

Socratic Citizenship

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The Paradox of Socrates

Plato scholars often ponder what has become known as the “Socratic Paradox,” which arises from Socrates’ notorious disavowal of knowledge, “I know only that I know nothing.” The disavowal is a paradox in the formal sense: a condition of the statement’s truth is that the statement is false. It is the sort of thing that many philosophers delight in. I shall not discuss the Socratic Paradox in this essay. Instead, I’d like to call attention to a paradox of a different sort, a “paradox” in the sense of a puzzle, what I shall call the *Paradox of Socrates*.

The Paradox of Socrates is of central importance to contemporary society, and strictly has to do with the character Socrates we encounter in Plato’s dialogues. Of course, Socrates the Platonic character may or may not bear a close resemblance to the *historical* Socrates. The *historical* Socrates, like the historical Plato, is a figure about whom we know very little. Yet there is much we know about the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues, and this is the Socrates with whom we shall be concerned.

We know that as a young man Socrates met Parmenides and Zeno and argued about metaphysics; we know that Socrates discussed justice with Thrasymachus, piety with Euthyphro, and love with Phaedrus; we know that he gave a courageous *apologia* of his life before a jury of 501; we know that, despite encouragement from his dear friend Crito, he refused to escape from jail on the grounds of the injustice of disobedience; and we know that he argued for the immortality of the soul on his last day. That is, we know that Socrates lived an *examined life*, a life of the open exchange of reasons, a life focused on the perpetual pursuit of knowledge.

For this reason, Socrates to this day serves as a model for the contemporary Academy in general, and for the Humanities in particular. To academics, Socrates represents both the ideal student-- relentlessly questioning, challenging, and yearning for the truth-- and the master of pedagogy--guiding and enabling, not “leading,” his interlocutors along the path of learning, instigating in them an inquisitive urge by

exposing their own misconceptions and misunderstandings. The Delphic injunction to “Know thyself!” still retains its force, and so we tend to think that a liberal education must include at least one serious encounter with Socrates. Insofar as we hold that a liberal education in some central way aims to cultivate in students the dispositions and habits necessary for citizenship in a modern democratic society, we hold that an engagement with Socrates is essential to that aim.

However, the image of Socrates as the ideal questioner and the life-long-learner quickly gives way once we turn from what Socrates *does* to what Socrates *says*. For there is another side to him, one much less congenial to our moral and political sensibilities.

In Book VI of the *Republic*, Socrates asks his interlocutors to imagine a ship whose owner “is bigger and stronger than everyone else on board, but he’s hard of hearing, a bit shortsighted, and his knowledge of seafaring is equally deficient” (488b).¹ This shipowner is surrounded by sailors who each desires to be captain, despite the fact that none of them has the slightest knowledge of how to navigate a ship or even to where it would be best for the ship to go. These sailors “stupefy their noble ship owner with drugs, wine, or in some other way” (488c) and take control of the ship. However, as the sailors are not expert navigators, they are not of one mind as to where the ship should go; consequently, there is great strife among them for control. Chaos ensues.

The ship symbolizes the democratic state, the stupefied shipowner represents the populace, and the controlling sailors match the politicians (a term that has a slightly derogatory sense today). This image is one of several that can be found in the Platonic dialogues that apparently reveals Socrates’ negative estimation of democracy. Baldly put, it runs something like this: Average citizens are too foolish to engage responsibly in self-government. Wisdom concerning political matters is not distributed equally across the population, but invested in a relatively small subset of individuals in any given society. Political wisdom enables the few who have it to discern the best political policies among the possible options, and hence to make the best political decisions. Therefore the democratic principle of distributing the power of political decision equally

¹ Citations to Plato will be drawn from the translations found in Hackett’s *Complete Works*, edited by John Cooper.

among all citizens is unreasonable. Further, since democracy puts the power of political decision in the hands of the ignorant majority, it is positively *unjust*.

In the *Republic*, Socrates offers his famous response to this line of argument, Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide, cities will have no rest from evils (473d)

That is, in the *Republic*, Socrates argues for a *epistocratic* state, that is, a state in which political power is invested entirely in those who are wise, the Philosopher Kings.² Yet this suggests a different Socrates, a Socrates who is radically antidemocratic, anti-egalitarian, anti-individualist, and hierarchical. As Karl Popper (1971) proposed, Socrates is an enemy of the open society.

Thus the Paradox of Socrates. He is at once the champion of the Academy and the archenemy of democracy. How could this be?

