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Socrates and the Divine Mission of Political Friendship

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The Apology: Socrates at the Center of Politics, Friendship, and Philosophy

The dramatic masterpiece of the Socratic dialogues—the *Apology*—offers some of the clearest evidence that Socrates engages in political friendship through philosophy. Socrates is challenged to defend a lifetime of philosophy conducted in public spaces according to his political and religious aim of reorienting the city toward virtue. The dialogue explains the sense in which Socrates believes he is practicing politics whenever he engages fellow citizens in dialectical examination. In the process of contemplating his own life—including such episodes as the trials of Leon and the generals at Arginusae—Socrates sees that he has practiced a role for philosophy in politics different from that espoused in the *Republic*. The *Republic* assigns political rule to the philosophers and restricts the political participation of the multitude. There are important discrepancies between the political functions Socrates ascribes to philosophers in the *Republic* and his own philosophical practice as described in the *Apology*. Putting what Socrates says in the context of what he does provides the most comprehensive account of the connection between philosophy and friendship. The *Apology* asserts a broader understanding of political activity and shows how Socrates practices it through philosophy. Socrates attempts to effect change within the clearly flawed democratic system but is not a revolutionary political figure. He claims the laws and governments of the best cities should be concerned with the moral and intellectual development of citizens. Socrates aspires to a kind of political organization in which philosophers behave as friends to the political community and are recognized as such. He envisions an ideal Athenian democracy which adheres to the philosophical principle of moderation. The more

democratic political model found in the *Apology* coheres better than the authoritarian model in the *Republic* with other Socratic dialogues. Those who continue to interpret Plato as an authoritarian political thinker must wrestle with the example Socrates sets during his lifetime and the implied ideal democracy of the *Apology*.

The manner in which Socrates carried out his philosophical work in Athens is the issue at the heart of his trial in at least two important senses. Socrates has been challenged to defend against accusations of impiety and corrupting the youth. The philosopher must describe how his philosophical mission is consistent with what the gods would want for Athens. Socrates meets this challenge by arguing that his philosophy is a public service that he has been instructed by the gods to perform. Socrates responds earnestly to the charges as lodged. This is the first sense in which he defends his philosophical mission. Yet he also acknowledges that many of the jurors are biased against him on account of “earlier accusers” like the comic playwright Aristophanes.¹ These are people who have reacted negatively to being humbled by Socrates or his followers and have become angry not at themselves but at the philosopher. Socrates acknowledges that he has become unpopular as a result of pursuing his philosophical mission and comments that this has caused him great distress.² Socrates addresses the jurors by saying:

[My earlier accusers] are silent, as they do not know [what I do to corrupt the youth], but, so as not to appear at a loss, they mention those accusations that are available against all philosophers, about ‘things in the sky and things below the earth....’ They have been filling your ears for a

¹ *Apology* 18d

² *Apology* 23a

long time with vehement slanders against me.... I should be surprised if I could rid you of so much slander in so short a time.³

Socrates has been maligned as a polemicist and a natural philosopher. Establishing the difference between such figures and himself is the second important sense in which Socrates clarifies his philosophical work. Socrates argues that his philosophy is not merely different from the work of the sophists and natural philosophers but also that it is in competition with them. Socrates is challenged to explain how the philosophical work that has annoyed his fellow Athenians has been carried out with good reason in their own interest. I submit that his response is to characterize himself as a political friend.

The divine mission Socrates introduces in the *Apology* firmly establishes the political nature of his philosophical work in the city. Socrates claims he has followed the instructions of the oracle at Delphi who told him that he was the wisest among all men. Socrates interprets the message to mean that human wisdom is worth little or nothing and that understanding this makes one wise.⁴ Anyone can be wise like Socrates according to this interpretation provided they too are aware of their own ignorance. The gods want the people of Athens to be good and goodness depends upon having a correct understanding of what to care about and how to behave in public and private life. Awareness of ignorance is a fundamental part of correct understanding and is beneficial to the person who possesses it. Socrates treats the pronouncement of the oracle as an

³ *Apology* 23d

⁴ *Apology* 22e

exhortation from the gods to practice dialectical examination. Socrates believes that he can come to the service of the gods by humbling his fellow Athenians.⁵ Socrates states:

I was attached to this city by the god—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly....

Another such man will not easily come to be among you.⁶

Socrates here affirms his attachment to Athens. That his philosophical work is directed toward the city on account of the instructions of the god proves that it is political. The passage also suggests that Socrates is uniquely fitted to Athens and in some sense *belongs* there. Socrates reiterates his commitment to the city in the *Crito* when he insists that he has never left the city except for military service despite having been able to do so freely.⁷ The special knowledge given to Socrates by the god regarding human ignorance makes him useful toward developing the character of the city and its inhabitants. Socrates conducts dialectical examination with fellow citizens because he appreciates their potential to live according to the good. Socrates identifies his utility as an important consideration against his execution in this passage. The Athenians are unlikely to find another like Socrates who will benefit them by bringing divine wisdom into the city. Socrates suggests that if they find him guilty and execute him, the gods themselves may decide to intervene in the interest of Athenian virtue by sending a

⁵ Apology 23b

⁶ Apology 30e

⁷ Crito 52b

replacement.⁸ We shall see that utility toward moral and intellectual development is the utility Socrates ascribes to friends in the *Lysis*.⁹

That Socrates chooses to frame his philosophical work as a mission from the gods defends him against the specific accusation of impiety. His philosophical and political work is pious because it is what the god has commanded him to perform. Yet he is here also responding to the likely prejudices and questions of jurors exposed to the slanders of his aforementioned “earlier accusers.” The jurors are expected to ask why Socrates would continue to practice philosophy at the expense of his likability and reputation. Socrates states:

That I am the kind of person to be a gift of the god to the city you might realize from the fact that it does not seem like human nature for me to have neglected all my own affairs... while I was always concerned for you, approaching each one of you like a father or elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue.¹⁰

Socrates again appeals to the religious nature of his mission. He shows that his seemingly irrational conduct is deeply pious. That his philosophical work is annoying and that he carries it out seemingly against his own interest reinforces that Socrates feels a higher calling. Socrates states that “what has caused [his] reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom... [for which he] shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness.”¹¹ Socrates acknowledges that his philosophical work is a contributing factor toward his unpopularity and poverty. Socrates elaborates:

⁸ Apology 31a

⁹ Lysis 210d

¹⁰ Apology 31b

¹¹ Apology 20d

As a result of this investigation,... I have acquired much unpopularity of a kind that is hard to deal with and is a heavy burden.... Because of this occupation, I do not have the leisure to... look after my own [affairs].... I live in great poverty because of my service to the gods.¹²

Is the public philosopher condemned to a similar life and fate as Socrates? Socrates wishes to assert otherwise. He recognizes the moral and intellectual state of Athens as another contributing factor to his unpopularity. Socrates explains that the fellow citizens whom he humbles should take issue with themselves for not recognizing their own ignorance. Athenians who are likewise confronted by Socrates' followers erroneously take issue with the philosopher.¹³ Socrates would not be subject to such a negative reception if his fellow Athenians were more concerned with virtue than possessions and reputation. Socrates' treatment represents a moral failing of the city.

The manner in which Socrates chooses to share his philosophical mission is itself philosophically significant. Socrates acknowledges that the occasion of his defense speech importunes him to speak in a manner with which he is not accustomed.¹⁴ The other Socratic dialogues depict the philosopher engaged in dialectical examination with fellow Athenians. This can account for only a small part of his defense speech in which Socrates must ask for the indulgence of the jurors to interrogate one of his accusers.¹⁵ How is Socrates to achieve his usual persuasive style? Socrates transforms his defense speech into an approximation of dialectical examination by revealing his inner dialogue to the jurors. Readers see that the philosopher follows the same process of logical

¹² Apology 23a

¹³ Apology 23d

¹⁴ Apology 17d

¹⁵ Apology 27b

refutation in his own mind as he does aloud in conversation with fellow Athenians.

