

A Short Note on Plato

In the present essay I will provide a general account of Plato's critique of democracy, and the knowledge upon which is founded. Subsequently, I tackle the issue of whether it is possible to build a conception of democratic knowledge based on Plato's theory of knowledge. Although there are a few different conceptions of knowledge present in the various Platonic dialogues, for the sake of the present work I will rely on Plato's theory as presented in the *Republic*. Among other things, I argue that presupposing this theory of knowledge gives way to a strong critique of democracy and the knowledge upon which it is based. Nonetheless, other dialogues will be brought up in relation to my main argument.¹

Before engaging Plato's explicit critique of democracy, it is worth mentioning that his critique is part of a broader argument against Athenian mentality in general. The *Apology* is a good example of this. In this dialogue, the Socratic practice of philosophy is portrayed not so much as propositional but as a negative

activity which consists in the critique of the established behaviour of the Athenians, through a process of self- and cross-examination. He critiques Athenians for presuming to know without knowing, and for paying too much attention to wealth, reputation, and honors, instead of caring for wisdom, truth, and the best possible state of the soul (*Apology*, 29d-e). Socrates wants Athenians "to care for virtue" (*ibid.*, 31b), and not do "anything unjust or impious" (*ibid.*, 32d). In the *Apology*, Socrates also argues—referring primarily of course to himself—that to strive for justice and do philosophy one needs to lead a private life, meaning that he thought the political order of the city was unjust: "A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time" (*ibid.*, 32a).

In the *Republic*, contrary to the *Apology*, the critique of the democratic state and the democratic citizen presupposes the previous establishment of a definition of justice and a theory of knowledge. In the creation of the ideal city, justice is defined through the principle of specialization. In other words, each specific class has a particular function and role to play in the *Kallipolis*. Moreover, this form of specialization impedes individual groups from meddling in the affairs of the other classes; to do so would constitute injus-

¹It is important to clarify that due to the nature of the question being posed in this essay, I will not stress issues concerning the consistency of some lines of argument through the different dialogues. The main argument will focus more on points of continuity between the dialogues, than on points of rupture. Also, the issue of dividing the Platonic dialogues into early/middle/late, and its consequence as to the Platonic conceptions and his portrayals of Socrates, will not be assessed in the present essay.

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tice (*Republic*, 434c-d). To achieve justice, however, a meticulous process of formation and education is required. This first program of education strives for the moderation of the guardians, and it consists on a tightly managed administration of the kind of stories, imitations, styles, and rhythms that are going to be permitted within the city. Unprejudiced imitation, which is a critique of the democratic city and its formative institutions such as the theater is condemned (*ibid.*, 394d-396b). The institutions of democracy are further undermined because these stories depict gods fighting one another, betraying, etc., and this is an explicit attack on the tragedians, who played an important part in the education of the democratic citizens.

Second, through the establishment of the theory of knowledge in the *Republic*, democracy will be seen as a disorderly state based on unending individual desires and based on opinion instead of knowledge. The theory of knowledge has as its main goal to achieve knowledge of the good, not only because it represents the supreme form of knowledge, but also because “it’s by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial” (*ibid.*, 505a). The theory of knowledge is presented through the line analogy in book VI and the allegory of the cave in book VII, although it emerges from an initial distinction between knowledge and opinion in book V (*ibid.*, 478a-e).

The line analogy presents a picture of different degrees or gradations of knowledge. It portrays mainly a division of knowledge into two realms of reality, the intelligible world [true reality] and the visible world [world of appearances] (*ibid.*, 509d), to which correspond the main division in the degrees of knowl-

edge, the realm of knowledge and the realm of opinion. To the realm of knowledge proper, of the intelligible, correspond two gradations, that of Understanding and that of Thought, while the realm of the visible or of opinion is divided into Belief and Imagination.

Within the realm of opinion or of the visible, the poorest or lowest type of wisdom is Imagination. This wisdom only grasps images, that is, “shadows, then reflections in water and in all close-packed, smooth, and shiny materials, and everything of that sort” (*ibid.*, 509d-e). The upper level within the realm of opinion is occupied by Belief, through which we can grasp the original things from which images are produced: “In the other subsection of the visible, put the originals of these images, namely, the animals around us, all the plants, and the whole class of manufactured things” (*ibid.*, 510a).

The realm of knowledge, for its part, is constituted first by Thought, and then by Understanding. Thought (*ibid.*, 510b, 511a) starts by using hypotheses based on abstractions from the things grasped by belief. Thought is still related to the visible world in that it takes concrete things as guiding principles. Understanding achieves a more complete independence from the visible world, since it uses the previous hypotheses not as “first principle” but as real hypotheses through which dialectic achieves “the un-hypothetical first principle of everything” (*ibid.*, 511b), and then conducts itself through the forms of things themselves.