The deep worry is that the paradox reveals that examined life is fundamentally elitist. Could it be that our institutions of higher education are incapable of furthering their own stated democratic goals? Might a liberal education be at odds with the broader character of a democratic society? Some have answered affirmatively. Of these, some reject Socrates and propose to trash the traditional canon as inherently biased in favor of entrenched injustice. Others take the second horn of the dilemma, embracing Socrates and trashing contemporary democracy as inherently vulgar and corrupt. I do not intend to engage these debates; I mention them only as a way of underscoring the degree to which the Paradox of Socrates affects us.

My aim in this essay will be to work through the Paradox of Socrates; that is, to talk about Socrates in a way in which eases the tension between the two aspects of his personality. The objective will be to defend the thought that Socrates, and the Platonic dialogues, are essential to the democratic aims of a liberal education. This will require that I occasionally make points of a semi-technical nature, but the discussion will be on the whole quite general. I begin with a few methodological claims about reading Plato's dialogues, I shall then move to a discussion of Socrates' method, and finally I shall say

² It is worth noting that no less a defender of our modern conception of liberty than John Stuart Mill endorsed a version of epistocracy. In his *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill argues that "graduates of universities" and others who "labor with their heads" rather than their bodies should be given "two or more votes" at the polls (Mill 1991, 336).

some things about democracy. The underlying thesis is that the activity of Socratic examination provides a compelling image of democratic citizenship *even when--* or, perhaps *especially when--* such examination leads to criticism of existing democratic practice.

Some Points of Interpretation

I follow the *dialogical* school of Plato interpretation.³ Dialogical readers of Plato base their approach on the following claims:

1. There is little we know about the historical figures of Plato and Socrates. (Accordingly, the name 'Plato' refers simply to the author of dialogues, and 'Socrates' refers to the character in the dialogues.)
2. Plato wrote dialogues in which a running character, Socrates, enters into various kinds of verbal exchange, running from argument and cross-examination to speech-making, poetic improvisation, and oratory.
3. In addition to presenting such verbal exchanges, the dialogues exhibit distinctive *dramatic* features.
4. Socrates does not present a consistent set of philosophical claims across the dialogues.
5. There is no easy warrant for the assumption that Socrates represents or articulates Plato's views.

These claims are not especially controversial-- they are more or less descriptive. The dialogical approach becomes more controversial in the lessons it draws from these claims, two of which are as follows:

- a. The *philosophical* import of the dramatic elements of the dialogues relative to that of the *argumentative* elements is an *open question* to which we must attend.
- b. Similarly, the *purpose* of the dialogues is also an open question.

³ Early intimations of the dialogical approach to Plato are found in Woodbridge 1929 and Randall 1970. More recent examples of dialogism can be found in Tejera 1984 and Arieti 1991. See also the essays collected in Griswold 1988; Press 1993; Gonzalez 1995; and Press 2000.

The dialogical school seeks to reexamine our usual approach to Plato, to investigate the nature of the dialogue form, and to integrate the dramatic and argumentative elements of the dialogues.⁴

This approach leads to what I think are positively crucial innovations in our readings of the dialogues. For example, on a dialogical reading, the point of the *Euthyphro* shifts dramatically. As I have argued elsewhere (***) , a series of dramatic features, allusions, and instances of word-play open up for us a reading of the *Euthyphro* that is not so narrowly fixed on the famed dilemma presented at 10a. On the reading I have developed, the dialogue is a sophisticated examination into the nature of ambition, obligation, expertise, and power, especially in the context of the father-son relationship. Recall that, in the *Euthyphro*, a son is attempting to prosecute his own father; throughout the dialogue, Socrates alludes to the mythological father-son rivalry between Icarus and Daedalus. I have argued further that this *dramatic* interpretation informs our understanding of the *arguments* of the dialogue, thereby integrating the logical and literary features of the text.

I shall not rehearse these arguments here. The point to emphasize is that the dialogical approach holds that Socrates' conversations are *not* instances of formal demonstration, easily convertible into the P's and Q's of logic textbooks, ready to be extracted from their textual home. Rather, Socrates' conversations are always conversations *with* a particular interlocutor, and they are sensitive to that particularity. That is, Socrates, who always objected to speaking to crowds, *engages* his discursive counterpart, *examines* those specific presumptions that his interlocutor brings to the conversation, and *inquires* with him.