Anne-Marie Schultz identifies four passages in which Socrates is engaged in what she calls “autobiographical disclosure.” Schultz writes:

It is reasonable to think that Socrates still regards his fellow citizens as potential interlocutors he can fruitfully engage with, which depends on a certain level of friendship between them.... [his] practice of narrating stories about himself to friends suggests that even at the time of his trial he felt some friendship toward his fellow citizens.¹⁶

Socrates appeals to the jurors as friends who he believes are capable of acting according to the good. This shows that friendship does not require the parties to act toward each other amicably. Socrates offers further evidence for this point in the *Gorgias*, where he thanks Callicles for his friendship despite Callicles’ verbal abuse.¹⁷ Socrates demonstrates that he does not reserve his friendship for persons who possess specific qualities that he appreciates. The basis for Socratic friendship is an acknowledgement of the potential of the befriended to live according to the good. We shall see that the difference between shallow and Socratic friendship is exemplified in such dialogues as the *Lysis*. Socrates offers additional evidence to suggest he thinks of fellow Athenians as friends when he says:

I shall reproach [any man] because he attaches little importance to the more important things and greater importance to inferior things. I shall treat in

¹⁶ Anne-Marie Schultz, “Socrates as Public Philosopher: A Model of Informed Democratic Engagement,” *The European Legacy* 24, no. 7-8 (November 2019): 714.

¹⁷ *Gorgias* 487d

this way anyone I happen to meet... and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me.¹⁸

Socrates describes his fellow citizens as “kindred.” This suggests that Socrates believes that he and his fellow Athenians are bound together by his divine mission. Socrates cannot accomplish the moral and intellectual reform of Athens without others in the city. This passage also establishes teaching as an important function of the Socratic friend. Friends impart the correct understanding of what to care about and how to behave in public and private life. Friends identify the potential of the befriended to behave according to the good and enable them to reach this potential through instruction.

The first autobiographical disclosure in the defense speech comes when Socrates describes his reaction to the message of the oracle. Socrates says that his friend Chaerephon went to the oracle at Delphi and was told that no man was wiser than Socrates. The jurors react to this uproariously and Socrates beseeches them not to make a disturbance.¹⁹ Schultz notes that Socrates interweaves personal narrative with comments directed specifically at his jurors.²⁰ This maximizes the rhetorical effect that narrative has toward exhorting the jurors to take part in his logical examination. The autobiographical disclosures give the jurors (and by extension the reader) unprecedented access to the inner workings of Socrates’ mind.²¹ Socrates does not understand how the oracle could have spoken truthfully. He repeats the questions he

¹⁸ Apology 30a

¹⁹ The jurors might be deriding that the oracle would praise Socrates. They might also have been impassioned by the mention of Chaerephon, who died in a battle against the Thirty tyrants. See Apology 21a.

²⁰ Schultz, 713.

²¹ Schultz, 715.

asked himself aloud to the jurors as a means of engaging them in his own process of interpretation. Socrates attempts to prove the oracle wrong by venturing into Athens and examining his fellow citizens through conversation. He ultimately acknowledges that the oracle is not permitted to speak falsely.²² These passages depict Socrates engaged in an internal questioning process similar to the dialectical examination seen in other dialogues. Socrates will say that by this point he was already practicing his philosophical mission!²³ Schultz claims that Socrates actively performs the interrogating even if he is passively following the direction of the oracle.²⁴ Socrates sees through his examination of public and intellectual figures in Athens that his fellow Athenians do not live up to their reputed wisdom.²⁵ Socrates asks himself whether he should prefer to possess both wisdom and ignorance or neither and answers “neither” on behalf of the oracle.²⁶ Socrates concludes:

What is probable is that the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing.... [When he says] ‘Socrates,’ he is using my name as an example, as if he said: ‘This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.’²⁷

That Socrates gives such detail to his quest to understand the meaning of the oracle suggests that he takes seriously the Delphic dictum to “know thyself.”²⁸ The conclusion

²² Apology 21b

²³ Apology 23b

²⁴ Schultz, 714.

²⁵ Apology 21c–22e

²⁶ Apology 22e

²⁷ Apology 22a–23a

²⁸ Protagoras 343b

of his autobiographical disclosure is his interpretation of the message from the oracle and the basis of his philosophical mission. Socrates describes his philosophy as the continuation of his investigation. Socrates comes to the service of the god by demonstrating the worthlessness of his fellow citizens' wisdom.²⁹ Socrates implicitly credits his jurors with the ability to follow his logical process of investigation and to agree with his interpretation. It does not matter that he does not expect them to fulfill this potential.³⁰

There is another sense in which the autobiographical disclosures are important: Socrates presents his own conduct and concern for virtue as an example for the jurors to follow in adjudicating his trial. Socrates describes the only time that he has held public office in democratic Athens—his participation in the trial of the generals—through a second autobiographical disclosure. Athenian forces had secured a dramatic upset victory at the Battle of Arginusae in 406 BCE. A storm subsequently prevented rescue ships from saving sailors who had fallen overboard. Public opinion was that the victorious generals had abandoned drowning Athenians by sending the bulk of their force away to pursue the Spartans.³¹ Socrates states:

I served as a member of the Council... when you wanted to try as a body the ten generals who had failed to pick up survivors of the naval battle.... I was the only member of the presiding committee to oppose your doing something contrary to the laws.... The orators were ready to prosecute me and take me away and your shouts were egging them on, but I thought I

²⁹ Apology 23b

³⁰ Apology 24a

³¹ Lee Ward, "The Relation between Politics and Philosophy in Plato's Apology of Socrates," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (December 2009): 506.

should run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear or prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course.³²

Socrates affirms in this passage that his concern for virtue eclipses his fear of death and imprisonment. Socrates did not take a stance on whether the generals were guilty or innocent, but rather objected on principle because legal custom in Athens required that the generals receive individual trials.³³ His commitment to justice in the trial had the same effect as the commitment to justice seen in his philosophical work: Socrates has made himself unpopular. This autobiographical disclosure constitutes an appeal to the very jurors whom Socrates is now asking to deliver an unpopular and principled acquittal. Socrates offers his own commitment to justice in the face of popular opposition as a model for the jurors to follow.

Socrates reinforces his religious commitment to instilling virtue in Athens even at the risk of physical harm in the *Gorgias*. Socrates has been challenged to defend his philosophical lifestyle by Callicles, who represents a number of misunderstandings average Athenians may have had about philosophers. Callicles says:

How sure you seem to be... that not even one of these things will happen to you! You think that you live out of their way and that you wouldn't be brought to court perhaps by some very corrupt and mean man.³⁴

Callicles objects to the philosophical life on the basis that it leaves the individual inexperienced regarding the ways of the democratic institutions. A philosopher would not be able to defend himself or his loved ones from suffering injustice at the hands of

³² Apology 32b

³³ Ward, 506.

³⁴ Gorgias 521c

fellow citizens. Callicles claims that Socrates would not know how to defend himself from an accusation brought before the assembly and Socrates agrees.³⁵ Callicles asks whether the inability to defend oneself is an admirable trait and Socrates responds:

Yes, Callicles... as long as he has protected himself against having spoken or done anything unjust relating to either men or gods.... If someone were to refute me and prove that I am unable to provide *this* protection for myself or for anyone else, I would feel shame... No one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust is what he's afraid of. For to arrive in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions is the ultimate of all bad things.³⁶

Socrates asserts in this passage that the care for virtue he expresses and the philosophical mission he undertakes to bring justice to the city are not selfless actions. Socrates defends his soul by maintaining his commitment to the instructions of the god and he is willing to sacrifice himself for Athens because that is what the god has commanded him to do. Socrates characterizes the pursuit of virtue as an act which benefits both the individual and the political community. The Athenians can strengthen their political community by coming to care for virtue without having to rely on any unrealistic expectation of altruism. Socrates asserts:

I shall not cease to practice philosophy, [but will continue] to... in my usual way point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your

³⁵ Gorgias 522b

³⁶ Gorgias 522c

eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible,
while you do not care for... the best possible state of your soul?³⁷

The choice Socrates faces between supplicating the jurors and practicing philosophy before the assembly is a choice which will affect the quality of his soul. Socrates beseeches his fellow Athenians to care for the best possible state of their souls and serves an example of doing so.