On the other hand, the allegory of the cave depicts also the journey of the philosopher towards knowledge of the Good. Only after achieving knowledge of the Good, or looking at the sun in the alle-

gory, must the people compel the philosopher to come back and rule the *kallipolis*. The consolidation and maintenance of the just city needs the ruling of the philosopher-king who achieves knowledge of the Good.

It is important to have this theory of knowledge in mind when taking into account the critique of democracy and the knowledge upon which it rests. If we assume the *Republic's* theory of knowledge, then the *kallipolis* constructed out of words will be the only political order based on real knowledge. In that sense, the democratic order is not based on knowledge proper, but on opinion, which—while not being ignorance—is like an ambiguity (*ibid.*, 479b) that lies between knowledge and ignorance, between being and not-being. This means that democracy's foundational knowledge itself is unstable, not fixed.

It is not accidental, then, that in Book VIII Plato presents such a harsh critique of democracy, being the next to worst in the degeneration of the political order. In contrast to the fixed order of the *kallipolis* through which Plato provides the just city, democracy is full of freedom up to the point where everybody has the license to do what he wants (*ibid.*, 557b), meaning that democracy is an unjust order, in which someone can potentially meddle in the affairs pertinent to others. This freedom of its subjects makes the democratic order a mixed one in which one can find “all kinds of constitutions” (*ibid.*, 557d).

The democratic citizen does not have knowledge, but false beliefs (*ibid.*, 560c) and useless desires (*ibid.*, 560d). They invert previous values into new ones: “... calling insolence good breeding, anarchy freedom, extravagance magnificence, and shamelessness courage” (*ibid.*, 560e). In

other words, they invert some of the most valued and necessary elements of the *kallipolis*, such as moderation, courage, and fixity. This license and freedom makes citizens even disrespectful of the laws. The extreme freedom which is constitutive of democracy and its citizens, argues Plato, will eventually bring its own dissolution and make it possible for a tyrant to come into existence.

Another important critique to the knowledge upon which the democratic order is built is presented in the dialogue *Gorgias*. This is a very important dialogue because it contains a profound critique of democratic knowledge and the different statesmen of Athens, as well as the general Athenian mentality concerning the issue of politics and justice.

It begins with Socrates wanting to find out about the nature of rhetoric. It is not fortuitous that rhetoric is the center of discussion since it is accepted that it plays a very important part in the functioning of democracy. For example, when Gorgias is arguing about rhetoric as a powerful tool of persuasion and its value, he says:

I'm referring to the ability to persuade by speeches judges in a law court, councilors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place. In point of fact, with this ability you'll have the doctor for your slave, and the physical trainer, too. As for the financial expert of yours, he'll turn out to be making more money for somebody else instead of himself; for you, in fact, if you've got the ability to speak and to persuade the crowds (*Gorgias*, 452e).

This passage shows the centrality of rhetoric within all the activities that were commonly held to be most important. It is

no wonder then that it preoccupies Socrates so much. After that, Gorgias further determines his definition by saying that rhetoric is the art of persuasion used in courts of law and assemblies, and that it concerns itself with what is just and unjust (*ibid.*, 454b). Since it deals with such an important issue as justice, Socrates wants to find out if rhetoric provides real knowledge or if it simply provides belief.

Socrates will argue that if rhetoric is able to persuade learned people, it must not be knowledge, but belief. For example, in the area of medicine the rhetorician is able to persuade not only the ignorant of medicinal knowledge, but also the expert in it. The rhetorician can overpower every specific expert, without needing to have the specific knowledge that the expert has. Gorgias has to accept that rhetoric provides only belief, and not knowledge, about what is just and unjust (*ibid.*, 455a).

If we take into account what has just been presented, we find a further critique of democratic knowledge. Plato is presenting rhetoric as the type of wisdom assumed in the general functioning of the democracy. If rhetoric produces only belief and not knowledge, democracy's foundation is flawed from the start.

In addition, politics—according to Socrates in the *Gorgias*—is an art of the soul. It should be interested in what is best and not in what is most pleasant. In dispute with Callicles—who represents also the common mentality²—Socrates

²Another important element in the discussion with Callicles is his notion of justice as the ruler possessing more than his subjects, which advances to some extent Thrasymachus' definition of justice as being the inter-

argues that the duty of the public man is to improve the citizens (*ibid.*, 515d), and not as Athenian statesmen had done. Unlike public officers in the democratic order, Socrates states that before engaging with politics, a person must first strive to know and practice virtue. Only then will we gain a better knowledge with which to govern a city:

Nothing terrible will happen to you if you really are an admirable and good man, one who practices excellence. And then, after we've practiced it together, then at last, if we think we should, we'll turn to politics, or then we'll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we're better at deliberating than we are now (*ibid.*, 527d).

It is left for us now to see if it is possible to build an alternative democratic knowledge based on Plato's theory of knowledge. If we insist, for example, in the *Republic's* theory of knowledge, the project will be doomed from the very beginning due to the undemocratic assumptions of this conception.