In this sense, everything Socrates does and says is *ad hominem*, but not in the sense of the fallacy. Socrates' philosophical activity is always directed to a specific interlocutor. As Socrates himself contends in the *Apology*, he *examines himself and others* (29a). This is to say that Socrates does not simply examine the *claims* or *statements* of his interlocutors; he examines his *interlocutors*.

⁴ See Press 1997 for a comprehensive survey of the issues.

The Elenchus: Standard and Revised

Socrates' characteristic mode of examination is called the *elenchus*. The Greek *elenchos* derives from the verb, *elenchein*, "to test" or "to refute." This seems fitting. However, the precise nature of the elenchus has been misunderstood by those who would like to interpret the dialogues as primitive logic textbooks, and a contrast between the standard view and one driven by the dialogical mode of interpretation will be instructive.⁵

On the standard view, the Socratic elenchus has the following structure:

1. **Interlocutor:** P
2. **Socrates:** Really? P?
3. **I:** Yes, P!
4. **S:** OK. Also Q and R?
5. **I:** Yes, Q and R.
6. **S:** Well, if Q and R, then not-P.
7. **I:** ???
8. **S:** Therefore, P is false (not-P).

On this standard model, the elenchus is aimed at the demonstration of the falsity of some proposition, P. Socrates' method of examination is thoroughly formal, addressed explicitly to the truth-value of a proposition.

Doubt about the standard model should arise once it is noted that, on the standard model, the elenchus is a logical failure. That is, the method of elenchus is insufficient to establish its conclusion, namely that P is false. This is so because the *falsity* of P is not entailed by the *inconsistency* of the set of claims {P, Q, R}. What Socrates shows is *not* that P is false, but only that at least *one* proposition in the interlocutor's belief set {P, Q, R} must be false. But this is not enough to show that P is the culprit! And therefore it is not enough to constitute a *refutation* of P. Hence on the standard model, Socrates is guilty of a rudimentary logical error, what we shall call the *Elenctic Fallacy*.

Whereas some philosophers have been content to conclude from the Elenctic Fallacy that Plato was just an incompetent logician, I, as a matter of hermeneutic principle, urge modesty in these matters. More directly, I think that the standard model is flatly incorrect both in its formal structure and in its background assumptions. Consider a revised model of the elenchus:

⁵ See Vlastos 1994 for an elaboration of defense of the standard model. The discussion that follows draws from (**).

1. **Interlocutor:** I know that P.
2. **Socrates:** Really? You know that P?
3. **I:** Yes, I know that P!
4. **S:** OK. Do you also know that Q and R?
5. **I:** Yes, I know that Q and R.
6. **S:** Well, if Q and R, then not-P.
7. **I:** ???
8. **S:** Therefore, you have not
demonstrated your knowledge that P.

Although the proposed revision may seem slight on its face, there is a world of difference between the revised model and the standard model. Not only does the revised model more accurately match the actual elenctic exchanges found in the dialogues; it does not commit Socrates to an obviously invalid formal inference, and it comports more fully with Socrates' own descriptions of his philosophical activity.

On the revised model, the elenchus is not primarily fixed on *propositions*, but rather on the interlocutor's *claim to know* some proposition. Thus Socrates does not conclude from the inconsistency of set {P, Q, R} the falsity of P (which, as we have said, is invalid), but instead concludes from the inconsistency of the set that the interlocutor has failed to demonstrate his knowledge that P. The interlocutor's *not knowing* that P is consistent, certainly, with the *truth* of P, and so the elenchus does not constitute a *refutation* of P. Neither does the elenchus constitute a formal refutation of the interlocutor's claim to know that P. Rather, the elenchus demonstrates to the interlocutor that he has not *shown* that he has the knowledge he has claimed to have, and that, if he is to maintain his claim to know, he must try again to give an account, a *logos*, of P.

The elenchus is therefore aimed entirely at the *self-conception* of Socrates' interlocutor. The interlocutor believes himself to have some knowledge. Typically, Socrates' interlocutors take their professed knowledge to entitle them to power, money, or some other perceived benefit. Euthyphro, for example, believes that his knowledge entitles him to special influence in the assembly (3c). Furthermore, Socrates' interlocutors concede, even if implicitly, that to know that P is to be able to *demonstrate* that one knows that P by means of a *logos*, a rational account. The purpose of the elenchus, then, is to test an interlocutor's claim to know by examining whether he can give a *logos* of his professed knowledge.

