Civic Care: The Value of Disagreement as Care in Plato's *Gorgias*

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Abstract

Joshua Miller: Civic Care: The Value of Disagreements as Care in Plato's *Gorgias*
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Democratic theorists like Rawls and Habermas identify pervasive disagreements as "facts" of pluralistic political life. Along with other social contract theorists, they propose strategies for mitigating or altogether avoiding especially recalcitrant disagreements. In contrast, critical and agonistic theorists like Chantal Mouffe, Iris Marion Young, and Amy Gutmann suggest that disagreements are not only pervasive but *desirable for* democratic politics. These criticisms suffer from their own shortcomings, some of which are addressed in this paper. Specifically, the paper explicates the value of disagreement within a democratic context, proposing that a disagreement's worth should be measured by its reasonableness rather than its termination in agreement between adversarial interlocutors. Plato's *Gorgias* illustrates such worthwhile disagreement. The dialogue suggests ways for interlocutors to approach and sustain disagreement while articulating Socrates' conception of disagreement as a form of *civic care*. By sustaining reasoned disagreements, citizens thus care for and about democracy and each other.

For Kathryn and Moose, as stubborn as they are caring.

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Introduction

August 11, 2009 was a tough day for Arlen Specter but, on the senator's account, a good day for democracy. Facing a groundswell of public opposition to United States healthcare reform, Specter found himself confronted by an agitated citizen who had come to voice his complaints at a nationally televised town hall meeting in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. After allowing the disruptive gentleman to speak his mind, Specter declared: "We just had a demonstration of democracy!" What did the senator mean by this? Surely he did not mean that democracy was displayed through a dispassionate negotiation of complex legislative concerns. Not only was the exchange between Specter and the citizens gathered that day anything but a conversation among experts, it also failed to produce any kind of final agreement between the politician and his constituents on how to effectively manage the difficult matter before them. The exchange was rather an emotionally charged disagreement between political actors that ultimately failed to resolve itself in a mutually agreeable compromise. If this disagreement was a "demonstration" of democratic politics, what does it tell us about democracy more generally? More specifically, does this exchange imply that disagreements carry some intrinsic worth for democracy even when they are unresolved by political compromise?

Disagreements pervade democratic political life. Societies that encourage self-actualization and tolerance for pluralistic conceptions of the good life are at once rich with cultural diversity and creativity as well as troubled by ethical and logistical hurdles to unified

policy formation. Consequently, many prominent democratic theorists have advanced ways to mediate disagreements while preserving the pluralistic character of democratic regimes. Such theories include Rawls' notion of the "overlapping consensus," Dryzek's "meta-consensus," and the procedural tenants of Habermas' deliberative rationality. Because these theories tend to address disagreements as problems which must be fixed for democratic politics to work, they fail to adequately account for those particularly intractable disagreements we encounter daily. Critics of these consensus-oriented theories—so-called "difference democrats" like Gutmann and Thompson (1996) and "agonistic pluralists" like Mouffe (1996, 2007), Honig (1993, 1996), and Young (1996, 1999)—contend that differences and disagreements constitute pluralistic society and, indeed, democratic politics. Attempts to reconcile those differences between groups through consensus, especially according the tenets of Enlightenment rationality, are criticized as elitist and exclusionary (Young 1996). While these theories instructively highlight the discordant nature of democratic political life, they nevertheless fail on at least two fronts. First, they do not locate the intrinsic value of disagreements for democracy. I will argue that disagreements are good for their own sake within a democratic context, and will offer account of why this is the case. Second, they do not offer a much needed account of better and worse modes of conflict. Though agonists like Mouffe suggest that we find ways to transform adversarial competitions into agonistic relationships, they fail to illustrate any such practice. Without some idea of what a worthwhile disagreement looks like, it remains difficult to realize the agonistic vision.

This essay is an intervention in the debate between consensus theories and their agonistic critics. In what follows, I argue that both consensus theorists and their agonistic critics offer instructive but incomplete accounts of how citizens can manage political

disagreements. On the one hand, consensus theorists are correct to emphasize the importance of reasoning in democratic politics. On the other hand, agonistic critics are right to regard conflict and disagreement as central ongoing aspects of democratic politics. Thus reasoning is not a practice through which we dissolve conflicts, but rather how we democratically *engage* them. I propose that democratic theorists need a model of what we might call "agonistic reason."

The Socrates of Plato's *Gorgias* offers such a model. My argument will demonstrate that Socrates' practice in the dialogue shows how reasonable disagreements function as a kind of *civic care* for democratic regimes and their citizens. Thus this project also works to expand the feminist literature on the ethics of care in a specifically political direction. Joan Tronto defines *care* as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live…That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (1995, 142). This literature instructively highlights multiple dimensions along which persons who share the same political space interact with one another. However, it fails to account for the disagreeable tendencies which also accompany such interactions. Nonetheless, the language of care also provides a useful framework for how citizens can productively channel those tendencies. The theory of civic care asserts that citizens of pluralistic democracies can best sustain their political communities not by suppressing dissenting view points, but rather by exchanging them. That is, more than merely *respecting* or *tolerating* alternative views—as the familiar language of liberalism might suggest—citizens should both assert their own views and understand the logic supporting alternatives. In this way, citizens "take responsibility for one another," to use Tronto's phrase, by assuring

that the reasons they provide to support their viewpoints are consistently defensible.[1] As such, I contend that an ethics of care can fruitfully inform an alternative conception of citizens-as-carers of citizenship in a pluralistic democracy.

The remainder of this paper will proceed in five main sections. I will begin with a more detailed review of the consensus-difference debate. This section will illustrate the problems with consensus-theorists' emphasis on rational consensus, as well as the insufficiency of the extant agonistic critique. I will then review the literature on disagreements in democratic theory, as well as other theories of what constitutes a *reasonable* disagreement. Here, I will show why democracy needs disagreements, but that we need a way to assess better and worse modes of reasonable disagreement. The third section will argue why we should conceive reasonable disagreement as care by linking my conception of civic care to the political aspects of care literature. In the fourth section, I will offer a reading of the *Gorgias* illustrating how care functions within a specifically political context, as well as how the Socratic *elenchus* serves as a model of civic care. Finally, I will explain how my conception of Socratic civic care reorients the consensus-difference debate toward a more helpful discussion of how best to encourage modes of reasonable disagreement that are most conducive for sustaining democratic politics.

[1] Other theorists have agitated for revisions to democratic theory by underscoring the value of disagreements between citizens. Indeed, John Stuart Mill advocated precisely this kind of civic engagement. In "On Liberty," Mill asserts that while we have no obligation to prevent others from pursuing deleterious lifeplans according to which they alone reap the consequences—say, indulging a debilitating heroin addiction— we nevertheless owe it to each other to identify better and worse conceptions of the good, and to encourage each other to stimulate our "higher faculties," even if we must modify conventional etiquette in order to do so (1991, 84-5). Like the aforementioned theorists, however, Mill fails to offer concrete illustrations for how citizens might adopt his advice. He does not address the immediate problem of politeness: why wouldn't citizens dismiss disagreements as mere rudeness? Thus I look further back in the canon for a viable example of what I call civic care practices.

Consensus and Pluralism

Contemporary democracies must negotiate varying degrees of pluralism. Some theorists have pointed out that there are many types of pluralism (Lowi 2006, Eisfeld 2006) and this range of definitions lends the term a certain conceptual ambiguity. For the purposes of this paper, I will define pluralism as the coexistence of multiple groups—characterized by their own conceptions of the good—within a single political community. As a characteristic of contemporary democratic regimes, conditions of pluralism have been at once praised for accommodating diverse forms of life and derided for tearing asunder the threads that hold political communities together.

Of the many ways theorists have attempted to negotiate the conflicts that inevitably emerge from pluralism (e.g. constitutionalism, elitism, etc.) few have had more resonance than the consensus theories championed by Rawls (1971, 1993, 2001), Larmore (1990), Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006), and Habermas (1998). Following Kant and Rousseau, consensus theories generally assert that coercive legal institutions are legitimated by the broad consent they enjoy from those who are affected by them. Consensus theories thus attempt to outline the conditions under which citizens *qua* citizens from divergent ethical, moral, and political backgrounds can agree on common standards of political legitimacy. In this view, the divergence and competition characteristic of pluralism are problems that must find remedy in some level of generalizable, reasonable agreement.

In *Political Liberalism* (1993) Rawls advances a theory of "overlapping consensus" within "reasonable" pluralistic political societies. By remaining neutral with respect to conflicting comprehensive doctrines (e.g. religions, philosophies, etc.) and focusing specifically on shared political values (e.g. justice), the overlapping consensus is designed to reduce the prominence of intractable conflicts of the good life (140). Rather than attempting to moderate conflicts between competing doctrines, the overlapping consensus aims to engage citizens of a polity as citizens rather than as members of different groups within society.[2] As will be discussed below, Rawls's insistence that different groups can share a common political consensus for different reasons differs from the Habermasian conception of deliberative consensus.

