion*) that worships new gods, teaches clients how to evade legal prosecution, and turns sons against their fathers.⁴¹ Meletus' accusations might be warranted were Plato's Socrates anything like his Aristophanic doppelganger. Socrates denies a likeness to Aristophanes' caricature, but is unsure that he can disabuse the jury of so deeply seated a prejudice in so short a trial.⁴²

Before addressing the formal charges against him, Socrates identifies the implicit charges brought by these earlier accusers. His accusers allege that he proffered the kind of knowledge supposedly possessed by sophists like Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias.⁴³ “Each of these men,” he says, “can go to any city and persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their fellow citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, to pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides” (20a). Socrates maintains that these traveling instructors threaten to corrupt the youth of Athens. Not only does their outsider status situate

⁴¹ Though Aristophanes' Socrates offers clients instruction in aristocratic Just Logic (961-1149) as well as in the Unjust Logic practiced by sophists (1036-1104), most, including the play's protagonist, choose the latter.

⁴² His worry betrays a problem with the dicastic institutional parameters – e.g. time limitations, topical scope, etc. – which I discuss at greater length in my treatment of the *Theaetetus*. It also speaks to a problem with extant Athenian decision-making: because his first accusers are “numerous,” they can simply outvote Socrates' sympathizers, thereby trumping truth with popular opinion. Socrates repeats this worry more explicitly at 28d-e. This is the basis of John Stuart Mill's use of Socrates as a critic of popular decision-making. As Villa nicely puts it, “For Mill, as for Socrates, the scandal of humanity is that we continually mistake local custom and convention for moral truth” (2001: 60).

⁴³ Plato attacks Gorgias as a teacher of rhetoric who cannot guarantee the virtuous use of oratory (*Gorgias* 461a-b). Prodicus and Hippias reappear in the *Protagoras*, where Plato pans Hippias as an elitist, vaingloriously proud of the “godlike intellect,” he exhibits at every Olympiad (*Lesser Hippias* 364a, cf. *Protagoras* 315c) and who considers the assembly of sophists in Callias' home “the wisest of the Greeks” (*Protagoras* 337d). Prodicus' wisdom amounts to nitpicking lexical distinctions (*Protagoras* 340b, 341c-e, 358b).

them as potential pariah upon the bonds of citizenship (24e), but Socrates discovers that sophists do not even possess the kind of expert knowledge (*epistēmē*) they claim to impart to the wealthy youths who can accompany them (21b-c).⁴⁴ They instead take advantage of highly esteemed Athenians like Callias who uncritically accept that a foreign “expert” of virtue can improve his children more than his city can, and who endanger their sons in the process (20b).⁴⁵ By discharging the care of their sons’ souls to sophists, these gullible elites break their ephebic oaths by condemning the city to poor advice.

Recognizing that his reputation for wisdom has grouped him in with the likes of Gorgias and Hippias in the popular imagination, Socrates must distinguish his philosophical practice from sophistic methods of instruction. He does so by denying command of the knowledge sophists advertise themselves as possessing (20c). Unlike the sophists’ godlike claims to expert knowledge of virtue, Socrates maintains that his is a distinctly “human wisdom” (*anthrōpinē sophia*) (20d), the nature of which remains a source of consternation among Plato’s interpreters.⁴⁶ Indeed, Socrates appears perplexed by it himself. He relates the story of how his friend Chaerephon asked the Pythian oracle of the Apollonian temple at Delphi “if any man was

⁴⁴ Cf. *Critias* (52e).

⁴⁵ Plato stages the *Protagoras* in Callias’ home, which was, as we shall see, a popular venue where sophists could exhibit their skills in private.

⁴⁶ The paradox stems from Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge on one hand while maintaining that knowledge of the “most important things” is necessary for virtuous life, all the while presenting himself as a virtuous moral agent. Many resolve the paradox by contesting the sincerity of Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge. See, e.g., Gulley (1968: 69), Vlastos (1971: 7-8); cf. Vlastos (1991: 32). Others agree with Reeve’s straightforward reading that, for Socrates, “human wisdom involves seeing that one does not possess any significant knowledge of the most important things, that in all probability such knowledge belongs only to the god” (1989:13). Cf. Irwin (1995: 28), Zuckert (2009: 679), Bett (2011: 225-227). On the distinction between human wisdom and craft knowledge (*technē*), see Reeve (1989: 37-45).

wiser than [Socrates],” to which the oracle replied, “that no one was wiser” (21a).⁴⁷ Surprised by the oracle’s statement, Socrates testifies that he is “very conscious that [he is] not wise at all” (21b) and sets out to examine purportedly wise figures in the *agora*. So began his elenctic practice.

Socrates practices the elenchus in his encounters with those citizens considered wisest in Athens. His questions initially confound the public men who thought themselves knowledgeable but were in fact easily refuted (22b). Socrates’ testimony does not explain the type of wisdom these public men claim to possess, but he does note that by publicly embarrassing them he invited the ire of elites and those who followed them.⁴⁸ He next finds that while the poets are “inspired” by some “inborn talent” they cannot explain or interpret their poems any better than their audience can (22c).⁴⁹ Finally, Socrates discovers that while craftsmen are knowledgeable of their particular trades, they nevertheless fall into the same error as did the poets:

Each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself very wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the wisdom they had, so that I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was more profitable to remain as I am (*moi lusiteloι hōsper*). (22e)

Two points about this conclusion warrant special attention. First, Socrates couches his philosophical practice in specifically religious terms in order to refute the charge of impiety.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Chaerephon was a well-known democratic partisan whom Socrates tellingly describes as “compulsive” (21a). One might suspect that his invocation here is an appeal to the jury’s populist sympathies. Some have challenged the veracity of Socrates’ story about Chaerephon’s venture to the Delphic oracle. See Brickhouse and Smith (1994: 40).

⁴⁸ Christina Tarnopolsky (2007: 291) insightfully observes the ambiguity of *elenchus* as a term describing refutation as well as shaming.

⁴⁹ The poets’ “inspiration” is not unlike the *daemoniac* gift that Socrates claims dissuades him from committing injustice (31d-e, 40a). I consider this an unsatisfactory wrinkle in his defense. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, this observation has implications for Socrates’ insistence that the users of goods are better positioned to judge them than those who craft them. See *Republic* (601d-e).

⁵⁰ Some have read Socrates’ response to the oracle as a challenge. See, e.g., Saxonhouse (2006: 106-7). Others have denied the religious aspect of his philosophical project altogether. See, e.g., Villa (2001: 40-1); Kateb (1998: 84).

Insofar as piety and patriotism were inseparable in fifth century Athens, his activity is expressly public and political. Second, Socrates presents a particularly difficult paradox with respect to judgment. He disavows the kind of wisdom others purportedly possess, claiming only to know better than others that he is ignorant of the most important things, namely virtue. Yet he claims the capacity to judge for himself which kind of life is most in his interest to pursue.⁵¹

Addressing this paradox is central to the distinction between elenctic philosophical practice and competing sophistic methods of instruction and, by extension, to the practice of Socratic political judgment. Though sophists perhaps believe that they trade in *Truth*, as the title of Protagoras' treatise suggests, Socrates argues that they instead peddle opinions, and poorly reasoned ones at that. By contrast, he restricts the domain of human wisdom to reasonable belief and examines it accordingly. To continually test, question, and refute a verified truth claim would be absurd.⁵² But he maintains that human wisdom can rarely be sure of when it has arrived at such certainty; instead, we can at best formulate justified beliefs about those things we think are true. When he asserts that the unexamined life is not worth living, he is positing a reasonable *belief* about how a virtuous life ought to be conducted and not a *truth-claim* based on irrefutable

My own reading adheres more closely to those who take Socrates on good faith that he considers his philosophical enterprise as one of pious and therefore civic duty. See Reeve (1989: 28); Corey (2005).

⁵¹ Some contemporary readers and even Socrates' own companions consider this position strange in light of his execution (e.g., *Critias* 45c-46a). Yet Socrates is unsure that death is actually a bad condition while he is much surer that living unjustly is a great evil (*Apology* 29b).

⁵² This again distinguishes Socrates' human wisdom from the craft knowledge sophists purport to possess insofar as expert knowledge entails the capacity to give accounts with irrefutable certainty. See Reeve (1989: 43).

evidence.⁵³ The interlocutors and contemporary interpreters who complain that he never satisfactorily defends the veracity of such positions miss this point.⁵⁴

Socrates draws several politically relevant lessons from his examination of Athens. The first contains a problematic kernel of democratic potential. “In my investigation in the service of the god,” he recounts, “I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable” (22a). Though his conclusion would certainly raise the hackles of embarrassed politicians, it should similarly reveal to the jurymen, many of whom would count themselves among “those who were thought to be inferior,” that their judgments were no further from true belief than were those held by elites. His second conclusion situates his philosophical practice within Athenian political life. By helping his fellow citizens recognize the inconsistency of their moral beliefs, he also helps to clarify their material interests. Specifically, he insists that adhering to the virtues they claim to revere, especially justice, demands that they dramatically change how they calculate material advantage. Finally, he argues that such a shift will make them flourish and that, because he is centrally concerned with their wellbeing in this regard, it is in their self-interest to spare his life.

The Athenians desperately need philosophical refection in order to recognize their own interests. Without continually examining their beliefs, Socrates fears that his fellow citizens will condemn themselves to “the most blameworthy ignorance” of believing “that one knows what one does not know” (29b). In this respect he envisions the elenchus as a tool for making beliefs

⁵³ My claim slightly departs from Vlastos (1991: 72), who claims that where knowledge “means justified true belief, justified through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument, there are many propositions he does claim to know.” I read Socrates as stopping short of equating justified true belief to *absolute knowledge*.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Stokes (1986); Nehamas (1998: 9); Benson (2000: 32-48); Villa (2001: 23). Cf. Thrasyarchus in *Republic* (337a).

cohere to genuine interests by prioritizing the care of one's soul over the shameful pursuit of "as much wealth, reputation and honor as possible" (29e).⁵⁵ Importantly, Socrates does not demand that the city abandon material pursuits altogether.⁵⁶ On the contrary, he stresses that "excellence (*arête*) makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively" (30b). In other words, the pursuit of virtue is a first-order priority that orients the second-order pursuit of other goods; pursuing the first does not preclude the second. If, however, Thucydides was right that the Athenians had entirely abandoned the former in favor of the latter during the Peloponnesian War, we can begin to see in Socrates' defense an explanation for how the city fell into pleonectic hubris. It was not merely the small-minded selfishness of the few, but rather the willful ignorance of the many that lead the city's judgment astray.

By uniting ethical reflection with material interests, Socrates defends his instrumental, if not intrinsic, value to the city. If the jury condemns him, he says, it will do much greater harm to Athens than to himself: "I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf" he protests, "but of yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me" (30e). For Socrates to label himself "god's gift" to Athens might seem at odds with his prior effort to characterize himself as the humblest man in the city. But we quickly learn that he is a peculiar gift:

I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly. It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city. I never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company. (30e)

⁵⁵ More precisely, he defines genuine happiness as the maintenance of coherent beliefs about one's interests. See his discussion of the tyrannical city in *Rep.* 566a-569c.

⁵⁶ See Vlastos (1991: 231).

Socrates' gadfly metaphor is by now so familiar that it serves as shorthand for encouraging critical thinking in everything from education to business.⁵⁷ Yet it remains strange for a number of reasons. For instance, we might think it odd to describe Athens as a "sluggish" horse in light of Thucydides' description of her people as having been born to take no rest and to accord it to no others.⁵⁸ Socrates' metaphor suggests that the restless military planning captured in Thucydides' narrative was a product of its philosophical complacency. That is, because the city never actively deliberated over its ultimate ends, its war effort was bound to continue indefinitely. With this reading in mind, we might expect Socrates to recall the horse-breeding metaphor deployed in his examination of Meletus, now casting himself more explicitly in the role of trainer to the city (25b). We might expect an account of how his elenchus improves the city's judgment by turning its natural energy toward philosophical study. Indeed, many commentators interpret this aspect of his argument as evidence of Socrates' hostility toward the democracy. Instead, he equates himself to an irritating pest without which, paradoxically, no one in the city will ever sleep easily (31b).

Contra popular interpretation, I argue that the gadfly metaphor offers an unsatisfying description of Socrates' political practice, especially with respect to the cultivation of judgment. True, it illuminates several aspects of the elenchus: like a stinging fly, it is often frustrating, disquieting, and rarely appreciated. But the metaphor threatens to obscure as much as it reveals. Nowhere in the image of the gadfly do we see Socrates and his interlocutors jointly investigating the "most important things," nor do we see how he guides his companions to meaningful conclusions. The gadfly metaphor also sells Socrates' mission short. His goal is not simply to

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Klausner (1952); Griffen (1963); Mallison (1983); Euben (1991).

⁵⁸ Thucydides (1.70).

agitate his interlocutors, but to improve them. As I will argue in the next section, Plato supplements – or, rather, supplants – the image of Socrates the Gadfly with a model of Socrates the Midwife in order to highlight these otherwise obscure qualities. For now, we are left with only a partial portrait of the philosopher as an agitator guilty of the purely negative practices attributed to him by his enemies.

The sentencing phase of Socrates' trial introduces questions about happiness (*eudaimonia*) that are central to Plato's critique of Athenian political judgment.⁵⁹ Reiterating his devotion to Athens and Apollo, Socrates initially suggests a "fine" amounting to publicly provided meals in the Prytaneum as appropriate penalty for philosophizing.⁶⁰ Especially because Meletus has proposed the death penalty, Socrates' apparently outrageous counter-proposal has led some to suggest that he is either defying the court or provoking the jury into martyring him.⁶¹ These interpretations have not considered Socrates' defense of the proposed sentence in which he appeals to his civic usefulness. "The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy," he says, "I make you be it" (36d).⁶² In other words, the Athenians may think that honors and pleasures bring *eudaimonia*, but they are mistaken; Socrates makes them genuinely happy by pursuing the "greatest good for man" (*magiston agathon hon anthropō*), namely "discussing virtue every day" (38a). Doing so is pursuant to his Apollonian mission within the city, which makes him not only pious but also civically useful.

⁵⁹ Though I follow Grube in translating *eudaimonia* as "happiness," the term describes a broader, distinctly human and self-sufficient good. "Flourishing" and "well-being" may also capture its meaning. See Irwin (1989: 80).

⁶⁰ He soon revises his suggestion to a fine of one mina, or 100 drachmas. This was a considerable sum.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Stone (1988: 230); Danzig (2003: 307). Socrates grants that many in the jury will think his proposal arrogant (37a).

⁶² Trans. Reeve (1988: 170). Grube translates the passage: "The Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy, I make you be happy."

Socrates' pithy declaration summarizes his critique of, and response to, Athenian *pleonexia*. It was not the first time the city was accused of heedless pleasure-seeking and honor-loving. Indeed, the same Aristophanic comedy that lampooned Socrates commonly teased the democracy for its hedonism, often to acclaim. A graver moment's reflection on the Peloponnesian War, only five years past, would remind anyone that the political costs of pursuing pleonectic policies were too high for any city.⁶³ Socrates suggests that he can reform the city, "make them [happy]," through the disquieting practice of elenctic examination. Yet given its largely negative form, the link between elenctic examination and *eudaimonia* is not altogether obvious. The jury certainly does not see it, nor do many of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato's later dialogues.⁶⁴ Examining the claim will therefore motivate much of Plato's ethical philosophy.

Plato explicates the connection between Socratic philosophy and happiness in the *Republic* when he has Socrates associate human happiness with psychic harmony. This radical redefinition of happiness stands at odds with conventional thinking but affirms the importance of justice for better decision-making. By disrupting the soul's harmonic balance, injustice forecloses upon any possibility for eventual human happiness.⁶⁵ But in order to avoid injustice, we need to know what kinds of actions are unjust. The elenchus assists that effort by clarifying tensions between competing conceptions of happiness, demonstrating the conclusions of each, and offering reasons for rejecting some pursuits as inconsistent with the ultimate end. Yet the

⁶³ See Frank (2007).

⁶⁴ Though Socrates insists that he could persuade the jury to take up philosophy were he given the time to do so, Plato almost never grants him that success in his later work.

⁶⁵ This is consistent with Irwin's interpretation of Socrates' unified theory of the virtues – e.g. courage, moderation, justice, etc. – as part of a broader argument that *eudaimonia* harmonizes all virtuous acts as a single pursuit of happiness (2007: 24).

elenchus cannot offer substantive alternatives to the propositions it resists; it does not produce positive knowledge, only good reasons for rejecting false beliefs. Given this limitation, how can the elenchus make Athens happy? The best answer, again borne out in the *Republic*, is that the contemplative life is the most choiceworthy and therefore “happiest” in the sense that it is most fulfilling. Socrates makes Athenians “happy” by challenging them to contemplate the nature of virtue as a serious undertaking of human life. The elenchus’ open-endedness combines with the limitations of human wisdom to ensure that Socratic philosophizing will be a continuous contemplation of the good. In this way, Socrates understands happiness as an ongoing activity rather than as an end state achievable through corporeal satisfaction.⁶⁶

Most of the jury disagrees with Socrates and settles on Meletus’ death penalty. Socrates warns them that future critics will seize upon their decision as evidence of Athenian wickedness. For had he pandered to their sympathies and pleased them with shameless supplication, he may have avoided their wrath. By refusing to do so, he maintained his dignity but ran afoul of their favor. The differences between Socrates’ philosophic defense and the kinds of apologies the jury is accustomed to rewarding with lighter penalties highlights a broader difference between philosophic and conventional conceptions of *eudaimonia* as a standard of judgment. Returning to the earlier question of why Plato thought the jury was wrong to convict Socrates, we may now say that its decision was guided by a conception of happiness that was widely shared and not particularly controversial. Socrates was not condemned by a jury of petty tyrants; he was voted down by ordinary people who believed they were acting in the city’s interests. Insofar as the city’s interests were dictated by a shared conception of *eudaimonia*, they indeed were. But as Plato would allow Socrates to later demonstrate, the jury’s hedonic definition of happiness is

⁶⁶ This view is consistent with Aristotle’s definition of *eudaimonia* as an activity conducted for its own sake. See *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097^b21-22, 1098^a5-8).

shifty and bereft of virtue; there is no guarantee that pursuing pleasure will enhance welfare. According to Plato, pleasure and welfare are not synonymous. By mistaking pleasure for happiness as the ultimate end of human action, the jury's judgment was a reflection of its "most blameworthy ignorance" of thinking it new something that it did not.

2.2 Epistemology and Judgment in the *Theaetetus*

Plato explores the relationship between judgment and democratic politics by pitting Socrates against his sophistic rival Protagoras. Born in the Thracian city Abdera in 490, Protagoras is widely credited as the "first democratic theorist in the history of the world," as well as the first openly professional sophist.⁶⁷ The intelligentsia of Periclean Athens widely circulated his treatises *Alethia* (On Truth) and *Peritheon* (On the Gods) while generously compensating him for instructing their sons in legal rhetoric and oratory.⁶⁸ Protagoras' success also attracted other sophists to Athens, including Anaxagoras of Clazomenae and Diogenes of Apollonia. When Pericles declared Athens the school of all Hellas in 431, he may well have had the city's preponderance of these sophists and rhetoricians in mind.⁶⁹

Few remnants of Protagoras' corpus survive for contemporary scholarship, and we only know of it through scattered fragments and Plato's commentary. Much ink has been spilt parsing Protagoras' actual doctrine from its Platonic filter.⁷⁰ If Cynthia Farrar is correct that Plato was

⁶⁷ See Farrar (1988: 77). Plato has Protagoras introduce himself as the first sophist in *Protagoras* (316d).

⁶⁸ Jacqueline de Romilly (1992: 5, 213) reports that Protagoras "sometimes charged as much as 100 minai," or 10,000 drachmas, for his services. To put that sum in perspective, Athens' citizen jurors were paid three obols, or half a drachma, *per diem*.

⁶⁹ See de Romilly (1992: 21-24).

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Schiller (1908); Morrison (1941: 7); Versenyi (1962); Maguire (1973); Burnyeat (1976); Nill (1984: 4-51); Farrar (1988:44-98); Balaban (1999); Chappell (2004: 112).

principally concerned with refuting the sophist, we might worry about the philosopher's temptation to distort Protagoras' arguments to suit his own ends.⁷¹ Yet as Paul Stern points out, Plato frequently puts into Socrates' mouth unpolished, incomplete arguments that fail to undermine Protagoras' position in the sophist's eponymous dialogue.⁷² Though it is often tempting to read Socrates as the hero of Plato's work, I follow Peter Euben in maintaining that, by the time he composed the *Protagoras*, Plato was genuinely interested in testing the theories set forth in his *Apology*.⁷³ Far from dressing Protagoras up as a straw man for Socratic refutation, Plato presents the sophist as a heavy counterweight to philosophical practice. In what follows, I consider the interplay between Socrates and Protagoras as a contest between two hypotheses about political judgment, neither of which is completely satisfying.

Before turning to Socrates' direct engagement with Protagoras, it is helpful to begin with Socrates' indirect engagement with his ideas in a work staged well after both the philosopher and the sophist had died. Written in 367, Plato's *Theaetetus* preserves much of what survives of Protagoras' epistemological theory.⁷⁴ The dialogue is best known as an inquiry into the proper definition of knowledge (*epistēmē*).⁷⁵ However, few contemporary readers have attended to the dialogue's political undertones, the study of which I argue can illuminate similar themes in the *Apology*, *Protagoras* and *Republic*.⁷⁶ In addition to examining competing epistemological

⁷¹ Farrar (1988: 53). So distorted is Plato's portrait of Protagoras in Farrar's view that she employs the moniker "Platagoras" in her study.

⁷² Stern (2008: 8); cf. Sedley (2004: 9-12).

⁷³ See, e.g., Euben (1993).

⁷⁴ Indeed, Farrar insists on consulting the depictions of Protagoras in both dialogues, as doing so provides "a coherent picture of Protagorean theory which brings together two realms, cosmos and community" (1988: 47).

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Runciman (1962); Burnyeat (1990); Desjardins (1990); Dorter (1994); Heidegger (2002:109-117); Chappell (2004); Peterson (2011).

⁷⁶ Exceptions include Stern (2002); Sedley (2004).

theories, the *Theaetetus* explores the inter-generational transfer of political wisdom through student-teacher relationships and the impact of that transfer on citizenship. By relating his own pedagogical and philosophical methods to the practice of midwifery, Socrates challenges the sophistic approach to political education favored by Protagoras. Most importantly, the *Theaetetus* also explores the contours of good judgment and proposes several ways in which we might understand the difference between better and worse models of the practice.

Plato clearly wants his audience to interpret the *Theaetetus* with Socrates' trial in mind. The dialogue is a written account of the philosopher's exchange with two interlocutors, the geometer Theodorus of Cyrene and his brilliant Athenian pupil Theaetetus, as dictated to the Megarian thinker Euclides during his final days awaiting execution (142c).⁷⁷ In the opening scene, Euclides tells his companion Terpsion that a chance encounter with Theaetetus has reminded him of Socrates' account of a prior exchange between himself and the bright geometer's student. Now an adult, Theaetetus is a famous mathematician and war hero who is returning home to die after suffering mortal wounds in a battle with Corinth. By portraying him as a citizen-scholar who is as brilliant as he is loyal to Athens, Plato gives the impression that Theaetetus and Socrates are cut from the same cloth. They even look alike.⁷⁸ Socrates reminds us of the trial later when he says that he "must go to the King's Porch to meet the indictment that Meletus has brought against [him]" (210d). By dramatically dating the *Theaetetus* to the morning of Socrates' trial, Plato encourages his audience to reflect on the dialogue's philosophical themes

⁷⁷ On the significance of Euclides as a student of the Megarian school, see Stern (2008: 15-23).

⁷⁸ While introducing him to Socrates, Theodorus describes him as a brilliant thinker but "not beautiful at all, but is rather like you, snub-nosed, with eyes that stick out; though these features are not quite so pronounced in him" (143e). Tellingly, Socrates later objects to Theodorus' assessment: "you are handsome and not ugly as Theodorus would have it. For handsome is as handsome says" (185e).

in close association with the political consequences captured in the *Apology*. The specters of politics and judgment hang over both dialogues.

The main dialogue opens *in media res* as Socrates and Theodorus chat about the next generation of talented Athenians. Socrates has just asked the geometer if he happens to know of any especially bright students, saying that he is “anxious to know which of our young men show signs of turning out well” (143d).⁷⁹ Theodorus recommends Theaetetus, introducing him as a “remarkable boy” who is as “manly” as any of his peers (144a). Socrates is more familiar with the boy’s dead father, adding that Theaetetus stands to inherit a sizable fortune from his family’s estate. This is not a trivial qualification: it marks Theaetetus as the kind of young noble whom Meletus has accused Socrates of corrupting and as a fatherless boy approaching manhood without access to traditional paternal guidance. Contra Theodorus’ estimation of the boy’s unique maturity, he is (or could be) a vulnerable character whom Socrates may either corrupt or nurture.

Socrates and Theaetetus first discuss Theodorus’ area of expertise. Socrates wants to know if they can trust the mathematician’s aesthetic appraisal of their apparently grotesque features (144e). Because Theodorus is not an artist, they agree to discount his judgment of beauty; but if they can agree that he is wise, they must also agree that his assessment of their own wisdom must be sound. Theaetetus thus submits himself to Socrates’ “examination” of his intellectual acuity as much for his own sake as for his master’s reputation (145c). Their ostensibly innocent exercise suggests that only experts are qualified to assess in others the qualities they purportedly possess. Just as a shipwright is qualified to appraise a boat’s

⁷⁹ Given the dramatic context, we might interpret this comment as a gesture toward Socrates’ prophesy that another generation would continue his work. See *Apology* 39c-d.

seaworthiness or a mason is qualified to test a wall's foundations, so too should a wise man be qualified to assess the wisdom of others.⁸⁰ Because Theodorus has praised Theaetetus as he has never praised anyone before, Socrates is curious about his companion's judgment. Again, he tests that judgment not by examining Theodorus himself but by evaluating his pupil.⁸¹ We shall see Socrates extend this method of proxy measurement in his evaluation of Protagoras' teaching through his later exchanges with both companions.

Socrates evaluates Theaetetus by asking him to define *knowledge*. As if to extend the parallel between the old philosopher and his young interlocutor, Plato has Theaetetus confess that while he has often pondered questions related to the essence of knowledge, he has never been able to persuade himself that he has definitively answered them. For that matter, Theaetetus complains, he has never before heard satisfactory answers from anyone else (148e). In other words, Theaetetus does not claim the kind of wisdom attributed to sophists, but instead demonstrates a natural tendency toward philosophical puzzlement (*aporia*). Socrates commiserates with the boy, explaining that he is merely experiencing "the pains of labor" which attend such endeavors (149a). It is here that Socrates introduces his celebrated *midwifery*

⁸⁰ These examples belie a deeper problem of moral expertise and knowledge of virtue to which I shall return in my discussion of the *Republic* in chapter 3. *Wisdom* is a much more abstract domain of expertise than a technical skill like *masonry*. To say that one is an expert of wisdom suggests that one is also an expert of all things about which knowledge is possible. As Myles Burnyeat (1990: 216) observes, Socrates – and, by extension, Plato – reaches the extreme conclusion by the end of the dialogue that, like in the *Republic*, "no-one knows anything unless they know everything." "But," he continues, "a twentieth-century reader is already hard put to it to swallow the interim conclusion [reached in the *Theaetetus*] that knowledge is expertise and that no-one knows anything in a given domain unless they have total mastery of the domain on the basis of its elements." As a means of dealing with this difficulty, Burnyeat suggests that we consider this conclusion rather as a weaker statement about *understanding* than as a stronger claim about *knowledge*. This approach appeals to what Martin Heidegger (2002: 111) identifies as the conventional pre-philosophical implication of *epistēmē*.

⁸¹ One wonders how useful an examination of Theodorus would be, given his repeated inability to engage in dialectical discourse with Socrates (162a-c, 165a-b, 169d) and preference for listening to long speeches (177c). It soon becomes clear that Theaetetus is sharper than his master – whom he nevertheless respects – suggesting that Theodorus was able to appreciate wisdom even though he lacks it himself. This observation would seem to refute Socrates' earlier position that only experts can accurately judge within their areas of specialty.

metaphor.⁸² Despite his reputation for “causing people to get into difficulties” and inducing the kinds of pain from which Theaetetus suffers, Socrates insists that he merely assists others in “giving birth” to their own ideas (149a).⁸³ Explicating the metaphor for his bewildered acquaintance, he observes that women employed as midwives are those who have experienced childbirth but are no longer of childbearing age (149b-c). Like these women, the old man suggests that he is better suited to helping younger thinkers deliver their own ideas into the world than to producing his own or imparting them to others. Experience thus contributes to an understanding of difficulties in practice that may escape the person of purely theoretical training.

Like the image of Socrates the Gadfly, the midwife metaphor is by now so familiar that contemporary readers rarely scrutinize it. *Prima facie*, it is straightforward enough. Unlike his sophistic counterparts, Socrates describes his elenctic examination as a means by which he can assist others in laying bare the beliefs they already hold within themselves.⁸⁴ So understood, it helps us appreciate several aspects of his method. First, as illustrated in Theaetetus’ complaint,

⁸² Socrates introduces it as a confidence shared between himself and Theaetetus, saying that he conceals his art from the rest of the world (149a). Given that he has allegedly asked Euclides to transcribe this conversation in order to save it for posterity, his secrecy should be read with an ear for irony. As Ruby Blondell (2002: 267) insightfully observes, Socrates’ explicit effort to associate his life’s work with his mother’s occupation rather than that of his father suggests that he is not only distancing himself from masculine conventions but is also attempting to relate to his fatherless interlocutor on a more personal level.

⁸³ There is some debate about the relationship between this passage and the dialogue’s discussion of knowledge within the Platonic corpus. F.M. Cornford (1935: 27-28) interprets Socrates’ defense as an allusion to Meno’s complaint in his eponymous dialogue that Socrates does nothing more than confound others without offering any positive instruction (*Meno* 79e). Insofar as both Meno and Theaetetus fall into the same trouble of defining concepts (i.e. virtue and knowledge, respectively) through examples, Cornford insists that Plato is also alluding to the *Meno*’s theory of *anamnesis* – that all learning is the recovery of latent, unremembered knowledge. He reasons that the theory is left undeveloped in the *Theaetetus* because it both presupposes familiarity with the middle dialogues and because the dialogue “is concerned only with the lower kinds of cognition...judgments involving the perception of sensible objects.” Later commentators have rejected Cornford’s analysis on textual grounds. John McDowell (1973: 116-117) points out that, according to the midwifery metaphor, the ideas Socrates delivers are “just as likely to be incorrect as correct,” thus complicating a connection between recollection and absolute knowledge. David Bostock (1988: 16-17) further complains that the theory of *anamnesis* advanced in the *Meno* remains unable to account for the distinction between knowledge and belief purportedly developed in the *Theaetetus*.

⁸⁴ C.f. Burnyeat (2012: 27).

Socrates' approach to philosophy is often agonizing. The painful experience of grappling with the ambiguity surrounding basic beliefs makes philosophical discourse qualitatively different from the pleasure-inducing speeches prepared by the city's politicians. (Though Wittgenstein may have been right to declare the *Theaetetus* Plato's most philosophically interesting work, it is far from his most pleasurable to read.) It is also more worthwhile. As Socrates says in the *Apology*, he aims not simply to perplex his companions but to help them work through the creative pangs of their confusion. Here, Plato is recasting the otherwise hostile aspects of Socratic practice, illustrated in the gadfly metaphor, through a more productive visage of midwifery.

The midwife metaphor also captures a social dimension of the elenctic process that is obscured by the image of the stinging gadfly. By depicting himself as an assistant to his laboring companions' self-discovery, Socrates suggests that such knowledge is not uncovered through isolated toil but through joint investigation. Its collaborative quality makes Socratic philosophy necessarily social, even political. Moreover, by resisting claims that he asserts any positive doctrine of his own, Socrates can distance himself and his own beliefs from the conclusions reached by his interlocutors. To the extent that he is "barren" of his own ideas, Socrates cannot be held accountable for Critias or Alcibiades' tyrannical tendencies.⁸⁵ A cynic might therefore read the metaphor as a clever attempt to exonerate himself from his companions' crimes.⁸⁶ Such

⁸⁵ As if to anticipate objections to his tyrannical companions in the *Apology*, Socrates explains that problems with his practice have arisen when these interlocutors left him too early. "And after they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what remained within them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them to bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and everybody else" (151a). Though he refers specifically to Aristides in this passage, it is difficult to read it without recalling Alcibiades and Critias. Cf. Sedley (2004: 35-7).

⁸⁶ The fact that Socrates does not invoke the midwife metaphor in his defense speech serves as evidence that it should not be applied directly to the historical Socrates but should instead remain reserved for Plato's portrait of him. See Tomin (1987).

a reading carries added weight in light of Socrates' assumption that he can rightly judge the wisdom of Theodorus and Protagoras through his examination of their pupil Theaetetus. But this assumption is underwritten by both sophists' claims to have imparted something to their students. Insofar as Socrates denies that he knows "any of the things that other men know," the midwifery metaphor exempts him from similar scrutiny.

The midwifery metaphor emphasizes the relationship between philosophical examination and practical judgment. According to Socrates, midwives have learned through practical experience when it is best to induce labor pains as well as when they should relieve them. They also decide when to "promote a miscarriage" (149d). To hear Plato's account, midwives are eugenicists worthy of guardianship in the kallipolis. Indeed, Socrates tells Theaetetus that the midwives' greatest secret is that they are the best judges of "whose marriage will produce the best offspring" (150a).⁸⁷ This qualification anticipates the kallipolis' marriage laws, which focus on cultivating the well bred and noble-born while discarding the children of unsanctioned unions (*Republic* 457d, 458d, 495d-e, 460c, 461b-c, 460a).⁸⁸ In such a state, "the midwife's greatest and noblest function would be to distinguish the true from the false offspring" (150b).⁸⁹ Insofar as Socrates delivers ideas rather than children, this suggests that his own "greatest and noblest function" is to distinguish justified true beliefs from false opinions (150c).⁹⁰ Like the

⁸⁷ Theaetetus confesses his ignorance of this facet of midwifery, and a dearth of corroborating evidence suggests that it is wholly of Socrates' creation.

⁸⁸ For all of the discussion of the differences between Plato's theory of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* and the *Republic*, this line of continuity has gone largely unnoticed in the secondary literature.

⁸⁹ Contra Stern's (2002: 66-67) interpretation of this passage as primarily comical, the parallels between Socrates' midwife and the archons of his perfect city are deeply provocative.

⁹⁰ Sedley, extends this interpretation to include Plato himself, concluding that Socrates functions as a *midwife of Platonism*: "By developing this implicit portrayal of Socrates as the midwife of Platonism, Plato aims to demonstrate, if not the identity, at any rate the profound continuity, between, on the one hand, his revered master's historic contribution and, on the other, the Platonist truth" (2004: 8). On this account, Socrates does not function as a

midwife, who remains the best judge of who should bear children for the greatest social benefit, Socrates serves as an excellent judge of which ideas his philosophically-inclined interlocutors should nurture and which they should set out for “exposure” (160c-161e).

The midwifery metaphor is instructive but opaque. The brief description above fails to account for how Socrates can call himself a midwife given his definition of the term. Midwives derived their authority from their experience of having actually given birth to children in their youth. Obviously, the metaphor can only apply in Socrates’ case if he has “given birth” to his own ideas at some earlier point in his life. Yet he denies this. As he puts it:

What I have in common with the ordinary midwives is that I myself am barren of wisdom. The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. And the reason of it is this, that God compels me to attend the travails of others, but has forbidden me to procreate. So that I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom. (150c)

Given his explicit denial of ever having delivered his own ideas, how can he justify his employment? Two unsatisfying answers come to mind. First, we might think Socrates is being ironic. But given that the *Theaetetus* is the only dialogue in which Socrates invokes midwifery, there is insufficient textual evidence to support such a supposition. Second, we might think Socrates is simply incorrect to describe his practice as midwifery in the ordinary sense.⁹¹ However, because the parallels with midwifery illuminate such important aspects of the Socratic elenchus, this approach risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

mouthpiece for Plato in the dialogue but rather serves as a means by which Plato can explore his own ideas about knowledge. Moreover, we may also read the midwife metaphor as one that Plato does not intend for us to apply to the historic Socrates. See, Burnyeat (2012: 21).

⁹¹ For an elaboration of this position, see Wengert (1988).

Rather than dismissing the metaphor as an example of Socratic irony or Platonic sloppiness, I propose that we reconcile philosophy and midwifery by reconsidering the bases of each profession's authority. Midwives derive their authority from the experience of having delivered children; but Socrates does not insist that these children necessarily prove healthy. Indeed, if the midwife's most important function is to determine which infants are likely to survive and which are not, we might suppose that some experience with delivering what Socrates describes as "wind eggs" might be of some value. Recalling his *apologia*, it seems that he has quite a bit of experience examining beliefs, including his own, and testing their viability. Even if he never discovered among his own thoughts any arguments that appear viable, he nevertheless avoided the blameworthy hubris of thinking himself wise when he is not.⁹² He repeatedly encourages Theaetetus to continue their discussion by telling him that even if they arrive at nothing they will have cleansed themselves of bad arguments (191a, 1210d). Underscoring the point, he mocks himself and Theaetetus in the conclusion of the dialogue by noting after their failed attempt to define *knowledge* that their "art of midwifery tells us that all of these offspring are wind-eggs and not worth bringing up" (210b).

The midwifery digression shortly suspended, Theaetetus continues the dialogue by equating knowledge to perception. "It seems to me," he says, "that a man who knows something perceives what he knows, and the way it appears at present, at any rate, is that knowledge is simply perception" (151e). Socrates quickly traces this definition to Protagorean epistemology, recalling the doctrine, "Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are,

⁹² This is not to say that Socrates never arrives at justified true beliefs (i.e. it is better to avoid injustice than to commit it). It is to say, however, that even if those beliefs prove false along with every other belief he has examined, Socrates' experienced examination can impart some measure of human wisdom to Theaetetus.

and of the things which are not, that they are not” (152a).⁹³ The so-called man-measure principle is generally regarded as a refutation of Parmenides’ Eleatic monism. Indeed, Socrates alludes to the debate in his initial treatment of the theory (152e). According to Parmenides, the only sensible statements about reality proceed from an assumption that reality is necessarily fixed, immutable, and contained in pure thought.⁹⁴ Protagoras, at least in this Socratic guise, denies this view for two reasons, both of which relate to a more general concern with the epistemic foundations of political judgment.

First, Parmenides’ argument that reality is not subject to change implies that valid statements about knowledge are also fixed and indisputable. He thus distinguishes between *knowledge* (i.e., objectively true observations about reality) and *opinion* (i.e., subjects about which knowledge is not possible) as discrete categories of enquiry.⁹⁵ Protagoras rejects this bifurcation, suggesting that each individual’s frame of reference informs their perception of reality such that all observations and utterances are subject to dispute.⁹⁶ Like Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance*, he insists that an utterance derives meaning solely from its relation to another such utterance, such that meaning is always deferred. Socrates objects that Protagoras’ position strips us of our ability to contemplate and sensibly discuss an ontologically prior notion of *truth*:

Wherever you turn, there is nothing, as we said at the outset, which in itself is just one thing; all things become relatively to something. The verb ‘to be’ must be totally

⁹³ The Greek text of the surviving fragment reads: *Pantōn chrēmātōn métron estin anthrōpos, tōn men ontōn hōs estin, tōn de ouk ontōn hōs ouk estin.*

⁹⁴ See Barnes (1987: 131-135).

⁹⁵ See Palmer (2009: 365-367).

⁹⁶ The relativist implications of this argument, as well as their political implications, are vividly captured in an anecdote recorded by Plutarch (2012). According to the story, after a competitor in the pentathlon was accidentally struck by a stray javelin and killed, Pericles and Protagoras spent the remainder of the day debating who was at fault. They concluded that the answer depended upon whom they asked: a judge would find the javelin-thrower guilty while an administrator would blame the contest organizers.

abolished—though indeed we have been led by habit and ignorance into using ourselves more than once, even in what we have just been saying. That is wrong, these wise men tell us, nor should we allow the use of such words as ‘something,’ ‘of something,’ or ‘mine,’ ‘this,’ or ‘that’ or any other name that makes things stand still. (157b)

For Socrates, a world without the possibility of absolute knowledge, regardless of whether it is within humanity’s limited reach, is subject to ceaseless, nihilistic flux. His resistance to such a state underscores the difference between doubting that humans can ever attain truth and denying that it exists at all. His critique also demonstrates the incomprehensibility of the relativistic world in which Protagoras insists we live. As we will see shortly, this has dire implications for the sophist’s reliance on persuasion as a means of collective decision-making.⁹⁷

Socrates’ critique relates to another aspect of Parmenidean metaphysics that Protagoras aims to unsettle. Because reality is complete according to Parmenides’ theory, we can make no sensible statements about change or pure negativity.⁹⁸ Arguing, as Protagoras does, that an individual can assert that something *is not* would result in absurdity for Parmenides, who denies that any sensible statements or judgments can be made about things *which are not*. That is, if a phenomenon has never existed, it cannot be a subject of knowledge. In Socrates’ view, these are matters of opinion rather than truth. Protagoras also resists this claim. Rather, by insisting that man measures *all things* (*Pantōn chrēmātōn métron estin anthrōpos*), he means to include negative as well as positive assertions under the rubric of possible knowledge.