What has been said so far about Socrates' defense speech may make it surprising that in two passages he disavows that philosophy and public life are compatible. These passages are meant to explain why Socrates has not pursued public office during his lifetime. Socrates does not retract the political nature of his philosophical mission. Socrates says that his philosophical activity leaves him without any leisure to engage in public or personal affairs.³⁸ He then anticipates an objection from the jurors that he should have taken up public office were he truly endowed with divine knowledge. Socrates states:

I do not venture to go to the assembly and advise the city. You have heard me give the reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign which... turns me away from something I am about to do without ever encouraging me to do anything.³⁹

Socrates mentions the assembly at the beginning of this passage. This suggests that the public life he disavows is limited to participation in public institutions before the multitude. Socrates engages in politics all the same by having philosophical

³⁷ Apology 29d

³⁸ Apology 23b

³⁹ Apology 31d

conversations with small groups of Athenians in private and public spaces alike. Socrates discusses piety with Euthyphro near the front of the Stoa Basileios in the northwest corner of the Athenian Agora.⁴⁰ He must have been conspicuous when accompanied during walks through the agora with many of his followers. Socrates recognizes the impact his philosophical work has on influential segments of the public such as the sons of the wealthiest citizens.⁴¹ Lee Ward correctly argues that Socrates kept private only the sense that he did not seek out the deliberative institutions of the Athenian state.⁴² Socrates continues:

No man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, and not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.⁴³

Socrates here extends the warning of his daimonion to apply to all men who share his concern for justice. Ward notes that the Attic term used to denote “public life” in this passage (*demosios*) has clear application to a public official.⁴⁴

Socrates credits his *daimonion* for advising him that an ill fate will befall him should he speak to the multitude. This is to be tragically confirmed in the *Apology*. Jurors may ask why Socrates would act to avoid such a fate given the stance on death he delivers later in the dialogue.⁴⁵ One answer is that Socrates follows the advice of the *daimonion* because of his piety and that he acts without regard for self preservation.

⁴⁰ Euthyphro 2a

⁴¹ Apology 23c

⁴² Ward, 503.

⁴³ Apology 32a

⁴⁴ Ward, 503.

⁴⁵ Apology 28b and 32d

Jurors may also ask whether Socrates has disobeyed the commandment of the oracle that he should practice philosophy. Ward argues that the combination of the oracle and the *daimonion* determines the bounds of the philosophical project.⁴⁶ The *daimonion* is able to qualify the directions of the god because both the *daimonion* and the oracle hold equal status as divine sources. Socrates references his *daimonion* to show that the oracle has instructed him to act as a political friend without requiring him to hold public office. The two voices are in tension with one another. How Socrates lives and conducts philosophy in Athens speaks to his own interpretation of their joint message: philosophers following his example are to act as political friends.

Why does Socrates choose to respond earnestly to the charges as lodged despite acknowledging they are but a small part of the challenge to his reputation? There is some reason to believe that Socrates was actually being persecuted for his association with treacherous political figures from the Peloponnesian War. That Socrates' relationships with men like Alcibiades were of public interest is captured in the narrative introduction to the *Symposium*.⁴⁷ Why does Socrates commit to the authenticity of the trial despite knowing that appearing before the assembly put him at great risk? Perhaps the most straightforward answer to these questions is that Socrates believes he can demonstrate his innocence. He tells the jurors that his argument is sufficient to demonstrate that he is not guilty and that if they convict him it will be the result of their bias.⁴⁸ Yet there is more at stake in his defense speech than the matter of his own innocence. Socrates states:

⁴⁶ Ward, 504.

⁴⁷ Symposium 172b. Plato may emphasize this point on account of the fact that Kritias, the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, was his uncle.

⁴⁸ Apology 28a

Perhaps one of you might be angry as he recalls that when he himself stood trial on a less dangerous charge, he begged and implored the jury with many tears, that he brought his children and many of his friends and family into court to arouse as much pity as he could, but that I do none of these things, even though I may seem to be running the ultimate risk.⁴⁹

Socrates is defending not himself but the people of Athens from both injuring their own souls and doing away with a gift of the gods to the city.⁵⁰ He does not beg the jurors because he believes that Athens suffers when trials are decided on emotion and not the rational application of law. Socrates mentions that it would be inappropriate for him to appeal to the emotions of the jury by begging for sympathy or bringing out his wife and children. (He manages to inform the jurors in the process that his household has three sons between childhood and adolescence.)⁵¹ He nevertheless entreats his jurors to take the judicial processes as seriously as he does and to fulfill their judicial oaths and civic duty. Socrates undermines his own defense to provoke the development of virtue in Athens, exposing himself to personal risk for the chance of accomplishing his divine mission. Socrates states:

I do not think it right to supplicate the jury and to be acquitted because of this, but to teach and persuade them. It is not the purpose of a juror to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do.⁵²

⁴⁹ Apology 34c

⁵⁰ Apology 30d

⁵¹ Apology 34d

⁵² Apology 35c

Socrates believes that to supplicate the jury would injure his soul and fall short of the mission ascribed to him by the gods. Socrates recognizes his trial and potential martyrdom as a prime opportunity to fulfill his divine mission by beseeching the Athenian people to practice virtue. Socrates exhibits concern for the characters (souls) of his fellow Athenians and the city in general.⁵³ This is the level of interest a friend takes in the befriended. Socrates must act toward his jurors in a manner consistent with the good which encourages them to practice the good as well.

Do not deem it right for me, gentlemen of the jury, that I should act towards you in a way that I do not consider to be good or just or pious... If I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods.⁵⁴

Socrates believes that jurors morally compromise themselves and their political community when they fail to adjudicate cases according to the agreed upon rules of society. The defendant should not request that jurors forsake their oaths or themselves act in a morally lacking manner. Socrates practices political friendship as a criminal defendant through rational persuasion to do the good. The subsequent failure of Athens to acquit Socrates is meant to be understood as a moral shortcoming of the city.

We have now seen that Socrates practices philosophy with the political objective of reorienting his fellow citizens toward virtue. What effect does he hope his philosophy will have on the administration of the city? Socrates hopes to effect a change in the judicial process which will slow it down and allow for speech and deliberation. This can again be seen through the autobiographical disclosures. Ward characterizes the trial of

⁵³ Apology 30a

⁵⁴ Apology 35d

the generals as a battle between an impassioned democracy and philosophical moderation. He writes:

Allowing each general to defend himself separately gives the Athenian people time to sort out the innocent from the guilty, as well as enjoy the benefits of calm, sober second thought prior to, as opposed to after, committing an unjust act.⁵⁵

Socrates notes that the Athenians came to regret having broken the law after the generals were executed.⁵⁶ Socrates believes that the desire for moral education and rational government is not merely the aim of philosophers but one of the deepest longings of the city.⁵⁷ One significant barrier to democratic government is that the multitude is easily overcome by emotion. The philosopher is ready to offer guidance. Schultz notes that Socrates captures the prominent role emotion plays in his own life.⁵⁸ He constructs a portrait of an Athenian multitude capable under certain conditions of rational reflection. This portrait suggests the ways in which Socrates believes philosophers and philosophy can inform the democratic city.

Socrates expresses a principle of moderation through his philosophical work in Athens which he believes can be adapted to the level of democratic politics. The fundamental problem with the Athenian democracy is that the multitude is possessed by their passion to rule without restriction. Socrates gives the example of the trial of the generals. Popular outrage against the generals was inflamed by their perceived

⁵⁵ Ward, 507.

⁵⁶ Apology 32b

⁵⁷ Ward, 517.

⁵⁸ Schultz, 719.

callousness toward helpless sailors and their disregard for religious rites of burial.⁵⁹ All of the Athenians who presided over the trial apart from Socrates followed their emotional desire to punish the generals in discarding their commitment to the law. Socrates is appealing to the Athenians to restrain their passion when he dissents. The episode shows that the corrosive tendencies of the passions are a danger at the public level as much as they are at the personal level. Socrates repeats his appeal in his own trial when he again and again requests that his jurors cease their commotion and consider rationally his argument.⁶⁰ Would Socrates appeal to his fellow Athenians for them to practice virtue and moderation if he did not believe they were capable of doing so? Socrates emphasizes the corrosive effect that ambition for unrestrained political power has toward turning politics into sheer domination based on strength and force. Those with the potential to become philosophers are attracted and corrupted by things said to be good including wealth, physical strength, and political connections.⁶¹ To be drawn into political life by such lures before receiving a proper education is to submit to the madness of the multitude.⁶²

One of the ways by which the philosophical principle of moderation can be adapted to the level of Athenian politics is through laws. Ward argues that Socrates beseeches his jurors to carry out the law because Socrates understands law as an imperfect substitute for philosophy.⁶³ Socrates intends the jurors in his case to practice virtue by adhering to the agreed upon rules of the political community.⁶⁴ Jurors engage

⁵⁹ Ward, 508.