There are a few components of Rawls's overlapping consensus that must be addressed here. First, Rawls envisions the consensus as a way for political societies characterized by "reasonable pluralism," that is, societies that are comprised of "a diversity of reasonable comprehensive doctrines," to find common ground (36). Reasonable comprehensive doctrines are those that "are in part the work of free practical reason within the framework of free institutions" that govern liberal democratic societies (37). Reasonable pluralism is contrasted with pluralism *as such* insofar as not every comprehensive doctrine (i.e. those that are intolerant, advocate slavery, etc.) is included. In Rawls's view, reasonable comprehensive doctrines must remain amenable to the political aim of justice as fairness, which "tries to provide common ground as the focus of an overlapping consensus" (193-4).

[2]As Rawls explains: "In such a consensus, the reasonable doctrines endorse the political conception, each from its own point of view. Social unity is based on a consensus on the political conception; and stability is possible when the doctrines making up the consensus are affirmed by society's politically active citizens and the requirements of justice are not too much in conflict with citizens' essential interests as formed and encouraged by their social arrangements" (134).

A second important feature of the overlapping consensus is that it is largely the product of public reason. "[In] a democratic society," Rawls observes, "public reason is the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution" (214). Public reason is limited to what he calls "constitutional essentials" which include "the fundamental principles that specify the general structure of government and the political process" as well as the basic rights of citizens, like voting rights, liberty of conscience, and legal protection (227). Public reasoning is also limited to public forums like Congressional debates; private political discussions are not subject to its constraints. However, Rawls is confident that standards of public reason will inform the way citizens deliberate even in informal exchanges: "As reasonable and rational…[citizens] should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality" (218). The standard of legitimate reasoning, then, appeals not to a comprehensive doctrine to which citizens can expect everyone to adhere[3]; rather, reasons are legitimated by their rational foundations and adherence to common evaluative standards of correctness and judgment.

I would like to stress a final point about Rawls's notion of the overlapping consensus that will be important for my own aims with this project: it is not a *modus vivendi*. While outlining the steps to reaching an overlapping consensus, Rawls notes that "once a constitutional consensus is in place, political groups must enter the public forum of political discussion and appeal to other groups who do not share their comprehensive doctrine" (165).

[3] These would be considered "nonpublic reasons" in Rawls's framework: "[All] ways of reasoning—whether individual, associational, or political—must acknowledge certain common elements: the concept of judgment, principles of inference, and rules of evidence…otherwise they would not be ways of reasoning but perhaps rhetoric or means of persuasion. We are concerned with reason, not simply with discourse" (220).

In so doing, groups cannot simply agree to disagree about the constitutional essentials mentioned above. Rather, the breadth and depth of the consensus is delimited by those issue areas of common political—rather than moral—concern that actors can reasonably expect to find common ground on through rational discourse. Though Rawls does not speculate about the specific breadth or depth of an overlapping consensus, it is presumably quite general and principally concerned with the fundamentals of a given political society.

Habermas' conception of deliberative democratic theory advances another important model of consensus that is also premised on the ideal of rational discourse between citizens. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1998) Habermas worries that moral or other norms derived from citizens' comprehensive doctrines will become the subject of bargaining. Because bargaining situations are characterized by compromises and potential winners and losers (rather than reasoned argument), the fear is that citizens will become subject to legal rules founded on norms with which they deeply disagree. Consequently, Habermas argues that citizens must not only be convinced to approve a rational consensus, but that they must also be convinced for the same reasons; that is, according to the same measure of rationality. He draws the distinction between a rationally motivated consensus and a compromise thus: "Whereas a rationally motivated consensus rests on reasons that convince all the parties *in the same way*, a compromise can be accepted by the different parties each for its own *different* reasons" (166). On this view, then, Rawls's overlapping consensus bears much more similarity to the latter than the former.

Contra Rawls, Habermas limits the legitimacy of a given consensus to its accordance with his discourse principle: "Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourse" (107). Even fair bargaining only

indirectly applies this principle because, according to Habermas, actors behave strategically in order to advance their private interests; compromises are more the product of effective resource management than the exchange of strong, rational arguments (167). Importantly, Habermas acknowledges that bargaining is often a necessary means of negotiating disagreements within pluralistic societies (165). Consequently, his own theory can only be "indirectly" brought to bear upon bargaining procedures by urging bargaining practices to be more inclusive and rationally motivated (166). But Habermas neglects to specify a more detailed account of what a "fair bargain" might look like. Moreover, he leaves the question of whether or not diverse societies are capable of reaching a consensus very much in question. It seems unlikely, for instance, that a diverse community of political actors can come to the same conclusions about stem-cell research policies for the *same reasons*. As I will discuss at more length in the following section, it is precisely when actors face difficult disagreements that they must maintain their commitment to reasoned debate. They should do so not because these disagreements will be resolved through a consensus, but because continually engaging one another in a reasoned dialogue about matters of common concern is an important step in maintaining a cohesive community in the face of discordant policy proposals.[4] Citizens owe it to themselves to ensure that the reasons they advance are consistent and coherent. As I will argue, they can achieve this by rigorously examining each others' proposals through reasonable disagreement.

[4] Waldron argues that reasoned dialogue can be embodied in the law: "The claims that law makes…are the claims of an existing (and developing) framework ordering our actions and interactions in circumstances in which we disagree with one another about how our actions and interactions should be ordered…The authority of law rests on the fact that there is a recognizable need for us to act in concert on various issues or to co-ordinate our behavior in various areas with reference to a common framework, and that this need is not obviated by the fact that we disagree among ourselves as to what our common course of action or our common framework ought to be" (1999, 7).

Though Rawls and Habermas disagree on the strict definition of *consensus*, their shared ideal of rational discursive exchanges between rational citizens leaves them subject to much of the same criticism. As noted above, radical democrats and advocates of pluralism take issue with both theorists' orientations toward consensus as an ideal remedy for political conflict. For instance, Iris Marion Young's work on citizenship insists that politics is never a settled, and that attempts to render it as such through Enlightenment discourse are mistaken. Theories of citizenship that idealize universal inclusion also risk suppressing group and individual particularity. As she explains, this poses problems for both of the consensus models outlined above:

> The ideal of the public realm of citizenship as expressing a general will, a point of view and interest that citizens have in common which transcends their differences, has operated in fact as a demand for homogeneity among citizens.[…] Feminists in particular have analyzed how the discourse that links the civic public with fraternity is not merely metaphorical. Founded by men, the modern state and its public realm of citizenship paraded as universal values and norms which were derived from specifically masculine experience. 2007, 341-2

Among the examples she lists of the "specifically masculine experience" is the commitment to unemotional, rational discourse. In an earlier work, Young proposes "that we understand differences of culture, social perspective, or particularist commitment as resources to draw on for reaching understanding in democratic discussion rather than as divisions that must be overcome" (1996, 120). This includes an expanded notion of democratic communication. Contra Rawls's distinction between public and private discourses, Young notes that rhetoric and reasoning are complementary. She provides Plato's *Gorgias* as an example: "As the

dialogue progresses it becomes clear…that Socrates and his interlocutors cannot sustain such a distinction between truth and rhetoric; argument also persuades" (128).

Extending her interpretation of *Gorgias*, Young proposes three elements that should be included in democratic communication: greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling. Her discussion of greeting is particularly important for the purposes of this paper. Against the Habermasian commitment to strictly rational discourse, Young points out that discussion is "wrapped in nonlinguistic gestures that bring people together warmly, seeing conditions for amicability…In this respect bodies, and care for bodies, must enter an ideal of communicative democracy" (129). "Since much democratic discussion will be fraught with disagreement," she continues, "intermittent gestures of flattery, greeting, deference, and conciliatory caring keep commitment to the discussion at times of anger and disagreement" (130).

As will be expanded upon in what follows, I largely agree with Young's insistence that democratic communication be expanded beyond strictly rational discourse. However, I differ in my interpretation of how the *Gorgias* exemplifies this practice. I will assert that the form of disagreement depicted in that dialogue makes a case for disagreement as a form of caring; and, further, care can be expanded not only to include the bodies of those who participate, but also to the discussion itself.