Socrates thinks the man-measure principle is both logically self-refuting and politically dangerous. For one thing, it renders all would-be truth statements interminably contestable; it

⁹⁷ Aristotle raises the same problem in his discussion of Protagorean metaphysics: “For on the one hand, if all opinions and appearances are true, all statements must be at the same time true and false. For many men hold beliefs in which they conflict with one another, and all think those mistaken who have not the same opinions as themselves; so that the same thing must be and not be” (*Metaphysics* 1009^a6-12).

⁹⁸ The Megarians held a similar view, inviting us to question what effect Plato hopes to achieve by putting Protagoras’ opposite position into the pen of Euclides. See Stern (2008: 17).

cannot tell us if we can trust our senses, nor even if we are dreaming or awake, let alone if one person is wiser than another (158d).⁹⁹ To the extent that everyone is their own measure of all things there can be no set standard against which we can make such evaluations (159e). As Socrates puts it,

My perception is true for me—because it is always a perception of that being which is peculiarly mine; and I am judge, as Protagoras said, of things that are, that they are, for me; and of things that are not, that they are not...How then, if I am thus unerring and never stumble in my thought about what is—or what is coming to be—how can I fail to be a knower of the things of which I am a perceiver? (160c)

Here, Socrates argues that the Protagorean theory of knowledge leads to perversely solipsistic consequences. It fails to provide a way of negotiating differences of opinion, with the result that all statements are mere reflections of untutored opinion rather than justified belief or knowledge. In short, the man-measure principle does not allow for the possibility of misjudgment. Though perhaps not as internally inconsistent as Socrates claims (171c), the principle nevertheless strips all social judgments of their authority.¹⁰⁰

Protagoras' epistemological theory carries a democratic potential that is more fully articulated in the *Protagoras*. By asserting that no individual's judgment is any more or less valid than anyone else's, his epistemology validates the Athenian practice of regarding all citizens as equally qualified, in principle, to advise the assembly on political matters (*Protagoras* 319b-d, cf. 323c). If we view Socrates as a committed Athenian with a critical but sympathetic disposition toward democracy, it is difficult to see why the philosopher resists this theory.

⁹⁹ We will see this problem reemerge in the *Protagoras* when the sophist attempts to explain how he can at once maintain that all truth-claims are equally valid while simultaneously touting himself as the wisest man in Greece.

¹⁰⁰ On the internal consistency of Protagoras' theory, see, e.g. Burnyeat (1976). Though Burnyeat is right to note the internal validity of the man-measure principle, his defense does not mitigate the anti-social implications of Protagoras' position.

Especially considering his doubts about the human capacity to discover genuine truth, we might conclude that he and Protagoras are not too far apart in their conclusions.

To better appreciate the difference between Socrates and Protagoras, we must clarify their competing claims. Socrates and Protagoras diverge in their theories of *truth* and its relation to human wisdom. In his *apologia*, Socrates proposed that while moral truth exists, human wisdom is incapable of fully understanding it. We can, at best, recognize our imperfect relation to truth and proceed through joint dialectical investigation in its gradual, if ever delayed, discovery. In doing so, we will hopefully avoid the commission of injustice but we will surely avoid the most “blameworthy ignorance” of thinking we know that which we do not. Protagoras’ man-measure principle asserts a very different position. He implies that objective moral truth – that is, truth in the Socratic sense – is an illusion; rather, our various perceptions give rise to various opinions about all things including virtue (171a). His theory simultaneously denies the existence of objective moral truth while claiming that we absolutely know this to be so (161c). When compared to the Socratic hypothesis, we see this as a strongly hubristic claim about human wisdom. According to Plato’s version of Protagorean epistemology, we *know* that there is *nothing to know* beyond our capacity.

Socrates’ discussion with Theaetetus reveals the political implications of his epistemological debate with Protagoras. In his view, the man-measure principle corrupts the practice of political judgment in two ways. First, Socrates questions the theory’s ability to settle disputes between competing judgments (171e). He instead argues that citizens specifically require a method to determine what pursuits are in their best interests (172b). The man-measure principle is unable to supply such a method because it rejects objective statements regarding the good. Without a reasonable standard of the good, political deliberation reduces to the kind of

fickle indecision for which Socrates condemns the democratic man in the *Republic*. As Socrates interprets it, Protagoras' theory reduces *political wisdom* to the skill of persuasion through appeal to emotion or pleasure rather than to reason (166e-167a, 201a-b). Given that Protagoras' friend and erstwhile defender Theodorus cannot uphold the view that "all men, on every occasion, judge what is true," we find strong evidence that this view is flatly untenable. The theory also corrupts political judgment and limits its adherents, including Protagoras' pupils, to the folly of injustice (177a). If the assembly considers all judgments, good or bad, with equal weight and without any clear conception of its ultimate ends or the moral limits imposed by justice, they doom themselves to the "deepest unhappiness" from which Socrates warns there is no escape.

Protagoras' approach to judgment is especially problematic for democracies like Athens, where appeal to majority opinion dictates policy decisions. Again anticipating the rhetorical challenge before him in his trial, Socrates complains that the institutional parameters that define deliberative space forestall philosophical discussion about the common good. Rather than engaging one another as equals in conversation about matters of common interest, the *demos* sits as a master in judgment of the enslaved speaker. "The talk is always about a fellow-slave," he says, "and is addressed to a master, who sits there holding some suit or other in his hand. And the struggle is never a matter of indifference; it always directly concerns the speaker, and sometimes life itself is at stake" (172e). Succumbing to the pressures of his environment, the speaker is "keen and highly strung, skilled in flattering the master and working his way to favor" (173a). Simply put, the extant institutions that serve as spaces of deliberation in Athens hold would-be advisors in servitude to the majority, muzzling their efforts to constructively engage with or criticize the city. Moreover, because *pleasure* rather than *truth* serves as the jury's standard of

judgment, public speakers are forced to indulge their audience's tastes and expectations at the risk of offering truthful, if painful, policy advice.¹⁰¹

The norms that structure deliberative space in Athens disadvantage philosophical discourse. In the *Apology*, Socrates admits that the constraints placed upon him would likely prevent him from disabusing the jury of its preconceived notions about his efforts to introduce philosophical reflection into its long-term conception of happiness. He returns to that point in the *Theaetetus* in a digression comparing the philosopher's political role within the city to that of the more ostensibly practical politician.¹⁰² He begins the digression by delimiting the field of political judgment to questions of tangible interests (172a-b). As noted above, Socrates doubts that either the lawcourt or the assembly can provide a deliberative space in which patient, well-reasoned and lengthy examinations of genuine interests can develop. The so-called practical men who attempt to advise the city from these forums "resort to lies and to the policy of repaying one wrong with another" and are "constantly being bent and distorted" (173b). Practicing politics under such conditions is bad for one's health and soul. Though "bent and distorted" by the pressures of public life, this practical man is nevertheless regarded as "a man of ability and wisdom" by himself and his peers (173b).

Socrates' philosophers appear comically incompetent in contrast to their more practical counterparts in the assembly. Divorced from the quotidian details of material life, they "grow up

¹⁰¹ Socrates acknowledged the risk of refusing to appeal to the jury's sentiments at his own trial, presuming that many of his peers would consider his decision not to present his family before them in a plea for mercy as a display of haughty self-righteousness (*Apology* 34c-35c).

¹⁰² Many commentators have either dismissed the digression as irrelevant or have downplayed its significance for the dialogue's main argument. See, e.g., Cornford (1935: 83); Ryle (1966: 157); McDowell (1973: 174); Burnyeat (1990: 33). Bostock (1988) fails to mention it at all. By contrast, Stern (2002; 2008) rightly highlights the third model of Socratic philosophy introduced through the contrast between the archetypical politician and philosopher, insisting further that this model is uniquely equipped with talents of political *phronēsis*.

without knowing the way to the market-place, or the whereabouts of the lawcourts or the council chambers or any other place of public assembly” and remain willfully ignorant of promulgated laws or the goings-on in partisan cliques (173d). They are also blind to the differences of social rank, gender, wealth, or reputation among their fellow citizens. Much like the early naturalist Thales, who allegedly walked into a well because he was so transfixed on the heavens, philosophers are often subjects of ridicule among their more worldly peers (174b).¹⁰³ Aware of their absurd reputations, Socrates’ philosophers remain confident that the practical sphere of politics is not only distracting but also beneath their talents (173e). They are therefore unperturbed by their bumbling performance in the lawcourt and elsewhere because they actively avoid acquiring the experience necessary for performing well in the city’s deliberative spaces (174c-d). “On all of these occasions,” Socrates concludes, “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 resource in dealing with the obvious” (175b).

The examples Socrates employs to portray philosophers as a misunderstood cast of deceptively deep thinkers might tempt us to read his digression as one of Plato’s thinly veiled criticisms of the boorish *demos* and their crass concerns for material gain. However, Socrates’ portrait of the archetypical philosopher does not neatly map onto his own life.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Thales, Socrates invests himself in politics and remains aware of the partisan factions that influence the city’s decisions. His testimony before the court was far from akin to stumbling into a well. He even gossips. Moreover, Socrates finds both the politician and the philosopher guilty of the same

¹⁰³ Socrates makes special note of the fact that it is a Thracian servant-girl who initiated the famous joke about Thales. Given Protagoras’ city of origin, we might read this as a clever allusion to the derision philosophers attract from their “more practical” sophistic counterparts.

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., Cornford (1935: 88-9); Burnyeat (1990: 34-6); Sedley (2004: 66-7); Stern (2008: 163). For a thorough treatment of the differences, see Benitez and Guimaraes (1993).

conceptual fallacies with respect to their judgments about the best life. Both are wrong to cleave the practice of human inquiry into mutually exclusive pursuits of material advantage and theoretical wisdom.¹⁰⁵ The mutual antipathy separating the politicians from the philosophers obscures what should be their common aim insofar as they should both concern themselves with formulating coherent and just public policies that enhance the city.

Following the digression, Socrates clarifies his definition of political judgment by specifying that we rely on it when writing legislation based on estimations about *future* benefits (178b-d). This qualification raises questions about how communities can distinguish between virtuous interests and vicious distractions. Briefly returning to his critique of Protagoras' man-measure theory, Socrates relates this dilemma back to the problem of deciding between better and worse beliefs about the good. As no one has yet experienced the future, and so could not claim expertise on the basis of experience alone, Socrates concludes that we cannot rely on the Protagorean equation between sensory perception and knowledge when formulating legislation about the future good. We must instead look to the soul as an instrument of reasoning about true and false judgments when debating law (186d, 190a).¹⁰⁶ This is a generally difficult task made harder by the illusive nature of the good (179a). Plato returns to this problem in the *Protagoras*

¹⁰⁵ As I argue in chapter 3, Socrates will rectify the philosophers' overly abstract and theoretical politics by insisting on several years' worth of practical experience as part of training the philosopher-statesmen.

¹⁰⁶ In setting the parameters of judgment (190a-191a) Socrates explicitly notes that we do not make judgments about things we already know to be the case. This would appear to position judgment as a practice which falls between *knowing* and being *ignorant*. We find a parallel schema in *Republic* IV, where Socrates sets belief (*doxa*) between *knowledge* and *ignorance* (477a-480a). Indeed, several of Plato's translators find little trouble indiscriminately translating *doxa* as 'judgment' or 'belief' or 'opinion.' See, e.g. McDowell (1973: 193); Bostock (1988: 157). Chappell (2004: 154), however, objects to the apparent parallel between the discussion of *doxa* in the *Theaetetus* and in the *Republic*. In his view, Plato uses the term in a popular, non-technical sense in the *Theaetetus*, but is more nuanced in the *Republic*. I will return to this controversy in the next chapter. What is especially important for my purposes is that Plato does not employ the more technical term *phronēsis* – most frequently translated as "practical wisdom" or "political judgment" – at this stage of his corpus.

and in the *Republic*, but for now the discussion turns to the more technical matter of discerning between true and false judgment more generally.

Discerning between true and false judgments is an immensely difficult political practice.¹⁰⁷ Socrates and Theaetetus first discuss it at 187b-c, when Theaetetus ventures “true judgment” (*alēthēs doxa*) as another possible definition of *knowledge*. According to this initial view, a true judgment is akin to correctly deciding upon a defendant’s guilt or innocence during a criminal trial. Such a decision might be limited by incomplete information, partial evidence, and inaccurate testimony, as well as by the jury’s cognitive ability to remember the facts as prosecutors and defendants presented to them. Theaetetus’ definition of true judgment accords with the way we typically understand good judgment as the capacity to accurately assess a possible state of affairs, to “get the answer right.” Likewise, false judgment amounts to a kind of heterodoxy, or “other judging” whereby an actor judges falsely when they mistake one subject of knowledge for another (188a). Socrates objects to this standard of distinction, insisting that “no one judges ‘The ugly is beautiful’ or makes any other such judgment” (190d) because doing so would amount to sheer ignorance rather than flawed perception or reasoning. We might also think false judgment emerges from incomplete information. Socrates rejects this view as well, however, because maintaining such a position would echo the Protagorean paradox that we can know that which we do not know. We may finally think that false judgment amounts to believing one has knowledge when in reality one is ignorant (199b). Again, Socrates resists this view because it describes ignorance rather than “truly false judgment.”

¹⁰⁷ Kant (2000: 168-169) found this ambiguity vexing and in need of philosophical attention. A more recent literature has emerged that attempts to defend a notion of judgment based more on reflective rather than universal principles. See, e.g., Ferrara (2008: 16-42); Azmanova (2012). Cf. Beiner (1983); Markovits (2008: 125, 158-159).

Despite their persistence, Socrates and Theaetetus find that they are no nearer a satisfying definition of “false judgment” than they were before their digression. Mocking himself, Socrates imagines a master of contradiction demanding an account of them:

Our friend the expert in refutation will laugh. ‘My very good people,’ he will say, ‘do you mean that a man who knows both knowledge and ignorance is thinking that one of them which he knows is the other which he knows? Or is it that he knows neither, and judges the one he doesn’t know to be the other, and judges that the one he knows is the one he doesn’t know? Or does he think that the one he doesn’t know is the one he does? Or are you going to start all over again and tell me that there’s another set of pieces of knowledge concerning pieces of knowledge and ignorance, which a man may possess shut up in some other ridiculous aviaries or waxen devices,¹⁰⁸ which he knows so long as he possesses them though he may not have them ready to hand in his soul—and in this way end up forced to come running round to the same place over and over again and never get any further?’ (200b-c)

Socrates considers their frustration appropriate punishment for having deviated too far from their original concern for knowledge (200d). Perhaps he is correct, but the baffling conversation is more than a non-starter, if for no other reason than that it helpfully illustrates the elenctic process by which Socrates’ midwifery judges each statement’s merits. He proposes three possible definitions of the term (i.e. false judgment), offers strong evidence supporting each definition, and then, just as Theaetetus has congratulated him on his discovery, refutes the apparent conclusion with an even stronger counter-claim that it has violated previous agreements – namely, that Protagoras is wrong to claim that we can know that which we do not know and that we do not make judgments about things we already know to be the case. In so doing he has rejected several conventional definitions of misjudgment as a strictly cognitive defect, thereby opening space for a refreshed perspective on received wisdom.

¹⁰⁸ At previous points in the dialogue Socrates has described the soul as a ball of wax upon which perceptions are imprinted to form memories (191d-e) and has also compared it to an aviary in which pieces of knowledge and ignorance flutter about (197e).

Socrates and Theaetetus' digression into the nature of false judgment is particularly instructive because it resonates with a view of knowledge as mastery of the complex whole. Returning to their original inquiry, they tentatively agree that in order for a person to claim partial knowledge of any subject (e.g., the alphabet, wagon construction, virtuous life, etc.) they must first demonstrate their complete knowledge of the entire subject. As Socrates puts it, “Let the complex be a single form resulting from the combination of the several elements when they fit together; and let this hold of language and of things in general” (204a). The standard reading of the *Theaetetus* puzzles over the conspicuous absence of the forms from its discussion of knowledge.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, even if Richard Robinson (1950) and others are right to suppose that Plato had rejected the theory by the time he wrote the *Theaetetus*, we might expect a more explicit demonstration here of why it was unsatisfactory. But what we do see from the failed effort to define “false judgment” is an early case for the unity of virtues and knowledge. Socrates and Theaetetus are unable to define false judgment partly because they have not yet adequately defined *judgment*, nor have they understood the connection between judgment and knowledge. The conclusion is obvious: we must be able to identify a thing before we can say whether or not it is present. Looking ahead to dialogues like the *Protagoras* and *Republic* in which Plato explores the connection between knowledge and virtue, we can draw from their conclusion here that before we can claim knowledge of any particular virtue – e.g., courage, justice, moderation, etc. – we must first understand that each of the virtues are one in the same.

¹⁰⁹ Cornford (1935: 7, 28) reads their exclusion as an attempt to show that the problems posed in the second half of the dialogue could have been solved by imposing a theory of the forms. This view has been rejected for lack of textual evidence as well as for Cornford's inability to show delimiting the range of knowledge to forms alone help define *knowledge* let alone solve the problem of faulty cognition. See, e.g., Robinson (1950); Hicken (1957); Adalier (2001).

In the third and final section, Theaetetus amends his original definition of *knowledge* as “true judgment,” adding that it must be “true judgment with an account (*logos*)” (201d, 202c). Supplying an account of how one reaches an ostensibly true judgment is meant to distinguish the wise judge from the lucky one. Socrates summarizes the position, saying, “when a man gets a true judgment about something without an account, his soul is in a state of truth as regards that thing, but he does not know it; for someone who cannot give and take an account of a thing is ignorant about it” (202c). By stipulating that an account of one’s reasoning accompany a true judgment in order to qualify as knowledge, Theaetetus intends to separate wisdom (knowledge) from dumb luck (chance).

Equating knowledge to true judgment with an account raises two important questions. We must first clarify what we mean by an *account* (*logos, legein*) and then specify what is added to a “true judgment” by giving such an account. With respect to the first problem, it initially appears that “giving an account” means describing the features of a complex whole by defining the elements that comprise it and demonstrating how they fit together (202e). As in the previous case of true and false judgment, we might presume that if a person really knows a complex subject like masonry they should have no problem accurately describing all of the elements that constitute the whole – e.g., the proper fashioning and use of a trowel; mixing, measuring, and applying mortar; etc. – and demonstrating how they amount to a final end –e.g. a structurally sound wall. In this way, *logos* amounts to offering a proof of the sort we expect from a *technē*.

Socrates tests their hypothesis by way of a lengthy examination of the alphabet, a complex subject about which literate people claim expertise. If such a person were to describe the alphabet by distilling it to its basic elements, they would quickly find themselves stumbling over how to distinguish between individual letters in such a way that did not depend on reference

to the complex whole of which they are trying to give an account (204e).¹¹⁰ The elements only derive intelligible meaning with reference to the whole; we are not capable of answering the question “What is X?” without reference to the alphabet because without the alphabet, X has no meaning. Likewise, the alphabet has no content without its constitutive parts. Though Plato does not explicitly develop the argument as such, we can infer that the same may be said in support of the unity of the virtues – i.e. courage, moderation, and justice are all reflections of the good. As Socrates summarizes their enquiry:

So if, on the one hand, the complex is a plurality of elements and a whole, with them as its parts, then complexes and elements are knowable and expressible in account to just the same extent, since it has turned out that all the parts are the same thing as the whole...And if, on the other hand, it's a single thing without parts, then a complex and an element lack an account and are unknowable to just the same extent; because the same reason will make them so...So if anyone says that a complex is knowable and expressible in an account, and an element the opposite, let's not accept it. (205d-e)

While their conclusion gets them no closer to an account, it remains significant for two reasons.

First, Socrates has concluded for the second time that in order for anyone to claim expert knowledge of any subject they must not only know everything about the subject but also everything else that could inform it. Especially with respect to knowledge of virtue and politics, the subjects of the *Protagoras* and *Republic*, this argument implies that the truly knowledgeable person must know everything. Yet this is impossible. As his discussion with Protagoras in the next section further demonstrates, Socrates' standard is clearly beyond human wisdom. We might once again conclude that informed, but fallible, belief rather than knowledge governs social life. Socrates' conclusion is also significant for my interpretation of the *Republic*. Briefly put, if the philosopher-kings are to govern the kallipolis according to their knowledge of the good, it follows from this that they must also possess comprehensive knowledge of everything

¹¹⁰ He admits that one might distinguish between letters by distinguishing syllabic differences in a given language, but this again would presuppose mastery of the language in question (204d).

the city needs to function. As I will show in the next chapter, Socrates designs the guardians' training with just this point in mind.

Before the dialogue concludes, the companions turn to the question of how adding an account of reasoning to a true judgment would get them closer to a definition of *knowledge*, assuming they knew what such an account would entail. Socrates proposes three different meanings of an *account*. According to the most literal meaning, an account (*legein*) is simply “making one’s thoughts known through words and verbal expressions” (206c). He objects that anyone can provide an account according to this definition, even when they are mistaken in their judgments. The account will not correct the judgment and thus fail to get it closer to knowledge. Rejecting that definition, he briefly floats a definition of account as “expert judgment,” namely the capacity to explain each element of a complex whole (207c). As the discussion above shows, however, this definition of *logos* is outside the realm of human understanding. Finally, he suggests that most people will say that giving an account means “being able to tell some mark by which the object you are asked about differs from all other things” (208c). This tempting definition implies that the key difference between a wise judgment and a lucky guess lies in one’s understanding of a measure or method by which one can make distinctions between categories. The difference between better and worse judgment, then, is that knowledge motivates the former but not the latter. But in practice, this qualification still gets us no closer to the difference between good and bad judgments. For in order to distinguish the good from the bad or the just from the unjust, we must *know* what is good or what is just. If we already know these things, we are no longer relying on our best judgments but are rather operating according to knowledge. Here, Socrates points out that he and Theaetetus have painted themselves into a tautology whereby *knowledge* equates to *judgment* supplemented by *knowledge* (209e).

Exasperated, Theaetetus confesses that he seems less sure of himself at the conclusion of his conversation with Socrates than ever before. Reprising his role as midwife, Socrates concurs with the young man and insists that they have yet to give birth to any ideas “worth bringing up” (210c). But their time has not been wasted. Having spent the morning judging between sound and unsound arguments, Theaetetus has presumably learned quite a lot about how to interrogate common opinion and philosophical argument. His future inquiries are likely to be more productive because he has now cleansed himself of inconsistent beliefs. Even if he should remain barren, Socrates consoles him, he will conduct himself in a humbler, more sociable way now that he has guarded himself against the hubris of claiming to know what he does not.

Though the dialogue concludes without a positive definition of knowledge, these closing remarks offer a window into the political aims of Socrates’ philosophical practice and of Plato’s aims more generally.¹¹¹ When lauding Theaetetus’ fighting spirit and insisting on how his commitment to philosophical examination will make him “less burdensome on those with whom [he associates],” Socrates admits that his own art is rather limited:

That much my art (*technē*) can do, but no more, and I don’t know any of the things which others know, all the great and admirable men there are and have been; but this gift of midwifery my mother and I received from God, she with women, and I with young and noble (*gennaiōn*) men who are beautiful (*kaloi*). (210d)

The passage is especially significant because it directly connects Socrates’ *technē* of midwifery to the practice of citizenship among the “young and noble men who are beautiful.” Socrates aligns himself with the Athenian political class who will one day distinguish themselves in public affairs. Insofar as that *technē* concerns the capacity to judge between well-reasoned

¹¹¹ Cornford (1935: 162) interprets the dialogue’s unsatisfying conclusion as an indication that a theory of the Forms, as developed in the *Republic*, is needed to provide a more satisfying answer to the question of knowledge. His conclusion neglects the social and political significance of Socrates’ philosophical method.

arguments and poorly considered opinions, we see him engaged in cultivating or at least challenging these capacities in the city. As we shall see in the next section, however, he will have to compete with more popular sophists in order to retain his station. Second, we see in the post-discussion description of Theaetetus a sketch of the good Socratic citizen. We know, along with Plato, that Theaetetus will actively pursue public life. As well he should. Nowhere in the dialogue does Socrates encourage philosophical quietism at the expense of political action; rather, he here suggests that philosophical self-examination is an essential feature of good citizenship and human flourishing. A talent for wise judgment lies at the heart of that civic practice.

2.3 Hedonism and the Measure of Judgment in the *Protagoras*

The *Theaetetus* engages with sophistry at a remove, primarily through Socrates' interpretation of the Protagorean man-measure principle discussed above. The *Protagoras* deepens Plato's critique of Protagoras and of democratic decision-making rooted in sophistic influence. This section focuses on three interrelated aspects of Plato's overarching critique of Athenian judgment present in the *Protagoras*. I begin with Plato's fixation on fifth century sophistic instruction. Like the *Apology*, the *Protagoras* paints a portrait of young and undiscerning Athenians flocking to sophists, seduced by their reputations for wisdom. This aspect of the dialogue vividly dramatizes a phenomenon that earlier dialogues allude to, and here we feel the full force of Plato's discomfort. I then return to the relationship between knowledge and virtue briefly discussed in the preceding section. Protagoras makes two conflicting claims about virtue in the dialogue. He claims, on one hand, to teach virtue – which suggests that knowledge is necessary for virtue – while resisting, on the other hand, that all virtues depend on knowledge. The former position seems to indicate his belief in a unified theory of virtue, while

the latter position seems to undermine such a theory and questions the usefulness of his instruction. Socrates reveals Protagoras' contradiction and supports the unified theory by insisting that knowledge is necessary and sufficient for virtuous action. Finally, I examine Socrates' argument for hedonism, showing how his vexing account of political judgment as a hedonic calculus exposes contradictions in popular hedonism and affirms his unified view of virtue.

Plato stages the *Protagoras* in the home of Callias sometime around 432 BCE, just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.¹¹² It is a propitious time for Athenian democracy, culture, and, among the aristocracy, for sophistry.¹¹³ Imperial wealth combined with Periclean interests in liberal education to nourish the sophistic movement in the city. Callias was among the most affluent men in Athens and was an especially enthusiastic patron of sophists like Protagoras.¹¹⁴ Socrates chides him for spending so lavishly on their services in the *Apology* (20c)

¹¹² The dialogue's exact date is a matter of disagreement with little hard evidence. The consensus has long held that Plato stages the dialogue within a stylized version of the 430s prior to the Peloponnesian War. See Guthrie (1975: 214); Taylor (1976: 64). John Walsh (1984) advocates a later date sometime in the 420s because any earlier date would subject Plato to gross historical anachronisms. Not only would Callias not have become the master of his house before the late 420s (his father Hipponicus was an Athenian general in 427) but many of those attending the dialogue, particularly Alcibiades, would not have been old enough to exert the kind of influence Plato attributes to them. Walsh instead argues that the dramatic staging is a combination of two separate visits Protagoras made to the city, one in the 430s and another in the late 420s. Yet this argument is also circumstantial: Alcibiades, for instance, would have been at least 20 according to proponents of the earliest possible dating in the late 440s, by which time his popularity among the young was firmly established. It is clear, however, that Plato wanted readers to understand the meeting as an occasion attended by the generation of elites directly after Pericles who would lead the city through the Peloponnesian War. We should regard the dialogue's dramatic audience as a depiction of the reservoir of talent upon which Athens could draw after the great statesman's death, and should therefore bear Thucydides' criticism of this generation in mind throughout our study. See Farrar (1988: 45) for a similar argument.

¹¹³ On the importance of Athens as a magnet for sophistry, see Kerferd (1981: 15); cf. de Romilly (1992: 18-22); Schiappa (2003: 168-71). Within the context of the Peloponnesian War, Syracuse was also a tellingly important city for rhetoricians. See Robinson (2000). For a thorough treatment of the political reasons for understanding the sophistic challenge to conventional morality, see Bartlett (2003).

¹¹⁴ Callias belonged to aristocratic Alcmeonid clan of which both Pericles and Alcibiades were members. He inherited his fabulous wealth from his father and continued to lease slaves to the Laurium silver mines. By the end of his life he was publicly condemned as a profligate spendthrift devoid of morality. See, e.g., Andocides (1962: 130-1); Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1405^a20-23).

and Theodorus describes him as the “guardian of Protagoras’ relics” in the *Theaetetus* (165a). By the date of the dialogue, he has converted his frugal father’s house into a menagerie of exotic luxuries, aspiring princelings, and pontificating wise men.¹¹⁵ Socrates describes the scene as a veritable who’s who of the Athenian upper crust: “On one side [of Protagoras] were Callias, son of Hipponicus, and his brother on his mother’s side, Paralus, son of Pericles, and Charmides, son of Glaucon. On the other side were Pericles’ other son, Xanthippus, Phillippides, son of Philomelus, and Atimoerus of Mende, Protagoras’ star pupil who is studying professionally to become a sophist” (315a). Agathon, Adeimantus and Pausanias cluster around Prodicus of Ceos, who is also visiting Athens in addition to a collection of foreign physicians, rhetoricians, and intellectuals who join Protagoras in his tour of the Hellenic world. “He enchants them,” Socrates says, “with his voice like Orpheus, and they follow the sound of his voice in a trance” (315b).¹¹⁶ Comparing himself to Odysseus gazing upon Hades, Socrates quips that Callias’ house is a vision of hell.¹¹⁷

Socrates has come to Callias’ home under the auspices of introducing his young friend Hippocrates to Protagoras. Eager to become Protagoras’ student, Hippocrates promises to bankrupt himself and his friends to pay for the sophist’s services but needs a formal introduction from Socrates in order to do so. Before arriving, Socrates examines Hippocrates with questions

¹¹⁵ When he describes the scene, Socrates quip that Callias stores sophists where his father once stored grain. He also mentions that Callias’ doorman was a eunuch, suggesting that his host not only had a taste for conspicuously expensive luxuries but also a fascination with Persian culture (314d). The practice of keeping eunuchs would have been highly unusual across Greece, and to have employed one in so public a position would require considerable remove from community norms. See, e.g., Miller (1997: 214). That Callias seems to be able to afford to do so speaks to the growing cultural and normative disparity between the aristocracy and the rest of democratic Athens.

¹¹⁶ Like Protagoras, Orpheus was of Thracian birth.

¹¹⁷ See 315c. His reference is to Homer’s *Odyssey* (xi.601) in which the hero recalls what he saw in Hades.

about what he hopes to gain from Protagoras.¹¹⁸ Over the course of their brief conversation, Hippocrates reluctantly admits that he would, as a sophist, like to be able “to make clever speeches” (*deinon poēi legein*) (312d).¹¹⁹ Their exchange on the purpose of education frames the longer discussion between Socrates and Protagoras:

S: Maybe you expect to get the kind of lessons you got from your grammar instructor or music teacher or wrestling coach. You didn’t get from them technical instruction to become a professional, but a general education suitable for a gentleman.

H: That’s it exactly! That’s just the sort of education you get from Protagoras.

S: Then do you know what you are about to do now, or does it escape you?

H: What do you mean?

S: That you are about to hand over your soul for treatment to a man who is, as you say, a sophist. As to what exactly a sophist is, I would be surprised if you really knew. And yet, if you are ignorant of this, you don’t know whether you are entrusting your soul to something good or bad. (312e)

When Hippocrates fails to deliver a clear definition of what craft Protagoras presumably practices, Socrates admonishes him for recklessly endangering his soul. Surely Hippocrates would not entrust the care of his body to an unknowledgeable physician, so why would he turn his much more precious soul over to such a man as Protagoras? The question echoes previously

¹¹⁸ While doing so, Socrates references Hippocrates of Cos, his companion’s namesake (311c). Socrates insists that Hippocrates talk with him in the open air of his courtyard while pointedly noting that, because “Protagoras spends most of his time indoors,” they are not likely to miss him (311a). The remark suggests an early contrast between Socrates, who famously conducts philosophy in the open-air *agora*, with Protagoras, who typically practices sophistry behind closed doors because he fears persecution (316d).

¹¹⁹ Hippocrates’ phrasing in this passage is telling. *Deinon*, usually translated as “clever,” carried connotations of terrifying ingenuity associated with Prometheus. For instance, the first choral ode of Sophocles’ *Antigone* (lines 332-375) describes the ways in which “clever man” (*anthrōpon deinōteron*) subdues nature through technological know-how. As Martin Heidegger (2000 [1953]: 115) observes, *deinon* invoked terrifying anxiety about the limits to which man could use reason (*logos*) in the service of violence or deceitfulness. When Socrates introduces himself in the *Apology* as a speaker who is not accomplished, he says that he is not capable of “clever speech” (*deinou ontos legein*) (17b). Here, Plato suggests that sophistry abuses rationality by divorcing it from typical norms of ethical conduct. We see the point reemerge in Protagoras’ “long speech,” in which Prometheus is responsible for endowing humanity with rationality only to be punished by Zeus. It is perhaps because of Socrates’ disavowal of “clever speech” that Hippocrates is reluctant to admit that he would like to learn its craft (*poesis*).

cited remarks about the dangers of sophistry to vulnerable souls, but it also leads to an important point about judgment. Insofar as Hippocrates and others like him are untrained in the skills necessary to distinguish between qualified masters and deceitful imposters, they are especially reliant upon the better judgment of their elders. Here, Socrates approaches Hippocrates not as a midwife or a gadfly, but as a “father or older brother” who wants to protect him. He demonstrates throughout that the practice of soul-craft begins with discerning between those things that are good for the soul and those that are not.

When Socrates and Protagoras finally meet, the sophist thanks the philosopher for discretely discussing his services in private. “Caution,” he says, “is on order for a foreigner who goes into the great cities and tries to persuade the best of the young men in them to abandon their associations with others, relatives and acquaintances, young and old alike, and to associate with him instead on the grounds that they will be improved by this association” (316d). Protagoras’ phrasing is conspicuously similar to Socrates’ warning about the draw of sophistry in the *Apology* (20c), and we might question how likely the historical Protagoras would have been to express such reservations. For by coloring Protagoras as a cryptic figure, Plato not only captures the intrigue that surrounds him but also leads us to ask what useful, if dangerous, wisdom the sophist claims to possess.

When asked about his services, Protagoras declares, loudly enough for everyone in attendance to hear, that he will improve his students daily. Other sophists “abuse young men, steering them back again, against their will, into subjects the likes of which they have escaped from at school, teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music and poetry” (318e).¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Protagoras’ language parallels Socrates’ language of “compulsion” in his description of the philosophers’ training in the *Republic* (515c-e).

“What I teach,” he continues, “is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters – how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs – how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action” (319a). Socrates interprets this as the “art of citizenship” (*politikē technē*). Protagoras appeals to Hippocrates because his instruction is both useful and easily, if expensively, acquired.¹²¹ Traditional education is painful; his training is pleasant. This important qualification comports with the popular hedonism to which Socrates will return later in the dialogue (351c). It also clashes with Socrates’ view of philosophical training as a difficult and sometimes painful process that, as we saw in the *Theaetetus*, may only produce “wind eggs” even as it disabuses students of their naïve ignorance. Moreover, it recalls Socrates’ warning about Olympic victors who please their supporters but do not necessarily bring them happiness (*eudaimonia*). At this stage, Protagoras does not promise happiness in the Socratic sense; but he does guarantee public and private success, and he banks on his prospective pupils equating that success with genuine happiness.¹²²

Protagoras professes to teach his students sound private and public judgment, returning us to the dissonance between his purported pedagogical goals and Plato’s representation of his character. If Protagoras’ primary goal is to mold men into good citizens by teaching them to persuade others, why does he express a strong desire for discretion when discussing the matter

¹²¹ Protagoras tellingly confirms Socrates’ impression that he intends to teach “the art of citizenship” (*politikē technē*) (319a). In their earlier conversation, Hippocrates confirmed Socrates’ impression that the young man was not after technical instruction (*technē*) but was rather interested in a more general education (*paideia*) “suitable for a gentleman” (*idiōtēn kai ton eleutheron prepei*) (312b). Protagoras promises to make Hippocrates a professional politician rather than a gentleman.

¹²² Though the conversation soon turns to the challenge of teaching *virtue*, it is Socrates – not Protagoras – who directly connects virtue with the political craft (320b). Protagoras accepts this additional requirement without question, but it is telling that he does not immediately include virtue as a precondition of good citizenship. Protagoras could have easily resisted the equation. Indeed, when he agrees with Socrates that “having good sense (*sophrosynē*) means having good judgment (*bouleuesthai*) in acting unjustly” (333d), he suggests that he does not equate good citizenship with Socratic virtue at all.

with Socrates? Why does he fear persecution, especially in a city that is most amenable to the sophistic movement? Socrates seems sensitive to this tension and doubts that such a political art can be taught at all:

The truth is, Protagoras, I have never thought that this could be taught, but when you say it can be, I can't very well doubt it. It's only right that I explain where I got the idea that this is not teachable, not something that can be imparted from one human being to another. I maintain, along with the rest of the Greek world, that the Athenians are wise. And I observe that when we convene in the Assembly and the city has to take some action on a building project, we send for builders to advise us; if it has to do with the construction of ships, we send for shipwrights; and so for everything that is considered learnable and teachable. But if anyone else, a person not regarded as a craftsman, tries to advise them, no matter how handsome and well-born he might be, they just don't accept him. They laugh at him and shout him down until he either gives up trying to speak and steps down himself or the archer-police remove him forcibly by order of the board. *This is how they proceed in matters which they consider technical.* But when it is a matter of deliberating on the city's management, anyone can stand up and advise them, carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, low-born—it doesn't matter—and nobody blasts him for presuming to give counsel without any prior training under a teacher. The reason for this is clear: They do not think that this can be taught. Public life aside, the same principle holds also in private life, where the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit to others the virtues that they possess. (319b-e)

Again, we hear echoes of Socrates' defense speech when he complains that Athenians seek out experts to advise them in every facet of life except virtue and political judgment. Cynthia Farrar connects this complaint with certain democratic features of the man-measure principle developed in the *Theaetetus*. As she notes, "This example suggests that each man judges for himself when it comes to political questions...The Athenians, [Socrates] asserts, recognize the existence of expertise with respect to 'technical' matters, but with respect to political questions they practice what amounts to free speech" (1988: 78-79). Indeed, Protagoras agrees that he does not teach virtue in the conventional sense at all. In a long speech, he posits that humanity acquired virtues from the gods, who endowed primitive man with sociable feelings in a bid to save the race from mutual destruction (321d-328b). It is therefore reasonable, he says, for the Athenians to accept advice from anyone "for they think that this particular virtue, political or civic virtue, is shared

by all” (323a). That said, Protagoras further insists that people do not consider civic virtue a fully developed native talent equally distributed among everyone; rather, virtue is cultivated through a combination of legal punishment and formal education (324c, 325d-326e). He facilitates that effort by modeling a “more advanced” virtue for his students (328a).

In order to support his claim to teach virtue, Protagoras would have to demonstrate that civic virtue is a knowable subject akin to a *technē*.¹²³ In his *Metaphysics* (1.1), Aristotle writes that the four primary features of a *technē* are that its tenets can be universalized, taught, precisely measured, and explained.¹²⁴ A *technē* must also aim at a defined end. We can illustrate the concept more clearly by turning to Socrates’ analogy with medicine.¹²⁵ The end of all medicine is to secure the health of a patient. With respect to universality, Aristotle explains, “A *technē* arises when, from many notions gained by experience, one universal judgment about similar objects is produced” (*Metaphysics* 981a5-7). That is, a craft must demonstrate a shared commonality between all cases that come under its purview. In the physician’s case, these include common features about all human bodies such that accurate predictions can be made about how particular bodies will respond to given stimuli (e.g. all bodies bleed when cut with a sharp knife). Likewise, a physician can know enough about the human body to accurately judge

¹²³ The *technē* analogy underpins his own pedagogical approach (328a). The analogy between virtue and craft is also a staple of Plato’s early and middle dialogues. See, e.g., *Charmides* 173a; *Gorgias* 460a-461b. As Nussbaum helpfully observes, “*Technē* is closely associated with practical judgment or wisdom (*sophia*, *gnōmē*) with forethought, planning, and prediction...A person who says (as many did in the fifth century) that practical reasoning should become a *technē* is likely, then, to be demanding a systematization and unification of practice that will yield accounts and some sort of orderly grasp; he will want principles that can be taught and explanations of who desired results are produced. He will want to eliminate some of the chanciness from human social life.” (1986: 94-95, 97). Cf. Reeve (1989: 37-41).