⁶⁰ Apology 21a

⁶¹ Republic 490d–491c

⁶² Republic 496c

⁶³ Ward, 507.

⁶⁴ Apology 35c

with the laws in internal debate when they use reason to understand and adjudicate each specific case. The process of internal debate approximates dialectical examination. The great advantage of laws is that they can be determined in advance of specific instances in which they must be applied. The multitude can write out laws without being affected by the emotional nuance of the case. Since laws are the product of prior deliberation, incorporating them into the judicial process effectively extends the time a deliberative body spends considering a case. While it may not be safe for philosophers to hold public office, laws could be made in consultation with philosophers. Socrates expresses his disdain for the Athenian custom of trying and sentencing capital cases on the same day. He claims that the outcome of his own trial would be different had Athens employed the more deliberative process in use by the Spartans.⁶⁵ Introducing philosophical moderation into the judicial process through laws accomplishes the aim of the philosopher to slow down the legal process.

Some scholars argue that philosophical questioning allows Socrates to challenge laws and accepted conventions and therefore disobey them without offending his conscience. Allan Bloom finds Socrates responsible for freeing Alcibiades from loyalty to his own city.⁶⁶ These interpretations do not line up with the dialogues. Socrates does not use dialectical examination to subvert the legal authority of Athens' democratic institutions even when others beseech him to. Crito approaches Socrates after the trial and encourages him to leave Athens before his execution can be administered. Socrates

⁶⁵ Apology 37b

⁶⁶ Allan Bloom, "The Ladder of Love," in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete with commentaries by Allan Bloom and Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 166.

personifies the laws and debates them in the same sense the reader might imagine he expected of his jurors. He enumerates their objections. The laws tell Socrates:

Do you not by this action that you are attempting [running away] intend to destroy us... and indeed the whole city? Or do you think it possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but... [can be] nullified... by private individuals?⁶⁷

Socrates asserts that the city will be harmed if its laws and judgments can be overturned by the philosopher. His philosophical mission attaches him to Athens and its well-being and for this reason he cannot justify acting unlawfully. There is one exception: Socrates mentions that he would not obey and order from his jurors to cease practicing philosophy.⁶⁸ Socrates' general adherence to the rules of democratic Athens undermines any suggestion that he means to replace that government with his authoritarian model of the philosopher kings.

⁶⁷ Crito 50b

⁶⁸ Apology 29d

The Philosophical Mission in the Gorgias and the Symposium

Socrates tightens the relationship he establishes in the *Apology* between politics and philosophy in the *Gorgias*. His exchange with Callicles about whether philosophy or conventional politics is the best way of life dominates the dialogue. Callicles presents some of the assumptions Athenians may have had regarding the lifestyle of philosophers and the degree to which they participate in political affairs. Socrates claims that he has benefitted from running into Callicles because Callicles is willing to make the arguments other Athenians think but would not be caught saying.⁶⁹ Callicles claims that human beings should follow the example of nature where the strong have the most possessions and rule over the weak.⁷⁰ Callicles tells Socrates that he shall come to the same realization when he abandons philosophy and moves on to more important pursuits. Callicles asserts that Socrates should be ashamed to practice philosophy because it leaves him vulnerable to other citizens. Callicles states:

Philosophers turn out to be inexperienced in the laws of their city and in the kind of speech one must use to deal with people on matters of business... so when they venture into some political activity they become a laughingstock.⁷¹

Callicles has objected to the philosophical life on the basis that it leaves the individual inexperienced regarding the ways of the democratic institutions. A philosopher would not be able to defend himself or his loved ones from suffering injustice at the hands of fellow citizens. Philosophy may be useful for Athenian youths but Socrates should be

⁶⁹ Gorgias 486e–487b

⁷⁰ Gorgias 483d and 500c

⁷¹ Gorgias 484d

embarrassed for not having outgrown it.⁷² Callicles claims that his fellow Athenians should participate in the democratic institutions of Athens to protect and attain their desires.⁷³ Callicles and Socrates both frame their arguments in terms of accomplishing virtue by resisting temptation. Ward points out that Callicles asserts that the just man must be vigilant against the temptations of living a private life.⁷⁴ Participation in conventional politics is for Callicles fundamentally a matter of self interest and preservation. He tells Socrates that he should be ready to flatter and serve the city since this will be his best defense if he is brought to court.⁷⁵ Socrates does not adhere to his advice. Socrates agitates his jurors when he compares himself to Achilles, refers to himself as the gift of the gods, and suggests that he be punished with free meals in the Prytaneum.⁷⁶

In responding to Callicles, Socrates asserts the connection between philosophy and politics even more emphatically than he does in his defense speech. Callicles has claimed that conventional politics is a virtuous practice. Politicians exercise their strength within the democratic institutions of Athens to protect themselves and attain their desires. According to Callicles, the public sphere is a realm of competition where the strongest and most virtuous men are able to protect their own interests. Callicles idolizes figures such as Pericles. Socrates presents an opinion that appears to reverse his claim in the Apology that men who are concerned for justice must live in private.

Socrates states:

⁷² Gorgias 485b

⁷³ Gorgias 492d

⁷⁴ Ward, 516.

⁷⁵ Gorgias 521c

⁷⁶ Apology 28c, 30e, and 36d.

I believe that I'm one of the few Athenians [and] the only one among our contemporaries... to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best.⁷⁷

Socrates claims that Callicles is a lover of the Athenian people who seeks not to rule them but rather to serve their desires. The public speech that Callicles approves of is mere flattery which inflames the impulsive passions of the multitude.⁷⁸ Socrates says that conventional politicians in Athens have contributed to the moral and intellectual deficiency of the city. The Athenian statesmen have employed their intellectual talents to gratify their fellow citizens at the expense of the health of the city. He suggests that Pericles could have practiced philosophy instead of swelling the city with infrastructure.⁷⁹ Conventional politicians satisfy the appetite of the city without possessing any knowledge of what is admirable and good. The result of their work is that Athens becomes sick.⁸⁰ Socrates means that the city has become deficient morally and intellectually but is also alluding here to the Plague of Athens.

Socrates offers the fact that on occasion politicians are punished by the multitude as evidence that the Athenian statesmen have not made the city better. Socrates believes that the desire for moral education and rational government is one of the deepest longings of the city.⁸¹ The citizens become sick because their need for moral education is not being addressed. Socrates takes the desire of the city for security and domestic

⁷⁷ Gorgias 521d

⁷⁸ Gorgias 502c—503a

⁷⁹ Gorgias 519a

⁸⁰ Gorgias 518c

⁸¹ Ward, 517.

stability as evidence that the multitude shares his appreciation for the moderating principles of philosophical examination.⁸² Socrates warns Callicles:

Perhaps if you are not careful they'll lay their hands on you, and on my friend Alcibiades... even though you are not responsible for their ills but perhaps accessories to them.⁸³

In this passage Socrates reverses Callicles' warning by pointing out that demagogues come to depend on the fickle good will of the multitude. Socrates claims that the Athenian statesmen cannot be real politicians because nobody who leads the city would be condemned by it. Socrates claims:

*What could be more illogical... than this statement: that people who've become good and just, whose injustice has been removed by their teacher and who have come to possess justice, should wrong him?*⁸⁴

Socrates makes it a requirement of real politicians that they help the city by making its inhabitants good and just. Philosophers are true politicians because they are uniquely qualified and inclined to do so. We shall see that Socrates also attributes the ability and inclination to help another develop their character to the friend.

Socrates describes his philosophical work as the true political craft.⁸⁵ The descriptions he offers of his philosophical work elsewhere in the dialogue help us see what true politicians look like in practical terms. Socrates exposes through his philosophical work a range of possibilities regarding the political craft not typically

⁸² Ward, 518.