The achievement of true knowledge, of knowledge of the Good, in this conception already assumes an anti-democratic foundation because it rests on the established division of the city into the three hierarchical components and its legitimization through the falsehood of the myth of metals, which will say:

All of you in the city are brothers, [...] but the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are the most valuable. He put silver in those who are auxiliaries and iron and bronze in the farmers and other craftsmen. [...] So the first and

est of the stronger, presented in Book I of the *Republic*.

most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of the next generation (*Republic*, 415a-b).

This means that right from the start, within this conception, only people considered to be born with “gold” in their soul will be permitted to educate themselves properly in order to reach true knowledge. Everybody else is supposed to have the proper moderation and temperateness to comprehend that only those should really know and rule the city, that there are souls which are superior to other souls. Therefore, I do not see how it could be possible to build a democratic knowledge upon the *Republic*’s theory of knowledge.

Let us consider next if it is possible to construct a conception of democratic knowledge based upon other theories of knowledge presented in other dialogues. Of the other conceptions of knowledge present in the Platonic dialogues, one of the most famous is the one presented in the *Meno*. The *Meno* concerns an inquiry towards a definition of virtue [*arete*], and in it we find a conception of knowledge based on the theory of recollection. When Socrates finally makes Meno reach a state of perplexity (*Meno*, 80a-b), he presents an account in which the soul is immortal. Socrates will argue that since the soul is immortal, it has had the opportunity of seeing and learning everything, including “virtue and other things” (*ibid.*, 81c-d). What is called learning, then, is really a process of recollecting—of looking within oneself—something that was learned and lived in a past life-experience. This recollection, on the other hand, is not entirely *self*-recollection since you need another to show the proper road in order to recollect. Socrates tries to prove this

through his questioning of Meno’s servant.

This theory of knowledge has strong implications for a democratic knowledge since it puts the souls of everyone on an equal footing, hence the point of showing that even the slave or servant is able to achieve knowledge. The democratic potential in this conception is obvious not only because of the equivalence of souls (even a slave is able to know), but also because of its social nature and origin through exchange and dialogue. Nonetheless, I think that this potential is undermined by some of its problematic assumptions. First, the example of the slave presupposes that Socrates already knows the proper questions to ask him. Second, there is no real intellectual input from the servant, he is presented as a very passive interlocutor, who is just very briefly answering Socrates’ questions in the affirmative or choosing options that are already half-suggested by the manner Socrates phrases the questions (similar to the interlocutors of Books II to X in the *Republic*). In the end, we still have the suspicion that Socrates knows more than he usually admits,³ and that there is an asymmetrical relationship between his soul and the slave’s soul.⁴

³In the *Apology* we have the same tension. For example, the quest for knowledge and the questioning of others is first presented as having curiosity as its origin, while then he changes this innocent claim and says that he started because the god asked him to, and even that he was the god’s greatest gift to Athens.

⁴There is the additional problem that Socrates, in a very un-Socratic manner, assumes uncritically a narrative about the immortality of the soul given by “priests and priestesses.” In a sense, this undermines the theory of recollection from the beginning.

Another possibility, for example, is presented in the conception of knowledge of the aviary analogy in the *Theaetetus*. We forego the wax analogy because, besides the fact that it is defeated by Socrates in the dialogue, the wax analogy already assumed a hierarchy of capacities for knowledge by stating that some souls had blocks of wax bigger, better, and more pure than others (*Theaetetus*, 191d). Meanwhile, the aviary analogy presupposes that everyone has an aviary in their soul. In this conception, the person takes particular pieces of knowledge (birds) and puts them in his aviary (soul). Within this framework, there are two kinds of “chasing”: possessing and having. Possessing is when you take a piece of knowledge and put it inside the aviary, while having is when—within the soul itself—you take a particular piece of knowledge which you already possessed (*ibid.*, 198d). Within this conception, false knowledge is the result of an individual trying to hold a particular known thing, but by mistake getting a hold over another known thing (*ibid.*, 199b).

Although this conception provided by the aviary analogy has potential for democratic knowledge because everyone has the same capacity for it, Socrates dislikes it because he cannot accept that error is a product of knowledge itself, something—according to him—implied in it⁵ (*ibid.*, 199d). We may say that trying to construct a democratic knowledge upon Plato’s theories of knowledge, is a task he wanted to prevent. And every

⁵Socrates’ rejection of the aviary analogy seems somewhat problematic because if at first he distinguishes two moments in the process (possessing, then having), to reject it he ignores the established distinction and assumes knowledge as a constant whole, through which either one knows or one does not.

time we start to come up with a way to do it, it seems that Plato manipulates Socrates into moving around the arguments and not letting them stay put.⁶

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⁶An accusation which is seen in various dialogues, for example in the *Euthyphro* (11-c-d), and in the *Meno*.