¹²⁴ Xenophon developed a less schematized but similar definition in his discussion of making body armor. See *Memorabilia* 3.10. Cf. Miller (2012: 111).

¹²⁵ It is worth noting, however, that ancient physicians were anxious to defend the epistemic status of their own *technē*, especially given its challenges to religious doctrine about the human body. The causal relationship between a given treatment and its effects was of particular concern. See Miller (1949).

how a set of conditions will likely affect particular bodies over time. Practitioners must also be able to teach these universal principles. For example, an experienced physician can train an intern in how to treat hemorrhagic fever without the intern ever actually experiencing a case of hemorrhagic fever himself. Equipped with theoretical wisdom, the new physician should not have to treat his patients through trial and error alone, though he will not possess genuine medical knowledge until he has acquired some experience with individual cases.¹²⁶ Third, a *technē* brings a measure of precision to its subject. This is perhaps the most difficult element of a *technē* to define insofar as it demands a common standard against which to judge all similar cases. Physicians can agree that a certain blood pressure or standard of cardiovascular capacity can amount to *health*; but even here, those measures are subject to revision as more is learned about human bodies. Finally, a *technē* should be able to explain why and how a subject works. That is, it can explain – or seek to explain – why a certain practice was successful in meeting its end. In the hemorrhagic fever example, this might entail understanding how and why rodents transmit the disease and why exterminating their nests can effectively prevent contagion.¹²⁷

In the *Theaetetus*, knowledge of the sort appropriate to a *technē* is difficult for all but the most empirical of sciences. Here, Plato extends the problem of acquiring technical knowledge of virtue to its application in political judgment. In order to teach virtue and sound deliberation in the technical sense, Protagoras would first need a coherent account of *virtue* similar to the

¹²⁶ See Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 981^a20-25).

¹²⁷ Reeve recalls Aristotle's criticism of the craft-virtue analogy. "A craft is a capacity for opposites. It enables its possessor to do both good and bad things. The doctor knows how to cure, but *ipso facto* he knows how to kill as well. A virtue, on the other hand, can result only in good things. A virtuous person cannot perform vicious acts. Precisely on this ground Aristotle will later reject the idea that virtues are crafts" (2006: 4). Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1129a. Terence Irwin (1977: 177) argues that Plato, too, distances himself from the craft-analogy by the time he writes the *Republic*. Rosamond Sprague (1976: 9) rejects this view, arguing that the *technē* analogy continues to provide an aspirational model in the *Republic* and elsewhere throughout the Platonic corpus. Cf. Nussbaum (1986: 74).

physician's account of *health*. In his long speech about their divine origins, Protagoras talked about justice, moderation, and courage as though they were collectively one thing, namely, virtue (329c). When Socrates presses him to more precisely specify whether the virtues are unified or discrete, Protagoras replies that "virtue is a single entity, and the things you are asking about are its parts," much as eyes, noses and mouths are constitutive features of faces (329d-e). Yet when Socrates follows up by asking if all people necessarily share all parts of virtue equally (i.e. all virtuous people are necessarily just, temperate, and brave), Protagoras balks: "By no means, since many are courageous but unjust, and many again are just but not wise" (329e). According to this revised account, justice, piety, moderation, and courage each carry different powers (*dunamois*) with none exactly like any other. Socrates questions Protagoras' explanation, positing that justice, piety, and all of the other virtues are necessarily unified, for if they were not, pious acts could be unjust and just acts could be impious (331b). Protagoras relents only to a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" between the various virtues that extends only so far as "anything at all resembles any other thing" (331d).¹²⁸ Socrates then challenges Protagoras by getting him to agree to three dissonant positions: first, folly is the opposite of wisdom (332a); second, all actions have exactly one correct form described as "good" and one opposite "bad" form (332d); third, acting intemperately is as much an act of folly as behaving unwisely (333b). Protagoras realizes that he cannot hold all of these views on pain of contradiction, meaning that he cannot supply a coherent definition of the *technē* he purportedly teaches.

¹²⁸ Irwin (1995: 80-81) characterizes Socrates' argument as a Reciprocity Thesis (i.e. "the claim that [virtues] imply each other, and are therefore inseparable"), and notes that by rejecting it, Protagoras raises a difficulty for his own position: "If the Reciprocity Thesis is correct, then Protagoras is right to assume that we cannot acquire the self-regarding virtues, aiming at one's own success, without also acquiring the other-regarding virtues of the good citizen...The sophist is shown not to understand the conception of virtue that underlies his own claims about teaching virtue; and so he is shown to need the sort of enlightenment that results from a Socratic inquiry."

Socrates embarrasses Protagoras by demonstrating that the sophist does not know what he claims to know about virtue or, by extension, sound deliberation. Unlike his conversations with Theaetetus and Theodorus, Socrates questions his older and more distinguished interlocutor with a verve and contempt that is more gadfly than midwife. We see the effects in Protagoras' tone, when he refuses to continue the dialogue within the strictures of the Socratic elenchus (335a). The dialogue nearly breaks down again when Protagoras only reluctantly agrees to resume elenctic discourse in the face of public shaming by Alcibiades (348c).¹²⁹ Socrates thereafter adopts a more conciliatory, if ironic, tone when the conversation resumes.¹³⁰ Yet he surely wanted to discredit Protagoras when he arrived at Callias' home, for doing so amounted to the kind of public service he describes in the *Apology*. The meeting affords Socrates a chance to grapple with the most famous sophist of his generation before of an audience that includes young aristocrats and social climbers very near the eve of the Peloponnesian War.¹³¹ Men like Alcibiades will soon lead the city into war; men like Hippocrates will vote on their policies,

¹²⁹ Shame operates throughout the dialogue as a socializing emotion, first given to us, according to Protagoras, by Zeus (322c). Alfredo Ferrarin (2000: 314-316) observes that shame is only felt when a subject looks to others for approval. By replacing shame with moderation (*sophrosynē*) in his catalogue of social virtues, Ferrarin argues that Protagoras hopes to cultivate an internalized sense of sociability among his students. If Ferrarin is correct, it appears that Protagoras has either looked to Alcibiades or, more likely, the audience for approval in the same way that Hippocrates looked to Socrates when he blushed as he admitted to his sophistic aspirations (312b). Cf. Bartlett (2003).

¹³⁰ When Protagoras agrees to abandon long speeches about poetry and to resume Socrates' dialectical method, the philosopher reassures him: "Protagoras...I don't want you to think that my motive in talking with you in anything else than to take a good hard look at things that continually perplex me" (348c). This follows from a long speech in which Socrates insists that they put poetic references aside: "The best people avoid such discussions and rely on their own powers of speech to entertain themselves and test each other. These people should be our models. We should put the poets aside and converse directly with each other, testing the truth and our own ideas" (347e-348a). Taken together, these remarks suggest that Socrates is trying to take a more earnest approach with Protagoras as a co-investigator. His next line therefore drips with irony: "I think that Homer said it all in the line, 'Going in tandem, one perceives before the other.'"

¹³¹ Socrates attempts to engage the audience as an assembly of active judges by refusing to continue his discussion with Protagoras unless they do so (338d-e). It is a remarkably democratic gesture in the sense that the collective body will bring their force of numbers to bear on assessing and regulating the discussion. It also gives the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras a more public quality despite the secretive confines of Callias' home.

serve under their leadership, and die in their battles. Plato has already established how easily men like Protagoras can persuade men like Hippocrates to part with their souls and bankrolls. Plato also knows how enthusiastically the same men will sail on Sicily because of Alcibiades' promises of fame and fortune. In other words, Protagoras and Alcibiades both owe their influence to popular beliefs about how the talents they possess will ensure greater pleasure for themselves and the city alike. It is to this popular hedonism that Plato turns next.

Plato turns to the problem of popular hedonism as part of a broader investigation of courage. In the first part of their conversation, Protagoras objected to Socrates' unified theory of virtue by observing that some people are widely considered courageous but also unjust (329e, cf. 349d). Socrates returns to the dispute over courage in an effort to persuade Protagoras that he really believes that the virtues are not only unified, but are so through knowledge – a point Protagoras anticipates but nevertheless resists (350a, cf. 351a-b). Though Protagoras is prepared to grant that knowledge enhances confidence and courage, he is not yet willing to concede that knowledge is a necessary condition for bravery and, therefore, of all virtue. Before Socrates can fully refute Protagoras, then, he must first reveal inconsistencies in the sophist's theory of virtue through an elenctic examination.

Socrates begins his elenchus, somewhat incongruously, by having Protagoras agree to three points: some people live well while others live badly, a life of distress and pain is not a life well lived, and "having lived pleasantly" (*hedeōs bios*) a man can be said to have lived well (351b). Yet when Socrates glibly concludes, "to live pleasantly is good, and unpleasantly, bad,"

Protagoras agrees only insofar as the pleasure taken was in “honorable things” (351c).¹³²

Socrates reacts to the amendment with surprise:

What, Protagoras? Surely you don’t, like most people, call some pleasant things bad and some painful things good? I mean, isn’t a pleasant thing good just insofar as it is pleasant, that is, if it results in nothing other than pleasure; and, on the other hand, aren’t painful things bad in the same way, just insofar as they are painful? (351c)

Socrates thinks that while most people generally agree to a hedonic theory of value – desiring pleasure and avoiding pain – they confuse themselves by valuing unpleasant activities and renouncing others that are. Protagoras replies that Socrates’ first conclusion – that everything pleasant is good and everything painful is bad – remains unclear:

It seems to me to be safer to respond not merely with my present answer in mind but from the point of view of my life overall, that on the one hand, there are pleasurable things which are not good, and on the other hand, there are painful things which are not bad but some which are, and a third class which is neutral – neither bad nor good. (351d)

From this point, the philosopher and the sophist agree to examine the question of whether pleasure itself is good. We might suspect, along with Bartlett (2008), that Protagoras secretly harbors hedonic sympathies. Plato has, after all, depicted him as a fabulously wealthy tutor of luxuriating men like Callias. Yet Socrates does not implicate him in popular hedonism. By avoiding this charge, the philosopher flatters Protagoras as a gentleman who restricts himself to honorable pleasures and disdains the crass materialism enjoyed by “the many.” This is a sly move. For by including Protagoras among those noble people who revere knowledge and disdain the popular attitude toward it, Socrates simultaneously disarms his defensive companion and

¹³² Bartlett (2008: 141) describes Protagoras’ immediate disavowal of hedonism as a “precautionary measure” taken to insulate himself from allegations of hedonism by “the many.”

begins to build his case that knowledge is the supreme virtue.¹³³ As we shall see, this gesture represents the beginning of Protagoras' undoing.

Socrates examines hedonism through a study of *akrasia*, or weakness of will. *Akrasia* describes a condition in which a person does something they know they should avoid, or fails to do something they know they should, because they are overcome, usually by some immediate pleasure.¹³⁴ In other words, the akratic person does not act merely on impulse (e.g., compulsively drinking wine until they are very drunk) or out of recklessness (e.g., drinking the bottle of wine in the belief that doing so outweighs the merit of meeting other obligations), but acts against their better judgment in spite of their practical reason (e.g., I know I shouldn't drink tonight because I have an important meeting in the morning, but I'm going to drink anyway).¹³⁵ Socrates finds *akrasia* troubling, for it raises the possibility that reason really is dragged about like a slave by non-rational desires. He also finds it puzzling. On one hand, "the many" who subscribe to hedonism equate pleasure to the good and pain to the bad (354c-d). According to this account, practical judgment amounts to choosing actions that induce pleasure while avoiding actions that induce pain. On the other hand, these same people explain bad actions by attributing the person's poor decision to their having been "overcome by pleasure" (355a). Socrates demonstrates the absurdity of the akratic account by replacing "pleasure" with "good" and "pain" with "bad," and

¹³³ Once they have begun their investigation of popular hedonism, Socrates asks Protagoras if he agrees with the many knowledge is "not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler...while knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is not knowledge but rather anything else – sometimes anger, sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear; they think of his knowledge as being utterly dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave" (352c). Protagoras joins Socrates in his condemnation of this position, saying that it would "be shameful indeed for me above all people to say that wisdom and knowledge are anything but the most powerful forces in human activity" (352d).

¹³⁴ In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle remarks that pleasures related to sex, food, and alcohol are the usual culprits (1118^a30-33, 1147^b25-35).

¹³⁵ For a contemporary elaboration in the differences between recklessness, compulsion, and *akrasia*, see Smith (2003).

then imaging someone repeating the akratic argument: “What you’re saying is ridiculous – someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good” (355d). Dyson points out that Socrates’ demonstration invites readers to reflect on the incompatibility between hedonic ethics and ordinary descriptions of akratic dilemmas: “Socrates has shown that, if good and pleasure are identical, there is something very odd about the way people would ordinarily describe cases of moral weakness.”¹³⁶ It also allows Plato attend to the problem with hedonic political judgment.

“The many” could still claim that the hedonic account of *akrasia* remains sound on the grounds that akratic judgments are faults of how pleasures and pains are properly weighed while one deliberates. They might say that the immediate pleasure appears much greater than the longer-term pleasures and pains, leading the akratic to believe falsely that they were pursuing a greater pleasure when, in fact, they were mistakenly pursuing a lesser pleasure in the moment (356a). Plato raises a similar concern in the *Philebus* when, in a conversation with Callias’ son Protarchus, Socrates describes the challenge of hedonic judgment when pleasures are distant:

Earlier it was true and false judgments which affected the respective pleasures and pains with their own condition. [...] But now it applies to pleasures and pains themselves; it is because they are alternately looked at from close up and far away, or simultaneously put side by side, that the pleasures seem greater compared to pain and more intensive, and pains seem, on the contrary, moderate in comparison with pleasures. (42a-b)

Here, Socrates returns to the assertion raised in the *Theaetetus* that judgments are necessarily about a future benefits. Our estimation of future pleasures can be distorted by our hopes or fears about the future, just as our estimation of immediate pleasures can become distorted by their proximity to us in the present. Consider, for example, the ways in which Alcibiades justified the tremendous cost of the Sicilian Expedition with promises of future wealth and glory to Athens.

¹³⁶ Dyson(1976: 37); cf. Santas (1966: 12).

What we need, then, is an art of hedonic measurement, according to which we can see more clearly the relative scales of pleasures and pains *as the really are*, rather than *as they appear to be* (356e). A science of hedonic measurement would save us from the systematic distortions of hope and fear by basing political judgments in knowledge.

A science of measurement should appeal to hedonists because it supplies them with a *technē* model of political judgment. As Jessica Moss argues, “Once a person learns to judge that some particular immediately gratifying pleasure will be outweighed by the pains to follow, she will lose her desire for that pleasure, and desire the better course of action instead” (2006: 507).¹³⁷ The science of measurement should also appeal to Protagoras, as it grants him the outline for a *technē* of sound deliberation that justifies his profession. If he can demonstrate that his teachings about the proper way to regard pleasure can eradicate the problem of *akrasia* – now properly understood as a product of false belief – he can more than justify his steep fees. Indeed, Daniel Russell argues that Socrates constructs the measurement thesis solely in order to persuade the sophist that virtue requires knowledge.¹³⁸ When they return to the problem of courage, Socrates can demonstrate that cowardice is a product of ignorance and bad judgment, best corrected through the kind of wisdom Protagoras claims to possess (360c-e).

Socrates’ *aporetic* goal is important to keep in mind when understanding the context from which the hedonic argument arises. For many interpreters, the hedonic theory of value Socrates develops in the *Protagoras* reflects a hedonistic turn in Plato’s philosophical thought.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Cf. Nussbaum (1986) and Balaban (1987).

¹³⁸ Russell (2005: 244-247) further notes that when Socrates returns to the question of courage (359b), Protagoras abandons his objection to the equation between knowledge and virtue.

¹³⁹ Hackforth (1928), along with Gosling and Taylor (1982), argues that this brief period in Plato’s thought represented a moment in which the philosopher was trying to make sense of Socratic *eudaemonism*, but which he rejected by the time he wrote the *Gorgias*, thereby explaining Socrates’ attack on Callicles. Vlastos (1956) notes,

If this account is accurate, then much of the critique of Athenian political judgment that I have located in Plato's early and middle dialogues would face serious difficulty. Russell gives two reasons for hesitating: first, Socratic hedonism appears nowhere else in the Platonic corpus and he in fact attacks hedonism quite aggressively where it does appear; second, there is nothing about Socrates' *aporetic* aims that necessarily commits him to believing the arguments he uses in the dialogue.¹⁴⁰ There are at least three additional reasons for rejecting the *Protagoras* argument as genuinely Platonic. First, the measurement *technē* it supports is anti-elenctic and nonpolitical. It reduces a philosophical process that Socrates elsewhere considers essential for the best human life (i.e. continually reexamining and contemplating virtue) to an empirical calculation that obviates Socratic practice. Second, by suggesting that special training is necessary for accurate hedonic calculation, the *technē* argument implies that the democratic assembly is largely and systematically mistaken in its usual decision-making process. Plato of course criticizes Athenian political judgment elsewhere, but Protagoras earlier justified his pedagogical practice by appealing to the assembly's intuitive wisdom. By persuading Protagoras to endorse the measurement *technē* as an alternative version of the political art, Socrates exposes the sophist's antidemocratic prejudices. The upshot of this exchange is that Socrates drives a wedge between Protagorean sophistry and the democratic assembly. Finally, the measurement *technē* seems

however, that at the time of his translation of the *Protagoras*, scholarly opinion was in agreement that, however briefly he held it, the hedonism expressed in the dialogue was genuinely felt by Plato. Rudebusch (1999) takes a more nuanced view, reconciling the discrepancies between Socrates' hedonism in the *Protagoras* with his attack on Callicles in the *Gorgias* by insisting that Socratic hedonism aspires to contemplative pleasures while Calliclean desire is strictly appetitive. Irwin (1995: 82-89) locates a similar argument in the *Euthydemus* and insists that the epistemological hedonism expressed in the *Protagoras* "makes it more reasonable to say that virtue is purely instrumental to happiness" rather than constitutive of it, and is, moreover, supportive of the foundationalist version of *eudaemonism* he traces throughout the early dialogues. He, too, however, notes that Plato moved beyond this view by the time he wrote the *Gorgias* (1995: 111). In her insightful analysis of the dialogue, Moss (2006) posits that the hedonism thesis is essential for the theory of hedonic measurement Socrates constructs in the *Protagoras*. She extends this theory of appetitive calculation to the *Republic*, thereby moving it to the center of Plato's ethical thought.

¹⁴⁰ Russell (2005: 239-240); cf. Santas (1966: 8).

cleverly designed to undermine Protagorean epistemological claims. The man-measure principle posits that all beliefs are equally valid because they are derived from individual experience. By arguing that sound political judgment involves weighing *future* pleasures and pains alongside *present* pleasures and pains, Socrates suggests that accurate assessments must be premised on knowledge that cannot be derived from experience alone.¹⁴¹ In other words, Protagoras would have to abandon the man-measure principle in order to accept the validity of the measurement *technē* as Socrates develops it. The sophist's willingness to do so indicates a fundamental weakness in his purported wisdom. Each of these additional reasons supports Russell's interpretation of Socrates' argument for hedonism in the *Protagoras* as strictly ad hominem efforts to undermine the sophist.

Socrates attended the meeting at Callias' house in order to challenge Protagoras and the sophists in his company. By demonstrating deep inconsistencies in sophistic theory and practice, he hoped to disabuse Hippocrates of his naïvely sophistic aspirations. Socrates does not suggest that Hippocrates or any of the other young men in attendance take up philosophy as an alternative; that is, he does not try to persuade them to take up philosophy so much as to abandon sophistry. Socrates implicitly assumes throughout that internal consistency is a hallmark of genuine knowledge and can, therefore, serve as a standard against which to assess wisdom in others. The elenctic demonstration in the *Protagoras* teaches similar lessons about sound political judgment. It teaches men like Hippocrates to assess the arguments of men like Protagoras on the basis of rational consistency rather than upon the speaker's reputation. Political decisions are better or worse depending, in part, on how rationally consistent they are. This is no small observation in a city that will soon find itself addressed by men like Cleon, whose

¹⁴¹ Indeed, experience is actually shown to distort accurate hedonic assessment.

violently populist speeches will appeal to a great many in the assembly. The exchange between Socrates and Protagoras also reveals a profound challenge to hedonic theories of judgment. In the *Apology*, Socrates accused the Athenians of maintaining a crassly hedonistic conception of the good which focused too much on materialism and risked falling into *pleonexia*. The argument for hedonism in the *Protagoras* is more sophisticated, yet equally problematic. If sound hedonic judgment requires knowing everything about present and future pleasures and pains, that standard is clearly beyond the bounds of human ability. In his commentary on the *Republic*, Allan Bloom argues that Socrates' philosopher-king proposal is so outlandish that, in making it, Plato is actually demonstrating the political impossibility of securing a truly just city.¹⁴² I disagree with that interpretation, but Socrates appears to be up to something in the *Protagoras* that resembles what Bloom finds in the *Republic*. The hedonic measurement *technē* is impossible for anyone but a god. On Plato's account, citizens must aim at a different conception of the good when making their political decisions. Though advancing that alternative lies beyond the scope of the *Protagoras*, the dialogue nevertheless gives good reason for rejecting the status quo.

2.4 Conclusion

In Plato's view, the citizens assembled on the Pnyx and in the lawcourts based their political decisions on whether policies seemed likely to maximize short-term pleasures without regard for longer-term virtues. Insofar as the majority equated pleasure with the good, they would always run the risk of descending into the kind of *pleonexia* Thucydides captured in his account of the Sicilian Expedition. Plato also worried about the influx of sophists into Athens. Sophists' hubristic claims about knowledge and virtue confirmed their wealthy clients' biases

¹⁴² Bloom (1991: 408).

while manipulating the judgments of the many. Though Plato is sometimes guilty of exaggerating the opulence associated with fifth and fourth-century sophistry, he does not ultimately present them all as an intentionally corrupt lot. Rather, because they do not realize how ignorant they are of the very subjects they profess to teach, Plato regards them as quite a bit more dangerous.

Plato's critique of Athenian judgment is not a criticism of democracy per se, but with the Periclean claim that the Athenian *demos*' unchallenged intuitions were sufficient for practical wisdom. The *Apology* disrupts that claim by revealing how rarely the Athenians' knowledge of virtue matched their confidence. Indeed, Socrates estimates that he alone gets the balance of knowledge to confidence right, insisting that it is quite low. Whether we believe that self-effacing assertion or not, Socrates also demonstrates a strong commitment to his peculiar brand of civic action. By conducting his elenctic practice in the open with a large and diverse cross section of the city's populace, he suggests that anyone is capable of serious ethical contemplation provided they are willing to take up the difficult task. In other words, confidence poses the greatest impediment to broadly practiced philosophical reflection, not class or intelligence. Insofar as he considers political judgment an extension of philosophical reflection, this insight gestures toward a model of practical wisdom that is, at a minimum, friendly to democracy.

The *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* dialogues demonstrate the difficult task before Athens. These dialogues show Socrates taking up the first deconstructive phase of his political philosophy by challenging the hedonic standard by which most people make their decisions. *Pleasure* is an expansive and slippery notion, susceptible to solipsism, inconsistency, and *pleonexia*. Thucydides gestured toward this problem in the *History*, but Plato dives more deeply into the standard's internal inconsistencies. His Socrates wants to demonstrate two points for his

interlocutors: first, *eudaimonia* entails more than mere pleasure, requiring virtue as well; second, most people already realize that *pleasure* is a poor standard against which to assess a policy's choiceworthiness. These dialogues do not, however, aim to replace *pleasure* with a fully articulated account of virtue. These are instead *aporetic* dialogues whose function is to unsettle our comfortable notions of what counts as good judgment. For the second, more constructive phase of Plato's thought, we must turn to the *Republic*.

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CHAPTER 3: JUSTICE, EXPERIENCE, AND JUDGMENT IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

The *Republic* is the magnum opus of Plato's Socratic dialogues. To read it as a dialogue about *justice* is to at once belie the breadth of other topics covered in its pages – the features of a good life, the nature of knowledge, the pitfalls of governance – as well as to recognize the ways in which a discussion about justice binds them together. No treatment of Greek political thought is complete without some comment upon it and, as such, it has been the subject of exhaustive analysis. Yet with few exceptions, scholars have not sustained attention on the relationship between justice and political judgment in the dialogue.¹⁴³ I hope to illuminate that relationship by showing how Plato's theory of justice informs practical political decision-making in Socrates' kallipolis. As an elaboration of the *kallipolis* – a “beautiful city” in words – the *Republic* is conventionally read as an exercise in ideal theory without regard for practical application. I challenge that interpretation in this chapter by examining how justice ought to inform political decision-making. According to my interpretation of the dialogue, sound practical judgment is guided by and directed toward the philosopher's rational conception of justice.

Socrates consistently posits justice as a model of right action. Like courage, moderation, wisdom and other virtues the form of justice supplies an archetype of action that allows actors to pursue the good life. To act justly according to Socrates' model is to pursue psychic harmony; that is, to find balance between the sometimes competing demands of other virtues so that each can maximize its contribution to the whole without encroaching on the others. Insofar as political

¹⁴³ For exceptions, see Frank (2007); Wolin (1960: 60-63); (2007); Markovits (2008).

decision-making entails balancing competing demands on a community's scarce resources, justice can be understood as a virtue of social decision-making. As in his *apologia*, Socrates worries that a community which lacks such a virtuous model will doom itself to *pleonexia* and irrational policies. Understanding justice, then, is of great practical urgency to anyone seeking political office.

I argued in the previous chapter that Plato's early and middle Socratic dialogues issue a two-fold critique of Athenian political judgment. In his *Apology of Socrates*, Plato expresses reservations about the method of collective decision-making that governs the city. His Socrates cautioned the jury against basing its decisions about collective welfare on popular but inconsistent beliefs about the "most important things" (*talla ta megista*) (22e). Plato extends that criticism into the *Theaetetus* and *Protagoras* dialogues, suggesting that a rigorous, methodical examination of competing accounts of the good life is necessary for good political judgment. Unlike sophistry, which seeks persuasion rather than analysis, Socratic philosophy recognizes the value of uncertainty and the limits of human wisdom. By challenging the sophists' hubristic certainty, Socrates encourages us to continuously reexamine the foundations of our judgments.

The *Republic* explores the practice of virtuous politics in an unstable and often violent world. Plato advances a model of political judgment comprised of a philosophically defensible conception of justice that guides and assesses policies aimed at enhancing community welfare. By encouraging citizen-rulers to take their stated commitments to virtue seriously, he hopes to stabilize the volatility and impulsiveness that characterized the assembly's judgment during the Peloponnesian War. Furthermore, by bringing philosophical theory to bear on practical concerns

that arise from contingency and crisis, the work demonstrates an alternative model of judgment that improves the polis through a combination of moral reflection and practical experience.¹⁴⁴

My first goal is to frame the work's reflections on political judgment within the historical and intellectual tradition in which Plato composed it.¹⁴⁵ I do so by offering a careful analysis of Book 1. Like Thucydides' *History*, we can interpret Plato's *Republic* as a work whose lessons are meant "for all time."¹⁴⁶ But the dramatic dating and setting of the dialogue raise important questions about Plato's practical concerns for the politics of his own time. Attending to the work's dramatic situation in Athens during the Peace of Nicias encourages us to reflect upon the connection between its philosophical themes and the experience of practical politics in fourth-century Greece.¹⁴⁷ Book 1 strengthens the connections between philosophy and politics by taking up three popular theories of justice. These theories are more than set pieces. Indeed, Plato develops an alternative model of judgment by grappling with conventional wisdom. By presenting them in Book 1, he primes his audience to weigh them as they consider Socrates' alternative model.

¹⁴⁴ My argument departs from Catherine Zuckert's (2009: 179) interpretation of the *Republic*, which she argues that the dialogue's city-soul analogy renders its practical applicability moot. I also diverge from Alan Bloom's (1991: 392) argument that the philosopher-kingship model developed in Book 6 is so unlikely that it instead illustrates an unbridgeable gulf between philosophy and politics.

¹⁴⁵ Though the reflections on *justice* contained in Book 1 remain significant today, placing the discussion in its historical context foregrounds the practical urgency of political philosophizing.

¹⁴⁶ See, Thucydides (1998: 1.23). Cf. Nails (1998). Quentin Skinner (1969: 49-50) insists on the interpretive importance of accurately establishing the dialogue's dramatic context: "the classic texts cannot be concerned with our questions and answers, but only with their own," and that, as such, understanding the exact historic context of the *Republic* is of vital interpreting importance." While I disagree with Skinner's assertion that historical texts cannot have anything relevant to teach us about our own time, I agree that interpreting the work within its own context is greatly important. Nevertheless, the *Republic*'s dramatic dating has been the subject of scholarly controversy. Lewis Campbell (1902: 16) suggests that Plato probably composed the *Republic* in 378 BCE but that the dialogue is set in 411. Cf. Voegelin (2000: 3.52); Bloom (1991: 440). Other commentators have argued persuasively that the dialogue was set in 421. See, e.g., Taylor (1960 [1937]: 264); Howland (1993).

¹⁴⁷ For a similar argument, see Frede (1992: 219).

I take up the features of Plato's model of judgment in the second section. Recalling his criticisms of both philosophers and politicians in the *Theaetetus*, I argue that good political judgment is informed by philosophical investigation as well as through practical experience. Justice supplies a model of right action according to which no individual element within the soul or the city reaches beyond its proper role. This model offers a standard against which actors can compare competing proposals and make policy decisions accordingly. But contemplating the form of justice alone is not sufficient; philosophers must test their wisdom through the practical experience of actually governing. By requiring philosophers to rule, or by requiring rulers to philosophize, Socrates turns the city's welfare over to those who carefully consider the demands of justice. Socrates reminds the philosopher-rulers that their happiness is tied to the fate of their political communities. For Plato, even philosophers are political animals.¹⁴⁸

Finally, I will explore the democratic potential of Socrates' model of the philosopher-ruler.¹⁴⁹ Building on Socrates' observation that craftsmen have the most knowledge of their products, but that the products' users are best qualified to judge their quality, I argue that democratic politics positions citizens to act both as the creators and as the "users" of laws. This argument raises two important questions about democracy and judgment. First, I will ask how democratic judgment differs from judgment practiced in alternative regime types. Second, I will examine the characteristics and temperaments that democrats should acquire in order to judge well. As a member of the assembly, each citizen is asked to make judgments about the welfare and long-term interests of the polis and to decide on policies that aim at the collective good. I argue that it is by encouraging citizens to see justice as advantage – rather than advantage as

¹⁴⁸ See Wallach (2001: 213).

¹⁴⁹ Interpretations of Plato's Socrates as a friendly critic of Athenian democracy have been established in the secondary literature for some time. See, e.g., Euben (1997); S. Sara Monoson (2000); Wallach (2001: 278-301); Markovits (2008: 47-81).

justice – that Socrates implores them to consider collective, sustainable wellbeing in their decisions. Taken literally, the philosopher-ruler model developed in Book 6 is impractical; yet it provides a useful model of good decision-making toward which the unphilosophical majority might aspire to govern the city.

3.1 Political and Philosophical Context

Book 1 frames the *Republic* by providing two levels of interpretive context. It first establishes the historical backdrop, alerting readers to the circumstances that motivate its thematic concerns and the connection Plato wishes to draw between philosophy and politics. Book 1 also introduces three theories of justice that reflect dominant attitudes toward virtue, politics, and decision-making. Because one or more of these theories of justice often informed popular political judgment in fifth and fourth century Greek thought, I will pay special attention to flaws Socrates identifies within them as he sets the stage for his own theory.

Writing in 380, Plato sets the *Republic* on the precipice of Periclean Athens in 421. The dialogue takes place roughly three months after the Peace of Nicias declared a formal break in hostilities between Athens and Sparta. It was an ominous time for the city. The Peace, never steady, formally dissolved in 414 when Athens sailed on Sicily while the Lacedaemonians renewed their Attic offensive. The democracy would succumb shortly thereafter to the Thirty Tyrants, whose campaign of terror purged the city's popular leaders and persecuted the metic population.¹⁵⁰

Given the bloodlust that would soon consume the city, readers might be surprised to find Socrates enjoying a summer evening in the Piraeus among friends. In the opening passage, he

¹⁵⁰ Plato's own connection to the Thirty Tyrants is well documented. See, e.g., Taylor (1911: 3-6); Rosen (2005: 14). Along with his brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus, Plato was a kinsman of their leader Critias. According to the *Seventh Letter* he was invited to join the oligarchic junta but declined (324c-326b).

recounts that he and his young companion Glaucon were returning from the port town when a rowdy group of friends detains them:

I went down (*Katabēn*) to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston. I wanted to say a prayer to the goddess, and I was also curious to see how they would manage the festival, since they were holding it for the first time. I thought the procession of the local residents was a fine one and that the one conducted by the Thracians was no less outstanding. After we had said our prayer and seen the procession, we started back towards Athens... Just then Polemarchus caught up with us. Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, was with him and so were Niceratus, the son of Nicias, and some others, all of whom were apparently on their way from the procession. (327a)

The passage intimates interpretive and historical themes to which readers should remain attentive throughout the dialogue. Sara Monoson notes that its first word, *katabēn*, describes not simply the act of decent, but of “going down *to do some active spectating*.”¹⁵¹ In this case, Socrates and his companions were drawn down from Athens and into the port in order to say a prayer to the Thracian goddess Bendis and are later enticed to stay in order to watch a nighttime torch race on horseback – a novelty for Athens – as well as to attend the all-night festival (328a). The “decent” theme carries through the text, and is widely interpreted as Plato's effort to connect philosophy and politics.¹⁵² We see a similar description of the philosopher's decent (*katabateon*) into the cave in Book 7 (520c), as well as near the conclusion of the text when souls “come down” from the heavens to select their earthly lives in the Myth of Er (614d). This pattern gives the dialogue's opening a liminal quality; the conversation will concern movement between the theoretically good city (*kallipolis*) and the world of lived experience in which political judgments are made.

The Piraeus is an unlikely stage for so lofty a script. Like the cave of Book 7, it was a place of people “like us” (515a), a menagerie of cults and craftsmen, theaters and brothels,

¹⁵¹ Monoson (2000: 217).

¹⁵² See, e.g., Monoson (2000); Frank (2007: 461). On the pattern's structural significance, see (Reeve, 2013: 45). Cf. Strauss (1964: 56); Mara (1981: 356).

residents and travelers.¹⁵³ As the seafaring city's largest and best fortified port, it was a democratic stronghold that also served as the launching pad of Athenian imperialism.¹⁵⁴ When that effort failed after the War, Thrasybulus would revive democracy from its banks when he fought the Thirty with his army of Thracians.¹⁵⁵ The Piraeus was also a planned community. Designed by Hippodamus of Miletus, whom Aristotle credits as the inventor of urban planning, the town featured one of Greece's first orthogonal street designs and homes carefully arranged to reflect the diversity of its denizens.¹⁵⁶ On the one hand, Hippodamus' rational approach to city planning and concern for class divisions evokes similar themes in the *kallipolis* to come. On the other hand, if Aristotle correctly chastised the planner as the "first among those who was not a statesman," but who foolishly tried to speak of the ideal state, Plato's decision to stage the conversation within the Piraeus may indicate its failure.¹⁵⁷ Hippodamus was not, after all, a philosopher.

Though often glossed over, Plato's description of the Thracian festival is conspicuous for its level of detail and historical significance. Most Athenians regarded Thracian visitors to their city as barbarously wild; they were the antitheses of Periclean citizenship. As Despoina Tsiafakis' insightful analysis of fifth and fourth century Greek pottery demonstrates, the

¹⁵³ Finley (1985: 65); Saxonhouse (2009: 745-746).

¹⁵⁴ Garland (2001: 28-32). A number of historians have questioned the influence that rowers and sailors had over Athenian politics, challenging the view that the Piraeus was symbolically central to Athenian political life. See, e.g., Osborn (1985: 64-92); Von Reden (1995).

¹⁵⁵ Once democracy was restored, Thrasybulus launched an unsuccessful bid to bestow full citizenship on all residents of the Piraeus who participated in the war of liberation. See Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 40.2. Though defeated by the more moderate Archinos, the assembly nevertheless passed a decree bestowing honors and citizenship rights on some 1,000 non-Athenians.

¹⁵⁶ See Aristotle, *Politics*, II.1267b22-30.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Athenians transmitted their prejudices against Thracian culture through the myths of Orpheus and Thamyras, whose divinely inspired poetry and songs wrought divine doom.¹⁵⁸ This popular view comports with Plato's parallel between the Thracian sophist Protagoras and mythical Orpheus in the *Protagoras* (315b), as well as with his hostility toward the poets in the *kallipolis*. But read against the background of the Peloponnesian War, the fact that Socrates and Glaucon have been attracted to the Piraeus for a novel Thracian festival suggests more than idle fascination with a culture known for its drinking parties. Tolerant as the Athenians were, the public honors accorded to the new Thracian cult to Bendis were exceptional for their grants of *enktesis* (the right to construct a shrine) as well as for their extension of the right to form *orgeōnes* (sacrificing groups) an official status that was unprecedented for a foreign cult.¹⁵⁹ The gestures may have been part of Athenian diplomatic efforts to attract Thracian military support for future campaigns against Sparta, or perhaps they were meant to cleanse the city of plague.¹⁶⁰ In either case, the festival's Thracian overtones recall the conflict that has never fully left the Athenian horizon. This observation lends weight to Jill Frank's argument that conflict, politics, and philosophy mingle in close proximity to one another throughout the dialogue.¹⁶¹

Finally, the list of young gentlemen named in the opening passage should alert readers to future tensions within historical Athenian politics. Glaucon and Adeimantus, Plato's brothers, are kinsmen of the oligarchic junta that would unleash havoc upon the city. The Thirty would

¹⁵⁸Tsiafakis (2000). Cf. Bianchi, Horewitz and Girardot (1971).

¹⁵⁹See, e.g., Planeaux (2000: 179, 186-9).

¹⁶⁰On the effort to attract military support, see, e.g., Garland (1991: 113. On the effort to rid themselves of the plague, see Planeaux (2000:181). For a careful treatment of evidence from both perspectives, see Sears (2013: 153-56). For an instructive analysis of race and Athenian citizenship, see Lape (2010: 21-52). According to Lape, racial narratives were central to Athenian conceptions of citizenship and, by extension, their understanding of who was due moral consideration.

¹⁶¹Frank (2007: 444).

execute Polemarchus, the wealthy metic, in 404 along with Nicias' son Niceratus.¹⁶² Niceratus' father would die honorably in 413 during the Sicilian campaign that he adamantly opposed. Socrates, of course, would drink the hemlock when democracy was restored. In light of the events to come, the list of characters reads like a necrograph of Periclean Athens. By casting this collection of foreigners and citizens as a group of friends, Plato transports his audience to a time of relative peace prior to the *stasis* that would overwhelm the city in its days before Lacedaemonian capture.

Plato's introduction frames his discussion about justice within a context of impending inequity and disruption. The norms that governed Athenian social life (e.g. their reticent tolerance of foreigners, their preference for rationality over superstition, etc.) are already bending to the pressures of the War. Likewise, the bonds that hold the young friends within a community of equality will soon dissolve under an oligarchic junta that would not likely have come to power had the Athenians not overextended their wartime ambitions. Athens learned these lessons in hindsight through the tragic experience of war, and we learn them in part by studying works like Thucydides' *History* and the dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides. To the extent that good judgment entails foresight, however, we might hope to find some alternative education that anticipates such tensions before they manifest as tragedy. Philosophy aspires to supply that alternative.

The intellectual tradition in which Plato situates the opening scenes of the *Republic* provide further interpretive tools for understanding the work's argument. Plato dedicates the majority of Book 1 to three theories of justice that are more or less conventional throughout

¹⁶² His brother, the famed orator Lysis, would be driven into exile.

fourth century Greece. By challenging these theories, his Socrates is doing more than impressing his audience with his intellectual acumen. Indeed, if we agree with Thrasymachus that Socrates' questioning was chiefly *eristic*, we might be disappointed; Socrates' treatment of these arguments is not always particularly generous or convincing. But the exercise is thematically important for at least two reasons. First, Plato suggests that philosophical examination should start on fresh ground. By clearing away old arguments, Plato positions his characters to develop new solutions to persistent problems pertaining to justice. Second, and more importantly for my purposes, Socrates' elenctic examination of each conventional theory of justice attempts to expose problems with their application. To the extent that justice ought to inform political judgments about a polity's welfare, the definition of justice should also be consistent and practically applicable. Socrates' concentration on practice suggests that Plato is not content to advance an ideal theory of justice alone. Rather, such a theory should also apply to the non-ideal circumstances of lived political experience via judgment.