In addition to Young's criticism, Mouffe raises two primary issues with rational consensus models. First, like Young, she observes that rational discourses tend to exclude

already marginalized political groups.[5] Second, consensus models reify institutions, thereby precluding the opportunity for future critique. Further, Mouffe argues that consensus models, specifically those advanced by Rawls and Habermas, fail to understand politics as a real-world struggle between competing interests for scarce resources. In favor of an agonistic conception of politics, Mouffe posits that the terms of consensus are designed such that, once agreed upon, they cannot be criticized or overturned, thereby equating the goal of consensus to a dangerous utopia that focuses too much on rational conflict resolution and not enough on the radically contingent, non-essentialist nature of democratic pluralism (1996, 250). The procedures that consensus theorists suggest should mediate disagreements actually preclude them from taking place on the onset. She suggests that attempts to formulate a rational consensus, "that is, one that would not be based on any form of exclusion" should be abandoned because they are not only impossible according to the terms set forth by the Habermasian discourse principle, but also that even if these terms were relaxed—as under a Rawlsian overlapping consensus—the product would reify sclerotic institutions and insulate them from future revision (254). Instead, Mouffe's conception of agonistic pluralism embraces the contingency of a politics premised on competition between interests. The goal of democratic theory, it follows, should be oriented toward designing institutions that include marginalized discourses and mediate potentially oppressive power asymmetries.

[5] Jane Mansbridge (1980) finds that town hall meetings tend to be dominated by white middle-class men who may have more practice speaking in public forums. She additionally observes that minorities—including mothers and elderly citizens—tend to have more difficulty getting to such meetings in the first place.

The Value of Reasonable Disagreements

My analysis fills in two important gaps in both the consensus and pluralistic literatures. By emphasizing the conditions under which citizens can agree, consensus theories neglect the value of disagreements. Consequently, they fail to account for how citizens can best approach one another when they disagree about shared political concerns. Pluralists instructively highlight the discordant nature of democratic politics, urging us to consider ways to transform antagonistic political relationships into agonistic exchanges. However, their account fails on three fronts. First, they fail to illustrate the specific differences between antagonistic and agonistic disagreements. Second, they do not provide an adequate alternative theory of moral disagreement. Finally, they do not address empirical evidence suggesting that increased levels of disagreement actually lead to correspondingly high levels of political disengagement.[6] Despite these shortcomings, I would like to highlight the agonistic claim that disagreements are not only characteristic of, but also intrinsically valuable for, democratic politics. Restricting our political conversations to those with whom we share likeminded opinions threatens to create a kind of feed-back loop in which otherwise controversial views become entrenched as dogmatic "common-sense" perceptions of *how the world really is*. Left unchallenged, such opinions not only threaten to undermine citizens' capacities for advancing creative, defensible, reasoned arguments for why they hold the

[6] See Roger Brown, 1986. *Social Psychology* (2nd ed.) New York: The Free Press. 203-226. For discussion of deliberation exacerbating political cleavages, see Gaus 1997 and Shapiro 1999.

views they do but they also a hinder a democratic regime's ability to make good collective decisions.

Cass Sunstein (2003) addresses this problem of group polarization in his examination of social dissent. He notes that the effects of deliberation-related group polarization are particularly problematic for democratic legal systems.[7] Following deliberation, jurists tend to adopt stronger attitudes toward punishment or leniency than they held prior to trial (113). Further, Republican and Democratic judges tend to vote in a more stereotypical fashion when they share the bench with like-minded peers (114). For Sunstein, group polarization is not the product of too much disagreement between individuals; rather, it is the product of too much agreement *within groups* that disagree *with other groups*. He locates this "group think" motivation in two places: information and peer-pressure. "When people are responding to the information conveyed by what others do," he writes, "we have a distinctive kind of conformity" (9). Likewise, we frequently desire the approval of people with whom we identify. Consequently, Sunstein observes that would-be dissenters within groups tend to suppress information that contradicts the ideological assumptions which constitute the group in the first place. This practice frequently produces skewed—potentially wrong—convictions. He cites empirical findings which suggest that while persistent conflict between group-members who fail to get along can hinder group performance, sufficiently complex tasks that demand innovative solutions actually benefit from dissenting views.[8] Sunstein concludes that well-functioning societies institute practices that promote diversity, "partly to protect the rights of dissenters, but mostly to protect interests of their own" (213). The

[7] For a similar discussion of disagreements and the law, see Waldron 1999.

[8] See Karhen A. Jehn and Elizabeth A. Mannix. 2001. "The Dynamic Nature of Conflict: A Longitudinal Study of Intragroup Conflict and Group Performance" *Academic Management Journal* 44 (2): 238-251.

theory of civic care advanced in this paper holds a similar view of the value of disagreement. By advancing their views and examining others, democratic citizens preserve both their individual voices and the robustness of their shared political community.

Sunstein makes a strong case for why promoting free speech is good for democracy. However, he offers little in the way of improving the content of that speech. A viable theory of civic care should not only defend the value of disagreements, but also show something of what a reasonable disagreement might look like. As will be argued later in this paper, I believe Plato's *Gorgias* provides a rich example of civic care as reasonable disagreement in practice. It is nevertheless instructive at this juncture to account for what is meant by *reasonable disagreement.*

My theory is informed by a recent body of literature that has articulated an account of what constitutes reasonable disagreement (Besson 2005, McMahon 2009). This literature instructively observes that much of what makes disagreement so pervasive and enduring is, in fact, its reasonableness. Following Samantha Besson, I restrict the domain of reasonable disagreement to conflicts about shared ethical or moral dilemmas within a political context. That is, citizens are principally concerned with the definition, value, and constitutive functions of justice within their political community.[9] In order to reasonably disagree, citizens must also have some standard by which to evaluate evidence. As Christopher McMahon points out, what counts as germane evidence is contingent upon the specific issue being discussed (18). Broadly speaking, however, discussants must be able to mutually recognize the validity of evidence presented in favor of, or in opposition to, a proposed thesis. This is because discussants must also be willing to be persuaded by opposing

[9] See also Nagel 1987.

arguments. If discussants are unable to recognize the validity of counterevidence, they are unable to meet this criterion.[10] Finally, reasonable arguments must be internally consistent. Besson notes that standards of reasonableness are typically regarded as less rigorous than standards of rationality (93).[11] But this should not suggest that reasonable arguments lack their own logic. As my interpretation of the Socratic elenchus makes clear, inconsistent beliefs—particularly regarding claims to justice, according to which a discussant would presumably will that all members of her political community would adhere—must either be rendered consistent or else rejected. In short, all valid, reasonable arguments must be able to withstand immanent critique.

A brief example from the 2009 White House Healthcare Summit helps illustrate reasonable disagreement. In an effort to lend transparency—and political theater—to the generally opaque process of healthcare reform, the Obama administration convened a nationally televised meeting between recalcitrant policymakers in late February. Different forms of evidence were brought to bear during the meeting. In addition to the empirical evidence both Democrats and Republicans brought forth to ground their positions, President Obama claimed that he read several letters each day narrating citizens' healthcare-related woes. These narratives motivated his normative arguments for why expanded healthcare coverage was an especially pressing policy concern. By offering these narrative examples, the President attempted to distill a normative dimension of the debate that was not captured by statistical projections and other quantitative measures of the impact healthcare reform

[10] Though the theory of civic care values disagreement it does not preclude the possibility of reaching agreement, provided such agreement is supported by well-reasoned arguments. The value of a disagreement is not wholly contingent upon an agreeable outcome. Nevertheless, well-reasoned conclusions are not all treated as suspect according to the theory. Rather, the theory would target those agreements that citizens suspect may not be supported by valid reasons.

[11] See also, Rawls 1993, 48; and Scanlon 1998, 22-3

would have on the United States. In other words, both forms of evidence were considered equally valid and reasonable.

This example illustrates another component of reasonable disagreement; namely, reasonableness is not measured by resolution in compromise. In interviews with the press following the conclusion of the summit, Obama admitted that Democrats and Republicans may not "bridge the gap" between their philosophical differences on the issue. "Politically speaking, there may not be any reason for Republicans to want to do anything," he acknowledged, "But I thought it was worthwhile for us to make this effort."[12] As my interpretation of the *Gorgias* will demonstrate, even disagreements that do not resolve themselves in compromise are still politically valuable. Despite the discussion, the final policy did not reflect a "bridge" spanning the ideological divisions between parties. Nevertheless, the political spectacle surrounding the debate had its advantages. Like the audience witnessing the exchanges between Socrates and his interlocutors, those who watched the summit on television gained accurate insights into both parties' positions—e.g. no Democrat pressed for "death panels"—as well as the reasons supporting them. These insights help frame debates between citizens, thereby elevating the level of public reason beyond mere propaganda and sound-bites toward more meaningful engagements. Finally, the exchanges between Republicans and Democrats at the summit exemplify the ongoing nature of reasonable disagreements. Though Obama would not concede to Republican demands that reform talks begin anew, he did remark, "[We've] got to go ahead and make some decisions and then that's what elections are for," suggesting that future legislators could amend or overturn unpopular policies. This acknowledgement captures the ongoing

[12] For a complete transcript, see Washington Post, "President Speaks at Healthcare Summit" March 5, 2009.

nature of reasonable disagreement insofar as it reflects the unsettled quality of democratic decisions.