When successful, the elenchus purges us of a kind of self-deception-- we no longer believe that we know what we do not know. We can call this state of confronting our ignorance of our ignorance *aporia* (impasse), and it is marked by a surprising and arresting confusion. Yet the effect is not purely negative: when purged of our ignorance of our own ignorance, we gain an important bit of self-knowledge, and are prepared to *pursue* knowledge, to inquire further. We also come to learn better what proper inquiry is: we are reminded that knowledge does not depend upon social status or rhetorical skill or power to compel assent. In the process, certain epistemic virtues are cultivated-- we develop intellectual modesty, fair-mindedness, charity, and courage. These are virtues that enable us not to tenaciously hold on to our beliefs, but rather to *rationally revise* them, and hence to gain a kind of epistemic self-control. Finally, we come to see that proper inquiry requires others. We cannot live an examined life in isolation; the elenchus is an irreducibly *discursive* activity, requiring the participation of others.

Democracy and Dialogue

Let us now briefly turn to contemporary democratic theory. Much of current theorizing about democracy begins with a familiar criticism of our contemporary political scene that is well-characterized by Jane Mansbridge as “adversary democracy.”

Mansbridge describes adversary democracy like this:

Voters pursue their individual interests by making demands on the political system in proportion to the intensity of their feelings. Politicians, also pursuing their own interests, adopt policies that buy them votes, thus ensuring accountability. In order to stay in office, politicians act like entrepreneurs and brokers, looking for formulas that satisfy as many, and alienate as few, interests as possible. From the interchange between self-interested voters and self-interested brokers emerge decisions that come as close as possible to a balanced aggregation of individual interests. (Mansbridge 1983, 17)

Note that Mansbridge’s depiction is not far removed from Socrates’ image of the ship.

Mansbridge continues,

Adversary democracy is the democracy of a cynical society. It replaces common interest with self-interest, the dignity of equal status with the baser motives of self-protection, and the communal moments of a face-to-face council with the isolation of a voting machine. (Mansbridge 1983, 18)

More recently, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin have connected the adversarial model to present democratic ills,

We have a public dialogue that is ever more efficiently segmented in its audiences and morselized in its sound bites. We have an ever more tabloid new agenda dulling the sensitivities of an increasingly inattentive citizenry. And we have mechanisms of feedback from the public, from viewer call-ins to self-selected internet polls, that emphasize intense constituencies, unrepresentative of the public. (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004, 8)

Contemporary theorists of democracy, writing under a number of banners, have sought to devise a democratic response to the adversarial mode of democratic politics. The leading approach of this sort is *deliberative democracy*.⁶ Deliberative democrats reject the traditional view according to which the legitimacy of a democratic decision derives from the fact that it was produced by a voting procedure that fairly aggregates the preferences of the voting populace. Deliberative democrats contend that voting must be preceded by processes of public deliberation by which citizens exchange reasons, contrast perspectives, and *rationally engage* each other. These processes make for better informed citizens with increasingly coherent sets of preferences who are more aware of their own pre- and mis-conceptions and less susceptible to rhetorical manipulation. In turn, a deliberative citizenry generates a more rational political process in general: politicians could no longer pander to the lowest common denominator or engage in rhetorically-charged but logically vacuous campaigning. In short, deliberative democrats seek to generate a drastic sea change in our political status quo by means of the introduction of public deliberation.

But in my view deliberative theorists have not gone far enough. We arguably live in a political culture that is fully saturated with public deliberation. Television news is becoming increasingly interactive, with call-ins and daily polling taking center stage; talk radio is more popular than ever; the contemporary politics book business is a multi-billion dollar a year industry; and the phenomenon of the Internet, with its blogs,

⁶ The main statements can be found in the essays collected in Fishkin and Laslett 2003; Macedo 2000; Elster 1998; Bohman and Rehg 1997. See also the extended treatments in Fishkin 1993; Sunstein 1995; Bohman 1996; Habermas 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1998; Dryzek 2001; Young 2002; Goodin 2003; and ***.

listservs, and message boards, has us all connected to up-to-the-minute political news, information, and argument in ways we never imagined possible twenty years ago.

Of course, deliberative democrats would deny that the abovementioned forums are *properly* deliberative. And here I agree. Our popular forums of political exchange reflect the adversarial model lamented by Mansbridge: they polarize and divide citizens, defame and slander political opponents, and fix upon the sensational and scandalous.

Fair enough. But here is where we must press the question of what *proper* deliberation consists in; and here is where I think the prominent versions of deliberative democracy fail, for they are not sufficiently Socratic to provide a compelling response to this question.