Plato introduces the first theory of justice in the comfortable home of Cephalus, Polemarchus' father.¹⁶³ Cephalus is a wealthy Syracusan shield manufacturer whose moderate lifestyle has eased his transition into old age (330a). For all that moderate living may be intrinsically virtuous, Cephalus' long experience has taught him that *sophrosynē* certainly has material benefits as well. When asked about what lessons his experience has taught him about the road ahead, Cephalus reports that old age is only difficult for those who have lived immoderately. When he meets with others of similar age, he says that the majority complain about "the lost pleasures they remember from their youth" like drinking, feasting, and having sex

¹⁶³ Cephalus' significance to Plato's project in the dialogue has received relatively scant treatment in the secondary literature. Important exceptions include Steinberger (1996); Beversluis (2000: 185-202); Reeve (2013: 38-45).

(329a). But if one lives temperately, he says, the twilight years are not so bad. Indeed, a measure of pious clarity surfaces as the appetites ebb (329c-d).

Cephalus' advice seems to agree with Socrates' later depiction of psychic rule within the philosopher's soul. According to this later view, reason (*logos*) and spirit (*thumos*) keep the appetites in check so that bodily pleasures do not overrun the soul:

And these two, having been nurtured in this way, and having truly learned their own roles and been educated in them, will govern the appetitive part, which is the largest part in each person's soul and is by nature most insatiable for money. They'll watch over it to see that it isn't filled with the so-called pleasures of the body and that it doesn't become so big and strong that it no longer does its own work but attempts to enslave and rule over the classes it isn't fitted to rule, thereby overturning everyone's whole life. (442a-b)

Comparing this passage to Cephalus' remarks puts the agreement between the philosopher and the merchant into greater relief. Both take moderation as an essential quality of the good human life and both apparently treat corporeal desires as potential limitations upon it.¹⁶⁴ This similarity lends weight to the "disembodied" interpretation of Socratic virtue, according to which morality and experience are set in tension with one another.¹⁶⁵ Both experience and philosophy seem to instruct moral agents to abstain from appetitive distractions in favor of abstract learning. But notice that neither passage advocates the wholesale eradication of appetites; rather, both Cephalus (experience) and Socrates (philosophy) converge on a policy of moderation. After all,

¹⁶⁴ The latter passage is especially telling for its emphasis on the moderate importance accorded to moneymaking. It recalls Cephalus' self-characterization as a "mean" between his spendthrift father and avaricious grandfather (330d). For this reason, moderation is the virtue of the appetitive part while courage and wisdom are the virtues of the thumotic and rational parts, respectively.

¹⁶⁵ As David Roochnik puts it in his study of Plato's conception of *logos*, "Plato has been damned repeatedly as the architect of a hyper-rational and oppressive world" governed by the single-minded obsession with impartial, absolute Truth" (1990: x). For the strongest representative of this reading, see Popper (1964). For Friedrich Nietzsche (1995: 51, 65), Plato's Socrates was a delusional paragon of disinterested logic, while for Leo Strauss (1952: 17; 1964: 110-112, 138) the philosopher-rulers envisioned in the *Republic* were so enamored of the forms that they disdained material human life. Cf. Bloom (1991: 382). Martha Nussbaum (1986: 133, 164) has contended that the Platonic corpus develops a philosophical science devoid of emotional considerations or input from lived experience.

Cephalus was renowned for business acumen and Socrates was famous for his feasting and drinking.

Cephalus' experience aging demonstrates that virtue has its rewards. But that observation does not make him virtuous in the Socratic sense. As John Beversluis observes, Cephalus and Socrates share an appreciation for the connection between virtue and happiness.¹⁶⁶ But whereas Socrates understands the connection as one of rational desire, Cephalus appears merely to have stumbled upon it like so much good advice. When Socrates asks him to explain himself, he references anecdotes and poetry rather than offering reason and argument (329c-d, 329e, 330a, 331a). Indeed, he couches nearly everything he says in the authority of a poet or statesman whose reasoning he cannot further explicate. Socrates seems to like him, and Plato certainly does not portray him as vicious or stupid; but we would also struggle to describe him as wise. Moreover, like the hapless juror described in chapter 2, his judgments might happen to be correct on some occasions and incorrect on others, but he cannot give an account of the difference.

The difference between experience and philosophy becomes clearest when Socrates presses his old friend on the definition of *justice*. Cephalus has just finished saying that wealth is only useful for guarding against the temptation to cheat others (331a-b). "A fine sentiment," Socrates replies, "but, speaking of this very thing itself, namely, justice (*dikaiosynē*), are we to say unconditionally that it is speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred? Or is doing these things sometimes just, sometimes unjust?" (331c-d) He posits the example of returning a borrowed weapon to a friend who has since gone mad. Cephalus agrees that arming a lunatic would demonstrate poor judgment, but he does not say that doing so would be unjust per

¹⁶⁶ Beversluis (2000: 192) points out that Cephalus describes the benefits in terms of contentment (*eukolos*) rather than the philosophically richer notions of the "good" (*agathos*) or happiness (*eudaimonia*).

se. His concession nevertheless indicates that his theory of justice is not categorical and therefore incomplete. Abiding by it would also risk disastrous material consequences for his friends in Syracuse. Knowing that Athens will soon elect to sail on Sicily, Plato positions his Syracusan arms-dealer to equip the very men who will invade his homeland. His wrenching situation underscores the material importance of critically evaluating how we make decisions. The apparently abstract question of *justice* has suddenly become concrete, and relying on experience alone may not help us answer it.

Polemarchus takes up Cephalus' argument and allows his father to attend his sacrifice. Cephalus' quick exit might give the impression that he is not up for Socrates' challenge, or may indicate Plato's effort to clear the space of old, poetic sophistry so that real philosophizing can begin.¹⁶⁷ But we should not dismiss Cephalus' significance both for the dialogue's dramatic context as well as for its overall thematic unity. In addition to foreshadowing a number of themes that resurface on philosophically sturdier foundations later in the text, he also offers the first hypothesis about justice and demonstrates the insufficiency of a life tutored exclusively through experience. His conversation with Socrates also has bearing on Plato's theory of political judgment. To the extent that Plato's concerns for Athenian *pleonexia* motivate the *Republic*, Cephalus' insistence on the instrumental benefits of moderate – that is, virtuous – living should not go unnoticed, especially insofar as they come from a Syracusan arms dealer. More importantly, however, Cephalus' dependence on outside sources like poets and statesmen hinders his capacity for reflective examination. This trait is more than a character flaw specific to the old

¹⁶⁷ See, e.g., Leo Strauss (1959: 29-32); Bloom (1991: 312); Darrell Dobbs (1994). Cf. Blanchard (2000: 434); Saxonhouse (2006: 38).

man; it is also indicative of how the average Greek made judgments about how to live their lives.¹⁶⁸

Polemarchus inherits his father's argument in grand style. True to his namesake, he appears at first like an rowdy brat spoiling for a fight.¹⁶⁹ Paraphrasing Simonides' remark that "it is just to give each what is owed to him," he insists that "friends owe it to their friends to do good for them, never harm," and that, likewise, "what enemies owe to each other is appropriately and precisely—something bad" (331e-332b). Or, as Socrates puts it, "to treat friends well and enemies badly is justice" (332d). As I argued in chapter 1, this theory of justice is especially pronounced throughout Thucydides' *History*. In my reading of that work, I argued that actors like Brasidas who took it seriously were better positioned to make sound political judgments than were those who rejected justice altogether as a factor in their decision-making. As if to underscore its specific application to combat, Plato presents Polemarchus' argument that wars provide the ideal venue in which to demonstrate one's justness (332e). His qualification raises important questions about where and with whom we practice justice.

¹⁶⁸ According to Reeve, "Cephalus cannot benefit from the elenchus because his character is already as good as Socrates'," though we should note that his inability to offer a rational defense of his character exposes him – and his son – to threats from moral skepticism. As Reeve explains, "Cephalus grew up in a world relatively free from ethical skepticism, but he has neither passed on that world to Polemarchus nor equipped him to preserve his values in the new and skeptical world in which he actually lives...The Kallipolis is in part Plato's solution to the problem of the transmission of the best values once they are found, and to the problem of how to insure that people who cannot defend their values against criticism, even when those values are the best ones, will yet hold securely to them" (2006: 9).

¹⁶⁹ His name translates as "war leader." That his first mention in the dramatic prologue is in the context of sending his slave to detain Socrates and Glaucon gives the impression that he is accustomed to exercising power and getting his way. This view is reinforced by his veiled threat of force when Socrates and Glaucon demure: "Do you see how many we are? ... Well, you must either prove stronger than we are, or you will have to stay here" (327c). When Socrates offers to persuade Polemarchus rather than overpower him, he replies, "But could you persuade us, if we won't listen? ... Well, we won't listen; you'd better make up your mind to that" (327c). This initial characterization is not unlike that of Polus in the *Gorgias*, whose intemperance recalled his equestrian namesake.

Conventional definitions of justice applied primarily to wartime. This point is worth remembering if we are to read Polemarchus' appearance in the *Republic* as anything more than a vehicle of inadequately reasoned beliefs that Socrates will easily refute.¹⁷⁰ Though vulnerable to philosophical scrutiny, Polemarchus expresses a view that would have seemed perfectly acceptable to most decent Greeks and one that regulated affairs between cities during periods of inter-Hellenic conflict. Helping friends and harming enemies were, in effect, the primary norms structuring the inter-polis political system.¹⁷¹

Socrates' interpretation of Polemarchus' definition of justice is notable for at least three reasons. First, he describes justice as a craft (*technē*) that, in Polemarchus' view, "gives benefits to friends and does harm to enemies" (332d). The craft analogy is a distinctly Platonic device. Given that so many of Socrates' elenchi in earlier dialogues turned on the virtue-craft analogy, we might actually attribute its inclusion here more to the philosopher than to the nobleman. The problems with defining justice as a *technē* become apparent, however, when Socrates presses Polemarchus on the usefulness of justice during peacetime. When not at war, Polemarchus replies that justice is useful for maintaining contracts between people, specifically with respect to the safe keeping of money (333a, 333b). Socrates objects:

- S: The one who is the best guardian of an army is the very one who can steal the enemy's clans and dispositions?
- P: Certainly.
- S: Whenever someone is a clever guardian, then, he is also a clever thief.
- P: Probably so.

¹⁷⁰ For a persuasive defense of Polemarchus' importance for the dialogue, see Page (1990).

¹⁷¹ Despite the prevalence of the friend/enemy distinction for much of Greek thought, we saw in Thucydides' narrative that the Athenians generally rejected or distorted it as a matter of material importance in their decision-making throughout the war. Consequently Polemarchus' station as a *Syracusan* elite is conspicuous.

- S: If a just person is clever at guarding money, therefore, he must also be clever at stealing it.
- P: According to our argument, at any rate.
- S: A just person has turned out then, it seems, to be a kind of thief. Maybe you learned this from Homer, for he's fond of Autolycus, the maternal grandfather of Odysseus, whom he describes as better than everyone at lying and stealing. According to you, Homer, and Simonides, then, justice seems to be some sort of craft of stealing, one that benefits friends and harms enemies. Isn't that what you meant?
- P: No, by god, it isn't. I don't know any more what I mean, but I still believe that to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies is justice. (333e-334b)

Polemarchus does not challenge Socrates' assumption that the most useful person in warfare is a spy. He could easily have objected that the most useful person is the wise general who prepares his men for combat while terrifying his enemies, or the courageous hoplite who maintains his position in the face of destruction rather than abandoning his friends in battle. Either of these characterizations would allow him to support his original position. Instead, Plato has him agree to a nefarious notion of usefulness in order to underscore the broader point that a *technē* is, to use Reeve's phrase, "a capacity for opposites."¹⁷² *Pace* Socrates' argument against Gorgias, there is nothing intrinsic to a craft that necessitates virtuous action. By undermining Polemarchus' assent to the craft analogy, Plato acknowledges a problem endemic to much of Socratic discourse. Tellingly, Plato has Socrates lead us there.

A second important point about Socrates' interpretation of Polemarchus' argument is the ambiguity surrounding "harm" (*blaptein*) in its second half. Critics who complain that Socrates fails to refute Polemarchus' argument, among other things, that the philosopher equivocates on the definition of harm employed throughout his examination of the young man. The problem comes into view when Socrates asks Polemarchus if a just person should ever harm anyone else.

¹⁷² Reeve (2006: 8).

Polemarchus replies that such a person, “must harm those who are both bad and enemies” (335b). Socrates next asks him if harming horses or dogs improves or diminishes them, to which Polemarchus concedes that they are diminished. Conversely, virtue (*arête*) improves them. Insofar as justice is a virtue, a just person should aim at improving others; likewise, a just person ought to avoid harming others because “those who are good” cannot “make people bad through virtue” (335d). D.J. Allan contends that Socrates’ refutation is made possible only by interpreting *blaptein* as “to do injustice” rather than “to hurt” (1953: 91). R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley contend that we should interpret the verb in its latter sense, as this is more appropriate for Socrates’ contrast with “improve” (1964: 21). Though they admit that this is not at all clear from Plato’s text, following their interpretation grants greater credit to Polemarchus as a thinker worthy of critical attention. It would be absurd for Polemarchus to suggest that the just person should make their enemy “less just,” as doing so may render them a more potent adversary, at least in the short run. Far more credible is the claim that Polemarchus intended “harm” in the bellicose sense, that is, to hurt or disadvantage an enemy in the protection of friends.¹⁷³ But Plato does not allow Polemarchus to issue that objection himself. Instead, the young man finds Socrates’ obviously fallacious counter-argument convincing, agreeing to be his “partner in the battle” (335e) against anyone upholding the conventional view he has just attempted to defend. When asked against whom they ought to do battle, Polemarchus lists a series of wealthy tyrants.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ As Reeve puts it, “Now it is clear that neither Solon nor Simonides meant that it is just to *corrupt* one’s enemies. No one wants enemies to be any more corrupt than they already are. What both poets mean is that it is just to destroy or disable one’s enemies” (2006: 7).

¹⁷⁴ He lists the Corinthian tyrant Periander, Perdiccas, King of Macedon, and the Persian king Xerxes (336a).

The question of whom one should count as a friend and whom as an enemy vexes Polemarchus as deeply as it did the figures in the *History*. Socrates presses him to clarify his position by asking him if by “friends” he means “those [whom] a person believes to be good and useful to him or those who actually are good and useful, even if he doesn’t think they are, and similarly with enemies” (334b-c). “Probably,” Polemarchus replies, “one loves those one considers good and useful and hates those one considers bad and harmful” (334c). However, people frequently err in making this distinction, supposing that “good people are their enemies,” while bad ones are their friends (334d). As Socrates puts it in the *Lysis*, “many people are loved by their enemies and hated by their friends, and are friends to their enemies and enemies to their friends...but that doesn’t make any sense at all” (213b). Indeed, this confusion yields two absurd judgments. On one hand, Socrates supposes that Polemarchus means to say that it is just to benefit bad people while harming good ones – a claim he flatly denies. On the other hand, Socrates suggests that Polemarchus means “that it is just for the many, who are mistaken in their judgment, to harm their friends, who are bad, and benefit their enemies, who are good” (334d). Though Polemarchus grants that Socrates’ conclusion is logical, it is clearly not what he believes. He goes on to define a friend as one who is both believed to be useful and is actually useful but even here his argument is ambiguous, for what does it mean for a friend to be “useful”? We might wonder if a self-sufficient person has any need of friends. Moreover, echoing Socrates’ defense in the *Apology*, we might also wonder about the status of people who are actually useful but are not believed to be so.

Polemarchus’ inability to distinguish between friends and enemies speaks to a host of practical and philosophical complications that arise from applying his theory of justice to

political judgments.¹⁷⁵ On a practical level, his definition of friendship rests on a prior definition of utility so vague that it cannot settle disputes between whether a person is a friend or an enemy. If Polemarchus cannot reliably distinguish between those upon whom he should bestow benefits and those whom he should harm, he risks committing injustice on a grand scale. But even if he were to formulate a standard of utility sufficiently nuanced to use as a standard against which to weigh the happiness or harm that another person could bring to his life, he would still have missed an important point that Socrates wishes to make about justice (and friendship), namely, that as a virtue *justice* is intrinsically good. Genuine friendship (*philia*) does not rest on mutual dependence or utility so much as on the sheer good that comes from having friends.¹⁷⁶ Put another way, if we were to adopt Polemarchus' definition of justice as the normative motivation of political decision-making, we could reduce much of the problem of judgment to a Schmittian parsing of friends from enemies.¹⁷⁷ If the constitutive principle of all friendship is merely sharing enemy, and the goal of friendship is to eliminate that enemy, it follows that the goal of all

¹⁷⁵ The problem persists throughout the *Republic*, as when Socrates quips that dogs are the most philosophical of all animals a dog “judges anything it sees to be either a friend or an enemy, on no other basis than that it knows the one and doesn’t know the other.” “And how could it be anything besides a lover of learning,” he asks, “if it defines what is its own and what is alien to it in terms of knowledge and ignorance?” (376b). Extending the metaphor throughout the dialogue, we can interpret the guardians’ efforts to insulate the city from outside corruption as an effort to protect their friends without, it should be noted, harming potential enemies. Even the justification he offers for the philosophers’ rule over the city is based in their superior knowledge which would, presumably, better position them to parse friends of the city from enemies. I will return to this point in section 3.

¹⁷⁶ Again, recalling the *Lysis* helps to clarify this point. Late in the discussion, Socrates and Lysis seem to have agreed that sharing a common enemy is a necessary condition of friendship. But supposing the bad could be eliminated, Socrates wonders if there would still be need of friends: “For if nothing could still harm us, we would have no need of any assistance, and it would be perfectly clear to us that it was on account of the bad that we prized and loved the good—as if the good is a drug against the bad, and the bad is a disease, so that without the disease there is no need for the drug. Isn’t the good by nature loved on account of the bad by those of us who are midway between good and bad, but by itself and for its own sake it has no use at all?” (220e).

¹⁷⁷ For Schmitt, all political action follows from the distinction between friends and enemies; that is, between those who are members sharing a political association and all others who are not of that association. The enemy, or *Fiend*, is not a moral distinction but rather a category of “strangers” with whom conflict is possible. Deciding between friends and enemies “can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party” (2007: 26-27.)

friendship is its elimination. Likewise, if justice exists because of the need to punish enemies, and all enemies are destroyed, there would be no need for justice. Extending this argument to all virtues (e.g. courage, wisdom, moderation, etc.) it would appear to follow that absolute self-sufficiency would negate the need of virtue. This is the tyrannical argument that, disturbingly, held sway over Athens at the zenith of the city's power.

Plato articulates the tyrant's justice – such as it is – through Thrasymachus, a sophist from Chalcedon.¹⁷⁸ Thrasymachus is among Plato's most controversial characters. Though some commentators have dismissed him as “a mere child in argument,” others have rightly read his challenge for a positive theory of justice – later refined by Glaucon – as the motivation for the remaining books of the *Republic*.¹⁷⁹ My primary aim is not to show that Thrasymachus offers a wholly coherent account of justice, nor is it my aim to demonstrate the weaknesses in Socrates' rebuttal. These have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.¹⁸⁰ I am instead interested in exploring the implications of his theory as they pertain to the practice of judgment. According to what principles, if any, does Thrasymachus think a ruler ought to make political judgments?

Thrasymachus bursts into the dialogue in a rage. Having grown restless throughout Socrates' conversation with Polemarchus, he pounces upon them “like a wild beast” and chastises them both:

What nonsense have you two been talking, Socrates? Why do you act like fools by giving way to one another? If you truly want to know what justice is, don't just ask questions and then refute the answers simply to satisfy your competitiveness or love of honor. You know very well that it is easier to ask questions than answer them. Give an answer

¹⁷⁸ Chalcedon was a Megarian colony founded near Byzantium, just outside of Thracian territory.

¹⁷⁹ For those who dismiss Thrasymachus outright, see, e.g. Jowett (1871: xi); Sidgwick (1968: 370). On his inconsistency, see Cross and Woollsey (1964: 42). For his argument as a unifying theme in the *Republic*, see, Kerferd (1947); Strauss, (1964: 73).

¹⁸⁰ See, e.g., Hourani (1962); Harlap (1979); Reeve (2006: 23-24).

yourself, and tell us what you say the just is. And don't tell me that it's the right, the beneficial, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous, but tell me clearly and exactly what you mean; for I won't accept such nonsense from you. (336b)

Thrasymachus' frustrated command, "is the cry of every substantive theorist against the destructive critic" (Reeve 2006: 10). But his question is also familiar from a Socratic perspective, inasmuch as it resembles the "What is it?" (*ti esti*) question the philosopher routinely asks his interlocutors when discussing virtues like justice and courage. Thrasymachus turns the question on the Socrates himself.

Thrasymachus' belligerence reminds us that violence is never far from the dialogue's main themes, or at least not from its implications.¹⁸¹ He embodies an adversarial approach to argumentation characteristic of competitive sophistry and lawcourt rhetoric.¹⁸² To that end, his style is not only more obviously aggressive than the philosopher's, but also more popular. As Plato has Socrates put it in the *Phaedrus*:

As to the art of making speeches bewailing the evils of poverty and old age, the prize, in my judgment, goes to the mighty Chalcedonian. He it is also who knows best how to inflame a crowd and, once they are inflamed, how to hush them again with his words' magic spell, as he says himself. And let's not forget that he is as good at producing slander as he is at refuting it, whatever its source may be. (267c-d)

Three points about this later description of the sophist are worth briefly noting. First, Plato establishes Thrasymachus as an authoritative orator on par with the likes of Gorgias and Protagoras. Read against dialogues like the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*, we see a familiar Platonic critique of rhetoric as a knack akin to flattery: a practice that manipulates crowds by

¹⁸¹ See Frank (2007: 447).

¹⁸² Following the work of Al-Farabi, Strauss famously argues that Plato uses Thrasymachus as a foil for Socratic philosophy as a means of communicating with both elites and the masses: "The Platonic way, as distinguished from the Socratic way, is a combination of the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus; for the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate only for the philosopher's dealing with the elite, whereas the way of Thrasymachus, which is both more and less exacting than the former, is appropriate for his dealings with the vulgar" (1952: 16). Cf. Al-Farabi, (2001: 67).

distorting justice and negating the relevance of truth to persuasion.¹⁸³ Secondly, the remark captures all that is problematic about the craft analogy examined above. Insofar as Thrasymachus excels at refuting slanderous allegations he is equally skilled at spinning them against his enemies. There is nothing about sophistic rhetoric that ensures its virtuous application. The same cannot be said of philosophy and, by extension, philosophically tutored political judgment. Finally, the *Phaedrus*' description of Thrasymachus' control over crowds suggests that a man of such talents could rise to greater prominence in a democracy than in an oligarchy or kingship.¹⁸⁴ Thrasymachus is not a citizen. His judgment will never be put to a vote in the assembly. But by transmitting his theory of justice to young aristocrats like Glaucon and Adeimantus, he can potentially benefit from his practice without subjecting himself to the consequences of its failures.¹⁸⁵ In other words, he and foreign sophists like him are well positioned within the democracy to reap benefits without making the sacrifices commonly associated with membership in a political community. He is a tyrant among democrats in a democratic polity that is increasingly behaving like a tyrant among Greeks. Though not an Athenian, he appears as the most Athens-like foreigner so far examined in the dialogue.¹⁸⁶

Socrates feigns shock at Thrasymachus' demand for a positive account of justice, resisting the charge that he is hiding his beliefs from the others while defending his method as an

¹⁸³ See *Gorgias* 463b, 465a. He puts the point more forcefully during his interrogation of Polus: "So that I won't make a long-style speech, I'm willing to put it to you the way geometers do – for perhaps you follow me now – that what cosmetics is to gymnastics, pastry baking is to medicine; or rather, like this: what cosmetics is to gymnastics, sophistry is to legislation, and what pastry baking is to medicine, oratory is to justice" (465c).

¹⁸⁴ The parallel between Thrasymachus and Pericles should not go unnoticed in this regard.

¹⁸⁵ Socrates alludes to Thrasymachus' profit motive later in their conversation: "Show some willingness to teach it to us. It wouldn't be a bad investment for you to be the benefactor of a group as large as ours" (344e).

¹⁸⁶ This finding is surprising, given the formal and historic similarities between democratic Syracuse and Athens during the war.

appropriately cautious, systematic exploration of truth. “If we were searching for gold,” he protests, “we’d never willingly give way to each other, if by doing so we’d destroy our chance of finding it... You surely mustn’t think that, but rather – as I do – that we’re incapable of finding it” (336e). As the following nine attest, this is not an entirely earnest reply, and Thrasymachus rightly challenges Socrates’ deflection. Sensitive to Socrates’ own theatrical strategies, Thrasymachus knows better than to let himself feel offended. Rather, true to his adversarial approach to argumentation, he is (ironically) offended by his perception that the philosopher refuses to put any of his own skin in the game: “I knew, and I said so to these people earlier, that you’d be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned *you*, you’d be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer” (337a). He agrees to engage Socrates in a discussion of justice only on the condition that they each prepare to pay a fine to the winner of the argument. Socrates insists that he has no money for a fine but is willing to praise Thrasymachus if he finds that he speaks well. With this, the parallel between Socrates’ discussion with Thrasymachus and his prior engagement with Protagoras comes into full relief. We are left with a familiar reputational competition between philosophy on one hand and sophistry on the other.

Socrates invites Thrasymachus to share his definition of justice with Glaucon and the rest of Polemarchus’ guests. “Listen,” the sophist replies, “I say that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger (*kreitonos*)” (338c). The sophist recoils in disgust when Socrates asks him to clarify his position by asking if it is just for everyone who wishes to become strong to eat beef in order to make themselves even stronger. He accuses Socrates of intentionally misinterpreting him in order to belittle his otherwise elegant definition.¹⁸⁷ “Your trick,” he says,

¹⁸⁷ The remark is a telling flag that readers should beware of the difference between a speaker’s intended meaning and Socrates’ interpretation. As we shall soon realize, the complaint is not without warrant.

“is to take hold of the argument at the point where you can do it the most harm (*kakourgēsais*)” (338d). When Socrates demurs, he observes that while cities may be governed by a variety of regime types their laws are always written such that they advantage the ruling element. Contra Socrates’ claim in the *Theaetetus* that political judgments differ across cities, Thrasymachus maintains that a common rule unites them, namely that “the advantage of the established ruler” is always their guiding force (339a).

Thrasymachus issues an institutional theory of justice according to which right action always supports established law, regardless of its content. Extending his reasoning to the practice of judgment, we might be inclined to think that all *political* judgments are not merely about the pursuit of individual interests, but more specifically about how power is retained once acquired. Like Polemarchus’ definition, which understood justice as an edict to protect and enrich already existing friendships, this conception of justice focuses on the maintenance of power without offering a rational defense of how that power was gotten to begin with.¹⁸⁸ That is, even if an actor achieved power through ethically questionable means, like tyrannicide or conquest, a Thrasymachian might describe that actor as *just* provided they effectively pursued their interests. Also like Polemarchus, who stumbled over the standard of friendship, Thrasymachus struggles to define a standard of *interests* against which would-be rulers can judge a policy’s worth. As we shall soon see, his admission that even rulers are liable to misunderstand their own interests will undermine his theory of justice, as well as of judgment.

It is tempting to reduce Thrasymachus’ initial theory to the oft quoted Athenian declaration in Thucydides’ Melian dialogue, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer

¹⁸⁸ Indeed, Thrasymachus’ brutally realist account of justice was likely as conventional as Polemarchus’ definition. As A.W.H Adkins puts it, “scratch Thrasymachus and you find King Agamemnon” (1960: 239).

what they must.”¹⁸⁹ This reading suggests that justice is equivalent to the domination of the weak by the strong. But this is not quite what he means. Instead, most commentators agree that he initially proposes that everyone pursues their own interests and, in doing so, competes with others for power.¹⁹⁰ Justice is silent on how such competition takes place. To the extent that one agrees that power is a scarce resource and that politics is a zero-sum struggle for control, this observation of human psychology yields a naturalist account of justice. Socrates, however, remains skeptical of the additional requirement that rulers are “stronger” than those they govern:

S: Tell me, don’t you also say that it is just to obey the rulers?

T: I do.

S: And are the rulers in all cities infallible, or are they liable to error?

T: No doubt they are liable to error.

S: When they undertake to make laws, therefore, they make some correctly, others incorrectly?

T: I suppose so.

S: And a law is correct if it prescribes what is to the rulers’ own advantage and incorrect if it prescribes what is to their disadvantage? Is that what you mean?

T: It is.

S: And whatever laws they make must be obeyed by their subjects and this is justice?

T: Of course.

S: Then, according to your account, it is just to do not only what is to the advantage of the stronger, but also the opposite, what is not to their advantage. (339c-d)

¹⁸⁹ See Thucydides, *History*, 5.89. Jeremy Mynott (2013) rightly observes that while Crawley’s translation perhaps captures the drama of the exchange, it does not reflect what the Athenians actually say. The passage reads, “You understand as well as we do that in the human sphere judgments about justice are relevant only between those with an equal power to enforce it, and that the possibilities are defined by what the strong do and the weak accept.” Steven Lattimore renders the passage in similar language, suggesting that power disparities render some actors unworthy of moral consideration.

¹⁹⁰ Strauss (1964: 74).

Socrates concludes from their initial agreement that rulers are likely to misunderstand their own interests. But unlike Polemarchus' definition of justice, which depends on an actor's ability to reliably distinguish between friends and enemies, Thrasymachus' legalistic conception understands right action as following whatever rules the leaders set (340a). Should a ruling body promulgate legislation that works more to its subjects' benefit than to its own, he would find the subjects remiss if they resisted the law in the name of the rulers' interests (339e).

Thrasymachus does not intend for his audience to draw this conclusion from his parsimonious theory. Scholars are divided over whether this is a product of Thrasymachus' inconsistency or if this conclusion is an unexpected consequence of his legalism.¹⁹¹ Plato's text lends support to the latter view. For example, when Cleitophon insinuates that Socrates has once again contorted the otherwise fine argument into one wrought with inconsistencies, Thrasymachus rejects his proposed amendment:

- C: But...he said that the advantage of the stronger is what the stronger believes to be his advantage. This is what the weaker must do, and this is what he maintained the just to be.
- S: If Thrasymachus want to put it that way now, let's accept it. Tell me, Thrasymachus, is this what you wanted to say the just is, namely, what the stronger believes to be to his advantage, whether it is in fact to his advantage or not? Is that what we are to say you mean?
- T: Not at all. Do you think I'd call someone who is in error stronger at the very moment he errs?
- S: I did think that was what you meant when you agreed that the rulers aren't infallible but are liable to error.
- T: That's because you are a false witness to arguments, Socrates. When someone makes an error in the treatment of patients, do you call him a doctor in regard to that very error? Or when someone makes an error in accounting, do you call him an accountant in regard to that very error in calculation? I think that we express ourselves in word that, taken literally, do say that a doctor is in error, or an

¹⁹¹ For a representative of those who attribute the conclusion to Thrasymachus' inconsistency, see Maguire (1971). For those who attribute it to his flawed legalism, see Hourani (1962); Kerferd (1964); Hadgopoulos (1973).

accountant, or a grammarian. But each of these, insofar as he is what we call him, never errs, so that according to the precise account (and you are a stickler for precise accounts), no craftsman ever errs. It's when his knowledge fails him that he makes an error, and in regard to that error he is no craftsman. No craftsman, expert, or ruler makes an error at the moment when he is ruling, even though everyone will say that a physician or a ruler makes errors. But the most precise answer is this. A ruler, insofar as he is a ruler, never makes errors and unerringly decrees what is best for himself, and this his subject must do. Thus, as I said from the first, it is just to do what is to the advantage of the stronger. (340b-e)

Two elements of Thrasymachus' reply are especially important for political judgment. First, by resisting Cleitophon's amendment, he suggests that political decision-making is not motivated by belief (*doxa*), but rather by knowledge (*epistēmē*). A ruling body's strength and legitimacy are contingent upon how clearly the regime defines and pursues its actual interests. Legitimate laws are therefore produced by knowledge of genuine interests, not on beliefs about which interests are genuine and which are not. In this respect, Thrasymachus' theory of rulership would appear to comport with the conventional interpretation of the philosopher-rulers' legitimacy; their superior knowledge of the good (interests) imbues them with the superior talents (strength) to govern the *kallipolis*.¹⁹² If Socrates rejects that view, it would seem to follow that he must find alternative grounds for legitimating the philosophers' rulership as well. If the *kallipolis* is populated by subjects who have been manipulated into supporting the philosophers simply because of how they have been taught to regard justice, there is no obvious need for them to hold elenctically justified conceptions of the virtues in order to confer legitimacy upon them. Much like Thrasymachus' tyrants, the *kallipolis*' citizens might agree that the philosophers ought to rule simply because philosophers told them that that is the natural order of things.

The second noteworthy element of Thrasymachus' reply is his reliance on the craft analogy to define genuine rulership. As we saw in the last chapter, and again in Socrates'

¹⁹² Reeve (2006: 13-5) offers a similar argument.

discussion with Polemarchus, the craft analogy is an attractive means of connecting legitimate governance to knowledge. But Polemarchus' refutation also exposes inadequacies in the *technē* model of virtue. Unlike virtues, crafts are normatively neutral. By maintaining the analogy here, Thrasymachus suggests that effective rulership is not synonymous with virtuous rulership. Insofar as rulers promulgate laws and codify the terms of justice, they stand apart from the constraints of both. Rather than constructing a polis that binds everyone to the rule of law, Thrasymachean rulers instead construct what Reeve describes as an "exploitation machine" in which subjects acquiesce to whatever the rulers' laws dictate. So understood, we see an important connection between his initial theory of justice (i.e. the rule of the stronger over the weaker) and his later insistence that justice is always for the good of another and never for oneself (343d). Justice is a fool's game, and any sensibly self-interested actor will disregard it as little more than "high-minded simplicity" intended for population control (348c). When Thrasymachus contends that acting unjustly demonstrates "good judgment" (*euboulían*), he means that doing so equates to acting like a true ruler (348d). As a sophist who aims to recruit wealthy pupils by promising them the keys to democratic power, he would think that knowledge of rulership, by which he means rhetorical persuasion, would free one from the bonds of common morality.

Thrasymachus' view that justice and law apply to subjects but not to rulers supports my earlier contention that he represents a tyrannical presence in the dialogue. In making this claim I do not wish to present him as a necessarily villainous character whose views are obviously reprehensible. Following T.D.J. Chappell (1993), I take his argument seriously not only because the rest of the *Republic* responds to it, but also because his views of justice and exceptionalism motivated Athenian decision-making during the Peloponnesian War. Especially given the

apparent similarities between his and Socrates' arguments in earlier dialogues, Plato must soundly refute him if we are to interpret the *Republic* as a work that resists tyranny by correcting extant Athenian political judgment.

Socrates seizes upon two problems with Thrasymachus' craft analogy. When the sophist reiterates his claim that rulership is a craft by which rulers always pass laws that work exclusively to their own advantage, Socrates asks him to define the objects of other crafts. Doctors, for instance, treat sick bodies; ships' captains rule sailors (341c). In each case, the craft improves an external body. Doctors and captains may derive happiness from their subjects' performance, but the craft itself does not supply that advantage directly to them. Next, the philosopher and the sophist agree that bodies and sailors are deficient, and that these deficiencies prompt the development of the physician's and the captain's crafts (341e). This suggests that crafts always aim at correcting a deficiency in their subjects. When Thrasymachus agrees, Socrates presses him on whether crafts are themselves wholly complete (342a-b). Not only does the sophist admit that each craft is dependent upon others to meet its aims, but he further concedes that each aims not at its own fulfillment but at the improvement of another. If governance is a craft, its ruling practitioners are no more self-sufficient than any of their subjects. To the extent that Thrasymachus considers rulership a craft, he must also accept, however reluctantly, that rulers direct their craft to the improvement of their subjects rather than to themselves (342e). His concession reveals the second kink in his initial position, namely that the ruler stands apart from norms and dependencies that structure normal political life. In short, even the tyrannical ruler needs the support of others.

Socrates' elenctic examination of Thrasymachus' original position reveals that governance entails the care of others rather than sustaining the rule of the powerful. We might

therefore conclude that political judgment is directed toward enhancing the welfare of a polis and its denizens. But Thrasymachus is not yet prepared to concede the final point that the art of politics is necessarily virtuous:

You think that shepherds and cowherds seek the good of their sheep and cattle, and fatten them and take care of them, looking to something other than their master's good and their own. Moreover, you believe that rulers in cities – true rulers, that is – think about their subjects differently than one does about sheep, and that night and day they think of something besides their own advantage. You are so far from understanding about justice and what's just, about injustice and what's unjust, that you don't realize that justice is really the good of another, the advantage of the stronger and the ruler, and harmful to the one who obeys and serves. Injustice is the opposite, it rules the truly simple and just, and those it rules do what is to the advantage of the other and stronger, and they make the one they serve happy, but themselves not at all. You must look at it as follows, my most simple Socrates: A just man always gets less than an unjust one. (343b-d)

Rulership, like husbandry, can be effective without being virtuous, at least in the short term.

While the shepherd may care for his flock, he does so because he will fetch more for fattened sheep than scrawny ones at market. Likewise, an effective ruler will fatten his subjects with pleasant speeches because doing so will render them malleable, not because he cares for their souls. Thrasymachus undergirds his argument with a refutation of the theories offered by Cephalus and Polemarchus. The business partner who cheats his just associate is rewarded for his deceit; the tax dodger enjoys the city's public goods without contributing to them; the honest politician annoys his friends and falls prey to his enemies (343e). In each case, political judgments motivated by virtues are personally disadvantageous and therefore wrongheaded.

Thrasymachus does not consider how mistrust and deceit would undermine public and private life, nor does he recognize how such instability would hinder the unjust person's long-term welfare. Socrates leads him in to this point in two ways. He first demonstrates that crafts like governance, wage-earning, medicine, and horse-breeding are necessarily socializing activities. Because no one can satisfy all of their needs by practicing a single craft, everyone is

necessarily dependent upon others to do so for them (346c-d). Returning to his earlier point that crafts aim at improving deficiencies, Socrates concludes, “no craft or rule provides for its own advantage, but, as we’ve been saying for some time, it provides an order for its subject and aims at its advantage, that of the weaker, not the stronger” (346e). The art of ruling is at once the most sociable and unpleasant of such crafts, for doing so requires practitioners to concern themselves with the manifold problems of others.¹⁹³ “It is because of this,” he suggests, “that wages must be provided to a person if he’s to be willing to rule, whether in the form of money or honor or a penalty if he refuses” (347a). Like Glaucon we might wonder how a penalty could count as a “wage” (347b). Socrates replies:

Good people won’t be willing to rule for the sake of either money or honor. They don’t want to be paid wages openly for ruling and get called hired hands, nor to take them in secret from their rule and be called thieves. And they won’t rule for the sake of honor, because they aren’t ambitious honor-lovers...Now, the greatest punishment, if one isn’t willing to rule, is to be ruled by someone worse than oneself. And I think that it’s fear of this that makes decent people rule when they do. They approach ruling not as something good or something to be enjoyed, but as something necessary...In a city of good men, if it came into being, the citizens would fight in order *not to rule*, just as they do now in order to rule. There it would be quite clear that anyone who is really a true ruler doesn’t by nature seek his own advantage but that of his subjects. (347b-d)

The remark is not aimed at Thrasymachus alone, but also at the likes of Cephalus (the money-maker) and Polemarchus (the honor-seeker). It also anticipates Socrates’ much later discussion with Glaucon about why and how they must compel philosophers to rule (519b-521c). There, he judges the philosophers the best rulers because they alone will practice the true political craft, which is to say that they will legislate for the good of others. Here, however, it is especially important to note that for all of the advantages Thrasymachus attributes to injustice, only the just person is social.

¹⁹³ As such, the political craft strains against Plato’s theory of specialization.

Arguing from the premises that excellent craftsmanship requires specialization, and that specialization necessitates sociability, Socrates demonstrates that justice ensures sociability in ways that injustice precludes. As already noted, Thrasymachus associates injustice with good judgment because acting unjustly is “clever and good” (348d). Injustice as a virtue like wisdom because, according to Thrasymachus, injustice is a source of strength in a society of foolishly just people who lack the wherewithal to compete with one another (349b). However, injustice is only advantageous according to his schema because most people are just. If they were not, injustice would lose its advantageousness. Socrates highlights this point by asking Thrasymachus to compare the natures of just and unjust people. Just people are like good doctors, musicians, and others who are knowledgeable of some craft. Insofar as they are clever, good, and knowledgeable, they seek to emulate one another in an effort to attain harmony (350a). To the extent that they try to outdo others, they only target those who are not like themselves. Conversely, an unjust person is driven to outdo “both his like and his opposite”; that is, those who are equally unjust as well as those who are just (350c). Socrates equates justice to wisdom and injustice to ignorance, a move that is not altogether obvious but to which Thrasymachus reluctantly agrees. In so doing, he concedes that injustice and craftsmanship are mutually exclusive, thereby suggesting that injustice equates to demonstrating poor judgment.