Civic Care in Context

Theories of care emphasize the specifically human dimension of social labor in contemporary societies. The language of care, highlighting affective connections between people—both between citizens as well as between citizens and non-citizens—who share social space, provides a useful conceptual vocabulary for the theory of civic engagement advanced in this paper. Though the care literature ranges from feminist political theory to the practical dilemmas of the so-called "care industry" (e.g. nursing, counseling, direct social services, etc.) for the purposes of this paper I will restrict the following review to concerns about the ethics of care and the relationship between care and political theory. I argue, contra much of the literature, that along with concepts like sympathy, commitment, fostering, and responsiveness, the language of care can be expanded to include disagreements between members of a political community as well.[13]

As noted above, theories of care tend to highlight the uniquely human dimensions of certain kinds of labor. For instance Dietmut Grace Bubeck (2002) observes that care is "fundamentally other-directed and beneficial to others, while involving an investment of the

[13] My insistence on including conflictual qualities as components of sustaining a political community places my theory of civic care at odds with other interpretations of care as an *embodied* political practice. For instance, Maurice Hamington's (2001) interpretation of Jane Addams as a proponent of embodied care locates her conception of care alongside Lugones and Spellman's emphasis on the language of solidarity, friendship, and love. While I am sympathetic to this argument, I disagree with Addams' contention that democratic politics is contingent upon one's belief in the "basic goodness of people" (117). Rather, I highlight the conflictual aspects of embodied care to underscore my claim that citizens can care for one another within a political context marked by interest-based motivations. Though this notion of civic care does not preclude conventional examples of democratic solidarity such as those found in Addams' work at the Hull House, it does not depend on common affection either.

carer's time and energy" (160). Unlike other forms of labor, the work associated with care—such as nursing the elderly or sick, providing social services the impoverished, or counseling to the abused—cannot be alleviated by machines in the way other forms of manual labor can. This is principally because the labor associated with care demands emotional and psychological effort from the care-worker that cannot be reproduced by machines. In this way, care labor "maintains and reproduces" human communities as associations of interdependence (165). Bubeck conceives of caring as "a mutual giving and taking [between the care-giver and receiver]…rewarding in itself, even if it does not generate any material returns for the carer" (163, 170). When defined in terms that highlight everyone's capacity to both give and receive, caring acquires a vital social dimension that resonates with my interpretation of Socrates in the *Gorgias*. As will be discussed in the next section, Socrates' *elenchus* is an emotionally and physically demanding procedure which aims to improve his interlocutors by insisting that they defend their conceptions of good social life.

While Bubeck's definition of caring as a "mutual exchange" between laborer and recipient has been adopted by others (Mackay 2001, Fine 2007), it remains somewhat problematic. Indeed, much of what can make care labor so exhausting is the fact that it can demand so much from those who give it while giving so little in return—monetarily or otherwise. Joan Tronto (2005) seizes on this point. Observing that much of the care work in the United States is provided by illegal immigrants who are not protected under existing labor laws, Tronto argues that citizenship should be extended to workers on the basis of the services they provide. An obvious shortcoming of this proposal is that, should care-workers lose their jobs, their citizenship rights could also be revoked. Nevertheless, the connection between care and citizenship is an important one for this paper. By underscoring the unique

contributions that care-workers provide to sustaining their communities, Tronto politicizes care-work beyond its economic dimensions and invites us to consider how caring can be understood as a political activity. Indeed, as will be shown shortly, this is precisely how Socrates characterizes care in the *Gorgias*.

The theory of civic care is not so much a critique of the extant care literature as it is an extension of it. Caring for each other does not mean citizens have to agree. As my interpretation of the *Gorgias* will demonstrate, sustained political debate is a political good in itself for a democratic polity. Finally, I must stress that the model of civic care is focused on citizens' interactions *as citizens*. Sustaining even the most dispassionate disagreements may not be productive for other dimensions of human life. Constantly arguing with our parents or siblings may, indeed, prove harmful for family life. In that context, a *modus vivendi* may be more appropriate. But this is not so for democratic politics, where interests are represented and compete with others for scarce political capital. If democratic institutions promote inclusion and public reason, they are also bound to promote the discordant exchange of reasons for why a polity should embrace some policies while rejecting others. In this context, citizens must take other viewpoints seriously, which entails subjecting them to critique. Moreover, according to the criteria of reasonable disagreement outlined in the preceding section, citizens must be willing to persuade and *be persuaded by* these alternative views. In this way, citizens commit themselves to caring for sustainable debate and, in turn, the democratic culture they support.

Civic Care in Plato's *Gorgias*

I have argued throughout this paper that disagreements can function as civic care in democratic polities. In this section, I will present a reading of Plato's *Gorgias* that illustrates how this model can function in practice as Socratic elenchus. In what follows, I will demonstrate how my reading of Plato's Socrates in this dialogue serves as an instructive archetype of democratic citizenship. My interpretation of Socrates in the *Gorgias* differs from some theories of so-called "Socratic citizenship." Unlike some accounts, I argue that Socratic elenchus functions on two levels. First, following a somewhat conventional interpretation of Socrates' project, I posit that the elenchus problematizes the received wisdom and deeply held but otherwise unquestioned beliefs of Socrates' interlocutors. I will argue that such beliefs threaten democracy by asserting an elitist privilege of private knowledge that fails to adequately engage most citizens in the independent analytical thought required of healthy democratic citizenship. By strongly encouraging interlocutors to question their prior beliefs, Socrates performs the activity of civic care as defined in the previous section of this paper. Second, I argue that Socrates maintains an often overlooked *positive* conception of justice (*dikē*) in the *Gorgias* as a harmony of soul effected through disciplined reasoning. As Gregory Vlastos (1994) also asserts—revising his earlier thinking about Socratic elenchus—Socrates is committed to the notion that his interlocutors maintain both

good and false beliefs about justice; elenctic arguments will highlight the inconsistency of false beliefs, thereby distilling the good.[14]

This is not to suggest that Socrates' conception of justice is the final word on the subject in the *Gorgias*—though it of course is within the dialogue itself. Despite the dialogue's arguable "failure" as a demonstration of pure political philosophizing, I argue that Socrates' method gestures toward the need for us to continually revisit our most settled beliefs. As many critics have emphasized, Socrates' philosophical wisdom is defined not by its product but by the collaborative, other-oriented process that generates it. Still, he *does* advance a positive conception of the good life, even if his interlocutors are not convinced by it. I argue that the instructive qualities of Socratic dialogue—much like intractable arguments in contemporary political life—are best judged not according to the degree of consensus it generates between the philosopher and his interlocutors, but rather by his commitment to engage others in difficult discussions about what is important for the good life. Moreover, because Socrates equips his interlocutors with a method through which they can consider and critique their own views *as well as his*, the overall dialogue can be read as settling upon a reasonably pluralistic conception of what the good life is. In short, Socrates' elenchus cares for citizens by engaging them in difficult discussions that, while not always persuasive, nevertheless discipline their souls through reason. This is good for the city insofar as citizens who are better equipped to offer and understand reasoned arguments are better able to govern themselves. Socrates' genuine political *technē* within a democratic context, then, equates leadership with care.

[14] Sung-Woo Park grounds a similar argument in Platonic epistemology.

My discussion will proceed as follows. I begin with a summary of the *Gorgias*, highlighting thematic elements that are important for the theory of civic care. Next, I consider alternative accounts of "Socratic citizenship" and demonstrate how my interpretation of Socrates differs from these accounts. Third, I defend the view that the Socrates of the *Gorgias* can be understood as a democrat. My defense is informed by several other prominent yet controversial arguments for a democratic Socrates. However, many of these arguments rely upon an interpretive assumption that explains anti-democratic qualities by either contextualizing the *Gorgias* within the Platonic corpus (e.g. Kahn's argument that it falls between the *Apology* and the *Republic*) or emphasizing structural consideration of the dialogue as a democratic form of political engagement (e.g. Euben's structural interpretation). My interpretation maintains that a case can be made for a democratic Socrates that is wholly contained within the substance of the *Gorgias*. Forth, I consider how the Socratic elenchus operates as a democratic form of civic care. Finally, I address potential challenges to this series of arguments.

The Philosopher and the Orators in the *Gorgias*

Over the course of the *Gorgias*, Socrates engages three increasingly intractable interlocutors—Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles—in a discussion about the differences between oratory and philosophy, as well as the merits of actualizing the good life according to the standards of justice rather than personal profit. He first encounters Gorgias, a prominent orator, sophist and teacher of rhetoric. The dialogue opens with Callicles' invitation to Socrates and his companion, Chaerephon, to join with a gathering of men at his home for a "presentation" of Gorgias's oratorical skill (447b). To this, Socrates asks, "Would he be willing to have a discussion with us?" (447c), suggesting an early contrast between the two analytical methods. As will be discussed below, the presence of an attentive audience which bears witness to both the rhetorical presentation and the philosophical discussions follow is an important but often overlooked component of the dialogue.