⁸³ Gorgias 519b

⁸⁴ Gorgias 519d

⁸⁵ Gorgias 521d

understood by the city itself without philosophical instruction.⁸⁶ True politics takes the appearance of the private individual conversing with other individuals and speaking with concern for what is best.⁸⁷ Socrates maintains that the key distinction between philosophers and statesmen lies in how they speak and the change their speech is intended to effect. Ward writes:

The central question dividing Socrates and Callicles relates to which kind of speech serves the good of the people.... Socrates presents his “true political art” as a form of speech directed toward a “view to the best, not the most pleasant,” in which the goal is to make “justice come into being in the citizens’ souls and injustice to be removed, moderation to arise within and immoderation to be removed.”⁸⁸

We have seen that Socrates structures the argument of his defense speech in a way that simulates the conditions of a philosophical conversation with his jurors. This speech shows how the practice of dialectical examination can be adapted for the democratic institutions. Ward writes:

The culmination of this process of examination is Socrates’ argument that philosophy... should serve the city by helping to fashion a theoretically rigorous and practically applicable idea of politics... reoriented away from the satisfaction of desire... [toward] the moral and intellectual development of the citizens.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ward, 502.

⁸⁷ Gorgias 474a

⁸⁸ Ward, 516. Ward cites Gorgias 521d and 504e.

⁸⁹ Ward, 513.

Socrates brings justice into the souls of his fellow citizens by carrying out his philosophical mission and teaching them of their ignorance. Socrates urges his fellow citizens to prioritize the wellbeing of their souls above and beyond their possessions and reputation. Socrates implores his fellow citizens to engage in rational deliberation themselves by debating with the laws when adjudicating cases. The political model of the *Apology* is imminently more democratic than that of the *Republic* because the multitude are expected to possess reason that enables them to perform the good.

Socrates at once both condemns and endorses human reason. The *Apology* appears primarily as a condemnation when considered alone. Socrates implies that the human tendency to be convinced by our own speech inhibits our ability to recognize our own ignorance. Socrates claims:

In my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation [for wisdom] were nearly the most deficient... What is probable is that the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing.⁹⁰

Socrates delivers his defense speech before an Athens which is morally and intellectually misguided. The Athenian multitude has not governed the city with appropriate concern for the moral and intellectual development of citizens. The people of Athens—particularly the intellectual class—believe they have knowledge when they are actually ignorant. Socrates bemoans that Athenians care more about reputation and belongings than they do about whether the city is good or wise.⁹¹ Socrates must encourage Athenian statesmen and intellectuals to care about virtue because in their current state they

⁹⁰ *Apology* 22a—23a

⁹¹ *Apology* 36c

prioritize body and wealth.⁹² Socrates criticizes the same Athenian democracy that will put him to death as being quick to deliver emotional judgment. That Athenian citizens do not care about virtue is meant to be understood as a failure of government. Yet even in the democracy Socrates appeals to his fellow citizens and jurors in a manner which credits them with the potential to change and understand the good. In this sense one can understand Socrates as a democratic reformer and not a revolutionary authoritarian. The work the philosopher does to encourage fellow citizens to care about virtue creates the political environment in which human reason can fulfill its purpose of allowing the individual to understand the good.

Socrates again confronts the intellectual corruption of Athens with his encomium of Love in the *Symposium*, where he offers a positive account of human reason. Socrates participates in a speech competition against members of the Athenian intellectual elite. These figures represent various corrupting influences in Athenian society and the reader is not meant to view them favorably! The comic poet Aristophanes is in attendance and speaks.⁹³ Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates in the *Clouds* in 423 BCE fueled the charges against him in 399 BCE.⁹⁴ Each of the other speakers is fittingly mentioned in the *Protagoras* as among those who have come to listen to the sophist.⁹⁵ Socrates delivers a speech praising Love which he claims to have heard from a foreign priestess named Diotima. Diotima draws a parallel between correct judgment and Love. Love

⁹² Apology 30a

⁹³ Apology 18d.

⁹⁴ Mary Nichols. "Love, Generation, and Political Community," in *Socrates on Friendship and Community: Reflections on Plato's Symposium, Phaedrus, and Lysis*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 25.

⁹⁵ Protagoras 315c–316b

exists between the earthly and the divine and is neither god nor mortal but spirit.⁹⁶

Diotima argues that human beings and the gods would not be bound together as a whole without this intermediary.⁹⁷ Love serves a noble purpose. Correct judgment is likewise an intermediary which binds human beings to the gods because it exists between divine wisdom and human ignorance. Socrates (as Diotima) states:

Those who love wisdom fall between those two extremes [of wisdom and ignorance]. Love is one of them because he is in love with what is beautiful and wisdom is extremely beautiful.⁹⁸

Diotima claims that Love himself is a philosopher. Love, including the love of wisdom, is useful to all human beings because it motivates them to pursue what is beautiful and good. The attainment of such things is happiness.⁹⁹ The Attic term used here is *eudaemonia*, which denotes not mere gratification but whole human flourishing. Human reason allows philosophers to issue correct judgments about the Forms without understanding them. Human reason is necessary to engage in Socratic debate. Socrates endorses human reason when he recites Diotima's speech and throughout his own philosophical work. Socrates famously suggests in the *Republic* that human beings should subject their appetite and spirit to the rational part of their soul.¹⁰⁰

Each of the Socratic dialogues deserves to be treated as an episode in which Socrates can be seen carrying out the philosophical mission he describes in the *Apology*. The *Symposium* is a dialogue in which Plato gives special attention to the charges

⁹⁶ Symposium 202a

⁹⁷ Symposium 202e

⁹⁸ Symposium 204b

⁹⁹ Symposium 205a

¹⁰⁰ Republic 441e–442a

Socrates faced of impiety and corrupting the youth. Mary Nichols argues that at issue in the speech competition between Socrates and the poets is not only their wisdom but their piety. Phaedrus announces the competition to see which speaker can deliver the best praise of the Love as the “greatest” and “most honorable and powerful of the gods.”¹⁰¹ Nichols writes:

The symposiasts may be praising a god, but there seems from the outside something impious about what they are doing. Is Love a Greek “god” of the status of other Olympian gods such as Zeus, Athena, Hermes, or Ares?¹⁰²

The guests at the symposium are proposing a new god in a similar manner to how Socrates was depicted as introducing new deities in the *Clouds*. Socrates is the only speaker to reject the idea that Love is a god in the same sense as the Olympians. Socrates repeats Diotima’s claim that Love is not a god but rather a spiritual force between mortals and immortals.¹⁰³ Plato also highlights the charge of impiety against Socrates by introducing Alcibiades into the *Symposium*. Alcibiades was accused of impiety for revealing secret mystery rites and (allegedly) mutilating statues of Hermes.¹⁰⁴ The *Symposium* shows that Socrates remains innocent of the charge of impiety while representative figures from the Athenian intellectual elite are guilty. Socrates adheres to his philosophical mission and tries to stem the tide of Athenian corruption by correcting the various impious accounts of Love.

¹⁰¹ Symposium 180b

¹⁰² Nichols, 26.

¹⁰³ Symposium 202d

¹⁰⁴ Nichols, 27.

Qualifying the Republic

Socrates seems to contradict the democratic nature of his philosophical work when he introduces the authoritarian model of the Kallipolis in the *Republic*. I shall present the Kallipolis and its authoritarian elements in this chapter to show that Socrates does not consider it a practical or desirable political constitution. The *Republic* should be read as another episode in which Socrates is engaged in his philosophical mission to assert the importance of virtue to his interlocutors. Socrates seeks to prove that just behavior is always advantageous and the details of the Kallipolis are accordingly determined not by earnest political theorizing but the needs of his argument. The *Republic* is an ethical work before it is a political treatise. Several passages within the *Republic* itself provide reason to believe that Socrates would distance himself politically from the Kallipolis.

Socrates' challenge in Book II of the *Republic* is to determine the nature and effects of justice within the soul and to present his account in a manner that will convince his interlocutors that just behavior is always advantageous. He introduces an analogy between souls and cities because he believes it will help him in this task. His consideration of the Kallipolis in the *Republic* is therefore wholly in service of his consideration of justice within the individual. Socrates states:

Socrates: We say, don't we, that there is the justice of a single man and
also the justice of a whole city?

Adeimantus: Certainly.

Socrates: And a city is larger than a single man?

Adeimantus: It is larger.