If justice is wisdom, and injustice is its opposite, then practical reason would recommend the former. We see this most clearly when Socrates turns the conversation to more explicitly political territory. Taking all that has been said as given, he probes Thrasymachus’ initial position that injustice helps to secure political power. If what Thrasymachus says is true, then injustice should yield material rewards; if his argument is false, then we ought to pursue justice on practical grounds. Socrates therefore asks him if he would agree “that it is unjust for a city to

try to enslave other cities unjustly and to hold them in subjection when it has enslaved many of them,” to which Thrasymachus replies in the affirmative (351b). The question is pregnant with significance. If I am correct to describe Thrasymachus as the most Athens-like interlocutor so far featured in the dialogue, we can read him as an ideal representative of that city’s wartime decision-making. By interrogating the sophist, Socrates likewise interrogates fifth-century Athenian politics. As such, we should interpret their exchange as a pointed commentary on fourth century Athenian political judgment:

- S: Will the city that becomes stronger than another achieve this power without justice, or will it need the help of justice?
- T: If what you said a moment ago stands, and justice is cleverness or wisdom, it will need the help of justice, but if things are as I stated, it will need the help of injustice...
- S: Do you think that a city, an army, a band of robbers of thieves, or any other tribe with a common unjust purpose would be able to achieve it if they were unjust to each other?
- T: No, indeed.
- S: What if they weren’t unjust to one another? Would they achieve more?
- T: Certainly.
- S: Injustice, Thrasymachus, causes civil war, hatred, and fighting among themselves, while justice brings friendship and a sense of common purpose. Isn’t that so?
- T: Let it be so, in order not to disagree with you. (351c-d)

In having Thrasymachus admit that injustice breeds *stasis*, Plato invokes Thucydides’ descriptions of Athens during the plague, the Corcyrean civil war, and the visceral horror that would attend the dissolution of the Athenian empire. Though at this stage in the discussion justice has not yet arisen to the level of an intrinsic good, we should not ignore its instrumental value. As in the *Apology*, Socrates maintains that justice is politically useful insofar as it cultivates sociability, enhances citizen welfare, and aims at civic improvement.

The three theories of justice so far discussed cannot direct sound political judgment because none of them are sufficiently political. Cephalus rightly values experience, yet tailors his conception of justice to commercial exchanges and fails to include any internal characteristics of the virtue that would prevent its abuse. His son's theory serves normal politics no better. By conscribing justice first within the domain of warfare and second to the domain of commerce, his theory of benefiting friends and harming enemies leaves much to be desired with respect to practice. Recall the problem of *stasis* discussed in chapter 1. When neighbors cannot know who among them are friends and who enemies, they would be fools to reward those who wish them harm while condemning those who are in fact friendly. Assuming one does not simply consider everyone a friend – a position Polemarchus initially resists – his theory of justice can prove as politically destructive as beneficial. Finally, Thrasymachus' tyrannical theory of justice militates against sociability of all kinds. The apparently powerful tyrant is the most isolated member of his community and so seeks to consolidate his rule by abolishing politics altogether. As we shall see in the next section, Socrates' theory of justice as psycho-social harmony conceives of justice as a distinctly political virtue. By emphasizing harmony over unity and plurality over monism, his theory of justice recognizes the human need for mutual dependence upon others while aiming as much as possible at collective welfare. In short, it is not only philosophically consistent but also, perhaps more importantly, eminently political.

3.2 Alternative Justice, Alternative Judgment

Though each theory examined in Book 1 formulates justice differently, none properly orients practical political judgments toward the good of an entire community. By privileging one group (i.e. one's allies, the strong, the wealthy, etc.) over others (i.e. one's enemies, the weak, the many, etc.) each theory threatens to justify factionalism rather than motivate virtuous,

sociable action. Moreover, because none of Socrates' interlocutors can account for the first principles upon which they built their theories, none withstand the philosopher's elenctic examination. In short, each theory of justice examined in Book 1 is as rationally inconsistent as it is practically problematic.

Socrates' alternative theory of justice prescribes a different practice of judgment, one in which he proposes that philosophers are best positioned to rule. Socrates presents justice as harmony between discrete parts of an otherwise unified whole. Justice benefits the practice of political judgment by modeling how an actor ought to balance conflicting claims of different groups in order to maximize the greater good of all.¹⁹⁴ Insofar as political judgments aim to sustain communities by marshalling the virtues of each part without allowing any single component to overwhelm the whole, we see that in Socrates' view judgment is best when guided by this particular account of justice.¹⁹⁵

I will address two major controversies as I develop that claim in this section. First, Socrates' definition of justice as "doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (433a) is not obviously more sociable than any of the theories examined in Book 1. Indeed, his definition of justice appears to recommend an intensely private, even selfish life of political quietism. If this account is correct, then the Straussian interpretation of the dialogue as

¹⁹⁴ The root of justice (*dikaiosynē*), *dikē*, connotes fair judgment. As Vlastos explains, however, *dikaiosynē* "could carry a sense broad enough to cover all virtuous conduct toward others, though for the most part it was used in a more specific sense to mean refraining from *pleonexia*, i.e., from gaining some advantage for oneself by grabbing what belongs to another...or by denying him what is (morally or legally) due him. What holds these two senses together is that *dikaiosynē* is the preeminently *social* virtue: it stands for right dealings between persons" (1969: 507). Aristotle captures its manifold quality in his *Nicomachean Ethics* when he describes justice as the practice of complete virtue: "Justice is complete virtue to the highest degree because it is the complete exercise of complete virtue. And it is the complete exercise because the person who has justice is able to exercise virtue in relation to another, not only in what concerns himself" (1129b31-32).

¹⁹⁵ He underscores the point in the *Apology* when describing the excellence (*arête*) of the judge as correctly distinguishing between true and false claims of justice (18a).

advocating the practical impossibility of the *kallipolis* project is surely correct.¹⁹⁶ I challenge that view by depicting the “synoptic” craft of philosophical rulership as a practical example of how just actors might make socially responsible decisions about the welfare of their community.¹⁹⁷ Justice is an eminently political virtue. Unlike wisdom, courage, or moderation, justice does not accord to any specific *part* of the tripartite soul, but is rather a virtue of the *whole*. Insofar as philosophy expands its practitioner’s vision of virtue and embraces the whole of its subject as a cohesive body of knowledge, I argue that it is eminently political as well.

My defense of the political applicability of Socratic justice elicits a second controversy, namely, the proposition of philosophical rule. “Until philosophers rule as kings in cities or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is until political power and philosophy entirely coincide,” Socrates says to Glaucon, “cities will have no rest from evils...nor, I think, will the human race” (473d).¹⁹⁸ Socrates’ proposal presents three problems for Plato’s interpreters. First, as Aristotle was the first to observe in the *Politics*, it is not obvious that the majority of people in the city, especially the warriors, will acquiesce to the same select group ruling the city in perpetuity (1264b7-15). Second, as Aristotle also objects, the

¹⁹⁶ See, e.g., Strauss (1964: 127); Bloom (1991: 410).

¹⁹⁷ My argument thus addresses Sheldon Wolin’s (1960) concern that philosophical rulership is only possible, on Plato’s account, at the expense of discord, disagreement, and dissent – that is, the very stuff of politics. Rather than dispelling discord, I argue that philosophical rulership models the ways in which it is managed in the ideal city.

¹⁹⁸ Socrates’ suggestion that philosophers are naturally better suited for rulership than non-philosophers can admit of a certain elitism in the *Republic*, or, as Ober understands the passage, at least that the *kallipolis* militates against democracy. See Ober (1998). Though the dialogue goes on to develop a sophisticated account of philosophical training – suggesting that this is, indeed, what Socrates has in mind – I believe that such interpretations unfairly discount the second suggestion that rulers can learn to philosophize. To the extent that rulers in any polity can be taught to philosophize, we can see that even democracies can become just given a wide dissemination of philosophical training. The thrust of the passage is often overlooked: “Until philosophers rule as kings in cities or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, *until political power and philosophy entire coincide*, while the many nature who at present pursue either one exclusively are forcibly prevented from doing so, cities will have no rest from evils...nor, I think, will the human race” (473c-d). The emphasized clause alerts us to Socrates’ main point that philosophy and political power must be harmonized in order for justice to prevail.

proposal not only implies that a single conception of happiness will suffice for the entire community, but that justice is so demanding that not even the philosophers will be happy pursuing it (*Politics* 1261a14-22, 1264b16-23). Third, insofar as the practice of rulership apparently necessitates “meddling” in the affairs of others, many commentators debate the extent to which Socrates is therefore commanding the reluctant philosopher-rulers to sacrifice their own contemplative happiness by violating the principle of specialization and, by extension, justice.¹⁹⁹ I argue that Socrates addresses these problems through a combination of philosophical training in dialectics and a regimen of military and political experience. Though often figured as the embodiment of rationality alone, I argue that Socrates’ philosopher-rulers achieve psychic harmony by demonstrating the manifold virtues of the through contemplation of the forms and its application to worldly conflict.²⁰⁰ As I demonstrate below, philosophical rulership amounts to a

¹⁹⁹ For arguments affirming this position see, e.g., Strauss (1964: 109-110); Bloom (1991: 378-379, 407-409); Aronson (1972); White (1979: 195-6); Annas (1981: 260-71). Irwin (1979: 236-243) counters that the philosophers do not actually sacrifice their interests to rule by relying on an interpretation of the *Symposium*. Reeve (2006: 202-3) challenges the “unhappy philosopher” reading by noting that the shift rotation among philosopher-rulers supplies sufficient political stability to allow others to contemplate the forms for as long as possible. Still others attack the core assumption that the contemplative life is most choice-worthy. Charles Kahn, for example, argues that philosophers are not motivated by a general curiosity but rather by their “desire for the good,” which is to say *justice*: “Hence the goal of rational desire, of reason as such, is neither the good of the individual alone (as it is sometimes said to be, on egoistic readings of Plato) nor the good of the community alone, but the good in every case, the good in general or the Good as such” (1987: 84). Timothy Mahoney (1992) concurs, observing that while no philosopher would regard ruling as an enjoyable activity taken up for its own sake, it is nevertheless “splendid” because it is necessitated by justice. Though I am sympathetic to this interpretation, Mahoney’s further claim that, by taking up ruling, the philosophers embrace a version of Glaucon’s third-order goods – those desirable only for their outcomes – as *superior* to Glaucon’s intrinsic goods strained. I suggest instead that the act of governing supports and participates in Glaucon’s second-order goods – those desirable both for themselves and their outcomes. Finally, Joseph Beatty (1976) offers the novel interpretation of philosophical rulership as more akin to education than warfare and are therefore happy to rule because doing so enables them to impart wisdom to others while discovering others like themselves.

²⁰⁰ On critics who associate philosophical rule exclusively with rationality, see especially Bloom, (1991: 391); Steinberger (1989; 1993: 91-93). Steinberger’s views are given special scrutiny in an exchange essay between himself and Christopher Duncan (1990). Duncan assents to Steinberger’s premise that there is a fundamental distinction between “ruling as philosophy” and ruling as *technē* (which is something more like crafting laws), agreeing further that the addition of the philosopher-kings to the *kallipolis* adds “little to the integrity of the model” of political life (Steinberger 1989: 1216). He insists, however, that the “role of the philosopher-king...is to *destroy* the *kallipolis* by getting the people to ‘despise the current honors’ and by killing off all those over the age of ten who desire...the self-contradiction of a community that is both luxurious and just” (1990: 1319). Steinberger is therefore correct to reject Duncan’s claims against his own. I think both are wrong. As Steinberger notes, Duncan’s critique

two-way street between dialectics (rationality/contemplation) on one hand and governing/warfare (experience) on the other. It is not sufficient merely to contemplate justice; it must be practiced. Political judgment, which is here understood as the act of addressing the model of justice as psychic harmony to material conflict, is the essential practice of justice. Before examining that practice in detail, however, we should first see how and why Socrates develops justice as he does.

Book 2 opens with a challenge. Unsatisfied that Socrates has actually proven the choice-worthiness of justice, Glaucon demands a fuller account that praises the virtue for its own sake. Irrespective of the potentially practical benefits of justice, Glaucon wants to know how he and his companions can appreciate justice as something akin to pure joy (*eudaimonia*). Glaucon and his companions are not skeptics; they harbor an intuitive sense that this must be the proper way in which to regard the virtue, but they cannot defend that view against the likes of a sophist like Thrasymachus.²⁰¹ While their intuitions incline them toward justice, they have not yet heard a rational argument to support that inclination. Though most people (*hoi polloi*) regard justice in strictly consequentialist terms, Socrates maintains that the virtue is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable (358a). Glaucon requests a defense of justice stripped of its beneficial consequences: “I want to know what justice and injustice are and what power each itself has

rests on an erroneous view of the “apolitical city” which he extends from the first “city of pigs” into the *kallipolis*. But Steinberger’s own distinction between philosophical and practical rule is too rigid. As I explain below, the training afforded the philosopher-rulers is explicitly designed to bridge that gap by enabling them to apply philosophical insights gleaned from their “synoptic view” to the discord which inevitably arises within the city.

²⁰¹ We might ask who they have to convince. They want to rationally assent to this view based on something more than belief. If the majority have the wrong beliefs about justice, they will have to convince them otherwise on firmer ground than slickly worded arguments which attest to little more than a countervailing but no more epistemically rigorous set of beliefs. Why shouldn’t they be corrupted by Thrasymachus and his ilk if there are no better reasons for agreeing with Socrates, and if Thrasymachus’ intuitions are profitable besides?

when it's by itself in the soul (*psyche*)" (358b).²⁰² Socrates will attempt but fail to meet that request throughout the remainder of the dialogue. As the conversation proceeds into the evening Socrates repeatedly reminds his companions that happiness and justice are not strictly synonymous and that only the proper view of human flourishing will harmonize with virtue (420b-c, 421b).²⁰³ Glaucon's later insistence that Socrates demonstrate the practicability of his otherwise ideal theory moves the philosopher's focus away from pure theory and toward the practical work of politics. While this movement is advantageous for a discussion of how judgment connects theory to practice, it may leave Glaucon a bit disappointed by morning.

Each theory of justice discussed in Book 1 fails to theorize justice in sufficiently political terms. All of the discussants, including Socrates, attempted to isolate the qualities of justice by asking how a just person would interact with those in his community. Plato takes a different approach in the *Republic*. An individual life is a relatively small subject of which virtue is an even smaller part. Socrates therefore proposes that we look to how justice will appear when expanded to the larger scale of the city in order to see it more clearly (368d). Insofar as justice is the same for people and polities alike, there should be analogous features between them. Likewise, what counts as good political judgment should also have some bearing on good personal judgment and, vice versa, practicing good political judgment should improve the individual's capacity for private decision-making. In other words, virtuous individuals can improve the quality of politics while virtuous politics can improve the quality of an individual life. The isomorphism between city and state is therefore an essential step not only for

²⁰² Unlike Socrates' earlier interlocutors, Glaucon understands justice as a virtue of the soul rather than a quality of actions or consequences. See Reeve (2006: 25).

²⁰³ Some theories of happiness are indeed contrary to justice altogether. Take, for instance, the consumer's hedonic equation between happiness and pleasure, which

underscoring the political quality of Socratic justice but also for legitimating the philosophers' claim to govern later in the dialogue. Furthermore, assenting to the city-state analogy justifies the demand that philosophers experience earthly political life before they can claim themselves among the Isles of the Blessed.

Plato's commentators have variously praised and attacked the city-soul analogy. Socrates appears to question the analogy's applicability almost as soon as he introduces it, saying that he and his companions would "consider it a godsend" if there was indeed a common set of principles underlying personal and political virtue (368d).²⁰⁴ Bernard Williams (1997) complains that Plato remains ambiguous as to whether we are to identify the city's "soul" with its leaders or with the majority of its citizens.²⁰⁵ On one hand, locating the city's soul in the reasonable but limited cadre of the ruling class – as the tripartite conception of the soul, with rationality (*logos*) as commanding part, appears to recommend – amounts to dismissing the majority and declaring the city a tyranny; on the other hand, locating the city's soul in the broad but appetitive majority diminishes effective rulership. In Williams' view, Plato fails to resolve this confusion at the heart of the drama. G.R.F. Ferrari (2005) rejects this interpretation, arguing instead that Socrates conceives of *justice* as a unitary virtue that remains constant between individuals and cities. According to his reading, when we praise individuals and cities as *just*, we identify and describe the same qualities. I am inclined to agree with this interpretation. In addition to defending the essential unity of the virtues and providing a measure of definitional clarity, the analogy between city and soul also reinforces the essentially political nature of individual life first posited in Book

²⁰⁴ Socrates twice speculates that treating the city and the soul as one will make his difficult task easier (368e, 369a).

²⁰⁵ Cf. Roochnik (2003: 15-17).

1. Just as all crafts depend on others for excellence, so too do all individuals rely on others for life and happiness.

By insisting on the isomorphism between individual souls and cities, Socrates suggests that judgments about justice in individual cases will hold for political case as well. This equation between civic and individual decision-making lays the groundwork for his controversial claim that justice can only thrive in political communities when philosophers rule as kings or when rulers learn to philosophize. That is, the city-soul analogy highlights Plato's practical concerns with the application of philosophical contemplation by way of political practice, i.e. judgment.²⁰⁶ It also intimates the features of virtuous political leadership developed later in the dialogue. Again, we see that the individual who aims at the right goods in her or his own life will likely translate that practical wisdom into ethical political practice. It is likewise easier – perhaps too easy, if the Myth of Er is any indication (619d) – for an individual to live virtuously if brought up in a virtuous environment free of the conflict that would compel them to assess the foundations upon which they build their lives.²⁰⁷

Socrates and Glaucon discuss three hypothetical cities, each of which corresponds to one of Glaucon's goods as well as to a component of the individual soul. Beginning from premises that should recall Protagoras' monologue, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus agree that cities arise from the common problem that no one is self-sufficient and that we require many things in order to survive (369c). The first city is fairly basic, composed of five or six people, and

²⁰⁶ For a similar argument, see Wallach (2001: 217-234).

²⁰⁷ As I show in the next section, some "[training] in suffering" is necessary for the practice of good decision-making because it compels otherwise just people to critically reflect upon the best course of action in the face of opposition. Training in philosophy absent this experience is as insufficient a propaedeutic for practically wise decision-making.

designed to maximize individual talents to meet collective needs. The city is small but “healthy,” populated with farmers and craftsmen who share their goods and services while eking out modest lives for themselves (372a-c). Because all members share their goods in common and pursue the same goals, there is no cause for discord and so little reason to discuss justice.²⁰⁸ Glaucon objects to this humble arrangement, disparaging it as a “city for swine” (372d). He demands that Socrates propose something more conventional (*nomōzitai*) and allow his citizens to avoid hardship with proper couches, dining tables, and delicacies (372d). This second city quickly becomes feverish with luxury. As the first city grows it becomes more diverse, resplendent with opulent adornments and succulent meals. Where the citizens of the first city shared their goods communally, the money-lovers of the second city establish markets and trade (371b). The growing city encroaches upon its neighbors, whose denizens have also “surrendered themselves to the endless acquisition of money and have overstepped the limit (*huberbantes*) of their necessities” (373d). Satisfying the city’s pleonectic desires and defending its wealth from envious counterparts requires professional warriors (374b). So described, it bears more than a passing resemblance to their own Athens.

²⁰⁸ Indeed, while there is much talk of moderation in Socrates’ description of the first and second cities, *justice* is not once mentioned. The striking omission suggests that justice only emerges when there is threat of immoderation; that is, justice regulates relations among the different parts of the city/soul as each pursues its own conception of the good. Where there is no conflict among the virtues, however, there is no need of justice nor, it would seem, of politics. The prospect of injustice is only raised in Book 3 when Socrates and Glaucon discuss the proper attributes of a guardian-judge: “As for the judge, he *does* rule other souls with his own soul. And it isn’t possible for a soul to be nurtured among vicious souls from childhood, to associate with them, to indulge in every kind of injustice, and come through it able to judge other people’s injustice from its own case, as it can diseases of the body. Rather, if it’s to be fine and good, and a sound judge of just things, it must itself remain pure and have no experience of bad character while it’s young. That’s the reason, indeed, that decent people appear simple and easily deceived by unjust ones when they are young. It’s because they have no models in themselves of the evil experiences of the vicious to guide their judgments” (409a). This passage offers two important insights into the connection between justice and judgment. First, political judgments are generated by comparing a case of disharmony with the model of harmony taken from the just individual’s soul. In order to judge effectively, then, one must possess a well-ordered soul. Second, we see that justice and judgments are only relevant in the face of potential injustice and viciousness.

Purging the second city of its decadence consumes the better parts of Books 2 through 5. Its money-lovers are ruled by appetite (*to epithumētikon*) and protected by guardians who, though tempered by moderation (*sophrosynē*), are principally motivated by honor and aspiration (*to thumoeides*). We learn surprisingly little about the producers and money-lovers beyond the fact that some produce goods (370d) while others provide services (371d).²⁰⁹ Plato instead directs our attention to the training of the guardian class who will maintain the city's constitution. Socrates suggests that children undergo affective conditioning through music and poetry. Along with Glaucon and Adeimantus, he purges all stories that falsely represent the “most important things” (*talla ta magista*) and references to discord among the gods (377c-378c). Tales that would impart a fear of death are similarly censored (386b), along with excessive laughter (387d), and restrictions on sexual desire (390c).²¹⁰ Echoing Pericles' edict against public mourning during his funeral oration, Socrates and his companions even agree to “delete the lamentations of famous men, leaving them to women (and not even to good women either) and to cowardly men, so that those we say we are training to guard our city will disdain to act like that” (388a). Musical censorship extends to the prohibition of multi-stringed instruments and “soft modes suitable for drinking-parties,” instead favoring the Dorian and Phrygian modes that invoke courage and discipline (399a-d). At the conclusion of their efforts to purify the luxurious city, Glaucon quips that they have gone to such extremes “because we're being moderate” (399e).

²⁰⁹ For one of the few studies of the marketplace, see Weinstein (2009).

²¹⁰ The final restriction on erotic desire is often considered the most important for the internal stability of the city. See, e.g., Nussbaum (1986: 164); cf. Newell (2000: 1-8). By denying these first guardians any capacity for *erōs*, Socrates suggests that they rule in accordance with obedience to the city's laws. Indeed, obedience emerges as the first guardians' primary civic virtue. This sets them apart from the philosopher-rulers, who are deeply motivated by an erotic love, first of knowledge, then of justice in the city.

Glaucon's remark seems strange given the extremes to which Socrates has gone to strip the city of the hallmarks of diversity, *eros*, and tragedy so familiar to extant Athenian life. Especially given their later position that moderation by external force, even of enemies, is inconsistent with genuine virtue (471a), we might worry that Socrates and Glaucon are in danger of violating rules they themselves set for their first guardians.²¹¹ Robyn Weiss helpfully reminds us that *kallipolis* "is not Plato's or Socrates' ideal city but is intended to be Glaucon's" (2012: 8). While the complete guardians of the second city possess right belief, they are not the philosopher-rulers who will oversee the fully formed city ruled by philosophy. Because these guardians do not themselves have access to the forms of high-minded courage, generosity, and justice – a concept which has not yet been re-introduced in the narrative – they must be inculcated as matters of true belief. As Reeve puts it, "primary education gives a person true beliefs about the visible manifestations of the virtues and vices...and hence cognitive access to their figures; for access to figures is required for reliably true belief about the visible world" (2006: 183). I would add that, in addition to giving the guardians access to the principles of justice, their primary education is also intended to inculcate them with the virtues of moderation from the beginning of their lives without requiring them to experience the tragic suffering attendant to *pleonexia* beforehand. This pedagogic exception is conspicuously absent from the training to philosophy developed later in the dialogue.

The second city needs guardians in order to sustain domestic harmony and temper expansionist desires. The guardians' claim to rule is based on the natural moderation which their education is intended to preserve, as well as upon their true beliefs about what constitutes communal welfare. Like pedigreed guard dogs, they are excellent judges of what will help and

²¹¹ See Frank, (2007: 452).

harm the polis, but they are not equipped to devise the standards for how to judge in the first place (375e). In short, the guardians described in Books 2 through 5 are trained to implement the laws they are given but not to devise any of their own. Still, as even Socrates' bad joke illustrates, Plato understands basic political practice in terms of practical judgments between what is good or bad for one's community. In order to improve upon this already elaborate model, he must introduce a superior class of judges – the philosopher-rulers.

The philosopher-rulers emerge in Book 5 as the first characters motivated by reason (*to logistikon*) and a love of knowledge. Socrates introduces this new class of guardians with some apprehension. While Glaucon and Adeimantus might be able to tolerate nude women exercising in public (452c-d, 457a-b) and agree that women and children should “belong in common to all the men” (457c-d), philosopher-rulership may still seem a bridge too far. Still, Socrates thinks that once the philosophers reveal their true natures even the masses will agree that they alone are equipped to rule the city “while the rest are naturally fitted to leave philosophy alone and follow their leader” (474b).²¹² Several talents recommend them for the post. They are “keen-sighted” guardians whose wisdom-loving souls provide a model of “what is most true” to which they can make constant reference (484c). They alone possess both sorts of qualities (i.e., intellectual acumen and moral courage) necessary for virtuous rulership (485a). Moreover, their love of wisdom purifies their souls, harmonizing their appetites with reason while making them naturally moderate and especially disdainful of money (485e).²¹³ Their disregard for “human life” is such

²¹² Aristotle's concern that the city's first guardians, henceforth relegated to an auxiliary class, will bristle at such an expectation is not unreasonable given empirical experience. But Socrates' optimism should only underscore the radical – one might say rabid – obedience with which these philosopher-dogs will execute the laws demanded of justice.

²¹³ This is not to suggest that commerce should be exorcised from the city: “It's appropriate for others to take seriously the things for which money and large expenditures are needed, but not for him” (485e).

that they are unmoved by fears of death while their long memories and cognitive capacity grants them superior decision-making skills.

With so many qualities to recommend them, we might wonder why more citizens do not come around to Socrates' way of thinking and compel philosophers to manage their cities.

Adeimantus points out that while no one would contradict what Socrates says, popular opinion nevertheless holds that philosophers are vicious cranks who are, at best, useless to the city (487b-d). Socrates agrees that philosophers are indeed useless to the city according to its own standards, but suggests that the citizens' skepticism is endemic of their deep discord. He illustrates the point with the so-called "ship of fools" simile, according to which the shipowner, who "is bigger and stronger than everyone else on board, but hard of hearing, a bit short-sighted, and his knowledge of seafaring equally deficient," struggles with the sailors who "are quarreling with one another about steering the ship, each of them thinking that he should be the captain, even though he's never learned the art of navigation, cannot point to anyone who taught it to him, or to a time when he learned it" to control this ship (488b-c). They praise anyone who is able to drug the ship-owner as a "captain" or "navigator" while dismissing everyone else as useless because

[they] don't understand that a true captain must pay attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft...And they don't believe there is any craft that would enable him to determine how he should steer the ship, whether the others want him to or not, or any possibility of mastering this alleged craft of practicing it at the same time as the craft of navigation. (488d-e)

Under such circumstances anyone who attended to the genuine matters of navigation would appear as a babblers or good-for-nothing. Because they lack within themselves a model against which to accurately judge the excellent captain, Socrates does not find it surprising that the majority (*dēmos*) rejects philosophical rule even though embracing it would maximize their

welfare. “I don’t think you need to examine the simile in detail to see that the ships resemble cities and their attitude to the true philosophers,” he says to Adeimantus, “but you already understand what I mean” (489a). Still, the majority’s failure to take advantage of the superior wisdom offered by philosophers is blameworthy. For it is not natural for the “captain to beg the sailors to be ruled by him,” but is natural for those who are sick to hammer down the doors of the doctors who can help them. The problem, of course, is that most people not only fail to recognize how sick they are but are also the most adamantly opposed to the treatment that might save their lives.²¹⁴

The majority reject philosophy less because they fail to recognize its benefits and more because they fail to recognize the very condition from which the philosophers might save them. Though false, their beliefs about virtue and happiness are so deeply engrained that any challenge strikes them as heresy. They are likewise inclined to praise anyone who confirms their worldview as eminently wise, particularly, as we saw in the last chapter, the sophists who defend their beliefs against philosophic critique (493a). The assembly’s vulnerability to confirmation bias threatens the quality of its democratic deliberation. When Socrates concludes that “the majority cannot be philosophic” (494a), he attributes their shortcoming more to this intolerance for genuine education than to anything innately lacking in their souls. They are intolerant, not stupid.²¹⁵ This observation is especially important for those who *are* naturally talented and

²¹⁴ My interpretation accords with Monoson’s reading. She argues that the parables of the ship and the cave “[link] the bad reputation of philosophy to something other than the poor-quality minds of the many. It links it to their inexperience and ignorance of justice. The parable casts the people, at least in part, as victims of circumstances, not just as hopelessly dumb” (2000: 124).

²¹⁵ For a similar interpretation but different conclusion, see Bloom, (1991: 392). Whereas Bloom insists that the majority’s hostility to philosophy dissuades philosophers from public deliberation, I argue that the majority’s potential for wiser action should induce the opposite; that is, it generates a duty among philosophers to educate their fellow citizens. The allegory of the cave explicates this point. Andrew (1983: 513).

inclined toward philosophy. If, after a lifetime of easy living and praise, a naturally talented person is informed by the truly wise that “there’s no understanding in him” and that “it can’t be acquired unless he works like a slave to attain it,” he is likely to resist the challenge (494d).²¹⁶ And even if such a student is receptive to the shocking news that he is not all that he has been told to believe he is, the majority are likely to haul him before the community to “prevent him from such persuasion” (494e).

Socrates further illustrates popular contempt of philosophy through a now familiar story about knowledge, resistance, and, I argue, judgment. He asks Glaucon to imagine human beings living in an underground “cave-like dwelling”:

They’ve been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets... Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it – statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you’d expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent. (514a-b)

This artificial environment is itself filled with artifice. The statuesque figures are artistic renderings of actual people and animals. The shadows are cast upon the wall by a flame, an artificial light Socrates contrasts with the much brighter sunlight at the opposite end of the dwelling. Its enslaved inhabitants are “like us,” mistaking the wavering figures cast before them for real people and animals who converse in distorted echoes. Next, Socrates asks Glaucon to consider the trauma of sudden release from such bondage:

When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before. What do you think he’d say if we told him that what he’d seen before was inconsequential, but that now – because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more – he sees more correctly? Or, to

²¹⁶ Socrates’ insistence that even the naturally talented will have to work hard in order to acquire genuine wisdom underscores my argument that knowledge and rulership are not necessarily the province of a gifted few but are rather earned by those who are humble and willing enough to seek them out.

put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown?...And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn't his eyes hurt, and wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being shown?...And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? (515c-e)

Emerging from the cave is painful. Insofar as it is an account of philosophical education, the story helps to explain why an ordinary person "like us" would reasonably resist the Socratic elenchus.²¹⁷ Unlike the natural philosophers, whose internal desires (*erōs*) for knowledge would drive them toward the sun, the randomly chosen prisoner must be compelled to emerge, compelled to open his eyes, compelled to gaze into the sun, and compelled to recognize the falsity of his own beliefs. Socrates does not dress the experience up as one of immediately ecstatic reverie or anything akin to the nirvanic bliss the true philosophers enjoy as they contemplate the forms on the Isle of the Blessed. Rather, he says three times that they must compel (*anagkazō*) the prisoner to appreciate the splendor that surrounds him.

The allegory of the cave is most obviously intended to contrast the difficulty of philosophical education with the milder, but ultimately deceptive, training acquired through sophistry. Unlike sophistry, which panders to popular prejudice, philosophical training amounts to a confrontation between false belief and truth. Everything about the philosopher changes as a result of this process: they reject previous pleasures (e.g. staring at a dimly-lit wall); they pity their imprisoned companions; they gain insights into the truth but lose the ability to traverse the

²¹⁷ This is how Socrates asks us to interpret the story (*logos*), with the visible realm "likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun." Relating the practice of philosophical education to the act of dragging a prisoner against his will to a harsh and alien place, Socrates asks Glaucon to see it this way: "In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it" (517b-c).

visible realm (518a). In short, their encounter with the noumenal realm subverts the standards against which they would previously have regarded life in the cave a perfectly choice-worthy existence.

This difference in judgment regarding the most important things exposes a tension between the philosopher and the cave-dwellers. If the philosopher gains the insights that make him a philosopher outside of the cave – that is, apart from society – and loses the desire to return to the cave – that is, to the city – to what extent can the philosopher and the cave-dwellers be regarded as members of the same community? This difference has led many, particularly Bloom and Strauss, to interpret the allegory as one intended to expose an unbridgeable gulf between philosophy and politics. Against these claims, I argue that the *Republic* not only equips us to narrow the apparent division between philosophy and politics, but further does so in an effort to make the otherwise ideal theory set forth in the dialogue more practical. In order to develop that argument, we must first get clearer on two elements of Socrates' philosophers, namely, their training and their motivations. Attending to these facets of the philosophers' lives will help to reconcile them with political society by amounting to an account of their judgment.

The philosophers' transferrable talents notwithstanding, there is little about their *natures* that lends itself to rulership. Unlike their "blind" counterparts, the guardians, the philosophers are best fit for rule because they alone possess the model of psychic harmony – that is, justice – within their own souls. Because the many "have no clear model" within themselves of what is true, they "cannot establish here on earth conventions about what is fine or just or good, when they need to be established, or guard and preserve them, once they have been established" (484d). But while such a balanced soul might model happiness or justice, it is not obviously practical. After all, natural philosophers are drawn to a specific love of changeless truth, a

learning of that which “does not wander around between coming to be and decaying” (485b). Insofar as everything in the temporal realm wanders “between coming to be and decaying” – which is to say, everything temporal *lives* – we might worry that anything practical might escape their otherwise keen sights. The philosopher is no doubt talented, “by nature good at remembering, quick to learn, high-minded, graceful, and a friend and relative of truth, justice, courage, and moderation” (487a), but also naïve and easily corrupted by wealth, powerful relatives, and especially the people (*hoi polloi*) themselves (491c-492a).²¹⁸ Very few survive their formative years with their natural talents intact, and these are driven in desperation to quiescence, “blameless and content” but hardly fulfilled (496e). In short, the very talents that suit them for philosophy also work against their appreciation for the earthly complexities of practical governance.

Most of those who demonstrate a natural aptitude for philosophy either abandon its study too soon or delay it until their later years when they resume it as a leisure activity. Socrates blames the neglect of philosophy on its usual method of instruction: rather than regarding philosophical practice as a mature activity, most people encounter it early in life and so regard it as a childish pastime. Popular disdain for philosophy seems more reasonable in light of this explanation, as most of those who pursue philosophy in their later years are either poor practitioners or outright charlatans.²¹⁹ Socrates therefore restructures philosophical pedagogy.

²¹⁸ The prospects of a democracy properly nurturing such a natural talent are especially dim according to Socrates: “for there isn’t now, hasn’t been in the past, nor ever will be in the future anyone with a character so unusual that he has been educated to virtue in spite of the contrary education he received from the mob... You should realize that if anyone is saved and becomes what he ought to be under our present constitutions, he has been saved – you might rightly say – by a divine dispensation” (492e).

²¹⁹ Callicles summarizes the view succinctly in the *Gorgias*: “When I see philosophy in a young boy, I approve of it; I think it’s appropriate, and consider such a person a liberal one, whereas I consider one who doesn’t engage in philosophy illiberal, one who’ll never count himself deserving of any admirable or noble thing. But when I see an older man still engaging in philosophy and not giving it up, I think such a man by this time needs a flogging. For, as I was just now saying, it’s typical that such a man, even if he’s naturally very well favored, becomes unmanly and

When would-be philosophers are young, they should “put their minds to youthful education” and “take care of their bodies at a time when they are growing into manhood” (498b). Physical training inculcates discipline and equips the student with “a helper for philosophy” in the form of a healthy body. “As they grow older,” he continues, “and their souls begin to reach maturity, they should increase their mental exercises” (498b). They should continue their philosophical pursuits into old age after they have “retired from politics and military service,” a qualification that clearly assumes that they would have pursued more conventionally public lives beforehand. Though admittedly few people will ever meet the pre-qualifications necessary for such lives, Socrates insists that finding them is not impossible, and that once their superior talents are revealed the majority (*hoi polloi*) will abandon their misgivings about philosophical rule (500d). But Glaucon maintains his reservations. Just as Socrates explains his alternative with growing enthusiasm, he anticipates even greater resistance from popular opinion. In order to disabuse the majority of these reservations, Glaucon challenges Socrates to give a more detailed account of how philosophical training improves one’s ability to govern. More specifically, he asks for a clearer explanation of their ultimate craft, the dialectic.

In order to meet Glaucon’s demand, Socrates declares that they must take up the subject of rulers in the *kallipolis* once more from the beginning. Like the auxiliary guardians, philosopher-rulers must demonstrate loyalty to their community in the face of pleasure and pain, fear, and adversity. Also as with their auxiliaries, the city should reward its philosopher-rulers with honors and praise them when they die. But these honors, so ancillary to motivating the auxiliaries, do not turn the proper philosopher to the task of rulership. For unlike their auxiliary

avoids the centers of his city and marketplaces – in which, according to the poet, men attain ‘preeminence’ – and, instead, lives the rest of his life in hiding, whispering in a corner with three or four boys, never uttering anything liberal, important, or apt” (358c-d).

counterparts, philosophers reluctantly govern from a position of knowledge rather than habituation (522a). In order to understand the distinction, we must turn to how philosophers acquire dialectical skill in the first place.

The Divided Line analogy in Book 6 demarcates the boundary between the realms of the intelligible (*to noēton*) and the perceptible. As we saw in the allegory of the cave, any effort to discover truth within the perceptible realm is bound to failure; the forms are only accessible in the noumenal realm (532b). In order to turn them toward the light, students receive propaedeutic training in mathematics as children, first in the form of games and later as more formal study in arithmetic and geometry (536d). Late adolescence is occupied with physical education too intense for intellectual training (537b) but is followed two years later with a ten-year curriculum in advanced mathematical and scientific study (537c). These “synoptic” studies aim to more than a technical mastery of mathematical principles; they further aim to inculcate philosophers with a “unifying vision” (*synopsisin*) that situates them relative to their community as well as to the form of the good.²²⁰ Those who excel in these studies and their other civic duties, including warfare, are tested and, if approved, pass into formal dialectical training. The training is difficult and dangerous, for “those who practice it are filled with lawlessness” (537e). The curriculum’s rewards are revelatory but potentially unsettling, rendering it suitable only for a distinct minority.

Socrates’ portrayal of dialectical training as a near panacea for the injustices pervading extant Greek civic life belies a number of challenges with the procedure itself. For instance, it remains unclear how or why dialectics rise above mathematics as the preferred method of contemplating the forms. By beginning in the visible realm of diagrams and moving into the

²²⁰ As Socrates puts it “The subjects they learned in no particular order as children they must now bring together to form a unified vision of their kinship both with one another and with the nature of that which is” (537c). In other words, the goal of mathematical training is not mastery of the subject per se, but rather to cultivate the philosopher’s capacity to locate him or herself in relation to the community as well as in relation to the truth.

realm of pure intellect, training in mathematics prepares the mind for an adequate grasp of the forms and inures it to the rigor with which their contemplation demands.²²¹ But there are at least two potential problems with this approach. Socrates explains them to Glaucon with respect to the Divided Line itself:

In one subsection, the soul, using as images the things that were imitated before, is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle (*arché anypótheton*) but to a conclusion. In the other subsection, however, it makes its way to a first principle that is *not* a hypothesis, proceeding from a hypothesis but without the images used in the previous subsection, using forms themselves and making its investigation through them....I think you know that students of geometry, calculation, and the like hypothesize the odd and the even, the various figures, the three kinds of angles, and other things akin to these in each of their investigations, as if they knew them. They make these their hypotheses and don't think it necessary to give any account of them, either to themselves or to others, as if they were clear to everyone. And going from these first principles through the remaining steps, they arrive in full agreement. (510b-c)

The propaedeutic training in mathematics has two potential shortcomings. First, geometers and the like develop axioms with the aid of diagrams, a method that supplements, or distracts from, a purely cognitive contemplation of the forms.²²² Why the use of diagrams is so objectionable remains unclear (the entire sketch of the *kallipolis* is, after all, an imagined but vividly rendered sketch of the soul), especially given Socrates' observation that when geometers "use visible figures" to make claims about their proofs "their thought isn't directed to them but to those other things that they are like" (510d-e). In other words, Socrates acknowledges that when Theodorus sketches a diagram to illustrate his point that the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, he is speaking of the *form* of a triangle and not of the one he has just drawn. But the second objection is more troubling, namely that mathematicians are unable to account for their

²²¹ See Kahn (1996: 295).