Callicles responds to Socrates that Gorgias would likely submit to the philosopher's questions, noting that "he invited [his audience] to ask him any question they liked, and he said that he'd answer them all" (447c). Here, Gorgias's didactic position with respect to his audience—and the authority he commands within the city—is dependent upon his command of private knowledge. That is, Gorgias claims to possess knowledge of certain subjects which becomes accessible to others in the crowd only through him. There are two important points to highlight about the opening exchanges. First, Gorgias boasts to Chaerephon that "no one has asked [him] anything new in many a year" (448a). From this claim we understood not only that Gorgias commands a good deal of oratorical experience, but also

that no innovative questioner has seriously challenged his practice.[15] His confidence underscores the fact that he is demonstrating his oratorical talents before a gathering of would-be (paying) pupils, who should presumably want to learn from a tried-and-true master. Gorgias apparently measures his system's success by its ability to satisfactorily answer questions. Second, the Gorgianic model positions the questioner and respondent in asymmetric roles: the questioner asks for information from the respondent, who supplies the information to a passive questioner. Gorgianic enquiry is not a joint venture between questioner and respondent; the respondent is posited as the sole locus of knowledge. In order for the practice of civic care to be viable, Socrates' elenchus must first displace this Gorgianic model of enquiry. As I will argue in more detail below, he does so by appealing to the audience's evolving capacity to judge the relative merits of his elenchus against his interlocutors' oratorical method of inquiry.

Gorgias' main claim to the power of oratory is staked in its ability to persuade people, especially large groups. A command of oratory would serve one well when attempting to convict another before the Athenian Assembly (454e). His claim that oratory gives individuals control over their city and freedom from rule (452d) underscores its antidemocratic aspirations. Tellingly, he offers an example of persuading a patient to submit to a physician's medical care. Though Gorgias does not have any medical training himself, he insists that he is better equipped to offer persuasive medical advice to a group of non-experts than the physicians themselves (456b-457c). Gorgias here presents himself as a potentially false physician. This is important because, as we will see, Socrates deploys

[15] Polus, a disciple of Gorgias, also connects experience to craft, telling Chaerephon that "it is experience that causes our times to march along the way of craft, whereas inexperience causes it to march along the way of chance" (448c).

medical analogies throughout the dialogue to explain how politics is a difficult, rigorous, and often unpleasant but nevertheless constructive sphere of activity—much like unpalatable medicine that heals patients. Indeed, Socrates criticizes oratory for failing to inculcate citizens with any genuine knowledge and for taking advantage of peoples' ignorance as it persuades them to adopt one position or another through flattery without actually teaching them anything (459b, 463b). That is, oratory does not improve citizens' souls through education—much as a physical trainer would improve their bodies through training—but rather pacifies them through sweet words—much as a pastry chef would please children with treats (465b).

The disagreement between the two, then, stems from Gorgias's conviction that teaching his pupils how to persuade members of the Assembly is a profitable skill, whereas Socrates considers it a dubious and potentially dangerous vehicle for injustice (461a-b). This in turn reveals the deeper philosophical disagreement about whether seeking profit—defined monetarily or otherwise—or justice is a better way to orient one's life. Though Gorgias apparently considers oratory a neutral practice (*technē*), his insistence that it is "concerned with those matters that are just and unjust" (454b) as well as "just about everything else that can be accomplished" (456b) adds an ethical dimension to the substance of the disagreement between himself and the philosopher.

Socrates politely insists that Gorgias discuss these matters with him through "an orderly discussion" by way of dialectical questioning and answering (454c). Throughout the dialogue, the difference between Gorgias' oratorical approach to "answering" questions and Socrates' use of questions in the dialectic is cast into relief. While the former is willing to allow for participation from others only to the extent that they can propose topics upon which

the expert will expound, the latter emphasizes a form of discussion that demands much more input from both questioner and respondent. Unlike oratory, the viability of a Socratic discussion is contingent upon an active, intimate engagement between questioner and respondent. As Michael Frede observes: "Obviously, the questioner has a decisive influence on the course of the argument; for he asks the questions the answers to which will form the premises. But equally obviously it is the respondent who gives the answers" (1992, 205). This is borne out in Socrates' willingness to assume both questioner and respondent roles in his exchange with Polus (462a-d).

By contrasting discussion to oratory in his early exchange with Gorgias, Socrates establishes the form his dialogues will attempt to assume. Socrates' second exchange with Polus highlights his preference for brevity and consistent, genuine responses from his interlocutors. These demands underscore the notion that Socrates' philosophical discourse focuses more on seeking reasonably defensible claims than on simply winning an argument (449a-b), by maintaining both participants' willingness to be refuted (458a). Just before Polus enters the discussion, Socrates has apparently shamed Gorgias for his inability to account for a purely just form of oratory (461a-b). Polus concedes that Socrates has revealed the inconsistencies of the master orator's argument with respect to justice and oratory (461b), and seeks to restore oratory as an amoral *technē* that insulates tyrannical leaders from accountability and gives them control over their cities. In order to do so, he must show that one's happiness and the means by which one thinks one has achieved it are mutually exclusive. His attempt to do so reveals a crucial distinction between how oratory and philosophy regard the happy life. For the orator, happiness is a settled state—an end—which one can achieve through unjust, unhappy means. For the philosopher, the end of happiness

and the means by which one pursues it are one in the same. That is, the happy life consists in pursuing happiness. As such, for Socrates no *technē* is morally neutral; rather, the means define the end to which they are pursuant.

Polus posits Archelaus, a despotic Persian king, as a viable model of happiness. For Polus, though Archelaus is an unjust and illegitimate ruler, his omnipotence nevertheless makes him happy (471a-d). Moreover, he insists that the audience—indeed, all of humanity—agrees with his argument that the means and ends of one's happiness are mutually exclusive (473e). Socrates' exchange with Gorgias highlighted the structural and substantive differences between philosophy and oratory; the exchange between Socrates and Polus extends this distinction by casting the substantive conflict between justice and advantage into relief. In order to disrupt Polus' view of happiness, Socrates must illustrate the connection between the process by which an actor attains political influence and the happy ends to which one aspires.

Socrates insists that tyrants are never happy because they do not exercise genuine power. If "having power" means commanding "something that's good for the one who has it" (466b), a tyrant who attains political power through unjust practices never commands genuine power because acting unjustly is never good. For the philosopher, justice and education are the two ingredients to a happy life (*eudaimonia*) (470e). Contra Polus, he maintains that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it (470c, 475c), and that suffering just punishment is better than escaping it (476e-477b). Conforming to these two demands prevents corruption of the soul and, accordingly, happiness (478d-e). This description places Socrates and Polus in direct substantive contradiction. Furthermore, Socrates' definitions of justice and the happy life stand in direct contradiction with everyone in the audience. Indeed,

as Sung Woo Park instructively points out, few agreements were more widely shared among Athenians than a definition of justice as "privileging one's friends and harming one's enemies" (2002, 120). As noted above, Polus underscores this point by evoking the audience's authority: "Don't you think you've been refuted already Socrates, when you're saying things the likes of which no human being would maintain? Just ask any one of these people" (473e). By attacking Polus, then, Socrates is also attacking the received, possibly dogmatic, wisdom of Athenian political life. If a political community is largely constituted through shared conceptions of justice and what constitutes a happy life, Socrates' elenchus threatens to upend the entire Athenian way of life. In this way, though Socrates claims that he is unable to perform an elenchus on a large gathering of people, insisting that he "disregards" and does not "even discuss things with the majority" (474a), we see him engaging broader Athenian political life.[16]

Socrates initially defines the goal of the *Gorgias* dialogue in terms of distilling the essence of oratory. This is important to note with respect to how one might gauge the success of a discussion versus an oratorical presentation. Whereas the latter emphasizes persuasion, the former is better judged by how faithfully the participants follow the line of reasonable inquiry. Again, Socrates' main criticism of oratory is that it seeks to persuade an un-knowing audience through flattery and deception (463a-466a). By contrast, his discussions apparently seek genuine knowledge, hard-wrought and painful as it may be to get at, rather than to elevate his social status among the majority. This is borne out when Socrates seems to have "won" the argument against his final interlocutor, Callicles, toward

[16] Socrates' claims that he disregards the majority might be interpreted by some as indications that he is opposed to democracy. However, if I am correct in asserting that he can engage a larger audience by publically performing his elenchus, it follows that the comparatively democratic dialectical argumentative format can be extended to the larger Athenian community.

the conclusion of the text. "But it's not for love of winning that I'm asking you," Socrates insists, "It's rather because I really do want to know the way…in which you suppose the city's business ought to be conducted among us" (515b). Socrates is not simply being humble here. A successful piece of oration "wins" when it convinces others, thereby precluding further debate. A successful elenctic dialogue, however, does not conclude with conviction or stop with one's interlocutor's puzzlement; but is further sustained through re-examination of the subject. For instance, when Callicles remains unconvinced by, but unable to refute, Socrates—when Socrates presumably "wins"—the philosopher insists that "if we closely examine these same matters often and in a better way, you'll be convinced" (513d). In other words, if the procedure is conducted often and thoroughly enough, it will eventually succeed in yielding some kind of knowledge. Importantly, however, it will not generate a consensus. Since none of Socrates' early dialogues seem to succeed in this respect, this suggests that the process should continue indefinitely. Furthermore, it suggests that whatever knowledge elenctic engagement will yield is not settled in the sense that it is open to constant re-examination.