Socrates: Perhaps there is more justice in the larger thing and it will be easier to learn what it is. So, if you're willing, let's first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual.¹⁰⁵

Socrates claims that justice will be easier to study on a larger scale and in so doing suggests why an analogy is necessary. The soul is invisible.¹⁰⁶ Norbert Blossner argues that, for Socrates, attributes of the city can be observed directly whereas attributes of the soul can merely be inferred.¹⁰⁷ Understanding justice within the soul requires Socrates to infer attributes of the soul through an examination of the city. Socrates frames the analogy as a tentative project but puts it to work in Book IV when he establishes the virtues of the city. The structural similarities between the city and the soul become compelling to Socrates when he realizes that the three parts of the soul correspond to the three classes within the city.¹⁰⁸

The analogy between the city and the soul provides the basis for the rigid distinction Socrates makes between the social classes. This is to say that the distinction between the social classes is made in the service of his argument regarding the nature of justice within the soul. Socrates claims that justice in both the soul and the city involves each of the elements doing—and doing only—the work that they are best at.¹⁰⁹ Making the soul just entails ordering it so that the rational element governs the spirit and the appetite. For the producer to govern the guardian would be a misordering of the

¹⁰⁵ Republic 368e–369a

¹⁰⁶ Phaedo 79b

¹⁰⁷ Norbert Blossner. “The City—Soul Analogy.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 346

¹⁰⁸ Republic 441d

¹⁰⁹ Republic 441d

Kallipolis and an affront to justice. The analogy simplifies members of each class to their dominant characteristic (e.g. the producers have only appetite) because Socrates does not afford for any overlap between the parts of souls. The appetite of the soul has further divisions but does not contain or reflect the rational part of the soul. Yet producers are individuals who have souls which are themselves comprised of at least the three elements and therefore do possess some degree of reason. This difference between the parts of souls and their respective classes establishes the limits of the analogy. The Kallipolis simplifies political reality and becomes a less effective model for a city and a less representative account of Socrates' political views as a result.

Even in the *Republic*, Socrates establishes from the outset that the Kallipolis is a false and unhealthy city. Socrates and his interlocutors agree that they will attempt to understand justice in the soul by imagining a theoretical city.¹¹⁰ Socrates says that the *raison d'être* of cities is that human beings have many needs and are not self-sufficient.¹¹¹ He imagines a simple city whose inhabitants support each other by specializing their labor according to their talents.¹¹² Every citizen is involved in the production or distribution of goods within the city and Socrates makes no mention of public offices. The city is small. Socrates describes the lifestyle of its inhabitants:

They'll produce bread, wine, clothes, and shoes... they'll build houses,
work naked and barefoot in the summer, and wear adequate clothing and
shoes in the winter. For food, they'll knead and cook the flour and meal

¹¹⁰ Republic 369c

¹¹¹ Republic 369b

¹¹² Republic 370a

they've made from wheat and barley... they'll enjoy sex with one another
but bear no more children than their resources allow.¹¹³

Socrates is describing a city in which the philosophical principle of moderation is at work. Socrates implies that human beings should be satisfied with this lifestyle unless they have been morally corrupted. Glaucon interrupts:

It seems you make your people feast without any delicacies. If you were
founding a city for pigs, wouldn't you fatten them on the same diet?¹¹⁴

Glaucon asks Socrates to describe a city with a higher material standard of living. His objection gives the simple city its name: the City of Pigs. Socrates abandons his discussion of the City of Pigs at the insistence of his interlocutors but does not share their dismissive attitude toward it. Socrates states:

All right, I understand. It isn't merely the origin of a city that we're
considering, it seems, but the origin of a luxurious city... Yet the true city
in my opinion is the one we've [already] described, the healthy one, as it
were. But let's study a city with a fever if that's what you want.¹¹⁵

This passage marks the transition between the City of Pigs and the Kallipolis. By claiming that the Kallipolis is the inferior city among the two, Socrates suggests that the ideal city is not characterized by its three rigid social classes. Rather than being an authoritarian model, the City of Pigs appears not to have or need a centralized government.

¹¹³ Republic 372a

¹¹⁴ Republic 372d

¹¹⁵ Republic 372e

In the process of presenting an allegory meant to establish the importance of a political system based on expert knowledge, Socrates offers a description of the philosophers which helps to bridge the gap between the *Republic* and other dialogues. Adeimantus asks Socrates to explain using a simile why the Kallipolis will be affected by evil unless it is governed by a philosopher.¹¹⁶ Socrates replies:

Imagine that something like the following happens on a ship... sailors are quarreling with one another about steering the ship [and] each of them thinks that he should be the captain even though he's never learned the art of navigation.... Indeed they claim that it isn't teachable and they are ready to cut to pieces anyone who says that it is.¹¹⁷

All of the sailors quarrel over who will be able to steer the ship despite the fact that none of them have any knowledge of the craft which makes someone a good navigator. The sailors are the equivalent of citizens in an impassioned and immoderate democracy vying over petty honors and offices. Socrates continues:

They don't understand that a true navigator must pay attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft... Don't you think that the true navigator will be called a real stargazer... by those who sail in ships governed in that way?¹¹⁸

The true navigator of the city—the person who understands the craft necessary to run the city according to the good—is the philosopher. While the craft of the navigator can be debated, the craft of the philosopher is dialectical examination. Socrates' description

¹¹⁶ Republic 487e

¹¹⁷ Republic 488a

¹¹⁸ Republic 488d

of the treatment the true navigator receives at the hands of the sailors matches the treatment he has received in Athens as a philosopher. In the ideal Athenian democracy, the citizens would recognize the philosopher as a friend whose expertise can help them acquire virtue. The use of the term “navigator” to describe the role of the philosopher fits with the relation between philosophy and politics Socrates sets forth in the *Apology* if the navigator does not steer the ship himself but rather advises and teaches the sailors.

Socrates responds to objections regarding the implausibility of the Kallipolis throughout the *Republic* and eventually admits that Athens should not aspire to it. Socrates claims that the true philosopher who is fit to rule the city will be concerned for the development of his soul and will avoid any public honor that would harm it.¹¹⁹ Glaucon responds that such a person would not be willing to take part in the political administration of the city. Socrates states:

Yes, by the dog, he certainly will, at least in his own kind of city. But he may not be willing to do so in his fatherland, unless some divine good luck chances to be his.

And Glaucon responds:

I understand. You mean that he’ll be willing to take part in the politics of the city we were founding and describing, the one that exists in theory, for I don’t think it exists anywhere on earth.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Republic 591c

¹²⁰ Republic 592a

Socrates affirms that the true philosopher will be willing to rule over the Kallipolis and no other city.¹²¹ Socrates here recognizes the limits of the Kallipolis as a political model and concludes that it does not describe cities in practice. Socrates does not seek to install a philosopher-king in Athens at least in part because no qualified candidate would agree to participate. Socrates asks Glaucon whether he can name any kind of person who eschews political rule besides the true philosopher and Glaucon remarks that he cannot.¹²²

Socrates concludes the *Republic* with a legend which shows that philosophy is useful for all people. Readers follow a soldier named *Er* through death and learn that souls are brought before the Fates and given the opportunity to choose their next life.¹²³ The souls are presented with a great diversity of future lives from which to choose and Socrates stresses the importance of choosing one that is good. Socrates states:

Each of us must neglect all other subjects and be most concerned to seek out and learn those which will enable him to distinguish the good life from the bad and always to make the best possible choice.¹²⁴

The subject which enables the soul to determine the best future life is philosophy. Socrates claims:

If someone pursues philosophy in a sound manner when he comes to live here on earth and if the lottery doesn't make him one of the last to choose, then, given what *Er* has reported about the next world, it looks as though

¹²¹ Republic 592b

¹²² Republic 521b

¹²³ Republic 617e

¹²⁴ Republic 618c

not only will he be happy there, but his journey from here to there and back again... [will be] smooth and heavenly.¹²⁵

Catherine Zuckert argues that the emphasis of the Myth is not on the rewards and punishments people receive after death so much as it is on the responsibility each person had to care for their soul while alive.¹²⁶ She notes that each person is constrained and shaped by the particular place and regime into which they are born. There is thus a political aspect to the Myth of Er. The proper political organization is one which allows for all citizens to prepare as best as they are able for the afterlife. The Kallipolis does not make much sense as a form of government which will benefit the citizens in this regard if the producers are prevented from practicing philosophy. Not everybody will be able to do philosophical work or prepare successfully. But Socrates' suggestion in the *Apology* that the multitude can approximate philosophy by moderating their emotions and adhering to the law paints a much more favorable picture of the Athenians' prospects in death.

¹²⁵ Republic 619d—620a

¹²⁶ Catherine Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009). 381.