²²² Socrates' discussion of the mathematicians and their reliance on diagrams in the *Republic* stands in apparent contrast with his use of the square in the *Meno* to explicate the doctrine of anamnesis. See, e.g. Patterson (2007). On its empirical interpretation, see, e.g., Ross (1951: 18); cf. Gulley (1954: 194).

first principles. Rather than regarding their hypotheses as contingent propositions in need of defense – “stepping stones to take off from” (511b) – the geometer is likely to proceed *as if* their first principles were statements of truth. The dialectician, by contrast, not only contemplates the forms free from the aid of diagrams but also proceeds with the understanding that their hypotheses about the form of the good are subject to refutation, defense, and revision.²²³ In order to count as knowledge of the forms, a hypothesis must pass through a rigorous dialectical test akin to the Socratic elenchus that is only possible from the synoptic view adopted by philosophical reflection. While the mathematician engages in thought, only the philosopher/dialectician enjoys genuine understanding (533d).

Dialectical analysis yields the genuine understanding of first principles from which philosophers can render their judgments. The level of rigor and training necessary for mastery of the science is clearly difficult, but why does Socrates warn that it is also prone to lawlessness and danger? Why does it require courage as much as stamina and curiosity? We get a sense of this by looking briefly to the *Parmenides*. Here, a young Socrates investigates a series of hypotheses set forth by Zeno. While he begins to articulate a recognizable doctrine of the forms in his critique, Socrates is unable to offer a robust theory in the face of Parmenides’ questions.²²⁴ He admits that whenever he gives the forms serious thought he recoils in fear of absurdity, a reaction

²²³ Underscoring its importance, Plato has Glaucon summarize Socrates’ position as follows: “I understand, if not yet adequately...that you want to distinguish the intelligible part of that which is, the part studied by the so-called science, for which their hypotheses are first principles. And although those who study the objects of these sciences are forced to do so by means of thought rather than sense perception, still, because they do not go back to a genuine first principle, but proceed from hypotheses, you don’t think that they understand them, even though, given such a principle, they are intelligible” (511c-d).

²²⁴ Socrates is especially overwhelmed by the multiplicity of forms implied in his doctrine and exasperated by Parmenides’ suggestion that these “patterns” are virtually unknowable to the human mind because they do not belong to our world: “Then the beautiful itself, what it is, cannot be known by us, nor can the good, nor, indeed, can any of the things we take to be characters themselves” (134c). This is especially troubling when applied to the gods, who possess knowledge of the forms but not, by necessary extension, of their terrestrial manifestations because gods are by definition extra-terrestrial (134d).

Parmenides attributes to his lack of experience, as well as to the natural limitations of the human mind for entertaining such subjects (135d, 133b-c). Socrates portrays the person capable of such work in hues of a *Republic* philosopher:

Only a very gifted person can come to know that for each thing there is some kind, a being itself by itself; but only a prodigy more remarkable still will discover that and be able to teach someone else who has sifted all these difficulties thoroughly and critically for himself... Yet on the other hand, Socrates... if someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of the same sort, won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way he will destroy the power of dialectic (*dialegesthai*) entirely. (135b-c)

Proving the doctrine of the forms therefore depends upon a mastery of dialectic few are capable of attaining. For in order to do so, Parmenides explains that Socrates and his companions will need to do more than test a positive hypothesis; they “must also hypothesize, if that same thing is not” (136a). Every hypothesis implies a series of naught hypotheses which must also be set against each other and tested:

[Take] as an example this hypothesis that Zeno entertained: if many are, what must the consequences be both for the many themselves in relation to themselves and in relation to the one, and for the one in relation to itself and in relation to the many? And, in turn, on the hypothesis, if many are not, you must again examine what the consequences will be both for the one and for the many in relation to themselves and in relation to each other. And again, in turn, if you hypothesize, if likeness is or if it is not, you must examine what the consequences will be on each hypothesis, both for the things hypothesized themselves and for the others, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other. And the same method applies to unlike, to motion, to rest, to generation and destruction, and to being itself and not-being. And, in word, concerning whatever you might ever hypothesize as being or as not being or as having any other property, you must examine the consequences for the thing you hypothesize in relation to itself and in relation to each one of the other, whichever you select, and in relation to several of them and to all of them in the same way; and, in turn, you must examine the others, both in relation to themselves and in relation to whatever other thing you select on each occasion, whether what you hypothesize you hypothesize as being or as not being. (136a-c)

Parmenides initially refuses to offer a public demonstration for Socrates because he is too old and enfeebled to engage with philosophy.²²⁵ More than this, Socrates recognizes in the *Republic* that philosophy threatens its practitioner with radical contingencies regarding knowledge. Even when truth is uncovered it would appear from this that its status would remain in flux. Socrates attempts to guard against the challenge of nihilism. Like his resistance to the fluctuations of Protagorean epistemology examined in the last chapter, Socrates commits himself to the view that truth statements about the form of the good are not only possible, but that they are verified by dialectical testing. In other words, dialectics supply a method of judging statements about the good. As in the *Theaetetus*, we see that applying this method rigorously to a particular statement demands a comprehensive understanding, a “synoptic vision,” of how various elements are composed and interrelated. Though such practice is difficult, it is no further beyond theoretical possibility than the *kallipolis* itself.

The philosophers’ dialectical training inculcates the skills necessary for them to arrive at well-reasoned, irrefutable truth-statements about the form of the good. Socrates is explicit that such conclusions should reveal themselves to the philosophers over a slow and gradual application of dialectics to various theses (539b-d); the form of the good is not a subject to be put into the mind like sight into blind eyes.²²⁶ After this strenuous “participation in arguments,” by which time they are around 36 years old, the philosophers enjoy a vivid view of the form of the good. But the philosophers’ education is not yet complete. Instead, Socrates insists that they must

²²⁵ With this description of dialectic in mind, we see how important a healthy body becomes as a companion to philosophy!

²²⁶ As if to further distance himself from the eristic practice to which the dialectic was often compared, Socrates insists that those who engage in contradictions not do so frivolously: “An older person won’t want to take part in such madness. He’ll imitate someone who is willing to engage in discussion in order to look for the truth, rather than someone who plays at contradiction for sport” (539c). See Nehamas (1990).

make them go down (*katabibestéos*) into the cave again, and compel (*anankastéos*) them to take command (*arkein*) in matters of war and occupy the other offices suitable for young people, so that they won't be inferior to the others in experience (*empiria*). But in these, too, they must be tested (*basanistéos*) to see whether they'll remain steadfast when they're pulled this way and that or shift their ground. (539e)

Only after fifteen years of public service, during which they are tested in practical matters as well as in the sciences, will the philosophers finally have been turned toward the light of the good.²²⁷ Only then are they prepared to put that light into the city and its citizens, ruling and educating each in turn when not engaging in philosophy (540b). And only then, having ruled and thereby improved the city, will they retire to the Isles of the Blessed.

Socrates' governing requirement has raised controversy among Plato's interpreters. Many insist that compelling the philosophers to return to the cave violates the prior notion that justice is intrinsically desirable. Bloom, for example, insists that the philosopher's liberation from the cave leads not only to greater happiness, but also to "a great contempt for the cave, its shadows and its inhabitants" (1991: 407). Citing Glaucon's concern for the philosophers' happiness during their turn at ruling, he argues that compelling the philosophers to govern represents "injustice in the fullest sense of the word," that returning to the cave is "contrary to their good" insofar as it forces them to violate the principle of specialization that has so far characterized Socratic justice. Moreover, mastering the practical arts necessary for complete rulership distracts from their most essential training:

Only [theoretical] knowledge seems to have the character of an end in itself. But the philosopher has nothing to do with the city. The practical virtues can only be justified if they are understood to be the means to the theoretical virtues... This disproportion between the city and philosophy becomes ever more evident during the presentation of the philosophic education. Glaucon and Socrates agree that the studies must serve war and thought because these are two essential activities of kings who are philosophers. But in the course of the discussion the politically relevant content of the studies progressively

²²⁷ Underscoring the unpleasantness of rulership, the term *basanistion* connotes an especially torturous means of testing.

decreases, and finally they are forced to abandon the notion that philosophic studies have anything to do with action in the city. (1991: 408)

Bloom draws from this statement the startling, and influential, conclusion that because philosophical rule is not only unwise but also undesirable and unjust, the *Republic* is actually a treatise on the impossibility of a perfectly just politics.²²⁸ Others have rightly challenged this interpretation. Though I am reluctant to retread that well-worn ground here, my own study of political judgment and its relationship to philosophy reveals serious flaws Bloom's argument. Exposing those flaws is an important step in defending my claim that Plato is actually more attuned to the practical dimensions of rulership than is often credited.

Bloom assumes that philosophers will become so enamored with contemplating the good that they will only return to political life on pain of coercion. Unless Socrates and his companions compel (*anankastéos*) them to return to the cave, the philosophers would gladly immerse themselves in divine thoughts, considering themselves already among the Isles of the Blessed. In Bloom's view, compelling the philosophers to take up politics means dragging them from paradise and back to a stinking pit of vicious skeptics torn by conflict. From this view it is easy to see how naturally the philosophers would come to resent their situation – in Bloom's words a “shotgun wedding” – and the people they must rule over. Some have taken issue with the way in which Bloom assumes the philosophers will be *compelled* to return, insisting that they

²²⁸ As he puts it, “This was not just any city, but one constructed to meet all the demands of justice. Its impossibility demonstrates the impossibility of the actualization of a just regime and hence moderates the moral indignation a man might experience at the sight of less-than-perfect regimes. The extreme spirit of reform or revolution loses its ground if its end is questionable. If the infinite longing for justice on earth is merely a dream or a prayer, the shedding of blood in its name turns from idealism into criminality” (409). How and why Bloom makes the leap from ideal philosophy to bloody revolution is unclear; surely there is still some critical advantage to holding extant politics in the light of an ideal, if only to see more clearly how lived political experience falls short. Speaking specifically of Glaucon and his presumed ambition to rule, Bloom – like Annas and others – concludes that Socrates is advocating a political quietism as the only viable alternative to a life steeped in acts of injustice. I disagree. If it can instead be shown that philosophy can make politics virtuous, he can instead be shown to advocate a very specific kind of political activity.

will be persuaded to rule rather than manhandled into office.²²⁹ For the most part, however, this debate overlooks a crucial point in Plato's theory of political rule, namely that gaining experience is necessary for the philosophers' education. Why would a thinker so closely associated with a purely cognitive ideal of moral theory insist upon *experience* as the final stage of moral education?

By compelling them to enlist in the military as well as to assume political rulership, Socrates tests philosophers in a crucible of conflict and contradiction. His philosopher-rulers do not merely return to the cave but to the city, and it is here that they prove themselves genuine philosophers. Though much interesting debate surrounds the nature of their political leadership, we should not overlook their military service. What does military service teach them about justice or the good? If Frank (2007: 450) is correct in her estimation of the military training surveyed in Books 2-5, we might not think very much of it; for in her view, the means of inculcating martial virtues are insufficient and indeed contrary to the aims of philosophy. She takes particular issue with Michael Kochin's (1999) suggestion that exposure to combat encourages sociability through "a kind of contest of virtue among its soldiers to provide models for its education" (1999: 418). I share those reservations as far as they go, but Kochin's study stops at Book 5, well before the philosopher-rulers and their prescribed military service are mentioned. I am also sympathetic to Frank's general observation that martial training is a poor prolegomenon to philosophy, but it is worth noting that Socrates never suggests that it would be.

²²⁹ William Greene explains the philosopher's return as an act of self-denying duty: "The liberated prisoner may, he must, descend again, however reluctantly, to the Cave in compassion and self-denial" (1958, 214). He defends Plato against charges of totalitarianism by emphasizing the philosophers' expertise and commitment to "the whole," while minimizing its practical qualities: "the *Republic* is not a handbook of politics for the totalitarian control of society, nor a blueprint for a viable state; it is rather a trumpet call to self-discipline (at best), or (at the worst) to conduct, for 'the good of the whole', guided by men of wisdom with no axe to grind" (ibid.). Cf. Cornford (1945: 65); Grube, (1974: 172 fn. 3); Wolin (1960: 51-55).

Rather, when he takes up the training of the philosophers he approaches it as fresh ground.²³⁰

The training Socrates recommends to the philosophers is unlike anything that has come before in the dialogue, apparently adding weight to Bloom's charge that philosophers would make for such hopeless warriors that any suggestion to the contrary must surely be in jest.

We are thus left with two questions. First, what could the philosophers gain by leading the military; second, what about their philosophical training equips them for such service? Approaching these questions requires us to recall how Plato's characters describe warfare to this point in the text, as well as to pay special attention to its evaluative function within the philosophers' training regimen. Polemarchus introduces war as the most urgent venue for justice (332e), only to have Socrates complicate the craft of warfare as one that could both aid or undermine an army (334a).²³¹ Warfare reappears when Socrates introduces the luxurious city. The wealthy city will have to defend itself against the pleonectic envy of neighboring polities (373e). Indeed, warfare is so important for the city's welfare that discussion of cobblers, farmers, and the rest of the city's denizens falls away so that Socrates and Glaucon can turn their full attention toward it.²³² Warrior-guardians are physically fit and courageous (375a), spirited but moderate (375b), and sensitive to the differences between friends and enemies (375c). They are honest and abstemious (382a), self-sufficient and thoroughly unerotic (387e, 388e, 390c, 402a).

²³⁰ This observation lends weight to Frank's challenge to the "evolutionary" view of guardian education: the philosophers' education fundamentally departs from that received by their auxiliaries; it does not build upon it.

²³¹ When Polemarchus later agrees to fight as Socrates' "partner in battle" (336a), he at once gestures toward aspirational values like loyalty and camaraderie (*philia*) while appearing to miss the irony.

²³² Though Frank does not mention it, the displacement of all other crafts for the sake of adequately attending to warfare lends weight to her instructive analysis.

They even shun desert (404d). They are, as Steinberger (1989: 1207) observes, the very antitheses of Achilles. They are also the city's judges.

The warrior-guardians' judgeship presents a similar paradox to the one we later encounter with the philosopher-rulers. Like their philosophical counterparts, they are reared in isolation from the city they protect and cloistered as much as possible from injustice in their youth. Yet they must also rule over the city and judge the souls who reside within it.²³³ Lacking "models (*paradigmata*) in themselves of the evil experiences of the vicious," Socrates worries that young warriors are too easily deceived (*euexapátētoi*) by the wicked (409a). "Therefore," he continues, "a good judge (*agathōn dikastein*) must not be a young person but an old one, who has learned late in life what wrongdoing (*adikīas*) is like and who has become aware of it not as something at home in his own soul, but as something alien and present in others, someone who, after a long time, has recognized that injustice is bad by nature, not from his own experience of it, but through knowledge (*epistēmē*)" (409b). In other words, the warrior-guardians must supplement their training with lived experience so that they can accurately judge between good and bad. Frank is right to point out that there is nothing philosophical about the clumsy heuristic (i.e., familiarity is good; unfamiliarity is bad) that these first guardians rely upon; but we would be mistaken to conclude that philosopher-rulers gain nothing from their experience in warfare.

Like the first guardians, the philosophers must supplement their education with practical experience in order to practice judgment well.²³⁴ That they gain experience through warfare

²³³ Glaucon assumes the city will need judges (*dikastēs*) just as naturally as it would need doctors, suggesting that even a well-defended luxurious city is not, like its healthy counterpart, free of injustice (408d). Socrates then equates rulership to judging: "As for the judge (*dikastēs*), he does rule (*archē*) other souls with his own soul" (409a).

²³⁴ Also like their counterparts, the philosophers will "be wary of coming to the craft of judging (*dikastikeis*)" (410a; cf. 521b) and must be tested in order to verify their excellence (412e; cf. 539e).

should not surprise us, as Socrates insists throughout his pedagogical discussion that a guardian “must be both a warrior (*polemikōs*) and a philosopher (*philosophōs*)” (525b). Indeed it would seem striking to the fourth-century Greek way of thinking if a political leader was not also a general (*strategos*).²³⁵ Others have overstated the importance of warfare to the training of Socrates’ guardians, and Frank is right to complain that there is little in the training of the city’s first guardians that would prepare them for political philosophy or independent judgment.²³⁶ But Frank’s analysis of political judgment in the *Republic* does not consider warfare in the career of a philosopher-ruler, and so does not connect Socrates’ theory of justice to the practice of managing conflict.²³⁷ Likewise, she does not connect the philosophers’ training in and exposure to conflict – in the form of their dialectical training – to the effective, practical management of war. If we are right, however, to read the dialogue as a partial reaction to the Peloponnesian War, attending to the philosophers’ training in war is as important for understanding the whole of how one comes to be a philosopher-ruler as it is to appreciating the *Republic*’s political salience.

I contend that the philosopher-rulers must engage in warfare and politics for three reasons. First, conflict in war and politics confronts them with opportunities to practice justice by way of practical judgment. The synoptic vision acquired from training in dialectic equips them not only to cultivate each of the virtues attendant to the tripartite conception of the soul, but also

²³⁵ The emergence of the *strategos* as a model of political leadership in Athens during the late fifth and fourth centuries was roughly commensurate with hoplite warfare, a pattern that would seem to confirm Frank’s intuitions that Plato is advocating a return to the battlefield traditions abandoned during the Peloponnesian War. See Snodgrass (1964: 204).

²³⁶ With scant textual evidence and on the basis of an elaborate theory of Plato’s numerology, Leon Craig (1994) considers warfare the central element in the philosophers’ training because it is their spiritedness that supplies the moral indignation necessary to defend justice. For a thorough critique of Craig and similar views, see Roochnik (1997).

²³⁷ Frank restricts her survey of the dubious educative benefits of conflict to the description of the auxiliaries’ pedagogy. While she offers an instructive critique of the tyrant’s equally poor but comparatively freer approach to political judgment, she does not attend to the war-making demands of philosophical rulership.

to recognize how best to balance each of these parts within their souls in order to maximize the virtue of the whole. Helping an actor to achieve such personal harmony would show the intrinsic worth of justice but, as Socrates initially explained to Glaucon in Book 2, would also carry instrumental benefits. The same talent for balancing between otherwise disparate demands within the soul could be equally applied to the material and political demands of the city. Where there is no conflict between these demands, as in Socrates' healthy "city of swine," there is no need for balance and hence no need for justice. Once their souls have been harmonized, then, the philosophers must be compelled to look beyond themselves for further instances of imbalance so that they can continue to practice justice by judging how best to reconcile the conflicting demands within their city. Because they alone are the only ones able to do so, by dint of their synoptic vision (485a-487a, 520b0c), any effort by others to engage in such practice would result in a fragile, unjust arrangement vulnerable to stasis.²³⁸

A second reason for compelling philosophers to rule, one more internal to the text, is that doing so demonstrates the superiority of Socrates' theory of justice over the alternatives outlined in Book 1, particularly those offered by Polemarchus and Thrasymachus. Recall that Socrates dismissed those theories because they could not be shown to render the kinds of decisions that maximized the happiness of an entire, complex political body. By withholding justice from perceived enemies in war, Polemarchus threatened not only to exacerbate conflict, but also to harm those true friends he would presumably like to help. Likewise, Thrasymachus' theory of justice as a virtue that benefitted one part of the city by exploiting the rest could not provide an account of genuine happiness. The philosophers' rationally moderate justice, by contrast,

²³⁸ This is perhaps the most commonly cited reason for compelling the philosophers to rule, well supported as it is by the text. See, e.g., Steinberger (1993: 104-5); Woodruff (2005).

privileges the welfare of the whole over any particular part. With his demand that they demonstrate their excellence (*arête*) in all spheres of life and in the face of all tests, Socrates suggests that happiness consistent with justice is more durable, and therefore more choiceworthy, than Thrasymachus' tyrannical alternative. Moreover, by showing how radically dependent the philosopher-in-training remains upon the city as he or she cultivates that happiness, Socrates returns political rulership to a deeply social activity.

Finally, by emphasizing the philosophers' superior performance in war, Socrates extends the possibility of applying ethical theory to practical judgments about the conduct of war.²³⁹ As I argue in Chapter 1, the Athenians were all too prepared to eschew justice as a principal consideration during their engagements throughout the Peloponnesian War. There, I argue that Thucydides' Brasidas demonstrates superior practical judgment by attempting to weigh a theory of justice – one not unlike that advanced by Polemarchus – against the empirical demands generated by conflict. Imperfect in execution as well as in analysis, Brasidas' considerations for justice provided a normative end toward which he could focus his actions. How might Brasidas have benefited further from training in philosophy? Socrates gestures toward an answer by thrusting philosophy into the fray, rather than by marshalling it to advocate quiescent passivity. His philosophers are thus not merely steadfast, but active.

3.3 Platonic Political Judgment

Unlike their counterparts in the *Theaetetus*, the philosophers of the *Republic* directly participate in politics. They are well equipped to do so. Their dialectical training inculcates several qualities Plato found lacking in extant Athenian political life, the most important of which is a just disposition. The “synoptic vision” acquired through dialectics enables

²³⁹ Though Frank never fully develops this point, I take it as implicit throughout.

philosophers to countenance the welfare of the whole rather than privileging any single part. By privileging communal over partisan welfare, they are better able to inoculate the polis against the spasmodic violence of *stasis*. Importantly, however, they do not do so at the expense of discord.²⁴⁰ As a method of grappling with and reconciling opposing views, dialectics instead acclimates philosophers to conflict (hence the potential danger in pursuing their study). Further experiences in warfare and governance – both of which are venues of pronounced conflict – impart the attention to practical matters necessary for grounding them in the world. In short, the philosopher-ruler model demonstrates how, at least theoretically, philosophy and politics mutually support one another.

The previous section defended a more practical view of the philosopher-rulership model than many conventional interpretations of the dialogue permit. By showing how philosophy and politics are mutually supportive endeavors, my goal was not to suggest that ethical politics requires literal adoption of the philosophical rulership as precisely envisioned for Socrates' *kallipolis*. Pace John Wallach, I instead suggested that the model of ethical governance developed in books 5 and 6 serves both to theorize the intrinsic and instrumental value of justice (*dikaiosyne*) as well as to offer a standard against which extant fourth century regimes could be assessed. As Wallach puts it, "One could not analyze the ethics of justice without making judgments about the collective exercise of power. One could not judge the conduct of power without determining the meaning of justice" (2000: 229). Even if, like Aristotle, we accepted Socrates' proposal as an ideal, we would still find ourselves hard-pressed to enact it. No guardians of the kind he describes exist, nor could they without the social conditioning he details. Moreover, if we maintain our normative commitments to democratic principles, it

²⁴⁰ Cf. Wallach (2000: 254).

remains unclear how studying the *kallipolis* could help us improve upon collective governance. Its elitist paternalism cuts against the very principles of equality that underwrite the entire democratic enterprise. If a just regime is one that is overseen by a vanguard of specialists who craft legislation without regard for popular input, relying instead upon their knowledge of unchanging forms, democracies would appear to stand beyond hope of reform. We are again faced with a choice between Popper's view of Plato the tyrant and Bloom's vision of Socrates' political quietism.

I resist that dichotomy. Like Wallach, I interpret the Republic not as an indictment of democracy per se, but rather of fourth century Greek politics. While democratic legitimacy came to rest on epistemological claims about the collective wisdom of the *dēmos*, its origins lay in class warfare between the impoverished many and the wealthy few.²⁴¹ As Aristotle observes in the *Athenian Politeia*, the steady expansion of Athenian influence and democracy were products of the *dēmos* – first under the leadership Solon, who freed the Thetes and *hektēmoroi* from debts and granted them positions in the assembly and lawcourts; later of demagogues who variously deceived and manipulated the majority – wresting control of the city away from the aristocracy, often violently.²⁴² Echoing Thucydides, he laments the deterioration of democratic leadership after Pericles, describing the diminished stock of potential leaders as “men who chose to talk the biggest and pander the most to the tastes of the majority, with their eyes fixed only on the

²⁴¹ For Ober (2008), Athenian commercial and military success grew from institutional measures ensuring the protection of private property and individual rights as well as from the city's ability to effectively organize otherwise disparate expertise scattered among the citizenry. This instrumental defense of democracy pays less attention to its normative qualities. On class tensions and the rise of Athenian democracy, see De Ste. Croix (1981: ch. 3); Ober (1989: ch. 5).

²⁴² On the condition of class conflict against which the Solonian reforms were established, see *Athenian Politeia* 5.1-2. On the extension of political membership to the Thetes, see 7.5. On the Cleisthenic expansion of the Assembly's control over policymaking, see 21-22. For a summary of the pattern between conflict and reform, see 41.

interests of the moment” (28.12). With few wise men able to consistently council it, the amorphous assembly adopted erratic and often contradictory policies.²⁴³ Though marked by periods of relative prosperity and stability, the democracy in Syracuse suffered its own vacillations between popular rule and tyranny. Diodorus of Sicily reports one such episode in which a civil war erupted between followers of a “rash fellow” named Tyndarides and the rest of the assembly. “And since this sort of thing kept happening time and again,” he writes, “and there were men whose hearts were set on tyranny, the people were led to imitate the Athenians and to establish a law very similar to the one they had passed on ostracism” (11.86). They quickly abandoned the ostracism measure, however, because too many of the “best citizens” were exiled, leaving only the “basest” to foment factional strife (11.87). Lest we think these troubles of democracy alone, we should recall Thucydides’ mention of Spartan claims to legitimacy that were continually contested by the enslaved helot population. In each case, a pattern of rule by force of arms emerges against which Plato’s philosopher-ruler model stands in rational counterpoint. Wallach puts this point nicely: “Relative to what preceded it, Plato’s *Republic* was unique in the way it theorized justice, by dynamically linking *logos* and *ergon* and providing both an ethical critique of political power and a political conception of ethics.”

In Wallach’s view, the Platonic *politikē technē* rationalizes government by applying the practice of philosophical dialectic to political deliberation. Socrates intends his *logos* of justice to serve as an ethical model upon which conflict can be addressed, though never entirely

²⁴³ Contra Thucydides, Rhodes speculates that the policy *mélange* adopted by the assembly was more a product of its fluctuating composition rather than its fickleness: “The assembly was perfectly capable of taking one decision at one meeting, and then at its next meeting (or even at the same meeting) taking another decision which would hamper the carrying-out of the first – not because the mob was fickle...but simply because different proposals attracted the support of different collections of men within an unregulated body of voters” (2004: 208).

eliminated.²⁴⁴ I am sympathetic to much of this argument, particularly as it relates to the “failure of twentieth-century liberal political theory” to “deal with political conflict and tensions” (2001: 409). Certainly, insofar as the political craft describes an “exercise of power in a collective,” the inclusion of philosophy – with its emphasis on humility, reflection, and rational order – provides an antidote to the spasmodic violence so pervasive in extant Greek politics, without displacing the discord of democratic politics altogether (2001: 221).²⁴⁵ But by restricting the exercise of justice to leadership, and by further dividing the *polis* into “active” and “passive” parts with philosopher-rulers occupying the former and the *dēmos* to the latter (260), Wallach neglects to fully extend justice into democratic politics. Where he does, he seeks to cultivate a Platonic political disposition among citizens in order to “enlighten” their souls by equalizing educational opportunities and exposing students to conflicting ethical arguments.²⁴⁶ These are laudable, if admittedly vague, goals intended to enliven public debate and encourage critical reflection

²⁴⁴ That the appetitive part of the soul – the source of pleonexia and injustice – is husbanded by *logos* in the final description of the tripartite model reinforces my own argument that Socrates is not addressing injustice by merely eradicating desire but is instead tamed through reasonable discipline (589a-b).

²⁴⁵ I am less sanguine than Wallach on Plato’s continued reliance on the craft analogy in the *Republic*. Like Irwin (1979) and Reeve (2006), I read Book 1 as a refutation of the analogy. Wallach thinks that dialectic, unlike rhetoric, necessarily promotes a virtuous mode of political practice that is less susceptible to dualistic perversion: “Such an art ultimately aims at the good because of the links between Plato’s views about knowledge, nature, and the ethics of states and souls and his theory of justice” (272). Taking the aim of dialectics to be the production of laws, and insisting that dialectics are necessarily virtuous, Wallach appears to conflate production (*poiēsis*) and action (*praxis*) in much the way Aristotle attributes to Socrates. Aristotle distinguishes a product from the action that produced it, arguing that a product belongs to a craft (*technē*) and not an action (*praxis*), which belongs to a state (*hexis*) (*NE* 1140a2-4, 12-15). While one can act from a virtuous state, a product is not properly judged with respect to the motivations that animated the craftsman – hence Aristotle’s rejection of the virtue-craft analogy. As Irwin notes, Socrates and Aristotle might be working from different definitions of a craft, but if they are then we are not given sufficient explication from Plato (70). Regardless, Wallach does not address that important criticism. While the rest of the philosopher’s training instills a just disposition (*hexis*), we cannot attribute that virtuous disposition to dialectics alone, nor can we attribute the passing of just legislation to dialectics alone. As Socrates describes it, the philosopher-rulers will pass just legislation because they are already just, but not simply because they practice dialectics.

²⁴⁶ Wallach (2001: 429-30).

among the citizenry. I understand Plato to gesture toward something more concrete in his account of democratic judgment.

Athenian democracy rested on formal equality and freedom. Nearly every citizen, regardless of competence, could expect his lot to be drawn for a position in the magistracy, as well as to be judged by his peers – who were themselves chosen by lot – upon completion of his term.²⁴⁷ Offices allocated by lot ranged widely between maintaining oversight of public contracts (*poletae*) and debts to the upkeep of horses, prisons, roads, ships, and corn supplies. Leaving so much of the polis' maintenance to chance – indeed, deliberately rejecting the privilege of expertise in such matters – might seem to have exposed Athens to potentially wild variation in the quality of state services; yet this pattern also underscores the importance of those matters over which the city wanted greater control. All officers connected with military service were elected by popular vote in the assembly, as were the Archons, whose candidacy received close scrutiny (*probouleuma*) in the Council of Five-Hundred and in the lawcourts – the members of which were also chosen by lot – before they could be voted upon (*Ath. Pol.* 43.2-3, 44.4, 55). Unlike direct policy votes in the assembly, which were frequently attacked as products of bribery or manipulation, there are few records of electioneering, leading some to suggest that elections were of lesser political importance to fourth century Greeks than to their Roman contemporaries.²⁴⁸ It is more likely the case that military matters were of graver existential consequence to the city and more urgently demanded specialized skills.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Hansen (1991); Saxonhouse (2006: 24).

²⁴⁸ Taylor (2007: 330).

²⁴⁹ The only formal civil education afforded new citizens focused on military drills, and failing to demonstrate the necessary martial skills appears to be the only criterion, apart from age, upon which one could be disqualified from suffrage (*At. Pol.* 42.5).

Though Athenian democracy may not have been as direct as previous generations of historians thought, the regime nevertheless relied upon the average citizen's native talents much more than many neighboring poleis – let alone contemporary constitutional democracies – for conducting civil affairs.²⁵⁰ Much like contemporary democracies, however, the average citizen's exercise of political, as opposed to administrative, power amounted to the casting of votes. By 403 much of the legislative process was passed from the *ecclesia* to the *nomothetai*, which debated and crafted legislation that was then submitted to the *ecclesia* for an up or down vote.²⁵¹ Moreover, despite norms of equal and frank speech (*isēgoria*, *parrhēsia*), few Athenians directly addressed the assembly or lawcourt if they could avoid doing so.²⁵² This is not to suggest that Athenian democratic procedures were simply cover for a crypto-oligarchy, but it is to suggest that the means by which most citizens exercised political power was through *collective* judgments regarding options set before them.²⁵³ Contemporary concerns regarding the rationality of voting notwithstanding, casting a ballot was a revolutionary act in fourth century Greece.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Schwartzberg (2004: 311).

²⁵¹ This procedural innovation was motivated by dissatisfaction with volatility stemming from popular decrees (*psephismata*) previously rendered by the *ecclesia*, but proposed by powerful politicians, with the force of laws (*nomoi*). Decrees were so frequently made and countermanded in the fifth century that the restored democracy sought to insulate the lawmaking process. After the reforms, the *ecclesia* would vote on whether or not the proposed legislation was satisfactory, but would not itself author any laws. See Demosthenes (1935: 20.91, 24.20-3); Harrison (1955: 33); MacDowell (1975). The assembly also relied upon the Council of Five-Hundred for an agenda of the policies upon which it would vote *en masse* during meetings.

²⁵² *Parrhēsia*, unlike *isēgoria*, might more accurately be translated as “frank speech,” implying an importantly critical connotation of addressing someone in power. Even more than *isēgoria*, *parrhēsia* captured the principles of freedom and equality underpinning democratic legitimacy. See Monoson (2000: 52-3); Foucault (2001: 19); Saxonhouse (2006: 94-96); Markovits (2008: 66). As Raaflaub puts it, *parrhēsia* “describes the chief characteristic of the fully entitled citizen; free speech is almost synonymous with citizenship. To be deprived of this right makes the citizen slavelike...Only democracy, which guarantees this right in political life, can help the freeman achieve full self-realization” (2004: 223).

²⁵³ See Ober (1993).

²⁵⁴ On the rationality of voting, see Downs (1957); Hardin (1982); Blais and Young (1999); Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2014). Cf. Salkever (1980).

Suffrage empowered citizens by recognizing the legitimacy and importance of each person's judgment about the welfare of the community.

When citizens vote they formalize their political judgments in a way that connects their considered views (*logoi*) about the welfare of a community with the exercise (*erga*) of political power. Though Plato does not directly comment upon voting in the *Republic*, Socrates and his interlocutors do examine judgment in the terms I have just described. Toward the conclusion of the dialogue, with the main argument complete, Glaucon and Socrates return to the problem of poetry and imitation. They describe three levels of crafts. First, the god, who has knowledge of the forms, is the “real maker” of concepts that emerge in nature; second, the craftsman, who has right understanding of these concepts, manifests them in tangible world; third, the painter, imitates the craftsman, reproduces depictions of tangibles.²⁵⁵ Socrates then maps this tripartite division of crafts onto the use of products themselves. “For each thing,” he says, “there are these three crafts, one that uses it (*krēsomēne*), one that makes it (*poiēsuson*), and one that imitates it (*mīmesomēne*)” (601d). The excellence (*arēte*) of each craft lies, of course, in its use. Socrates therefore privileges the user's experience with a product as a higher order of knowledge about how closely it accords with excellence:

It's wholly necessary, therefore, that a user of each thing has most experience of it and that he tell a maker which of his products performs well or badly in actual use. A flute-player, for example, tells a flute-maker about the flutes that respond well in actual playing and prescribes what kind of flutes he is to make, while the maker follows his instructions... Therefore, a maker – through associating with and having to listen to the one who knows – has right opinion about whether something he makes is fine or bad, but the one who knows is the user. (601e-602a)

²⁵⁵ Poetry and painting, thrice removed from knowledge of the forms, could make things “appear, but...couldn't make the things themselves as they truly are” (596e). No one, Glaucon agrees, would describe an imitative poet as a true maker of beds or houses. Likewise, Socrates replies, should we reject the poets' professed understanding of justice and government, for their leader Homer was no general or statesman (600a).

In this largely neglected passage, Socrates arrives at the startling conclusions that while artisans may possess theoretical insights into the function and design of their crafts, judgments about their quality are made through experience. Once again, theory and practice are brought to bear in the service of knowledge. In contrast, the imitator is not only ignorant of crafts but also distorts the means by which those who are neither producers nor users of crafts might regard them (602c).²⁵⁶

Though ostensibly a critique of imitative arts alone, Socrates' observations about the method of judging crafts carry political implications as well. Insofar as rulership is a craft capable of both social benefit and corruption, we can consider law its products. In all polities, regardless of regime type, the users of laws (i.e. citizens) are better positioned to judge their quality than the authors themselves. Thrasymachus failed to recognize this in his earlier exchange with Socrates. Were he able to defend the view that laws ought to benefit their authors alone, he may have been able to secure the complementary position that rulers are best positioned to judge their quality inasmuch as they alone have knowledge of their interests. By conceding that crafts are performed for the benefit of others, however, he would also have to grant that laws are judged and, in consultation with rulers, improved by citizens.

Unlike Thrasymachus' tyranny or Socrates *kallipolis*, democracies position all citizens as both the authors and users of laws. As such, Socrates' reflections on the qualifications for effective judgment are especially important democratic rule. No other regime was more accountable to public judgments than democracy and no other system of government took more seriously the legitimacy of those judgments. However, as the depiction of the democratic

²⁵⁶ Socrates targets Homer in this passage but the accusation of deliberate distraction and mystification seems better suited to sophists.

constitution in Book 8 warns, there is also no other regime more vulnerable to *stasis*. An agglomeration of every type of constitution and personality, the democratic regime maximizes individual freedom as “the finest thing it has” (557b-e, 562c). But its citizens selfishly guard their freedom, praising only those leaders who assuage it through praise while castigating those who would criticize or guide its desires:

A teacher in such a community is afraid of his students and flatters them, while the students despise their teachers or tutors. And, in general, the young imitate their elders and compete with them in word and deed, while the old stoop to the level of the young and are full of lay and pleasantries, imitating the young for fear of appearing disagreeable and authoritarian. (563a)

The consequence of privileging absolute freedom, even from self-imposed order, is chaos. As Thucydides made equally clear in his description of Athenian behavior during the Peloponnesian War, democrats eschew the standards of judgment that make possible a reasonable distinction between good and bad policy. So pathologically divided, their pursuit of freedom renders them vulnerable to tyranny.

The foregoing account of justice aims to reconcile democracy’s desire for freedom with the need for order. By positing a model of justice that identifies individual happiness with communal welfare, Socrates gestures toward a standard of political judgment that can accommodate individual difference within a framework of collective prosperity. It would be too much to suggest that average citizens engage in the practice of dialectics Plato set out for the *kallipolis*, and further still to suggest that citizens could only vote appropriately by comparing extant political life to the form of the good. They can, however, reflect upon the principles of justice when casting their votes.

Recalling Socrates’ claim in the *Apology* that the excellence (*arête*) of a judge lies in distinguishing between justice and injustice, we can now realize the practical benefits of political

philosophizing. Socrates did not define justice in his defense speech. Perhaps he took it for granted that most jurors could give an account of justice, though our study of Book 1 makes that doubtful. The *Republic* does supply such an account, however, in the model of philosophical-rulership. Like their theoretical counterparts in the *kallipolis*, democratic rulers (i.e. citizens) can rely upon a combination of philosophical reflection and lived experience when making judgments about the welfare of their entire community. As crafters of law, they must demonstrate right opinion about how to promote the good of the *polis*; as users of law, they must have standards against which to assess their performance as craftsmen. Plato guides that effort by turning the *dēmos* away from questions about material benefit and toward questions about virtue.

3.4 Conclusion

The *Republic* closes with a caveat about inexperienced decision-making. In his version of the Myth of Er, Socrates explains that each soul can choose among a variety of possible lives which they will pursue in the temporal plane. Sometimes funny, other times pitiful, the decisions each soul makes should tell an onlooker quite a lot about its character. The soul of Ajax, we are told, chooses the life of a lion, avoiding another human life “because he remembered the judgment about the armor” (620a).²⁵⁷ Agamemnon selects the life of an eagle because his “sufferings also had made him hate the human race” (620b). Finally, the soul of Odysseus chooses the quiet life of a private individual after finding it neglected by the others (620c). Such were the contented lives favored by the great figures of tragedy. By contrast, a soul who was fresh from heaven and “participated in virtue through habit and without philosophy” opts for the apparently dazzling life of a great tyrant: “In his folly and greed he chose it without adequate

²⁵⁷ The great Homeric figure, Ajax went mad after the armor of the fallen Achilles was given to Odysseus rather than to himself. After slaughtering a herd of sheep, thinking they were the Greek leaders who betrayed him, Ajax committed suicide in shame.

examination and didn't notice that, among other evils, he was fated to eat his own children as a part of it" (619c). The difference between this unhappy soul and those who chose better, Socrates explains, was largely a product of the latter having been trained in suffering. Recalling the miseries of apparently good but ultimately disastrous decisions, their suffering had made them more cautious and their judgments more deliberate.