Callicles is Socrates' most difficult interlocutor in the text. In many respects, the two are the most equally matched discussants. The equality between the philosopher and sophist is underscored by strategic parallels in their accounts of motivation. Whereas Socrates asserts that the good life is actualized by abstaining from injustice, Callicles argues that the good life is one which maximizes pleasure and power. Despite Socrates' claims that he is motivated exclusively by his pursuit of truth, Callicles accuses Socrates of in fact being motivated by the pleasure he derives from "crowd pleasing vulgarities" like humiliating his interlocutors (482e). Interestingly, Socrates maintains that the only pleasures worth pursuing

are those which are good because they orient us toward the good according to justice. As such, he must attempt to persuade his interlocutors that they commit themselves to pursuing justice, for pursuing justice is the only way to attain the good *by definition*.[17]

Some interpret the *Gorgias* as a limited, ultimately failed defense of philosophy because Socrates fails to win Callicles' unqualified ascent (Kahn 1996, Beversluis 2000).[18] Responding to Socrates' argument that the life of unrestrained pleasures is less than satisfactory, Callicles replies: "I don't know how it is that I think you're right, Socrates, but the thing that happens to most people has happened to me: I'm not really convinced by you," to which Socrates concedes, "It's your love for the people, Callicles, existing in your soul, that stands against me" (513c). I will discuss the implications of Callicles' love of the *demos* shortly. For now, I would like to illustrate why Socrates' exchange with Callicles is particularly important for understanding my theory of civic care.

In his discussion with Callicles, Socrates explicitly equates leadership with care, highlighting the parallels between care, leadership, and citizenship. He begins by asking: "Shouldn't we then attempt to care for the city and its citizens with the aim of making the citizens themselves as good as possible?" (513e). For him, we have an obligation to care for the souls of those who will rule the city because there is no point to anything else if this group is corrupt (514a). Good citizens care for the city by doing good things for it much the same as a doctor would his patient, that is, by "redirecting [the city's] appetites and not giving in to them, using persuasion or constraint to get the citizens to become better…That

[17] Kahn argues that "shame" functions throughout the text to highlight this point—the orators' shame in declaring that all pleasures are equally good is unsustainable.

[18] Indeed, this interpretation leads Kahn to believe that Plato wrote the *Republic* in order to fulfill the *Gorgias*'s objective (1996, 144).

alone is the task of a good citizen" (517b-c). However, when leaders behave irresponsibly, they corrode the people's souls, much as a baker would "fill and fatten [their] bodies…and besides that, destroy their original flesh as well, all the while receiving their praise!" (518c). Here, Socrates controversially attacks the archetypically democratic leader Pericles, asserting that he made the city gluttonous and thus unable to bear up to adversity (519a). According to Socrates, early leaders like Pericles left the city "swollen and festering…For they filled the city with harbors and dockyards, walls, and tribute payments and such trash as that, but did so without justice and self control" (519a). Consequently, when later leaders find themselves surrounded by "sickness," they resort to unjust coercion, all the while complaining of the injustice that pervades the city. "But that's completely false," Socrates concludes, "Not a single city leader could ever be brought to ruin by the very city he's the leader of" (519c). Had they been truly good *political* leaders, they would have improved the people by persuading them to aim at justice; accusing them of injustice is admitting to neglect.[19] But if one effectively cares for the city in the sense of making others good, one would have no fear of suffering injustice oneself (519c-d, 520d).

Socrates' attack on Pericles may strike readers—as well as his interlocutors—as excessive. Surely, one might think, Socrates does not *really* mean to suggest that Athens' democratically supported leadership rendered the city *swollen* and *festering*. On my interpretation, the philosopher's hyperbolic speech is strategically designed to provoke

[19] This claim underscores Socrates' definition of politics as an activity that aims toward justice. For him, injustice is a symptom of inconsistent belief. Accordingly, political *technē* is the reconciliation of consistent belief through elenchus; hence Socrates' claim that he is "one of a few Athenians…to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics…because the speeches [he makes] on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best" (521d).

Callicles and the rest of his audience.[20] Socrates deploys this tactic throughout the dialogue. During his earlier exchange with Polus, he argues that a good citizen should not merely accept just punishments, but should further "be his own chief accuser, and the accuser of other members of his family" (480d). Like Polus, readers might consider such arguments absurd. But before dismissing these statements, Socrates' interlocutors are compelled to articulate why they find them so incredible. That is, they must examine their own assumptions and weigh their arguments against the philosopher's statements. In so doing, they are further engaged in the elenchus.

This account illustrates three aspects of civic care. First, civic care is a self-interested practice insofar as one benefits oneself by improving the political community one inhabits. When citizens engage one another in the mode of political care Socrates describes to Callicles—as well as the onlooking audience—they foster just communities. Such communities are more likely to question arbitrary political violence and poor decisions, thereby guarding against them. As such, it is in every citizen's self interest to engage each other and their leaders in debate, thereby caring for the city. Second, the political *technē* of civic care is one that all citizens of a democratic regime have a potential—indeed, an obligation—to practice. According to my interpretation, if "redirecting appetites" rather than indulging them and "using persuasion" and reasonable debate to constrain the city are the tasks of a good citizen, it follows that all citizens have a role in engaging in civic care. Citizens who simply allow their city to make poor decisions or stand idly by as others suffer arbitrary injustice are as complicit in their city's decay as their leadership. In other words, civic care is not only a task for political leadership but also a task of political *membership*.

[20] Euben similarly suggests, "Suppose the point is to stimulate argument and debate, to have Athenians become more thoughtful about what they had done and could do in the future" (1997, 205).

Socrates' exchange with Callicles illustrates a third aspect of civic care. His commitment to persuading Callicles suggests, contra a purely negative view of the Socratic project, that the philosopher is convinced that his positive conception of the good life is one worth pursuing. That is, the Socratic project is not simply one that is characterized by the dialectical form of the dialogue, but also by his insistence that the just life is one that is worth convincing people to adopt.

Socratic Citizenship

As noted earlier, I am not the first to posit Socrates as a model of citizenship. Dana Villa's advances an interpretation of Socrates as a philosopher-citizen whose primary public activity is to engage others through a kind of "dissolvent rationality," the aim of which "seems to have been that the resulting perplexity would slow his fellow citizens down in their performance of injustice, which is almost always wrapped in the cloak of 'virtue'" (2). Contra his interpretation of Vlastos, Villa argues that Socrates' most important public contributions to democracy should not be judged according to how rational he was, but rather by the extent to which he challenges others' beliefs through a strictly negative rationality[21]. On Villa's account, Socrates is devoted to a deconstructive project: "*Elenchus* reveals the confident claims of the 'moral experts' as so many baseless illusions, but without offering the comfort of an alternative set of 'moral facts'" (17). Following Arendt, Villa asserts that "[questioning] is an end in itself" that does not require expert knowledge to do effectively (20, 26). Indeed, Villa lauds Socrates as a model of democratic citizenship precisely because, on his view, the philosopher was willing to engage anyone in dialogue regardless of social class or assertion of privileged knowledge.