Plato's Lysis: A Demonstration of Friendship Through Philosophy

The philosophical mission which Socrates establishes in the *Apology* presents the philosopher as a political friend. Socrates acknowledges that his fellow Athenians have the potential to live according to the good and performs the role of the friend by developing their characters so that they appreciate virtue. I shall argue in this chapter that Socrates' behavior matches the account of friendship that he provides in the *Lysis*. I argue that the dialogue should be read with special attention to its narrative framework.

The *Lysis* is most productively read as a demonstration in which Socrates plays the part of the aspiring erotic friend. In the dialogue, two young men named Hippothales and Ctesippus interrupt Socrates on his way from the Academy to the Lyceum and invite him to speak with their friends at a wrestling school. Ctesippus tells Socrates that Hippothales has become infatuated with the beauty of another young man named Lysis and will not stop talking about his crush. Hippothales has so far succeeded in annoying his friends but failed to win over Lysis.¹²⁷ Socrates accepts the invitation to speak at the wrestling school and promises to demonstrate proper courtship. Socrates says:

If you're willing to have him talk with me I might be able to give you a demonstration of how to carry on a conversation with him instead of talking and singing the way your friends here say that you've been doing.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ *Lysis* 204c

¹²⁸ *Lysis* 206c

The subsequent philosophical discussion between Socrates and Lysis demonstrates for Hippothales (watching in the audience) the interest an aspiring erotic friend should take in the character development of the beloved.¹²⁹ John M. Cooper notes that Socrates plays a far more active role in the arguments and spends less time seeking and examining opinions from his interlocutors than he does in other dialogues.¹³⁰ Such stylistic differences between the philosophical discussion in the *Lysis* and those from other dialogues further suggest that Socrates is performing. Socrates proposes the topic of friendship and confronts Lysis and Menexenus with a series of dilemmas meant to develop their intellectual curiosity. Were it some other dialogue, Socrates might challenge a sophist who claimed special knowledge of the lover and the beloved. Instead it is Socrates who claims such wisdom!¹³¹ Resolving the dilemmas and settling on a definition of friendship is the stated aim of the discussion but cedes precedence to the demonstration. Socrates completes the demonstration by instilling a sense of intellectual curiosity in Lysis and Menexenus and thereafter uncharacteristically is the first to propose the discussion be ended.¹³² Socrates acknowledges Hippothales' presence among the audience in an aside to the reader.¹³³ This shows that Socrates remembers his promise to Hippothales throughout the dialogue and does not abandon his performance while philosophizing.

The differences between two approaches to courtship presented in the *Lysis* inform the reader about the appropriate motivations of an aspiring erotic friend.

¹²⁹ *Lysis* 210e

¹³⁰ John M Cooper, "Introduction to the *Lysis*" in *Plato, Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 687.

¹³¹ *Lysis* 204c and *Symposium* 198d

¹³² *Lysis* 222d

¹³³ *Lysis* 210e

Socrates admonishes Hippothales for praising Lysis in songs and poems. Hippothales has foolishly and selfishly made Lysis a more difficult and prestigious catch by inflating his ego through flattery.¹³⁴ The appropriate way to court a young man involves demonstrating an interest in helping him develop his character. Flattery cannot demonstrate such interest! Hippothales covets beauty without offering an education and this constitutes a kind of unattractive selfishness. Socrates is willing to intervene on Hippothales' behalf in part because he shares Hippothales' appreciation of beautiful adolescent boys. Socrates wants to know who the most beautiful friend is before entering the wrestling school and accepting the invitation to philosophize.¹³⁵ Socrates and Hippothales differ in that Socrates supplements his appreciation of beauty with a desire to educate. Hippothales and Ctesippus tell Socrates that the friends share a pastime of discussion and Socrates recognizes that he can converse with Lysis while admiring his beauty.¹³⁶

Socrates shows that the proper way to speak to a prospective erotic friend involves forcing them to recognize their own ignorance.¹³⁷ Socrates achieves this with Lysis in the first stretch of the philosophical conversation before Menexenus arrives. Socrates shows Lysis that he does not understand his own relationship with his parents and entices him with the following remarks:

In those areas where we really understand something, everybody... will trust us, and there we will act just as we choose, and nobody will want to get in our way. There we will be free ourselves... if you become wise... then

¹³⁴ Lysis 206a

¹³⁵ Lysis 204b

¹³⁶ Lysis 204a

¹³⁷ Lysis 210e

everybody will be your friend, everybody will feel close to you, because you will be useful and good.¹³⁸

Socrates aims to show Lysis that he has something to learn from conversing with and befriending Socrates. Socrates tells Lysis that he cannot be high-minded because his own mind actually belongs to others.¹³⁹ Socrates pretends to address Lysis:

This is how you should talk with your boyfriends, Hippothales, cutting them down to size and putting them in their place, instead of swelling them up and spoiling them, as you do.¹⁴⁰

Readers are left to imagine Hippothales' disbelief and possible embarrassment at seeing methods of courtship so different from his own. Yet the promise of an education will naturally attract the love of a young man who shares an appreciation of knowledge and goodness. Lysis is evaluated on his response to the invitation to philosophize in the same way that Athens is on trial in the *Apology*.¹⁴¹ Socrates professes special knowledge over Eros which will make him a useful friend for both Lysis and Hippothales. Socrates constructs the same appeal to Hippothales earlier in the dialogue when he admonishes him for flattering his crush.¹⁴² Lysis and Hippothales are both afflicted by an ignorance of friendship which Socrates is prepared to instruct them in by demonstration.

Hippothales' flattery swells Lysis' ego just like Pericles' flattery swells the city with infrastructure when he gratifies the citizens' appetite.¹⁴³ Socrates educates Hippothales as he speaks to Lysis.

¹³⁸ Lysis 210b

¹³⁹ Lysis 210d

¹⁴⁰ Lysis 210e

¹⁴¹ Lysis 213d

¹⁴² Lysis 205d

¹⁴³ Gorgias 519a

The approach Socrates takes in appealing as a friend to Lysis and Hippothales is a matter of carrying out his philosophical mission. Socrates claims that the god has instructed him to confront his fellow citizens and instruct them in the matter of their ignorance.¹⁴⁴ The behavior that Socrates is called to defend—and in fact exhibits—in his speech before the assembly is consistent with his description of friendship. Socrates claims in both the *Apology* and the *Lysis* that he possesses special wisdom which makes him useful to those with whom he converses. Socrates claims special knowledge concerning friendship which makes him useful as a friend to Hippothales and Lysis.¹⁴⁵ Socrates claims special awareness of ignorance which makes him useful as a friend to his fellow Athenians as he conducts his philosophical work.¹⁴⁶ Socrates cannot be misguided because his knowledge in both cases comes from the gods. Socrates is useful as a friend and not in some other sense because his knowledge provides interlocutors the opportunity to better themselves. Friendship is an activity that requires the friend to encourage the befriended toward intellectual development by demonstrating to them their own ignorance.¹⁴⁷ The appeal of friendship which Socrates demonstrates in his discussion with Hippothales and Lysis is the very character development that he enables through his philosophical work. Friends must have not only the potential but also the inclination to participate in the moral development of the befriended. Socrates is interested in developing the characters of his fellow Athenians because he is both concerned for virtue and piously following the instruction of the god.

¹⁴⁴ *Apology* 23b

¹⁴⁵ *Lysis* 204c

¹⁴⁶ *Apology* 21a

¹⁴⁷ *Lysis* 210e

The *Lysis* depicts Socrates understanding and performing friendship as an activity without being able to put it in words. The discussion provides several accounts of friendship that the participants agree on until Socrates starts to doubt them and expresses frustration at having been fooled by arguments “no better than con artists.”¹⁴⁸ Socrates is unable to resolve a series of questions regarding whether friendship is mutual or takes place between equals.¹⁴⁹ Socrates nevertheless states:

These people here will go away saying that we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a friend is we have not yet been able to find out.¹⁵⁰

Socrates feels that he is able to affirm his friendship with *Lysis* despite the unresolved questions. Utility and equality may not be the most imminent considerations when trying to establish meaningful relationships. The dialogue demonstrates that friendship is deep and significant in ways which elude simple explanation.