Concluding a work that devotes so much energy to defending the intrinsic and instrumental value of abstract philosophical reasoning with a nod to tragic experience may seem strange. Indeed, were we to hold the view that Plato exclusively concentrates on the hyper-rationalism of which he has been accused, we might find it starkly out of place. However, if I am right to argue that political wisdom demands ethical reflection as well as practical experience, his depiction of Odysseus begins to make more sense. Were habituation to justice sufficient for the pursuit of the good, the new souls from heaven would have no problem choosing happy lives for themselves. We instead find that experience, particularly with a tragedy such as that seen in the Peloponnesian War, is not only a necessary prolegomenon to philosophy but is, further, a vital reminder of the necessity for reflection. By combining ethical reflection with political experience in his model of the ideal statesman, Plato gestures toward a paradigm of good judgment. We will see his student Aristotle elaborate upon that model in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 4: THE WISDOM OF A CERTAIN MULTITUDE

The preceding chapters highlight practical judgment as a central theme of ancient Greek political thought. Though I am not the first to notice its importance, the critical literature surrounding Thucydides and Plato tends to feature political judgment less prominently than I have treated it here. No such recovery efforts are necessary for Aristotle. If anything, contemporary theorists pass too quickly over Thucydides and Plato in their rush to Aristotle as “the preeminent ancient theorist of practical judgment.”¹ Aristotle’s account of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) remains especially influential among democratic theorists who locate within it a variety of insights into the practice of political decision-making and the tensions that animate it.² Unlike Thucydides, who appears to neglect ethical dimensions of political judgment, or Plato, whose “hyper-rational” idealism eschews politics for words, Aristotle strikes many as a practical thinker whose political science aims toward virtue while remaining sensitive to the vicissitudes of political life. Aristotle is a theorist of the possible, not of the ideal. I have tried to show that dominant characterizations of Aristotle’s predecessors are largely unfair: Thucydides is more concerned with ethics than is commonly recognized and Plato is more attentive to practical politics, even in his *kallipolis*, than we might initially realize. While Aristotle is not uniquely concerned with political ethics or practice, then, he is more sympathetic to the prospects of wise democratic political judgment than any other thinker I have studied in this dissertation. I turn to

¹Thiele (2006: 19).

² See, e.g., Arendt (1998 [1953]); MacIntyre (2007 [1981]); Beiner (1983); Sullivan (1986); Barber (1988); Salkever (1977, 1990, 1991); Yack (1993); Bickford (1996, 2011); Frank (2005); Garsten (2006, 2013); Galston (2014). Cf. Steinberger (1993).

his work for insights into how democracies can practice wise judgment by cultivating and embracing, rather than by limiting, popular participation.

Though I have argued that democrats can look to Thucydides and Plato for models of wise judgment, those models are, admittedly, not obviously democratic. Indeed, Thucydides and Plato were both roundly critical of Athenian democracy and developed their works largely in opposition to the politics of their day.³ They sometimes looked to Sparta's conservative ethos for their examples of healthy politics but rarely to the Athenians' unadulterated democracy. Likewise, the *politeia* Aristotle describes in the *Politics*, with its mixed constitution and warrior class of citizens, is more like the Spartan constitution than any other regime known to him. Apart from their liberal attitudes toward women – a point Thucydides ignored and Plato found appealing – Aristotle holds the Spartans in fairly high regard. Yet Aristotle also takes democracy seriously as a tolerable, albeit deviant, regime option and offers a more theoretically nuanced analysis of popular rule than any we find in his predecessors. More importantly, his prescriptive advice for maintaining democratic government, particularly against the tyrannical impulses and demagogic manipulation to which he thought it vulnerable, entails expanding and cultivating citizenship rather than delegating all political decisions to leaders like Pericles or submitting to the radical re-education demanded of Plato's philosopher-kings. In short, part of Aristotle's political genius lies in his recognition that promoting good character qualities and refining proper habits of mind could improve democratic government in the real world.

Aristotle examines political practice through an account of practical wisdom that is both illuminating and puzzling. Readers looking for a clear and simple definition of the virtue might

³ See Ober (1998: 3-10).

sympathize with Joseph Dunne when he complains that Aristotle never fully develops one.⁴ But the philosopher's lack of precision is not a fault of carelessness so much as a limitation of a subject that does not admit of precise description. Though I will focus on the treatment of *phronēsis* provided in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, it is important to note that Aristotle develops other important points about practical judgment throughout his corpus. Doing so encourages his audience to see how discrete and apparently disparate subjects are united as practical sciences. Taken together, *phronēsis* emerges as a manifold virtue of thought that also draws upon the kind of practical experience, praiseworthy character, and even-keeled emotional temperament we expect to find in generally wise people. It is supremely “architectonic” in the sense that it focuses the insights of theoretical, practical, and productive sciences on the subject of human happiness (*NE* 1143b21, *Rhet.* 1366b20-23, *Pol.* 1282b15-16).⁵ Finally, like the other examples of practical judgment I have examined in this dissertation, *phronēsis* takes place in the space between the universal and the particular, thereby connecting philosophical reflection with political practice.

Phronēsis provides an especially important thematic connection among the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, Aristotle's two major works of practical science.⁶ Aristotle taught these works together as a series of lectures in how to pursue the human good, yet contemporary theorists often neglect this connection by treating each text in isolation.⁷ For example, Jeremy

⁴ Dunne (1993: 245). Also see Allan (1952: 182-183); Steinberger (1993: 149).

⁵ References to the *Nicomachean Ethics* are taken from the Irwin (1999) translation unless otherwise noted. Those from the *Politics* are from Reeve (1998), references to the *Metaphysics* are from Ross (1984), to the *Rhetoric* from Roberts (1984), and to the *Constitution of Athens* from Kenyon (1984) unless otherwise noted.

⁶ The *Nicomachean Ethics* is a more prescriptive study in individual *eudaimonia* while the *Politics* is a comparatively empirical work of regime analysis and communal happiness. Irwin (1988: 352-3) helpfully observes that Aristotle does not exclude consideration of political life from the *Ethics*; both texts are concerned with political science and the complete human good.

⁷ On the value of studying the texts together for insights into Aristotle's dialectical method and its application to moral and political thought, see Irwin (1988: 347, 352-354). On the connection between the works as part of a

Waldron's influential investigation of the "doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude" (DWM) in the *Politics*, while attentive to some connections in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, neglects Aristotle's discussion of *phronēsis* in Book VI.⁸ Likewise, theorists such as Ronald Beiner and Benjamin Barber, who model democratic discourse on the deliberative rationality examined in the *Politics*, often downplay factors like class and upbringing in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that may limit how many people Aristotle thought likely to exercise practical judgment in an inclusive polity.⁹ Their neglect of the *Nicomachean Ethics* has lead Richard Ruderman to charge Beiner, Barber and other so-called "revivalists" with threatening to "undermine political science" by divorcing judgment from philosophy.¹⁰ According to Ruderman, Aristotle espouses a more rarified vision of political judgment than these theorists realize, according to which pre-political philosophical

broader curriculum, see Salkever (2007: 196). Also see Tessitore (1996), Smith (2000); cf. Lord (1981). Though Lord disagrees with Tessitore and Smith's insistence on the esoteric quality of Aristotle's rhetoric in these works, he accepts the widely shared belief that Aristotle's audience was primarily comprised of men interested more in political ambition than philosophical virtue. Gerald Mara (1987) examines the problem of treating each work in isolation, focusing especially on discrepancies between the ideal human life devoted to philosophical contemplation in *Nicomachean Ethics* (see, esp. 1177a17-27) with the practically wise man's commitment to social life in the *Politics* (see, esp. 1324a23-33). Mara argues that Aristotle and Plato are in closer agreement on the role of philosophy in public life than many realize, inasmuch as both use the philosophical life as a standard against which to judge the quality of political life. Stephen Salkever (1977: 407) further suggests that political scientists attend to the Aristotelian notion that practical philosophy aspires to change the world rather than to merely understand it. Like Aristotle, Salkever also cautions theorists against assuming that practical problems can be resolved through purely theoretical means: "Such recognition...places in appropriate perspective an activity which has no foreseeable end." Indeed, he advocates a reading of both texts together as a means of framing the *endoxa* of the *Politics* within the metaphysical and psychological themes of the *Ethics*. See Salkever (2007).

⁸ See Waldron (1995). The DWM is also variously called the "summation argument" or the "accumulation argument." Waldron is not, of course, blind to connections between the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. His argument draws instructively on Aristotle's discussion of distributive justice in *NE V*. Yet given his thesis – i.e. the many are better judges of factual and moral questions than the few because their collective judgments, experiences, and skill sets encourage deeper reflection – one might expect an extended treatment of *NE VI* as well.

⁹ See Beiner (1983); Barber (1988). Cf. Galston (2014: 16-17).

¹⁰ Ruderman's (1997) critique of contemporary interpretations of Aristotelian political judgment paints thinkers as diverse as Stephen Salkever, Sheldon Wolin (1960), William Sullivan (1986), and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007 [1981]) with the same brush. Tabachnick (2004) similarly criticizes Gadamer (1975, 1989) and Lyotard (1984) for failing to recognize *phronēsis* as a specialized form of rational deliberation that is not amenable to democratic discourse.

principles of virtue not only orient political deliberation but also assess its final outcome.¹¹

Contra the dominant revivalist interpretation, Ruderman regards any effort to popularize Aristotle through appeal to the DWM as sheer anachronism.

Ruderman's critique, if accurate, poses a serious challenge to those who find a democratic potential in Aristotelian thought. If only students of the Lyceum are capable of phronetic judgment, it does not appear as amenable to popular deliberation as many have suggested it could be.¹² Though Ruderman's critique enlivens this debate, I think he misinterprets philosophy's relationship to judgment in at least two ways. First, he equates philosophy to theoretical wisdom (*theoria*), noting that a theoretical conception of "what is best" affords those with practical wisdom "critical distance on popular but misguided views."¹³ Yet Aristotle does not call for any such theoretical wisdom in the passage cited (*Pol.* 1289a11-12).¹⁴ Indeed, as I explain later, it would be strange for him to do so given his distinction between theoretical and practical sciences. Thales and Anaxagoras are wise, he says, but not prudent (*NE* 1141b5). Ruderman's argument that "some transcultural element of *theoria* will be essential to the wise exercise of political judgment" is more appropriate to traditional interpretations of Plato

¹¹ Ruderman (1997: 419); Also see Newell (1991: 192). Ruderman cites *Politics* 1277a14-6 and 1277b25-6 as evidence that Aristotle dissuades most people from cultivating practical judgment.

¹² See Pangle (2013: 4).

¹³ Ruderman (1997: 411). Also see Mara (1989: 393). Cf. Reeve (1992: 82).

¹⁴ The passage Ruderman cites instead expands on Aristotle's comparative approach to regime selection. The common misconception to which Aristotle refers here is not the "rigid moralism of the community or regime" Ruderman describes but rather the error that all oligarchic and democratic regimes are essentially the same: "It is often supposed that there is only one kind of democracy and one of oligarchy. *But this is a mistake; and in order to avoid such mistakes, we must ascertain what differences there are in the constitutions of states, and in how many ways they are combined. The same political insight will enable a man to know which laws are the best, and which are suited to different constitutions*" (*Pol.* 1289a8-12, my emphasis). In short, the lesson we should take from a comparative analysis of regime types is practical, not theoretical.

than to Aristotle.¹⁵ Second, Ruderman undervalues the importance of popular belief (*endoxa*) to Aristotle's philosophical method. Aristotle takes seriously the possibility that popular views, principally derived from experience, likely contain some element of truth about virtue (*NE* 1145b1, *Rhet.* 1355a14-18).¹⁶ We thus find in his work examples of how groups can exercise sound political judgment (*politikē*) even when individual members lack a full share of *phronēsis*. By focusing on the account of individual *phronēsis* provided in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the exclusion of hypotheses about popular rule in the *Politics*, Ruderman ironically repeats the interpretive problem he criticizes in others.

Though I disagree with Ruderman's critique, his motivating concern remains worth consideration. Many of the contemporary theorists he criticizes have been drawn to Aristotle's model of practical judgment because it empowers the rule of the many (*plēthos*) as opposed to that of the elite (*aristos mēn oligos*) (*Pol.* 1281a39-1281b8). Josiah Ober, for instance, draws on Aristotle's "potluck analogy" in *Politics* III as an epistemic justification for democratic decision-making.¹⁷ "Political decision-making, for Aristotle, was," he explains, "an epistemic endeavor in

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Ross (1995 [1923]: 197-198); Reeve (2012: 158-159). Nussbaum (1986: 246) captures the importance of popular belief (*endoxa*) to Aristotle's method by way of an analysis of *phainomena*: "The *phainomena* present us with a confused array, often with direct contradiction. They reflect our disagreements and ambivalences. The first step must, therefore, be to bring conflicting opinions to the surface and set them out clearly, marshalling the considerations for and against each side, showing clearly how the adoption of a certain position on one issue would affect our positions on others." Nussbaum's description of Aristotle's philosophical method is at once Socratic – insofar as we premise truth-claims on the basis of non-contradiction – and democratic – insofar as Aristotle believes, perhaps more than Socrates, that popular opinions may bear some kernel of truth about virtue. She also connects the process to an important point about judgment: "Often our idea of the competent judge is more broadly shared among us, and less subject to disagreement, than is our view of the subject matter concerning which this judge is to render a verdict. In ethics, for example, we agree more readily about the characteristics of intellect, temper, imagination, and experience that a competent judge must have than we do about the particular practical judgment that we expect him or her to make" (248). Cf. Reeve (2012: 159).

¹⁷ See Ober (2013: 111-112). James Wilson (2011: 263-266) similarly reads the potluck analogy as a commentary on political judgment, according to which the multitude judge better than the excellent individual, in part, because they are better equipped to listen to multiple sides of a policy argument. Cf. Lindsey (1992).

that it was meant to discover the best answers to questions of appropriately-shared concern.”¹⁸

Jill Frank likewise observes that inviting multiple perspectives on a political problem promotes individual humility while encouraging greater recognition of the particularities that comprise the whole.¹⁹ As she puts it, “phronetic judgment is, in the first instance, not a gift of rulers but a virtue of the practitioners of fair exchange, citizens and noncitizens alike.”²⁰ These interpretations gesture toward a puzzling tension in Aristotle’s work. Though he describes *phronēsis* as a virtue unique to rulership in the *Politics*, he also suggests, along with Plato (*Republic* 601d-602b), that the users of the laws – that is, the citizens – are best positioned to judge them. Thinkers like Ober and Frank follow Waldron in claiming that the many are better judges than the excellent few because their diversity of experiences, talents and perspectives lend their judgment a measure of epistemic superiority.²¹ Put simply, a large and diverse assembly has a deeper reservoir of potential talent and expertise than a smaller committee of excellent men, thus improving its chances of making better political decisions.

While I agree that the “potluck” analogy implies a role for popular political judgment in Aristotle’s political thought, I depart slightly from the dominant understanding of the mechanism at work. Whereas most interpreters think that the judgment of “the many” improves with its diversity of experience and expertise, I submit that its superiority comes as well from its collective moral intuitions. Condorcet’s jury theorem notwithstanding, Aristotle found good

¹⁸ Ober (2013: 105).

¹⁹ Frank (2005: 92-94).

²⁰ Frank (2005: 98).

²¹ See Waldron (1995: 564).

reason to suspect the wisdom of popular decisions.²² He was not sanguine on the prospects that a more inclusively democratic Athens would make wiser decisions than one directed by the Areopagus Council; yet he was not entirely pessimistic either. Under certain circumstances with the right combination of laws, institutional arrangements, and civic education, he thought popular government was feasible and choiceworthy. But he was also attentive to the many challenges that popular politics must confront.

More than the dubious wisdom of assigning political office by lot, or the even more radical practice of paying citizens for jury service, Aristotle was deeply troubled by the problem of demagoguery.²³ Demagogues threatened to “pervert the judge” by unjustly playing upon emotions – e.g., stoking anger, feeding envy, manipulating pity – that warped otherwise straight measures of judgment (*Rhet.* 1354a23-25). Ober succinctly summarizes the problem: “The orator

²² Condorcet’s jury theorem imagines members of a group who share preferences and are faced with a decision between two proposals, one of which is “correct” and the other “incorrect.” As membership in the decision-making group grows, the probability that the group will make the “correct” decision improves even though individual members – each of whom begins with a better than even chance of making the correct decision – do not improve their individual decision-making ability – that is, their individual odds of picking the right answer do not improve over their initial probability. The upshot is that aggregated choices tend toward the right answers, provided the pool of decision-makers is sufficiently large. The Aristotelian roots of Condorcet’s theorem have been widely acknowledged (e.g., Estlund, Waldron, Grofman and Feld 1989; Congleton 2007). The theorem has drawn special attention from formal theorists interested in group rationality (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1992; Surowiecki 2004). Philosophers have looked to it for a model of democratic legitimacy. Epistemic democrats like Estlund (1990, 1998; cf. 2008), for instance, insist that that democracy is normatively preferable because, as the theorem suggests, larger groups are more likely to make decisions that reflect true beliefs about policies that will improve collective welfare than are small committees. Urbinati (2010) rejects these efforts as symptomatic of fundamentally unpolitical aspirations within democratic theory; by assuming that all voters share the same preferences, proponents of Condorcet-style decision-making procedures remove the discordant deliberative qualities that constitute politics. Cf. Ladha (1992), who attempts to show that the theorem’s formal results hold for large groups even when diverse preferences are (formally) introduced. Austen-Smith and Banks (1996) challenge Estlund’s assumption that citizens vote according to sincere beliefs. While their thesis – i.e., individuals do not vote sincerely because doing so cannot satisfy the conditions of a Nash equilibrium – is not persuasively reasoned, it does raise the point that some citizens vote strategically, thereby challenging the epistemic democrats’ faith in collective choices reflecting genuine preferences. List and Goodin (2001) defend the jury theorem on epistemic grounds, showing that it can accommodate a plurality of choices. Yet even here, they do not take up the difficult political question of what constitutes a “correct” choice.

²³ Melissa Lane (2012: 181) notes, along with Ober (1989: 106), that while *demagogue* is more used as a descriptive term than a normative epithet, Aristotle does begin to adopt Plato’s practice of employing it in a more pejorative sense in the *Politics*.

who could deceive the people into voting wrongly was a manifest danger to all other citizens.”²⁴

The *Constitution of Athens* is less a story of “the many” prying political control from the elite, and more a tale of popular opportunists exploiting their influence to consolidate institutions that favored them.²⁵ Aristotle recognized “the many” as the source of the demagogue’s power.

Inculcated with the right habits and exposed to the right way of reasoning, the same group could also limit that power. As Susan Bickford puts it, “Unless they are glaucoma-ridden, *phronēsis*-wise, the many can share in the exercise of reason with the *phronimos* as they actively judge his character and arguments.”²⁶ I extend Bickford’s argument by positing that Aristotle understood the cultivation of popular judgment as a uniquely democratic means of limiting the influence of demagoguery. Epistemic benefits aside, popular political judgment about character and arguments could serve as a bulwark against demagogic cunning.

I argue that Aristotle’s model of practical judgment serves as an antidote to the poisonous rhetoric of Athenian demagoguery. Understanding that model and its application to popular rule is therefore essential for appreciating the democratic sympathies in his work. Aristotelian *phronēsis* is amenable to popular government in part because it eschews the rule-based systematization of later thinkers like Kant in favor of more general and open-ended considerations of communal welfare. Reason and virtue of character guide his person of practical wisdom, the *phronimos*, but they do not foreclose upon deliberation about what constitutes the good and how to achieve it.²⁷ Exercising wise judgment instead demands critical and continuous

²⁴ Ober (1989: 169). M.I. Finley (1962: 4) puts it similarly well with respect Athens: “After the death of Pericles Athens fell into the hands of demagogues and was ruined.”

²⁵ See Chapter 1, fn. 21.

²⁶ Bickford (1996: 419).

²⁷ Deliberating about what constitutes the end and how it is best achieved is not the same as deliberating about the end itself. Aristotle takes it for granted that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the ultimate end toward which all humans

reflection upon happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the end to which all human action is directed. I highlight the *phronimos* model here as a standard by which citizens can assess the qualities of popular leadership.

This chapter begins with a brief survey of Aristotle's attitudes toward democracy in the *Politics* and *Constitution of Athens*. While the *Politics* contains Aristotle's theoretical understanding of democratic politics, the *Constitution of Athens* gives insights into how actual democratic politics developed in its most visibly Greek form. I emphasize Aristotle's attention to demagoguery as a uniquely democratic threat to political judgment in this section. I then turn to the model of *phronēsis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in order to highlight both its deliberative potential and difficult acquisition. The final section returns to the "potluck" analogy in *Politics* III. Here, I review the DWM and show that Aristotle did not favor popular political judgment primarily for epistemic benefits, but rather as a gesture of faith in popular virtue as a democratic counterweight to the potentially destructive advice of demagoguery.

4.1 Democracy and the Demagogic Challenge

Aristotle pursues two goals in the *Politics*, both of which are connected to the broader project set forth in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first goal is empirical: Aristotle wants to study man, a political animal (*politikon zōion*), in his natural habitat in order to get a clearer view of human flourishing and "complete the philosophy of human affairs, as far as we are able" (*NE*

direct their lives. As he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Deliberation concerns what is usually [one way rather than another], where the outcome is unclear and the right way to act is undefined. And we enlist partners in deliberation on large issue when we distrust our ability to discern [the right answer]. We deliberate not about ends, but about what promotes ends. A doctor, for instance, does not deliberate about whether he will cure, or an orator about whether he will persuade, or a politician about whether he will produce good order, or any other [expert] about the end [that his science aims at]. Rather, we lay down the end, and then examine the ways and means to achieve it" (1112b9-16). Insofar as *eudaimonia* is the end of political life, no one rationally deliberates from a position that the community ought to implode. Yet *eudaimonia* is a contested concept that is, within Aristotle's framework, open to deliberation. See Bickford (1996: 29).

1181b14-15). His second goal is normative: studying various constitutions will allow us to judge them as better or worse depending on how well they promote *eudaimonia*, and will help us identify “which political community is best of all for people who are able to live as ideally as possible” (*Pol.* 1260b27-28). The *Nicomachean Ethics* concludes with an outline for this project:

First, then, let us try to review any sound remarks our predecessors have made on particular topics. Then let us study the collected political systems, to see from them what sorts of things preserve and destroy cities, and political systems of different types; and what causes some cities to conduct politics well, and some badly. For when we have studied these questions, we will perhaps grasp better what sort of political system is best; how each political system should be organized so as to be best; and what habits and laws it should follow. (1181b16-24)

As Terrence Irwin observes, Book II of the *Politics* takes up the first task in this outline by examining Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*; Books IV-VI correspond to the second sentence by offering an empirical description of various regimes and “practical hints of the sort that might be expected from a technician and consultant.”²⁸ Books I and III study the nature of the state, while Books VII and VIII develop Aristotle’s ideal state. The *Nicomachean Ethics* concludes by encouraging students to “discuss this, then, starting from the beginning” (1181b24), indicating once again the thematic connection between the two works. In short, the *Politics* is an extension of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The *Politics* pursues its goals through a comparative methodological approach to regime analysis. Aristotle divides constitutions according to a number of empirical criteria – i.e. the size of the governing class, the arrangement of institutions, the end (*telos*) toward which all political action is aimed, etc. – as well along normative lines: constitutions that look to the common good “turn out...to be correct,” while those that pursue class interests at the expense of the common good are deviations (*parekbaseis*) (*Pol.* 1279a17-21). Kingship, aristocracy, and the mixed

²⁸ Irwin (1988: 354).

regime (*politeia*) are all similar just insofar as they aim at collective welfare; tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy are all deviant just insofar as they maximize the ruling element's happiness without regard for the entire community. Though Aristotle elsewhere shares the Athenian view that it is proper for free people to govern themselves, there is nothing normatively laudatory about inclusive government itself. Adding selfish or unreflective artisans to otherwise aristocratic citizenship roles, for instance, would make the constitution more inclusive but not necessarily better – and most likely, quite worse (*Pol.* 1278a5-12). Good laws are what matter, and Aristotle thinks that good laws come from good people.²⁹ Good laws also have a hand in making the citizens who observe them good, thus setting a virtuous cycle into motion (*NE* 1180a1-15).

Writing legislation is one of the main applications of *phronēsis* to communal life that Aristotle describes in the *Politics*. As I explain in the next section, Aristotle describes political wisdom (*politikē*) as a subspecies of *phronēsis* writ large. In order to write laws well, Aristotle counsels the would-be *politikos* to consider which laws are best and which are appropriate for each constitution (*Pol.* 1289a11-13). People are suited to different constitutions on the basis of how their society produces rulers and multitudes, and political leaders should remain sensitive to this. Kingships are appropriate where societies “naturally [produce] a family that is superior in the virtue appropriate to political leadership,” whereas aristocracies are preferable where the society produces a multitude (*plēthos*) capable of being ruled by “people who are qualified to lead by their possession of the virtue required for the rule of a statesman” (*Pol.* 1288a5-13).³⁰ Aristotle's mixed-regime, the *politeia* is only appropriate “when there naturally arises in it a

²⁹ See Cherry (2009: 1410).

³⁰ I elaborate on virtue and leadership in §2. Here, it is important to note that leadership qualification is determined by virtue writ large rather than on the basis of property ownership or native intelligence. While such qualifications might be necessary, they are not sufficient for the virtue specific to rulership.

warrior multitude (*plēthos polemikon*) capable of ruling and being ruled, under a law which distributes offices to the rich on the basis of merit” (*Pol.* 1288a13-14, also see 1279a38-1279b3).³¹ If a mixed regime is superior to a kingship or aristocracy, it is so not because the mixed regime is more inclusive per se, but because it fosters virtue among a greater share of the population and, in doing so, cultivates the kinds of citizens who are able to rule and be ruled in turn.³² Likewise, as P.A. Vander Waerdt observes, Aristotle accepts that an excellent kingship might be preferred where such a regime affords more people the leisure time to practice philosophy.³³

In order to legislate, the would-be *politikos* must possess two kinds of wisdom. He must first familiarize himself with the variety of known constitutions and be able to identify the qualities that make them better or worse given certain assumptions about the people who subscribe to them (*Pol.* 1288b27-29, *Rhet.* 1360a18-30).³⁴ He must extend that study to a global

³¹ The “warrior multitude” demonstrates a capacity to lead and be led by right reason. As Wilson (2011: 270) rightly observes, however, Aristotle criticizes the Spartan regime for mistaking warrior virtues – a necessary part of civic virtue in the mixed regime – with the whole of virtue, as doing so motivates an imperial mindset that is at once easily manipulated and difficult to satisfy in peacetime (see esp. *Pol.* 1279a14-17, 1279b2-4). See Salkever (1990: 198-199).

³² The process by which one acquires civic virtue is more experiential than cognitive. Would-be rulers learn to rule “by being ruled, just as one learns to be a cavalry commander by serving under a cavalry commander, or to be a general by serving under a general, or under a major or a company commander to learn to occupy the office. Hence this too is rightly said, that one cannot rule well without having been ruled” (*Pol.* 1277b8-13). Aristotle’s martial tone when describing political rulership is telling.

³³ Vander Waerdt (1985: 252-3) insists that this is only problematic in the case of the best regime, where ostracizing excellent individuals violates justice. In most cases, as Kraut (2002: 462) notes, Aristotle “thinks that a city that eliminates elites entirely is far superior to one that merely restricts their power by balancing it against the power of the people.”

³⁴ The Lyceum’s 158 or so copies of extant Greek constitutions was evidence of how seriously Aristotle took this advice. Apart from the *Athenian Constitution*, the remaining constitutions survive only as fragments that mainly record heroic myths associated with the polities they study. Contemporary theorists like Yack (1993: 281-282) have assumed that Aristotle could consult these constitutions when writing the *Politics*. David Toye (1999) challenges even that assumption, arguing that the Athenian Constitution was atypically attentive to institutional arrangements and empirical evidence of historical development. This is difficult to prove with the surviving fragments. Ober (1998: 291) summarizes the view of most historians: “Whether or not the 158 constitutional histories collected by students at the Lyceum were available at the time of the writing of the *Politics*, it is certainly a fair guess that its

understanding of his own constitution in order to know how his particular law will contribute to its end (*telos*) (*Pol.* 1289a20-25).³⁵ Additionally, as noted above, the *politikos* must acquire particular understanding of the people for whom he writes the law, including their history, the particular things they desire or wish to avoid, and the best ways to encourage or discourage behaviors that do not align with the constitution's aims.³⁶ In order to bring global and particular wisdom to bear on political life, the *politikos* must combine general ethical insights with his experience in actual political life.

Of the constitutions the *politikos* will examine, democracies are uniquely concerned with freedom. Aristotle divides freedom into two components. "One component of freedom," he says, "is ruling and being ruled in turn. For democratic justice is based on numerical equality, not on merit" (*Pol.* 1317b1-2).³⁷ The poor have more authority than the rich in democratic regimes simply because the poor are more numerous than the wealthy. Another component of freedom is living as one likes, and from this desire "arises the demand not to be ruled by anyone, or failing that, to rule and be ruled in turn" (*Pol.* 1317b14-15). According to Aristotle, "the many" in a democracy do not aspire to living well so much as to living without rules. Likewise, most people do not participate in political rule in order to live well, but rather as a grudging concession to necessity. This view comports with Aristotle's account of the way most people define

author knew more about comparative Greek political history than any other member of Athens' critical community." For further speculation on the authorship of the *Athenian Constitution* itself, see Rhodes (1981).

³⁵ Aristotle distinguishes constitutions – which are general – from laws – which are particular – by describing a constitution as the "organization of offices in city-states, the way they are distributed, what element is in authority in the constitution, and what the end is of each of the communities" (*Pol.* 1289a14-17). Laws, by contrast, are written with particular behaviors in mind (*Pol.* 1269a9-11).

³⁶ Ober (1991) notes that class differences would have been especially important for such training.

³⁷ Democracies tend to maximize the number of citizens. No matter the regime type, Aristotle says that the citizen "is defined by nothing else so much as by his participation in judgment and office" (*Pol.* 1275a22). As Reeve notes in his translation, the "numerical equality" Aristotle refers to involves equal participation in office – that is, ruling and being ruled in turn (*Pol.* 1261a30-1261b6) – and not on equal property ownership.

eudaimonia at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The vulgar multitude, he says, equate happiness with pleasure and so pursue lives of gratification that he considers “completely slavish” and most appropriate for cows (*NE* 1095b16-17). Only men of action are attracted to politics, for only they equate *eudaimonia* with honor (*NE* 1095b22). By describing the paradigmatic case of democracy as one favored by those least fit to rule and be ruled in turn, Aristotle appears to hold a dim view of Athenian politics.

In *Politics* IV, Aristotle shows how democracy’s two goals – maximizing freedom and promoting egalitarian self-rule – are mutually reinforcing. They give shape to the features that all democracies share:

[1] Having all choose officials from all. [2] Having all rule each and each in turn rule all. [3] Having all offices, or all that do not require experience or skill, filled by lot. [4] Having no property assessment for office, or one as low as possible. [5] Having no office, or few besides military ones, held twice or more than a few times by the same person. [6] Having all offices or as many as possible be short-term. [7] Having all, or bodies selected from all, decide all cases, or most of them, and the ones that are most important and involve the most authority, such as those having to do with the inspection of officials, the constitution, or private contracts. [8] Having the assembly have authority over everything or over all the important things, but having no office with authority over anything or over as little as possible...[9] Having pay provided, preferably for everyone, for the assembly, courts, and public offices, or failing that, for service in the offices, courts, council, and assemblies that are in authority, or for those offices that require their holders to share a mess...[10] Furthermore, it is democratic to have no office be permanent; and if such an office happens to survive an ancient change, to strip it of its power, at least, and have it filled by lot rather than by election. (*Pol.* 1317b18-1318a2)

These institutional arrangements maximize freedom in two ways. First, by opening offices to as many citizens as possible and compensating them for their service, democracies ensure that all citizens have an opportunity to share in power and exercise practical judgment. The assembly’s supreme authority over “over everything or over all the important things” enhances this measure by ensuring that no single office wields a disproportionate amount of control over the entire city. Second, by limiting terms of office, the democratic constitutions presumably restrict the amount of power any single individual can formally hold over the city. This feature of democracy is

especially important for understanding Aristotle's thoughts on the potential for popular political judgment. In the moderate democracies that he prefers, where some offices are reserved for those with a necessary degree of relevant experience, citizens elect their leaders from among their own ranks, implying that they must also have some idea of what good leadership looks like.

When Aristotle speaks of democracy in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1160b18-21), he describes it as a corrupted version of the true constitution (*politeia*), a distinction that awards it the dubious honor of "least vicious" among the deviant constitutions. Indeed, the sharpest distinction between democracy and *politeia* is not that the latter restricts the political role of the many (*plēthos*) more than the former, but rather that Aristotle assumes that the many in a democracy will favor policies that promote their class interests over the good of the entire city, while those of the more moderate middle-class *politeia* will aim toward a common good.³⁸ Democracies become more extreme as class interests exert a stronger influence over the laws of the city.³⁹ The first democracy "is said to be most of all based on equality," for the laws of such a city say "that there is equality when the poor enjoy no more superiority than the rich and neither is in authority but the two are similar" (*Pol.* 1291b30-33).⁴⁰ Other kinds of democracy require low property qualifications for political participation (*Pol.* 1291b38-41), restrict the franchise to "uncontested citizens" (*Pol.* 1291b42; 1292b35-36, 1275b22-26), or, like Athens after

³⁸ On Aristotle's political understanding of class conflict and institutional measures taken to avoid class-based faction, see Ste. Croix (1981: 69-80); Yack (1993: 215-238).

³⁹ For an elaboration of this point and critique of Aristotle's views on Athens as an example of the most extreme form of democracy, see Lintott (1992).

⁴⁰ By describing this definition of democracy as the "first," Aristotle does not mean to imply that it is best. The truly first or best democracy is the "farming kind" where "the multitude live by cultivating the land and herding flocks" (1318b8-15). Here, the multitude is kept busy with the necessary tasks of life and has less time for political participation – a point Aristotle finds attractive because it demands that more people hold office for shorter periods (1308a18-20) – but also lacks the desire to take others' property. "Indeed," he continues, "they find working more pleasant than engaging in politics and holding office, where no great profit is to be had from office, since the many seek money more than honor" (1318b14-16).

Cleisthenes, allow anyone to participate in politics by dint of conventional citizenship (*Pol.* 1292a1-2; 1275b34-1276a6).⁴¹ Though each of these cases differ in their extension of the franchise, they each promote freedom through absolute equality between citizens. Furthermore, like all regime types, each form of democracy owes its stability to how well the law (*nomos*) articulates a common end (*telos*) that citizens with diverse social and economic interests can aim toward. Because the rule of law is only weakly felt in “extreme democracies,” these constitutions are most susceptible to manipulation and lawlessness. As I explain below, tyrants and demagogues expand their power by exacerbating class conflicts and garnering support among the poor through the unjust redistribution of wealth. When these practices erode the rule of law to the point that the city is riven with class conflict and *stasis*, Aristotle is reluctant to call them cities at all.⁴²

The rule of law protects cities against popular tyranny and demagoguery. Demagogues do not emerge in democracies with strong institutional norms that support the rule of law; they only preside where the laws are weak and authority is determined by popularity (*Pol.* 1292a9-10, 1308a22-23).⁴³ Aristotle therefore considers democracies that surrender the rule of law to the decrees (*psēphismata*) of popular leaders (*dēmagōgoi*) sharply deviant, likening them to perverse

⁴¹ In the final case, the rule of law is most weakly felt, leading Aristotle to question whether it can rightly be called a constitution at all (*Pol.* 1292a32; compare with the description of tyranny at 1289b1). Barry Strauss (1991) argues that Aristotle exaggerates and sometime inaccurately describes Athenian democracy in ways that suggest it was more extreme than it actually was. Aristotle distinguishes between people who derive their citizenship from birth and those who owe their citizenship to changes in convention, as after a revolution. These are a difficult category because there is a chance that that we might confuse those who are “rightly citizens” (e.g. those who have lived in the polity under a former regime but were denied citizenship according to more restrictive laws) with those who are “false” (e.g. the man foreigners and alien slaves Cleisthenes enrolled as citizens after the expulsion of the tyrants in the sixth century). See Simpson (1998: 307).

⁴² See Kraut (2002: 253, 370-375).

⁴³ As Simpson (1998: 307-309) observes, demagogues are always present within democracies, but are only able to rise when (1) there is confusion as to whether the law or the multitude is in charge and (2) they are able to displace the city’s “best men.”

monarchies, “one person composed of many, since the many are in authority not as individuals, but all together,” that aspire to free themselves from lawful control (*Pol.* 1292a10-17). Such collective monarchy distorts democratic principles of equality in the name of freedom:

A people of this kind, since it is a monarchy, seeks to exercise monarchic rule through not being ruled by the law, and becomes a master. The result is that flatterers are held in esteem, and that a democracy of this kind is the analog of tyranny among the monarchies. That is also why their characters are the same: both act like masters (*despotica*) toward the better people (*beltionōn*); the decrees of the one are like the edicts of the other; a popular leader is either the same as a flatterer (*kolax*) or analogous. Each of these has special power in his own sphere, flatterers with tyrants, popular leaders (*dēmagōgoi*) with a people of this kind. They are responsible for decrees being in authority rather than laws because they bring everything before the people. This results in their becoming powerful because the people have authority over everything, and popular leaders have it over the people’s opinion, since the multitude are persuaded by them. Besides, those who make accusations against officials say that the people should decide them. The suggestion is gladly accepted, with the result that all offices are destroyed. (*Pol.* 1292a17-29)

This description bears a striking similarity to the portrait of the potentially wise multitude in Book III, who come together “just like a single human being, with many feet, hands, and senses” (*Pol.* 1281b5-6).⁴⁴ The descriptions are telling because Aristotle, unlike Plato, recognizes that cities are generally home to multitudinous families, clans, occupations, and classes that share basic beliefs about *eudaimonia* while maintaining discrete conceptions of their particular happiness (*Pol.* 1290b36-1291a11, 1291b5-15).⁴⁵ By uniting these varied and discordant groups into a single, univocal body, demagogues create a kind of partisan unity that strips them of something essential to their constitution. Such a people are at once empowered and powerless: empowered in the sense that their collective will overwhelms the force of law that would constrain them (hence maximizing collective freedom); powerless in the sense that each is enthralled to the very collective will of which they are a part (thereby diminishing individual

⁴⁴ I attend to the interpretive challenges of this characterization in §3.

⁴⁵ The type of democracy is largely determined by the composition and skill-set of the multitude (1291b14-29, 1296b24-34)

freedom). The demagogic potential is clear: it is easier to persuade a single person than it is to persuade many, especially when the many hold different views; far easier to persuade the many when they think and behave as one. Seen from this vantage point, too much unity, especially of the factional sort, can harm a polity. As I argue below, this insight is vital for appreciating two further points in Aristotle's political thought, namely, that people should seek unity toward the right ends for the right reasons and, second, that conflictual deliberation can improve civic health.

Demagogues threaten democracies by encouraging factions to undermine established laws, and this likewise hinders the citizenry's capacity for sound judgment. If citizens are supposed to make political judgments by looking to how their constitution frames the *telos* their community should strive toward, then replacing the constitution with disjointed and potentially conflicting decrees frustrates that process. General judgments that ought to concern the common good come to resemble the particular decisions that jurors make in the lawcourts, and this method of decision-making is, as Aristotle notes in the *Rhetoric*, inappropriate for political deliberation in the assembly (*Rhet.* 1354b12-16). In the *Politics*, Aristotle especially warns democracies against the "wanton behavior of popular leaders" (1304b21) who exacerbate class conflict either by unjustly persecuting the wealthy or by egging on the multitude against the elite. Indeed, demagoguery is usually the cause of negative constitutional change within democracies:

For popular leaders sometimes treat the notables unjustly in order to curry favor with the people and force them to combine, by redistributing their properties or the income by means of public services (*leitourgia*); and sometimes they bring slanderous accusations against the rich so as to be in a position to confiscate their property. (1305a3-5)

Aristotle suggests a number of institutional mechanisms that might prevent demagoguery, including changes to the ways that public men are elected.⁴⁶ In general, however, it is incumbent upon the people themselves to remain wary of demagogic speech and to resist the seduction of factional rhetoric. In short, the city's safety hinges on a populace with the critical capacities needed to distinguish between good and bad speech.

Athens herself provides a case study in how demagoguery works to alter democratic constitutions. Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* traces Athenian history from the city's roots as an exploitative oligarchy to a democracy assigning important offices by lot. In Chapter 1, I noted that Pericles was largely responsible for these popular changes during his tenure (*Ath. Con.* §27). Yet in Aristotle's estimation, Pericles governed well while in office, and while his efforts made the democracy more extreme, they did not fundamentally alter the city's constitution. Rather, Aristotle seems more concerned with figures like Pisistratus, an "extreme democrat" who came to political power during a period in which the city was divided between three competing parties of elites.⁴⁷ In a political stunt to turn the city against his rivals, Pisistratus "wounded himself, and by representing that his injuries had been inflicted on him by his political rivals, he persuaded the people...to grant him a bodyguard" (§14). Shortly thereafter, he deployed his bodyguard of "club bearers" in an assault on the Acropolis and briefly took power. He was deposed, but was recruited by his former rival Megacles to return to the city eleven years later "by a very primitive and simple-minded device":

[Megacles] first spread abroad a rumor that Athena was bringing back Pisistratus, and then, having found a woman of great stature and beauty, named Phye...he dressed her in

⁴⁶ Lane (2012: 191) notes, however, that oligarchies are also susceptible to demagoguery, suggesting that the problem is not rooted in democratic institutions alone.