Villa argues that the most surprising feature of the *Gorgias* is not its defense of the philosophical life as one devoted to the *arête* of soul-craft, but rather its central claim that committing an injustice is the worst thing one can do. Indeed, as I noted earlier, this is

[21] Vlastos seeks to reconcile inconsistencies in Socrates' elenchus to show that the philosopher's dialogues do contain defensible positive assertions

Socrates' main positive assertion against Callicles. Because Callicles does not view the philosophical life as sufficiently active, Socrates must demonstrate not only the predilection for injustice that often accompanies the "active life" in an imperial democracy but further that Callicles' is not a tenable alternative. In this respect, "[the] *Gorgias* represents the relentless picking apart of that contradiction [a democratic empire] and the statesman (Pericles) who tried to conceal it" (Villa 34). The Calliclian "active life" militates against thoughtful action and is thus more prone to injustice. Villa views Socrates as dedicated to curing Athens of injustice not by asserting an alternative view of justice himself, but by complicating its decision-making processes and inducing perplexed hesitation. In this respect, Socrates is cast as a kind of proto-Derridean, asserting that any positive action will necessarily commit an injustice against *someone*, and so the best action is no action at all.[22]

Villa's interpretation of Socrates as a frustrating figure in Athenian public affairs is no doubt accurate in many respects. However, his emphasis on the "dissolvent rationality" of Socratic elenchus neglects an important feature of Socratic citizenship, namely, that he maintains an implicit standard by which to judge the justice—or lack thereof—of particular actions. Though Socrates may not be as didactic as his oratory interlocutors, he nevertheless advances a positive assertion that privileges the disciplined, ordered life oriented by *logos* over the amoral, corporeally pleasurable Calliclean alternative. As Susan Bickford argues, "Socrates' characteristic activity was to insist that there is a good that is worth pursuing—that ethical norms are not simply cynical artifice or cloaks for power—for he was also

[22] Derrida (2006) contends that all norms remove individuals from responsibility toward one another because they shift the locus of authority from the individual to society. On his account, any positive assertion—no matter its claims to democratic inclusion—is necessarily exclusionary, rendering actors "infinitely overwhelmed…by a responsibility that cannot but be infinite—and impossible to assume" (113). As such, his notion of democracy-to-come assumes a deeply negative view of politics, wherein the only way to avoid committing injustice is to avoid any positive action at all.

arguing against the sophistic claim that nothing is true" (2009, 127). Villa's interpretation of Socrates in the *Gorgias* overlooks this point as a central motivation for the philosopher's claim that he is among the few Athenians to actually practice "the true political craft" (521d). Socrates does not characterize the political *arête* of asking questions as "constantly challenging decisions for the sake of making politicians think about their actions," but rather as crucial steps in aiming "at what's best" (521d-e).

My own notion of Socratic citizenship builds more upon Socrates' parallels between physical training and political education throughout the *Gorgias*. Like physical training, Socrates' pedagogy is challenging and painful. Contra Villa, I maintain that Socrates' elenchus *does* include a positive argument: justice is preferable to injustice and happiness is achieved through justice rather than injustice. Because his notion of happiness is often counter-intuitive, however, Socrates' elenchus must first compel his interlocutors to unlearn what they think they know by demonstrating the logical inconsistency of their own beliefs. As Gary Alan Scott insightfully observes: "Little wonder then that being questioned by the philosopher-diagnostician would have felt to some characters like being forcibly disrobed for examination by a trainer" (2000, 41).[23] Considered as such, Socratic rationality does more than merely dissolve dogmatic belief when it brings characters to moments of *aporia*. More, it clears space in which they can begin to reconstruct consistent moral beliefs. By reasonably disagreeing with one another, then, Socratic citizens are engaged in collaborative elenchoi, the aim of which is consistent moral belief. Though such citizens may not fully reconcile

[23] Scott's comment also speaks to the laborious quality of care. Training is difficult work, and the trainee is not always cooperative or even appreciative. Committing to caring for others is committing to struggle with them through a constructive—albeit unpleasant—process.

their differences, engaging with one another in this way is nevertheless a valuable practice insofar as it encourages the kinds of reasonable discussions that are good for democracy.

Finally, my interpretation of Socratic citizenship, in keeping with the theory of civic care, highlights the affective strategies Socrates deploys when engaging his interlocutors. I share Young's focus on an interpretation of Socrates as a model of human interaction between citizens. Throughout the *Gorgias*, Socrates' interlocutors exhibit a range of emotion, from respect (i.e. Gorgias) to aggression (i.e. Polus) to frustrated exasperation (i.e. Callicles). But Socrates is also shown to exhibit a corresponding range of emotional responses throughout the dialogue. If Socrates is to work as a model of citizenship and the embodiment of civic care, these affective qualities are important for at least two reasons. First, as noted in my discussion of extant theories of care, civic care is an embodied practice in which humans engage one another. Human interaction—particularly when it is contentious—is fraught with emotion. Taking disagreements seriously means taking counter-arguments as well as the emotions they incite seriously in turn. Second, as my discussion of reasonable disagreements made clear, emotional appeals *can be persuasive*. On the one hand, this means that citizens engaging one another in civic care must be attuned to the differences between genuinely reasonable arguments and disingenuous emotional coercion. On the other hand, citizens should also be aware that they are deal with one another as emotional beings who share a community. As such, negotiating these tensions through different affective strategies may prove vital for sustaining difficult—and exhausting—debates. Socrates' emotional flexibility as illustrated in the *Gorgias* offers an example of how this can be achieved, as he entices his interlocutors to continue the discussion.

Defending a Democratic Socrates in the *Gorgias*

Critics have often pointed out that while the Socrates of the *Apology* resonates with democratic sympathizers, the character is more difficult to defend in the *Gorgias*. *Prima facie*, Socrates' claims that he is unable to communicate with large groups (521e-522e, 472a-d, 474a-b), his *apparent* disregard for the intelligence of the masses (463a-c), and his claims to characterize politics as a craft, of which he is one among only a few who correctly practice it (521d) all weigh against him as a champion of democracy. Moreover, his frequent characterization of leadership as a *technē* of "soul-craft" (521d) suggests an undertone of manipulation or, in Peter Euben's parlance, "psychic engineering" in proper political leadership. Consequently, even critics who want to defend the view that Socrates is a sympathetic—if critical—friend to democracy frequently look outside the actual textual evidence of *Gorgias* to defend their positions. For instance, Euben (1997) contends that while the substance of the text paints Socrates as at best an elitist—and at worst a tyrant—the structure of the dialogue *as such* works to engage the reader in the discussion itself. To this end, the dialogue is instructive for democrats insofar as it challenges us to defend our views as yet another host of interlocutors. In a sense, the dialogue generates its own audience, which it then engages in the same dialectical exercise as the characters themselves.

Charles Kahn also argues in favor of a democratic Socrates in the *Gorgias*, but insists that we must read the dialogue within the proper context of the Platonic corpus. He argues that the *Gorgias* "lies on a direct line of moral concern that leads from the *Apology* and *Crito*

to the *Republic*, a concern with the defense of Socratic morality in the face of a radical challenge from the spokesmen for moral cynicism and *Realpolitik*" like Thrasymachus and Callicles (1996, 127). If the *Crito* presents a justification for the integrity of the moral life—that is, a moral life conducive to democratic politics—the *Gorgias* tests that conception of the good life by putting it in conversation with hostile objectors (126). But because the *Gorgias* fails to unequivocally persuade its most recalcitrant objector, Callicles, Plato must have written the *Republic* in order to establish a more complete "moral psychology…a psychological theory that can give rational support to the intuitive conviction that justice is the health of the soul, so that someone with a character like Socrates must be not only virtuous but happy" (144). In short, Kahn traces a conceptual trajectory between the Socrates of the *Apology* to the Socrates of the *Republic* by way of the *Gorgias* to demonstrate that the same democratic *ethos* runs throughout the early Platonic dialogues, which are presumably focused more on the historic Socrates than a vehicle for Plato's own political thought.

I do not take issue with either Euben or Kahn on their respective arguments; however, I differ from them to the extent that, on my reading of the *Gorgias*, a defensible argument for a democratic Socrates can be made that is wholly contained within the substance and structure of the text. Indeed, there are several textual elements that incorporate both of these views. First, as I noted in my summary of the dialogue, the discussions between Socrates and his interlocutors have an audience. Indeed, all of the early Platonic dialogues of which Kahn writes have audiences. The audience of the *Gorgias* is described as asking questions of Gorgias during his public "presentation" (*epideiknusthai*) at the opening of the text. Importantly, it is because Socrates and Chaerephon have joined this audience that they are invited by Callicles to ask questions of Gorgias themselves (447c) and it is the audience that

motivates the discussion to continue (458b-e).[24] Socrates even positions himself as a representative of the audience early in his discussion with the famed orator: "Perhaps there's actually someone inside who wants to become your pupil. I notice some, in fact a good many, and they may well be embarrassed to question you. So, while you're being questioned by me, consider yourself being questioned by them as well…Try to answer them" (455c-d). Though Socrates may not "even discuss things with the majority" (474a-b) nor care whether or not they agree with him (482c), he apparently feels equipped to question on their behalf. Further, that he is willing to ask Gorgias questions that the audience would be otherwise embarassed to ask—interestingly, not *afraid* to ask—suggests that Socrates finds it possible that he and the audience—that is, Athenian political life more broadly—can share a common conception of ethical life.

Euben suggests that much of the democratic force of the text's dialogical structure is derived from its engagement with the reader. It is democratic insofar as it unsettles elitist claims to privileged knowledge and invites us to formulate our own arguments much as Socrates and his interlocutors formulate their own.[25] We see, however, that the dialogue itself contains an audience. If Euben is right, the presence of an attentive audience witnessing either a rhetorical demonstration of oratory or a dialectical exchange of reasons is a source of power. Indeed, both Gorgias and Polus cite the locus of an orator's power in the

[24] Gorgias tellingly remarks that it would be his "shame ever after" if he were not willing to continue the discussion with Socrates (458d).