An important transformation takes place during the dialogue as Socrates befriends the boys through philosophy. Socrates exhibits the characteristics of a friend at the very same time as the trio inconclusively argues over definitions for friendship. Socrates initiates the discussion in the *Lysis* by claiming that there is nothing he desires more than a friend.¹⁵¹ Socrates implies that finding friends is the work of a lifetime when he expresses his amazement that *Lysis* and Menexenus have managed to become friends at such a young age.¹⁵² He professes ignorance regarding friendship and submits himself

¹⁴⁸ *Lysis* 218d

¹⁴⁹ *Lysis* 222d

¹⁵⁰ *Lysis* 223a

¹⁵¹ *Lysis* 211d

¹⁵² *Lysis* 211e

to the teaching of the two boys.¹⁵³ We cannot know the extent to which Socrates planned the direction of the conversation or whether he arrived at his intended conclusion. Yet Socrates—acting both as the adult and the celebrity—remains in command of the conversation throughout the dialogue.¹⁵⁴ Socrates concludes the discussion by remarking that he appears to have become friends with the boys. Socrates had not previously met Lysis.¹⁵⁵ Socrates exhibits good will and concern for the moral development of the boys. Socrates expresses concern that flattery will not just be ineffective but in fact shall make Lysis more arrogant.¹⁵⁶ Dialectic questioning is the hallmark of the truest and most beneficial friendships because it cultivates character in accordance with the aim of friendship.

Socrates establishes throughout the *Lysis* that lovers and friends overlap. Socrates asks whether it is possible to desire and love something passionately without feeling friendly towards it and Lysis and Menexenus agree it is not.¹⁵⁷ All people love what they believe to be good and that only people who do not understand what the good is could love something else. Goodness depends upon having a correct understanding of what to care about and how to behave in public and private life. Socrates implies that the love of the good—to the extent that each friend perceives goodness in the other—is the motivation to seek and preserve friendships.¹⁵⁸ Socrates comments that people who complement each others' virtues are naturally suited to friendship... and that this seems

¹⁵³ Lysis 212b

¹⁵⁴ Cooper, 687.

¹⁵⁵ Lysis 204e

¹⁵⁶ Lysis 206a

¹⁵⁷ Lysis 221b

¹⁵⁸ Lysis 221d

to be the case with *Lysis* and *Menexenus*.¹⁵⁹ Citizens who have the proper understanding of the good will recognize Socrates as a friend and be receptive to his philosophical mission. The virtuous person seeks to acquire the good by engaging in friendships with others who possess knowledge which will aid in the development of their character. One therefore naturally seeks to associate with those whose qualities they consider worthy of emulation. Mary Nichols argues that the account of Love Socrates presents in the *Symposium* accounts for the public nature of his philosophy.¹⁶⁰

The *Lysis* has defied interpreters who would use it to construct an affirmative account of Platonic friendship in part because Socrates repeatedly issues retractions and expresses his dissatisfaction with the arguments. Do any of the intermediate conclusions about friendship avoid contradiction through the end of the dialogue? Francisco Gonzalez argues that attempting to resolve the contradictions of the philosophical conversation requires one to go beyond what is stated in the text.¹⁶¹ The *Lysis* has been overshadowed by the *Symposium* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* because these texts appear to address the topic more comprehensively. Yet Gonzalez maintains that the *Lysis* is “remarkably coherent” independent of other dialogues when its arguments are situated in their dramatic context. The *Lysis* goes beyond the characterization of friendship presented in the *Symposium* and is fundamentally incompatible with the *Ethics*. Gonzalez emphasizes how the setting of the dialogue implies themes of competition, inequality, and submission. The appeal and originality of such an approach is that it interprets the dialogue without having to wrestle with Socrates’ retractions.

¹⁵⁹ *Lysis* 221e

¹⁶⁰ Nichols, 30.

¹⁶¹ Francisco Gonzalez, “Plato’s *Lysis*: An Enactment of Philosophical Kinship,” *Ancient Philosophy* 15, no 1. (1995). 69.

Gonzalez claims that the significance of the wrestling school as the setting for the philosophical discussion is that it introduces the theme of competition between friends.¹⁶² The reader might imagine the background for the philosophical discussion as consisting of wrestlers paired off in fierce physical struggle.¹⁶³ Socrates transforms the competition between the friends at the wrestling school into an insatiable desire for wisdom and virtue.¹⁶⁴ This encourages the boys to order their souls so that their spirit serves reason (individual justice as it is described in the *Republic*). Socrates initiates the philosophical conversation by asking Lysis and Menexenus a series of questions about their age and ancestry (e.g. who is richest?) which place them in competition with one another.¹⁶⁵ Socrates states:

I was about to ask them next which of them was juster and wiser when somebody came in to get Menexenus. It seemed he still had some part to play in the ceremony, and so off he went.¹⁶⁶

Gonzalez claims that the competition between Lysis and Menexenus in the pursuit for philosophical knowledge makes them akin.¹⁶⁷ Gonzalez considers the matter of whether the competitive spirit must extend to virtue and wisdom in order for the boys to be true friends an unresolved question of the dialogue.¹⁶⁸ Socrates depicts himself in competition for the soul of Athens with the natural philosophers and the sophists in dialogues such as the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*.

¹⁶² Gonzalez, 71.

¹⁶³ Christopher Tindale. "Plato's Lysis: A Reconsideration" *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 18, no. 2 (1984), 105.

¹⁶⁴ Gonzalez, 87.

¹⁶⁵ Lysis 207b

¹⁶⁶ Lysis 207d

¹⁶⁷ Gonzalez, 75.

¹⁶⁸ Gonzalez, 71.

The *Lysis* introduces the idea that friends belong to one another. Socrates claims that friends come to desire one another when they recognize that their souls possess complementary virtues.¹⁶⁹ Each friend recognizes in the other friend virtues which they once possessed (perhaps in past lives) and which belong to them. That friendships are beneficial to the soul because they compensate for missing virtues explains Socrates' great desire for a friend.¹⁷⁰ Gonzalez states:

We desire what we lack only when what we lack in some sense belongs to us and is our own. The good can belong to the person who desires it without being possessed by him. [Socrates introduces] a kinship that is compatible with lack.¹⁷¹

Gonzalez asks whether the friendship between the boys is compatible with their belonging to someone else.¹⁷² Lysis and Menexenus must submit to the rule of their parents and for this reason are described by Socrates as hardly being their own persons.¹⁷³ The discussion cannot finish because both Lysis and Menexenus are taken away by their pedagogues at the command of their parents.¹⁷⁴ Nothing about Socrates' treatment of belonging suggests that the boys cannot have friends apart from one another. Friendship is possible between and among the multitude. Zuckert writes:

The kind of possession Socrates has associated with friendship is not like the erotic madness he describes in the *Phaedrus*... when he speaks of friends belonging to each other by nature as parts of a household, he treats

¹⁶⁹ *Lysis* 222a

¹⁷⁰ *Lysis* 211e

¹⁷¹ Gonzalez, 83–84.

¹⁷² Gonzalez, 72.

¹⁷³ *Lysis* 210d

¹⁷⁴ *Lysis* 223a

friends as kinds of property. Political communities might be described in terms of friendship as Socrates has just defined it. But can philosophy?¹⁷⁵

The discussion of friendship and belonging in the *Lysis* is politically relevant because Socrates claims to belong to Athens.¹⁷⁶ Socrates complements the missing virtues of the Athenian democracy because he understands his own ignorance and moderates his appetite where his fellow citizens do not. Zuckert asks whether philosophy can be described as friendship. The philosophical life consists of conversing with others and examining them about matters of virtue. Zuckert suggests that philosophers desire friends among their fellow citizens who share an interest in virtue but who possess complementary insights.¹⁷⁷ Socrates can be seen in search of such figures as he carries out his philosophical mission.¹⁷⁸

In conclusion, the *Lysis* offers an account of friendship with remarkable connections to the way in which Socrates practices his political mission. Friends, as Socrates does, impart the correct understanding of what to care about and how to behave in public and private life. Friends, as Socrates does, identify the potential of the befriended to behave according to the good and enable them to reach this potential through instruction. Socrates cannot accomplish the moral and intellectual reform of Athens without others in the city and thus believes that he and his fellow Athenians are bound together in the democracy by his divine mission.

¹⁷⁵ Zuckert, 527.

¹⁷⁶ *Apology* 30e

¹⁷⁷ Zuckert, 528.

¹⁷⁸ *Lysis* 211e

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