⁴⁷ The party of the Shore was led by Megacles and "considered to aim at a moderate form of government;" the party of the Plain, led by Lycurgus, was more inclined toward oligarchy; and Pisistratus' party of the Highlands favored a more extreme version of democracy (*Ath. Con.* §13).

a garb resembling that of the goddess and brought her into the city with Pisistratus. The latter drove in on a chariot with the woman beside him, and the inhabitants of the city, struck with awe, received him with adoration. (§14)

Aristotle praises Pisistratus for his mild tyranny, saying that he was “accustomed to observe the laws, without giving himself any exceptional privileges” (§16).⁴⁸ Yet he set a dangerous precedent for future would-be leaders who found themselves at odds with their fellow elites. Cleisthenes, “being beaten in the political clubs, called in the people by offering the franchise to the masses” (§20), only to find himself ousted when his opponent Cleomenes returned to Attica and expelled seven hundred families and nearly dissolved the Council. When Cleonmenes fell out of popularity, Cleisthenes returned and, “now that he was the popular leader,” (§21) passed sweeping and disruptive changes to the constitution. This pattern repeats itself through the fifth and fourth centuries until Aristotle arrives at the extreme democracy of his present day.

These episodes capture two themes that are central to Aristotle’s understanding of Athenian democracy and the prospects for democratic political judgment. As noted earlier, Aristotle is sensitive to how socio-economic divisions can, without wise laws and robust institutions to moderate them, factionalize a democracy. The *Athenian Constitution* narrates that process, locating the source of institutional change in the waning fortunes of self-interested elites vying for popular approval. To the extent that Athens became an ancient welfare state of sorts, we see that her citizens owed their improved financial standing more to factional nobles offering them access and bribes than to thoughtful deliberation about how the city ought to share leadership and divide her wealth. By encouraging citizens to accept this rent-seeking behavior as a norm of political life, the democracy’s public men turned the people’s judgment away from considering the collective welfare and toward their own interests. As we saw in Chapters 1 and 2,

⁴⁸ Note that *tyranos* is used neutrally here.

these norms inculcated citizens with hedonic rather than virtuous conceptions of choiceworthy aims. Moreover, Aristotle's political history of Athens deflates the soaring Periclean vision of a people who naturally practice wise decision-making. Even when they supported leaders like moderate leaders who practiced personal restraint while in power, Aristotle suggests that the Athenians did so for the wrong reasons. As we shall see in the next section, Aristotle's notion of *phronēsis* holds citizens to a higher standard: they must not only make the right decisions, but do so in the right way and for the right reasons. Believing that a leader should exercise power because a tall woman has blessed him or because he will pay jurors for their civic service hardly rises to that standard.

As we have already seen in Thucydides and Plato, the pleasure-seeking and freedom-loving multitude are vulnerable to what Aristotle describes as a kind of absolute tyranny. Unlike lawful monarchs, who rule over willing subjects, absolute monarchies behave as tyrants when they rule "in an unaccountable fashion over people who are similar to him or better than him, with an eye to his own benefit, not that of the ruled" (*Pol.* 1295a20-22). In other words, tyrants become absolute when they are free from concerns for their subjects as well as from the norms of legitimacy that lawful regimes observe. It is the multitude's shared love of freedom, more than its varying intelligence, which makes it prone to tyranny when it comes together as a decision-making body. This argument resonates with Plato's critique of democracy in the *Republic*, which depicts the democratic man as a pleasure-seeking dilatant who vacillates between hedonic excess and abstention, sometimes going in for physical training and sometimes resigning himself to idleness, but never reaching an Aristotelian mean of virtue (561c-e, see also *NE* 1107a1-4). Not for nothing does Plato locate the origin of tyranny in democracy (562a). Though Aristotle associates democracy more closely and directly with the ideal mixed regime, we find that the

democrat's love of freedom from law renders him uniquely susceptible to demagogic tyranny. Proponents of a more inclusive practice of phronetic judgment must therefore show how a freedom loving people can acquire the habits and virtues necessary to meet Aristotle's standard. Doing so first requires us to more clearly understand *phronēsis*.

4.2 Practical Wisdom in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* begins and concludes by defining the aim and scope of political science (*politikē*). Political communities foster a wide array of crafts and sciences, each of which aim at particular ends (*teloi*): medicine aims at health, boatbuilding aims at boats, generalship aims at victory, and so forth (NE 1094a8-9). Aristotle classifies crafts and sciences according to their subjects of study with some naturally subordinate to others. In warfare, for instance, bridle-making is subordinate to horsemanship, while cavalry-oriented horsemanship is subordinate to generalship. A natural hierarchy thus emerges among sciences and crafts, in which the aims of specialized sciences contribute to the aims of sciences with more general and choiceworthy ends (1094a14-16). Subordinate sciences derive their social value from the contributions they make to higher, more general ends. Bridle-making and horsemanship are not themselves virtuous skills, but they become virtuous by dint of their roles in winning victory. Military victory is a likewise dubious goal unless it contributes to the city's overall welfare. In other words, specialized crafts and practical sciences derive their normative value from the contributions they make to the general ends of others. Aristotle describes *politikē* as the "highest ruling science" (*architectonikōn*) because it is responsible for orienting the community's various endeavors toward the all-inclusive end of general flourishing (*eudaimonia*) (1094a27).⁴⁹ In order

⁴⁹ Political science is also eminently prescriptive, legislating "what must be done and what avoided" for the city's sake (1094b6-8). Salkever (1981) draws on this point when he contrasts contemporary empirical social sciences with Aristotle's conception of the field. His argument rests largely on the argument that Aristotelian social science engages practitioners in the kinds of value judgments that comprise political life in ways that empiricism does not.

to legislate, “to make the citizens good and law-abiding,” the true statesman (*politikos*) must first become a good person himself (1102a8-10). Hence the aim of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to teach would-be politicians how they might become good.

Aristotle dedicates Book VI to a study of practical judgment and the puzzles it generates. Aristotle observes that human action is motivated by decision (*proairesis*), which is best understood as a “deliberative desire” that we can justify through sound reasoning. He explains this more clearly in Book III,

What we decide to do is whatever action, among those up to us, we deliberate about and [consequently] desire to do. Hence also decision will be deliberative desire to do an action that is up to us; for when we have judged [that it is right] as a result of deliberation, we desire to do it in accord with our wish. (1113a10-14)

Phronēsis is a practical science concerned with action. If action is motivated by desire, and desire is only correct when it is deliberative, then we need to know more about how we ought to deliberate if we are to develop our phronetic judgment. Before examining *phronēsis* as such, however, Aristotle first compares practical sciences and those that are theoretical or productive.

Theoretical sciences are concerned with subjects whose first principles are fixed by nature. Because the first principles of theoretical sciences like mathematics “do not admit of being otherwise” (1139a7) we can understand subjects like geometry with a higher degree of precision than subjects in the practical sciences, whose first principles change through human action or luck (1094b15-17). The different subjects also lend themselves to different methods of inquiry: theoretical study involves deductive reasoning or demonstration; practical thinking,

Unlike contemporary political science, Aristotelian political science recommends a method of political judgment prescribed in non-dogmatic language that is open to further and continuous engagement. Also see Strauss (1964).

again, entails deliberation (1140b31).⁵⁰ Contra Ruderman, we should not, therefore, expect the method of political science to yield results that are as precise as those we should expect from theoretical sciences (1094b24-30, *Met.* 995a14-17).⁵¹

Practical wisdom and *technē* are more closely related because both bodies of knowledge are concerned with things that can be otherwise through human influence (1140a1).⁵² Building a house, for instance, engages reason just as the science of carpentry studies “how something that admits of being and not being comes to be” (1140a12). They differ, however, inasmuch as production (*poiēsis*) and action (*praxis*) are different activities. In Dunne’s words, “Techne provides the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert in one of the specialized crafts, a person who understands the principles (*logoi, aitiai*) underlying the production of an object or state of affairs...Phronesis, on the other hand, characterizes a person who knows how to live well.”⁵³ Unlike the expert carpenter or shipwright, the *phronimos* is a generalist concerned with living

⁵⁰ Theoretical knowledge is typically more difficult because its first principles are “furthest from the senses” (*Met.* 982a25) but is also closer to true knowledge because the first principles of the eternal things it studies must also be “always most true” (*Met.* 993a27-30). Theoretical knowledge is also more exact because it has fewer first principles.

⁵¹ Garsten (2006) locates a democratic value of Aristotelian political judgment in the limited theoretical aims of practical wisdom. Unlike Kant, Aristotle did not think that generalized rules could guide ethical decision-making and thus made no effort to articulate such rules. By emphasizing practical judgment as a central practice of citizenship, Aristotle “found a way to recognize the importance of sensitivity, nuance, and insight – aspects of moral life that rule-based systems of ethics tend to ignore” (115). Citizen judgment is, as he puts it, “defined largely by its lawlessness.” The potential for lawlessness raises questions about how citizens can distinguish between better and worse arguments as they form their policy decisions and muddies the connection between practical science and ethics. While individual ethics might survive without rules, we might expect collective decisions to “stand on firmer and more definite grounds,” especially given the problem of sophistic manipulation Aristotle highlights in his *History of the Athenian Constitution* (116).

⁵² See Reeve (2013: 6). As Martha Nussbaum (1986: 290-291) notes, the connection between the unscientific quality of practical deliberation and the distinctly anthropocentric conception of *eudaimonia* he explores throughout are deeply entwined: “the reason why good deliberation is not scientific is that this is not the way this model good judge goes about deliberating; and the reason why this judge is normative for correct choices is that his procedures and methods, rather than those of a more ‘scientific’ judge, appear the most adequate to the subject matter.”

⁵³ Dunne (1993: 244).

well *in general*. As Aristotle explains in Book II, products and actions are also judged differently:

What is true of crafts is not true of virtues. For the products of a craft determine by their own qualities whether they have been produced well; and so it suffices that they have the right qualities when they have been produced. But for actions in accord with the virtues to be done temperately or justly it does not suffice that they themselves have the right qualities. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them. First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state. (1105a26-35)

We might judge a boat in terms of how it fares on rough water, the amount of cargo it can safely haul, the speed with which it sails, or even on the beauty of its paint; but no one judges a boat's quality by looking to the character of its builder. Actions are different. When we award soldiers with medals for demonstrating courage or praise wealthy donors for funding education, we care about the agent's motives and means. The soldier who stays at his post because he fell asleep during an invasion is not braver than the ones who fled; the donor who pledges large sums of money that she stole is not more generous than the miser. Character matters for practical judgment in ways it does not for productive and theoretical inquiry.⁵⁴

Having disentangled practical wisdom from theoretical and productive sciences, Aristotle concludes that *phronēsis* is a rational capacity necessary for promoting *eudaimonia*. As he puts it, practical wisdom “is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being” (1140b5-9). *Politikē* emerges as a subspecies of *phronēsis* concerned with actions that affect entire communities, which is then subdivided into two further parts:

⁵⁴ Indeed, Aristotle argues that certain qualities of character derive their virtuous status from their relation to practical wisdom. Temperance (*sōphrosunē*) is a virtue “because we think that it preserves prudence (*sōzousan tēn phronēsin*)” (1140b12) by preventing pain and pleasure from clouding judgments about choiceworthy ends and action. Likewise, *phronēsis* helps us develop virtuous character traits by helping us to understand why virtues are choiceworthy. See also NE 1104b5-20, 1140b25-28.

Politics and practical wisdom are the same state (*hexis*) but their being (*einai*) is not the same. Of the practical wisdom concerned with the city, the architectonic part is legislative science (*nomothetikē*), while the part concerned with particulars has the name common to both – ‘politics.’ This part is practical and deliberative, since a decree is doable in action, as the last thing. That is why only these people are said to take part in politics, since it is only they who do things in just the way handicraftsmen do. (1141b24-30)

This passage is challenging because it seems to suggest that political science and practical wisdom are at once unified and discrete. We can explain the distinction between them by looking more carefully at their ends. In Reeve’s words, “They are the same state because the abilities, skills, and virtues an individual needs to promote his own *eudaimonia* reliably are the same as those that a good ruler of a polis needs.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, *phronēsis* and *politikē* differ in their ends. “*Phronēsis* is most of all *phronēsis* when it is concerned with the individual’s own good; politics is more concerned with acquiring and preserving *eudaimonia* for ‘a people and a polis’.”⁵⁶ Marguerite Deslauriers further suggests that they are unified through the virtues more generally described as “an underlying disposition in the first case to see what is true, and in the second case to want what is good.”⁵⁷ Understood this way, we see that *phronēsis* and *politikē* emerge when right decisions are made for reasons that we can reasonably take to be virtuous. The passages’ further bifurcation of *politikē* into a legislative part (*nomothetikē*) and a deliberative part (*politikē*) also highlights the distinction between making laws and judging particular cases. As Kevin Cherry observes, few people are likely to have the “amount or breadth of experience and reflection” necessary to acquire *politikē* in the broad sense, “let alone that *phronēsis* necessary for lawgiving.”⁵⁸ If a broader multitude is capable of acquiring the traits of

⁵⁵ Reeve (1992: 76). See *Pol.* 1277a25-30.

⁵⁶ Ibid. See *NE* 1094b7-11.

⁵⁷ Deslauriers (2002: 120).

⁵⁸ Cherry (2009: 1410). Also see Lindsay (1991: 505-506).

phronēsis, then, it is more likely that they will possess the kind of practical wisdom necessary for judging particular matters like specific decrees or the quality of particular candidates. While this may seem restrictive, I argue that it is more inclusive – and, indeed optimistic – than the depiction of democratic judgment we found in Thucydides or Plato. For here, Aristotle is acknowledging that the citizens of a “certain kind of multitude” need not become a community of Solons and Periclesees in order practice judgment. Rather, they merely need the wherewithal to tell the Solons apart from the Cleons.

Because political science is concerned with general human happiness within a community, political practitioners should train themselves as generalists rather than specialists. As Aristotle puts it, “Each person judges rightly what he knows, and is a good judge about that; hence the good judge in a given area is the person educated in that area, and the unqualifiedly good judge is the person educated in every area” (1095a1-2). We saw in the previous section that the *politikos* should study a variety of constitutions – especially with regard to the principles they aim toward – as well as the particular people for whom he legislates. Aristotle’s account of the *phronimos* further underscores the importance of cultivating a desire for “fine and just things,” first through habituation (1095b5-10) and later through the development of deliberative desires. Taken together, Aristotle’s ideal statesman bears striking similarities to a less godlike version of the philosopher-statesman outlined in Plato’s *Republic*. Like my interpretation of the philosopher-statesmen, *phronemoi* require life experience in order to make sound political judgments. “This is why a youth is not a suitable student of political science,” Aristotle says, “for he lacks experience of the actions in life, which are the subject and premises of our arguments”

(1095a2-4).⁵⁹ They also learn to reason well. Aristotle cautions that practical wisdom is difficult because it is deliberative and deliberation is prone to error “about either the universal or the particular” (1142a21). His statesmen do not benefit from access to Plato’s forms, making Aristotelian political judgment a decidedly deliberative exercise.⁶⁰

Many proponents of a more democratic Aristotelian political philosophy note the close association between phronetic judgment and deliberation. In Book III, Aristotle posits that deliberation concerns actions that are both possible and for the sake of other things (1112b31-1113a1), yet this does not tell us how we might deliberate well. Book VI supplements Book III by suggesting that good deliberation “is correctness that accords with what is beneficial, about the right thing, in the right way, and at the right time” (1142b26-30). This “correctness” is partly supplied through his use of the practical syllogism, according to which a conclusion is correct if (1) the major and minor premises are true and (2) the conclusion validly follows them.⁶¹ If I want to eat a healthy lunch, for example, and I know that (1) light meats are healthy and (2) chicken is a light meat, then (3) I ought to eat chicken for lunch when I am hungry. Aristotle notes that experience can improve this reasoning by acquainting us with information about particulars:

[Practical wisdom] must also acquire knowledge of particulars, since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars. That is why in other areas also some people who lack knowledge but have experience are better in action than others who have knowledge. For someone who knows that light meats are digestible and [hence] healthy, but not which sorts of meats are light, will not produce health; the one who knows that bird meats are light and healthy will be better at producing health. (*NE* 1141b15-25)⁶²

⁵⁹ By “youth” (*néos*), Aristotle does not necessarily mean “young in years” so much as “immature.” (1095a6-8). As Irwin (1999: 354) observes, Aristotle likely means anyone under the age of eighteen who has not yet taken their ephebic oath and is not, therefore, properly a citizen of the city, though this is unclear.

⁶⁰ See Bickford (1996: 30).

⁶¹ See Miller (1984); Reeve (2013: 130-132). Cf. Hardie (1968: 230, 240-243).

⁶² This is why the young and immature can be *clever*, but not *practically wise* (*NE* 1095a5-11).

This procedure seems to accord with what Aristotle refers to as a “certain sort of correctness in deliberation” (*orthos...euboulia*) (*NE* 1142b16). Though no amount of familiarity with particulars will definitively prove the major premise (i.e. light meats are healthy) this method of reasoning nevertheless provides a more rational prescription for action than guesswork, intuition, or unfounded belief. Character virtues can also improve deliberation by activating our practical intuitions.⁶³ Aristotle notes that, in addition to stumbling upon the right action through false inference (*NE* 1142b24), a base person “will use rational calculation to reach what he proposes to see, and so will have deliberated correctly [if that is all it takes], but will have got himself a great evil” (*NE* 1142b19-20). For example, if my goal is to get drunk, I can correctly reason that (1) alcohol will make me drunk and (2) red wine is alcoholic, so (3) I ought to drink the wine. Because drunkenness satisfies a base pleasure, however, Aristotle would be loath to describe my drinking as a phronetic action.⁶⁴ Again, insofar as character virtues shape our desires and our desires inform our goals, good deliberation must accord with the ends that people of good character would rationally desire.

Aristotle’s distinction between good and bad deliberation becomes clearer when he turns to the problem of cleverness (*deinon*). He prefaces his remarks on cleverness by affirming the link between virtue and correct decision-making, saying that a decision’s nobility or baseness is a function of the end toward which it aims (1144a8, 20-25). He then clarifies the role of cleverness with respect to judgment and deliberation:

There is a capacity, called cleverness (*deinotēta*), which is such as to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever goal is assumed and to attain them. If, then, the goal is fine (*skopos ē kalos*), cleverness is praiseworthy, and if the goal is base,

⁶³ See Schollmeier (1989).

⁶⁴ Rather, I would have become incontinent (*NE* 1147a30-1147b1).

cleverness is unscrupulousness. That is why both prudent and unscrupulous people are called clever.

Prudence is not cleverness, though it requires this capacity. Prudence, this eye of the soul, requires virtue in order to reach its fully developed state, as we have said and as is clear. For inferences about actions have a principle, ‘Since the end and the best good is this sort of thing’ [...] And this [best good] is apparent only to the good person; for vice perverts us and produces false views about the principles of actions. Evidently, then, we cannot be prudent without being good. (NE 1144a25-1144b1)

Cleverness is a necessary but insufficient feature of *phronēsis*. Quickly perceiving a problem and correctly formulating a solution is virtuous, provided the end one aims toward is consistent with *eudaimonia*. Aristotle strips *deinon* of its unsettling connotations – terror, awfulness, wonderment, uncanniness – to render a more value-neutral account of cleverness amenable to noble strategic decision-making.⁶⁵ *Phronēsis* harnesses cleverness, using it to ascertain the best means toward a noble end. That end, the major premise of the practical syllogism, is not chosen by cleverness, however, but by virtue. As I have argued, other virtues of character combine with long-sighted virtues of thought to shape that choice of ends. If stripped of its moderating virtues – temperance, justice, etc. – unbridled cleverness may still stumble upon the right goal; yet nothing internal to the agent ensures this and truly terrifying consequences may result if a clever agent aims at the wrong target. Though not necessarily evil, the clever person is not necessarily good, either. As Gadamer puts it, the *deinos* is “capable of anything.”⁶⁶ “It is more than accidental,” he continues, “that such a person is given a name that also means ‘terrible.’ Nothing is so terrible, so uncanny, so appalling, as the exercise of brilliant talents for evil.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Compare Sophocles’ *anthrōpon deinōteron* with Plato’s Protagoras who refers to *deinon* as skillfulness and quick-wittedness (*Protagoras* 338e, 339a) only to have Socrates reassert its negative connotations (341a-b).

⁶⁶ Gadamer (2004 [1975]: 320).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* together further clarifies the differences between a genuine *politikos* and his demagogic counterpart that might assist citizens in distinguish between them. In simplest terms, the *politikos* possesses capacities for *phronēsis* that elude the demagogue. *Politikē* not only requires an accurate and rational conception of communal *eudaimonia*, but a further degree of intimate familiarity with the particular people who live under the laws he writes. He must possess the rational faculties to deliberate well among other leaders while demonstrating sufficient foresight to legislate about an uncertain future. Aristotle's offers few examples of people with *politikē*, and when he does, they are typically men like Solon. It is not speaking too poorly of democracies, then, to suggest that multitudes of people will not fully share equal capacities of this sort. Happily, they (we) do not need to. As I shall explain further in the next section, Aristotle's "certain multitude," the kind capable of phronetic judgment, can make wise decisions about particulars without full possession of *politikē*. Though dependent upon *politikoi* to write laws that inculcate them with the proper habits, desires, and regard for *eudaimonia*, the average person in a well ordered polity can, at a minimum, distinguish between candidates for public office who will likely benefit their city and those who may harm the whole to benefit the part.

4.3 The Wisdom of a Certain Multitude

In Book III, chapter 10 of the *Politics*, Aristotle takes up the question of who should govern a polity. Authority must go to the "either the multitude (*plēthos*), or the rich, or the decent people, or the one who is best of all, or a tyrant" (1281a12), yet all involve difficulties. If the majority seize power only to unjustly divide the wealth of the few, then surely that must not be right. The same logic applies to the tyrannical and the wealthy, who may abuse the majority in the same way. If the decent people rule to the exclusion of everyone else, then they will deny

most people the honor of holding office. Again, this logic applies to aristocracies, which will only exacerbate the problem by excluding even more people from their share of honor. Even those who insist that law (*nomos*) should have authority rather than people are mistaken. What difference does it make, Aristotle asks, if law has authority when it, too, can be oligarchic or democratic? Chapters 12 and 13 examine the difficulties of distributing offices among the well-born, the wealthy, and the free, all of which turn on competing conceptions of justice. Chapter 11, in a passage made famous by Waldron, turns first to examine the claim that the multitude has to legitimate authority.

As noted above, Waldron and others argue that Aristotle's account of the multitude in Chapter 11 offers a compelling case for popular *phronēsis*. Before examining that claim, it is worth quoting the relevant passage in full:

But the view that the multitude rather than the few best people should be in authority would seem to be held, and while it involves a problem, it perhaps also involves some truth. For the many (*to plēthos*), who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively, just as feasts to which many contribute are better than feasts provided at one person's expense. For being many, each of them can have some part of virtue (*aretē*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), and when they come together, the multitude is just like a single human being, with many feet, hands, and senses, and so too for their character traits (*ta ēthē*) and wisdom (*dianoia*). That is why the many are better judges of works of music and of the poets. For one of them judges one part, another another, and all of them the whole thing.

The basic hypothesis set forth in this passage is that, while each individual is not as competent a judge as the single good man, collective bodies of individuals who unite in collective deliberation render better judgments than the good man can on his own. Waldron examines two formulations of the DWM that follow from this hypothesis. DWM₁ elevates popular decision-making over kingship, proposing that that people "acting as a body are capable of making better decisions, by pooling their knowledge, experience, and insight, than any individual member of

the body, however excellent, is capable of making on his own.”⁶⁸ DWM₂ is a stronger claim that privileges the multitude not only over kingship but also over aristocracy: “In considering the rival claims of democratic and aristocratic regimes, the appropriate comparison is not between the people as a whole and individual aristocrats, but between the people acting as a body, on one hand, and an aristocratic subset of them, *also acting as a body*, on the other hand.”⁶⁹ In other words, the stronger version of the claim privileges the entire populace working together over any subset of those same individuals. Here, Waldron is not claiming that the people are better judges than experts, but is rather reminding us that the experts are part of the people. This is the formulation that Ober appears to have in mind when he claims that the multitude make better political judgments than the expert few.

Appealing though it is, there are reasons to be skeptical of Waldron’s reading of this passage. The claim that the multitude are epistemically superior to the expert few – i.e. those with *politikē* – appears especially shaky when extended to Aristotle’s understanding of democracy. Waldron takes care to note that the DWM only holds for populations that are not morally debased or prone to the kind of venal factionalism that marks extreme democracy.⁷⁰ Yet as we saw in Chapter 1, even moderate democracies like Periclean Athens made poor decisions about foreign policy matters. Waldron’s example of the Sicilian Expedition, intended as evidence of the majority’s ability to notice particular facets of complicated policies that might escape experts, does not help his argument:

The assembly is debating whether to mount an expedition to Sicily: one citizen may be familiar with the Sicilian coastline; another with the military capacities of the Sicilians; a third with the cost and difficulty of naval expeditions; a fourth with the bitterness of

⁶⁸ Waldron (1995: 564).

⁶⁹ Ibid, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ Waldron (1995: 565-6). Also see Lintott (1992), Ober (1989: 163-165), Bickford (1996: 33).

military failure; a fifth with the dangers to a democratic state of successful military conquest; and so on. Between them, pooling their knowledge, they can hope to gain the widest possible acquaintance with the pros and cons.⁷¹

This is an attractive portrait of democratic deliberation, yet it could not be further from the *actual* debate Thucydides reported.⁷² There, the people's judgment was blinded by their almost erotic attachment to the voyage and the pleonectic desires its proponents promised to would fulfill. Moreover, as Daniella Cammack has shown in her thoughtful analysis of Waldron's argument, the kinds of decisions Aristotle thought appropriate for collective judgment – particulars like elections, audits, and court cases – were not deliberative affairs of the kind imagined in this example. In each of these cases, decisions were made “simply by voting, *without prior discussion*.”⁷³ Cammack similarly deflates Waldron's reading of the “potluck analogy,” noting that Aristotle is principally concerned not with the variety of dishes on offer but rather with the expense: “the contrast he draws is with a meal ‘from a single purse’ (*ek mias dapanēs*), not one cooked ‘by a single chef.’”⁷⁴ In her view, Waldron's focus on the epistemic value of popular participation is not only inconsistent with Aristotle's political thought but also with Greek political culture more broadly. Kevin Cherry agrees, arguing that Waldron is inattentive to what he takes to be a martial quality in the “certain kind of multitude” Aristotle thinks appropriate for the model of depicted in *Politics* III.⁷⁵ Like Cammack, he posits that Aristotle intends to alert us

⁷¹ Waldron (1995: 567, 571).

⁷² It should also be remembered that the Sicilian debate occurred during a more tumultuous period in Athenian democratic life.

⁷³ Cammack (2013:181), emphasis in original.

⁷⁴ Cammack (2013: 179). She also points out that the Greek diet was, in any case, limited to “bread, olive oil, garlic, figs, and wild greens, with a little cheese, meat, or fish.” It is hard to imagine that a “potluck” would yield an especially impressive diversity of dishes from that menu.

⁷⁵ Cherry (2015). Unlike Cammack, who maintains that Aristotle reserves a measure of *phronēsis* for members of the multitude, Cherry insists that the martial culture of Aristotle's deliberative multitude cultivates the related quality of *sunesis*.

more the qualities of character a virtuous multitude would possess rather than to any distinctive epistemic features.

Though I depart from Waldron's account of the mechanism at play, I share his view that Aristotle was amenable to active and popular political judgment. I have suggested in earlier chapters that democrats can look to the models of good judgment described by Thucydides and Plato for insights into how they might think differently about decision-making. If we assume, like Cammack, that actual citizens rarely engaged in deliberation, then much of that argument is rendered moot. Yet if we are to consider Aristotle's contribution to that broader conversation, we should try to get on firmer textual ground rather than speculate about whether or not citizens actively deliberated in the assembly. (After all, deliberation can take place outside of formal spaces and, in any case, Aristotle suggests that a certain measure of deliberation can occur within an individual themselves.) Given the demanding nature of *politikē* and Aristotle's reservations about democracy discussed in the previous sections, I am sympathetic to Cammack and Cherry's argument that Aristotle is more interested in cultivating certain virtuous qualities of character than *phronēsis* among the many. Nevertheless, I find that they are too dismissive of the broader ways in which citizens combine their ethical intuitions with their rational faculties when they engage in apparently limited practices of political judgment. These qualities emerge most clearly in the people's selection and assessment of legislators.

One casualty of the focus on deliberation within the multitude is the dynamic between candidates for office and the voters who select them. Beyond legislation, Aristotle restricts most political judgments to particulars – i.e. court cases, official elections and audits, etc. – about which the law is not sufficiently detailed to decide (*Pol.* 1281b25-34, 1282a23-41; *Rhet.* 1354b12-16). Though such subjects may appear more pedestrian than philosophical – Aristotle

describes these tasks as the “minimum power necessary” (1274a15) – they are phronetic in the sense that they require citizens to differentiate between better and worse advisors according to the goals and principles of justice encoded in their constitution. More than other forms of government, democracies depend on citizens to select their magistrates from a broad and varied field of people with different talents and qualities. As Aristotle’s account of democratic politics makes clear, the private ambitions of public men pose the greatest threat to civil order, for it is they who are positioned to exploit social and economic tensions for their own gain. In order to avoid faction, a people need some manner of distinguishing between prudent advisors and demagogues.

I have already noted several ways in which demagogues differ from *politikoi*. Whereas demagogues pander to a subset of residents, *politikoi* remain sensitive to the needs and dispositions of their entire communities. Possessed of *phronēsis*, genuine *politikoi* are also more desirous of genuinely *eudemonic* ends, and their deliberations aim toward a general good rather than to the good of a single part within the city. Yet effective demagogues are not stupid; the clever speaker might reason just as well as his phronetic counterpart, and has strategic reasons for understanding his audience as well. In order to tell them apart, Aristotle encourages us to consider extra-rational qualities like reputation and character. As he notes in the *Rhetoric*, a speaker’s character has a material impact on his ability to legislate and persuade:

Particularly in deliberative oratory, but also in lawsuits, it adds much to an orator’s influence that his own character should look right and that he should be thought to entertain the right feelings towards his hearers; and also that his hearers themselves should be in just the right frame of mind. (1377b25-30)

Contra Plato, Aristotle raises the status of rhetoric to a practice which, though not on a level with *politikē*, is consistent with ethics (1355b8-11). He not only finds it likely that the average citizen has a “natural instinct” for the distinction between truth and falsehood (1354b15-16, also see

1354a27-31) but further argues that citizens are well positioned to judge those who would be their leaders. “A man’s neighbors,” he says, “are better judges than people at a distance; his associates and fellow-countrymen better than strangers; he contemporaries better than posterity; sensible persons better than foolish ones; a large number of people better than a small number” (1371a8-13). Proximity and experience are important for grasping particulars, and Aristotle here again indicates that such familiarity enhances judgment. The final clause also gestures toward Waldron’s argument that a more inclusive polity will make better decisions than one that is more restrictive.

Though he acknowledges the potential objections to inviting the multitude to elect and inspect legislators, Aristotle thinks there are two good reasons for doing so, both of which aim to ameliorate the factional conditions that can lead to demagoguery and lawlessness. First, he observes that “a state in which a large number of people are excluded from office and are poor must of necessity be full of enemies” (*Pol.* 1281b28-30). By following Solon’s practice of including these marginalized groups deliberation and judgment, legislators secure them an active role in the polity while preventing them from holding office alone. In this way, they share in the practice of politics enough to feel included but are not positioned to make more complicated decisions like whether or not to sail on Sicily.⁷⁶ A second reason for including the people in the practice of judgment, already noted above, is that the users of the laws may be specially positioned to judge them according to criteria that elude the lawmakers. Here, Aristotle draws on a craft analogy that resonates with the handicraft-quality of *nomothetikē*:

For example, the maker of a house is not the only one who has some knowledge about it; the one who uses it is an even better judge (and the one who uses is the household

⁷⁶ Even this might be risky, as it seems inappropriate to assign the task of assessing experts to non-experts, an observation that recalls Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

manager). A captain, too, judges a rudder better than a carpenter, and a guest, rather than the cook, a feast. (*Pol.* 1282a20-23)

This is a decidedly more empowering justification for including the many in the judgment of officials. For by describing the many as the users of law in this way, Aristotle draws but inverts a parallel with the users and producers of flutes in *Politics* III, Chapter 5. There, in an explanation of the architectonic qualities of *phronēsis*, he described the ruled as the producers of flutes and the rulers as the flute players who assess their quality (1277b28-29).

Taken together, these measures aim to include the majority in political life enough to maintain broad consent to the city's laws but not so much that they transform themselves into a factional mob seeking absolute tyranny. By turning the majority's faculty for judgment toward a more general account of the good, Aristotle seeks to increase their share in *phronēsis* and the moderate, noble qualities of character it entails. This is still not the "potluck" of epistemic perspectives that Waldron describes, as it restricts the scope and range of most people's judgment to the assessment, rather than production, of legislation. But it is also more participatory than Cammack's critique of the feast analogy implies. One reason for attending a potluck is, after all, the enjoyment and sense of belonging that come from contributing to a group enterprise. Most importantly, it represents an institutional means by which democracies can insulate themselves from their greatest threat, namely, demagogic rhetoric. The demagogue is persuasive, in part, because marginalized masses want a share in the governance they feel they are entitled to. Aristotle forecloses on that potential by providing a means by which dispossessed citizens can register their grievances without resorting to extra-legal alternatives.

4.4 Conclusion

My earlier chapters interpreted Thucydides and Plato as sympathetic critics of democracy. Both thinkers were concerned with the effects of demagogic or manipulative rhetoric on political judgment, yet both distributed blame for bad decisions primarily to the Athenians themselves. Cleon and Protagoras harmed the city, but only as much as she allowed them to. Accordingly, Thucydides and Plato were interested in ways of improving the people's political judgment. Aristotle is likewise concerned that democratic majorities are, in some cases, too eager to accept corrupt reasoning as a basis for decisions about public policy. Yet he is also prepared to hold speakers accountable for the bad consequences that follow from their advice. "Rhetoric is useful," he says, "because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so that if the decisions of judges are not what they ought to be, the defect must be due to the speakers themselves, and they must be blamed accordingly" (*Rhet.* 1354b22-24). In one way this is refreshing, as it acknowledges a power disparity between speaker and listener that was particularly problematic in a city as addicted to speech as was fourth century Athens. In another it is humbling, as it recognizes that the people can only be reformed so much by thinker who do not know them. Better to focus on bringing up good leaders who emulate Solon more than Cleon in the hopes that they will write good laws for the people they know better than Plato could.

Yet Aristotle does suggest ways in which democratic institutions can preserve themselves and foster better political judgment. Read together, his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* develop a nuanced and multi-layered account of decision-making. In its fullest sense, *politikē* captures both the productive and deliberative aspects of lawmaking and assessing. This is a rare quality of mind requiring studious attention to particular aspects of a people, their desires, and their

problems, as well as a grasp of *eudaimonia* and the best means of pursuing it. *Politikē* is but part of *phronēsis*, a broader quality of mind and character shared by many in part but by few in full. By developing this gradient of judgment and finding a place for each type within an inclusive regime, Aristotle suggests that institutional arrangements can mitigate the worst effects of factional speech while preserving the diversity and multiplicity that attend actual political life. In this regard, he is unique among the figures discussed in this dissertation.

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CONCLUSION

The three models of better judgment presented in this dissertation – Thucydides’ Brasidas, Plato’s philosopher-statesman, and Aristotle’s *phronimos* – each reflect characteristics of their creators. Though Brasidas was a historical figure, Thucydides undoubtedly took liberties with his characterization of the Spartan that emphasize his commitments to conventional virtues like moderation and justice. Despite his strategic and diplomatic innovations, Brasidas retains conservative qualities that are consistent with Thucydides’ polis-centric values. Compared with Thucydides’ Brasidas, Plato’s philosopher-statesman is a revolutionary ideal. Replacing Brasidas’ conventional conception of justice with an alternative theory of justice as psychic harmony predicated on his or her knowledge of the good, Plato’s philosophers set a nearly impossible standard of political leadership. Yet by emphasizing the practical and experiential aspects of their training as rulers, I have tried to resist their frequent depiction as “hyper-rational” and godlike. Finally, Aristotle’s *phronimos* appears to strike a mean between the Thucydidean and Platonic models of judgment. For Aristotle, *phronetic* judgment is guided by and toward virtue but remains aware of practical constraints on action. Like Brasidas, he is a rare figure in political life, but he does walk among us; like Plato’s philosophers, he is also able to step outside of convention to think critically about virtue.

None of these models of judgment is perfect. Brasidas’ allegiance to the truth is sometimes dubious and his diplomatic victories vanish soon after his own death. Though largely bloodless during his own life, many cities were sacked and people killed because of his Thracian

campaign. Likewise, while Socrates insists that his model of the philosopher-rulers is practical, his critics are not wrong to point out the remoteness of that possibility. As already noted, even Aristotle's *phronimos* is a rare political figure. Surely, few in Aristotle's own day could claim Solonian or Periclean status. Acknowledging all of this, I have argued throughout this dissertation that, like the *kallipolis*, these models of judgment do not need to be entirely feasible to teach us valuable lessons about decision-making. Rather than ranking these figures and arguing in favor of one over the others, then, I highlight the features they share.

Each of these models privileges virtue, especially justice, as a feature of good judgment. While divided by different conceptions of virtue, each found value in framing particular decisions within broader ethical contexts that they could reasonably expect others to understand. As I observed in the introduction, good judgment does not mean shackling oneself to ethical commitments – wise judgment sometimes bends the rules – but it does benefit from aiming toward just goals. These models also acknowledge the uncertainty surrounding judgment. We rely on judgment when information is scarce or unreliable, when outcomes are not known, and when right answers are not obvious. Again, ethical reflection can assist decision-making in the face of uncertainty by clarifying the goals one ought to aim for. Finally, each of these models depicts judgment as an essentially social and political practice. This is important because it clarifies the difference between judgment and prediction. Even a very talented game theorist relies on her judgment when, looking down different decision trees, she selects one path among many. For the figures studied here, such judgments are normatively better when they take other people's interests into consideration.

By reading Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle together, I hope to have shown how these very different thinkers arrived at broadly similar outlines of good judgment. One reason for their

common conclusion is that all three identified similar problems with Athenian decision-making. Indeed, all were sensitive to the irony that the Athenians, a people who prided themselves on their excellent judgment, were among the worst decision-makers in Greece. I have tried to stress throughout this dissertation that their problem with Athens had less to do with her democratic constitution and more to do with the goals the city set for herself. In short, these thinkers do not necessarily suggest that the solution to poor democratic judgment is to make it less democratic. Rather, I have argued that their solution was closer to a suggestion that political decision-makers cultivate their capacities for ethical reflection and critical thinking. Importantly, all three thinkers suggest that one can improve one's judgment by practicing judgment.

Though she won the popular vote, Hillary Clinton fell short in her bid for the White House. As her supporters have tried to understand how an experienced and qualified, albeit disliked, candidate for the presidency lost to a political newcomer whom few consider moral and many consider dangerous, we might forgive them for questioning the quality of American democratic judgment. Looking abroad to other established democracies, the British decision to leave the European Union last summer and the swelling popularity of the National Front in France might add to these anxieties. Indeed, one large-scale study finds that fewer than 30 percent of those who were born after 1980 consider it essential to live in a democracy, while 24 percent consider democracy a bad way to govern.¹

One lesson from Thucydides' *History* and Plato's Socratic dialogues is that moments of crisis can also provoke overdue reflection. How we decide between competing claims about the

¹ See, e.g., Foa and Mounk (2016).

good reveals something of our character, our priorities, and our goals. As Socrates suggests in Plato's *Euthyphro*, the way we define *justice* and *the good* can at once deepen social belonging among those who agree and harden differences with those who do not. One potential limitation of looking to the Greeks for insights into this process is that the average polis was both smaller and more homogeneous than contemporary nation-states. Where class conflict was unlikely, fellow citizens could assume a greater deal of background agreement about how virtues were defined and pursued than contemporary liberal democrats can. This problem revives questions of how we judge the judgment of others.

I have argued that Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle challenged Athenian judgment on the basis that it was both ethically impoverished and politically wrongheaded. I have also suggested that their works could serve as a means of articulating those challenges with the aim of improving Athenian judgment. They were not especially successful. Yet as I noted at the beginning of this dissertation, judging is an unavoidable activity; we cannot avoid it by asking others to do so in our place. By encouraging citizens to reflect on the foundations upon which their judgments stand, the thinkers I have considered here provide an enduring service to democracy.

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