[25] Interestingly, Euben invokes the language of care with respect to interpretation: "Such a shift [toward engaging the text] would, to begin with, turn our attention away from the historical Socrates and authoritarian Plato to the interplay between an evolving text and the generation of sometimes *divided interpretative communities who care about and for them* [emphasis added]" (226). In this respect, Euben's view of interpretation as engagement comports with my own notion of care in the *Gorgias.*

audience insofar as they are able to persuade others to agree with them.[26] I argue that the presence of this audience provides an opportunity to extend Euben's claim such that the same democratic argument can be made within the text itself. In order to do so, it must be shown that Socrates can engage the audience in a way that promotes democracy.

[26] It is worth noting that the audience is active within the dialogue even though it is referred to only in the abstract as a group of men making a commotion (458c). As Susan Bickford (1996) points out, listening is itself a form of *active* political participation.

Socratic Elenchus and Democratic Engagement

This audience in the *Gorgias* plays several important roles that are overlooked in most commentaries on Plato's early dialogues. During the exchange with Gorgias, the crowd represents a slice of the Athenian *demos* most interested in acquiring rhetorical skill and the political influence it garners. That is, they are would-be leaders who, if they are persuaded by the orators, threaten to corrupt the city. As such, the audience is first established as the indirect target of Socrates' civic care: persuading these particular members of the *demos* of Socrates' thesis is especially important for constituting Socrates' notion of a just political community.

In the exchange with Polus, the audience is figured as a source of received wisdom: it is constituted by a shared conception of happiness (*eudemonia*) which suggests it is better to escape punishment than suffer it, and likewise with injustice. Socrates' discussion with Polus dramatizes how completely antithetical the latter's worldview is from the former, and helps explain why Socrates' elenchus with Polus is more aggressive. Because Polus posits himself and the crowd as adherents to an inconsistent view of happiness which directly refutes Socrates, the philosopher must drag out the inconsistencies of their arguments in order to clear space for his reconstruction of the type of justice which *should* constitute the Athenian political community.

Finally, during his exchange with Callicles, Socrates advances an argument favoring philosophy because it allows the individual to maintain a sense of self within the *demos*.

Unlike oratory, which stakes its truth-claims in mass appeal, philosophy encourages the individual to formulate independent, critical thought. As noted earlier, Socrates and Callicles are similar insofar as they are deeply committed to their two loves: Socrates has Alcibiades and philosophy; Callicles has the Demos and *demos*. The two thus represent countervailing notions of how one situates oneself in society. For the former, this means engaging one's community with a degree of critical distance necessary for effective political leadership. The latter view lacks this critical distance, and is thus rendered unable to engage political life in difficult, sometimes disagreeable, discussion. As Socrates observes of Callicles: "I notice…you're unable to contradict your beloved, clever though you are, no matter what he says or what he claims is so. You keep shifting back and forth" (481d). On this account, Callicles and the oratorical model fail to provide a viable theory of democratic political leadership. To return to the example with which I began this paper—between the senator and the citizen—it would have been easy for Specter to have indulged the crowd's outrage. Following the oratorical model, such a disposition would likely have won the senator that crowd's votes. However, he would not have engaged them in the difficult disagreement he clearly thought they needed to have. Perhaps more importantly, the citizens would not have risen to engage their representative. Consequently, the exchange between the senator and the angry citizen, that "demonstration of democracy," would not have taken place. Thematizing the audience of the *Gorgias* thus allows my argument to reconnect to the debate between consensus theorists and difference democrats discussed earlier in the paper. On my interpretation, Socrates is warning against a politics that focuses on finding common ground at the expense of attending to the cleavages that cut across a genuinely democratic political landscape.

Targeting the audience and democratically engaging it are, however, two different tasks. Viable accounts of civic care—perhaps even the elenchus as a form of social interaction—must also demonstrate how the elenchus is more democratic than its rhetorical alternative. Here, it is instructive to turn to Vlastos' account of how the elenchus operates. Briefly summarized, Vlastos argues that the elenchus is a four-stage process:

1. The interlocutor asserts a thesis, *p*, which Socrates considers false and seeks to refute.
2. Socrates affirms agreement to further premises—*q* and *r*—which are not apparently connected to *p*. Socrates argues from {*q*,*r*}, not to them.
3. Socrates next argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that *q* and *r* entail *not-p*
4. Socrates finally claims that he has demonstrated that *not-p* is true, rendering *p* false. 11

If Vlastos' account is correct, the elenchus suffers from at least two flaws. First, the strength of the conclusion, *not-p*, is contingent upon the interlocutor's assent to the validity of {*q*,*r*}, as well the disagreement between {*q*, *r*} and *p*. Vlastos does not appear to recognize this problem. Importantly, if Socrates can only extract qualified assent from his interlocutors (e.g. "If you say so" or "So it would seem" or "Apparently") he will not likely extract unqualified assent (e.g. "Absolutely") for the conclusion *not-p*. This leads to the second problem, which Vlastos identifies as "*the* problem of the elenchus": namely, that proving *not-p* does not necessarily disprove *p* (21). Taken together, these problems may explain some of the reason that Callicles, like many of Socrates' interlocutors, finds himself unable to respond to the philosopher, yet unconvinced of his thesis.

Unlike Vlastos, I do not find a need to resolve these problems of elenchus, especially not as the model works as an example of civic care. Rather, they make elenchus a more democratic procedure. True, elenctic arguments do attempt to persuade interlocutors of positive theses; but, as noted earlier, the other goal of elenchus is to render supporting arguments logically consistent. An elenchus has not failed simply because it fails to reconcile two contradictory viewpoints. Rather, it has failed only if initial beliefs go unchallenged. When citizens engage one another in elenctic dialectic, they must explore the logical ramifications of their beliefs, *p*, while examining whether or not their supporting reasons *upon examination* support *p*. In order to engage in elenchus, they must first acknowledge that they are prepared to be refuted, and must further commit to truthfully following the logical consequences of their initial beliefs. They must be willing to abandon their initial beliefs if these are revealed to be unsupportable; however, should they find themselves unconvinced, they must only be willing—as Socrates is—to continue the examination. As such, the elenctic model is more democratic than its oratorical alternative insofar as it loosens the elitist grip of private knowledge upon which the latter is grounded.

As I argued in my interpretation of his exchanges with Gorgias and Polus, Socrates engages public reason by conducting his elenchus in a public forum. Though he may not examine each audience member individually, he at least debases the orators' elitist—potentially tyrannical—claims to knowledge. In so doing, he democratizes the examination of what we count as knowledge. Rather than asymmetrically positing himself against the *demos* as a possessor of esoteric wisdom, he has given them the tools to conduct their own reasonable moral debates through elenchus. Furthermore, the elenctic model posits radically different standards of success than oratory. Whereas oratory defines political *aretē* in terms

of one's ability to manipulate unknowledgeable groups of people, elenchus posits political *aretē* as one's capacity for reasonable, sustained debate.

The elenctic model is more democratic than oratory in at least two ways. First, any reasonable person can adopt it. Though some elenchi are more successful than others, one need not necessarily be as crafty as Socrates to sustain a successful elenchus with one's peers. (That Socrates fails to persuade his interlocutors of his thesis might actually cast doubt on how crafty he really is!) Secondly, elenchus is not amenable to tyrannical cooptation. By encouraging citizens to challenge one another's beliefs on reasonable grounds, it at once empowers citizens to formulate independent beliefs and the wherewithal to assess them, all the while unsettling potentially dogmatic commonsense.[27] Moreover, these skills comport with Socrates' notion of politics as soul-care insofar as they will engender a culture of citizens who are constantly debating issues of public concern. Such practices are good for individuals' *logoi* and, by extension, the regime's democratic quality. Finally, citizens who are accustomed to elenchus as a model of reasoning are better equipped to lead themselves. Consequently, the pool of potential candidates for political leadership expands beyond Callicles' house, so to speak, to a broader cross-section of the ever-changing *demos*. This will, in turn, produce a more robust democracy.

[27] Interestingly, these are the same critical thinking skills Mill thought liberal societies should promote in "On Liberty," and for very nearly the same reasons.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this paper that reasonable disagreements retain a special value for pluralistic democracies. By engaging one another in such disagreements, citizens perform what I have called a practice of *civic care*. This theory works as an intervention in the debate between democratic political theorists who argue, on the one hand, that disagreements between citizens should be mediated by some form of consensus and those who, on the other hand, promote pluralistic values of diversity and individual-oriented politics on the other. The theory of civic care retains a commitment to reasoned argumentation found in the former, while seeking to articulate the political value of disagreement found in the latter. As my interpretation of Plato's *Gorgias* further demonstrates, citizens who exchange reasoned arguments for and against competing conceptions of justice—and its place in securing the conditions under which humans flourish—take responsibility for themselves, each other, and their broader political community. In so doing, they sustain and revitalize the democratic ethos that characterizes their polity. That is, in challenging each other, they care for themselves.

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