Deliberative democrats typically hold that deliberation is a prelude to voting and as such is focused on the State and its policies. The point of deliberation, we are told, is to enable citizens who might otherwise disagree fundamentally to focus their thoughts on the common good, to seek agreement. That is, on the typical account, deliberation is a means to a certain kind of political end-- a democratic outcome that represents a consensus among citizens about the common good.

However, it could be argued that our current forums of political discussion are fully consistent with this account of deliberation! Where there is polarization, there tends to be deep consensus (at least within one's own discursive group) about what the State should do.

What is missing from contemporary versions of deliberative democratic theory is the Socratic concern, not simply with outcomes, but with the character of the deliberative process, and the characters of those who participate. That is, as we've seen, the Socratic elenchus is aimed at examining our *epistemic self-conception* as confident knowers, experts, and authorities. When successful, the elenchus exposes our self-minconceptions on these matters. As Socrates dismantles our *logos*, we discover that we do not know what we once believed we did, and that we must therefore take up the inquiry. But inquiry, as Socrates constantly reminds his interlocutors, requires the *virtues* or fair-mindedness in weighing arguments, charity in listening to opposing viewpoints, humility in changing one's mind, and courage to follow the arguments to where they lead.

That is, Socratic discourse provides a model of what democratic citizens owe to each other. We owe each other more than slogans and catch-phrases, we owe each other *justifications* for our views. We recognize each other's autonomy and individuality by entering into a process by which we *exchange reasons* and *critically engage* each other's ideas. When we do this, we realize that, at the end of the day, we may have to abandon or revise some cherished belief; yet we recognize that our primary commitment does lie within some particular belief, but rather with *logos* itself, the activity of articulating, exchanging, criticizing, and defending beliefs. Thus we see the importance of seeking out new dialogical partners, engaging new perspectives and ideas. Most importantly, we see this as an essentially *public* activity, the activity characteristic of a *citizen*. Accordingly, Socratic citizens are citizens of neither the Left or Right, they reject pre-packaged platforms and sound-bite analyses.

Conclusion: Socrates and Democracy

I have suggested that Socrates provides a model of discursive engagement among democratic citizens. But what of Socrates' objections to democracy? Here I must be suggestive rather than exhaustive. To begin, there are three general points. First, Socrates is generally no more critical of democracy than he is of other regimes, such as oligarchy. Second, Socrates' argument against disobedience in the *Crito* explicitly *presupposes* the legitimacy of democratic political arrangements. Third, only in a democratic city could Socrates practice elenchus, since elenchus requires that democratic norms of discursive equality and political accountability be in place.⁷

More substantively, Socrates' objections to democracy are aimed always at a particular conception of democracy, namely, democracy not as a "republic of reasons" (Sunstein 2001, 239) but as rule without reason. In this way, the Socratic criticisms cut most deeply against the adversarial model that is now widely criticized among democratic theorists. That is, many contemporary democratic theorists *share* Socrates' criticisms, but maintain that an alternate and superior understanding of democracy is available. Perhaps Socrates would contend that modern day deliberative democrats are

⁷ It is worth noting further that in Socrates' *kallipolis* as described in the *Republic*, there could be no philosophy of the sort that Socrates practices and no conversation of the sort that Socrates is engaged in with his interlocutors in the *Republic*. See the related discussion in Roocknik 2003.

overly sanguine about the capacity of individuals to be rational public deliberators. However, Socrates himself seems guilty of this same charge; given that he sought to engage rationally his fellow citizens--young and old, rich and poor, powerful and weak--publicly, he too seems committed to a positive estimation of the rationality of his fellows.

And yet we must never lose sight of the fact that a democracy executed Socrates. Although this is often understood as Plato's ultimate indictment of democracy, we may instead argue that the trial and execution of Socrates presents us with a compelling image of *democratic failure*, and a warning about the ways in which democracy can be corrupted. That is, Socrates' execution provides an essential lesson for democracy: When democracy loses its ability to be self-critical, it runs the risk of great injustice and hence dissolution. Socrates remains a most compelling reminder to us all of this fact of our political universe.

In this way, the tension between Socrates qua inquisitive gadfly and qua archenemy of democracy is eased. The kind of democracy that Socrates rejects is the kind of democracy that a liberal education is designed to combat. Socrates' public practice of elenchus provides a powerful model of how democracy can protect itself against its own corrupting tendencies. Accordingly, on the approach I have sketched here, Socrates emerges as a hero for contemporary democrats.

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