

Plato and the Problems of Modern Politics

Thomas Bartscherer

I

At a key moment in his influential essay on popular sovereignty, Harold Laski writes:

The truth surely is that we should regard the idea of popular sovereignty as expressive of what is the most real problem in modern politics. In some sort it goes back to Plato; for the institutions of which we make use are an attempt to answer his uncompromising rejection of the democratic system. Plato, in substance, denied the value of any general public opinion; and it is at least clear that the philosophic justification of democratic government must begin by showing that his argument is unsound.¹

Laski was writing just after the conclusion of World War I, waged, according to Woodrow Wilson, in order to make the world “safe for democracy.” It would of course not be long before democracy would once again require not only philosophical but also military defense, a situation that persisted, in the form of the Cold War, through to the end of the 1980s.² As that period was coming to an end, a prevalent view among many Western democratic

I am grateful to the participants in the workshops sponsored by the Social Sciences Research Council, identified in the Introduction to this volume, who responded to an earlier draft of this chapter with great thoughtfulness and rigor. Thanks also to all who have given me feedback on this work both in writing and in discussion. In particular, I would like to thank Ewa Atanassow, David A. Bateman, Samantha Hill, Ira Katznelson, and Elizabeth Markovits. I am especially grateful to David McNeill for his comments on this work and for many illuminating conversations about Plato and modern politics.

¹ Laski, “Theory of Popular Sovereignty,” 212–13.

² For an accessible recent account of how democracy failed in Europe in the 1930s, and what lessons that failure may hold for contemporary defenders of democracy, see *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. For a discussion of Carl Schmitt’s attempt to reconcile dictatorship and democracy, see Chapter 5 by Atanassow in this volume.

theorists was that much of the world was indeed finally being made safe for democracy – liberal democracy in particular. So promising was the situation that it seemed reasonable to some to speculate about whether history had come to its end, with liberal democracy becoming “the final form of human government.”³ When the *Journal of Democracy* was founded in 1990, its editors announced that it would be dedicated to unifying “what is becoming a worldwide democratic movement” now that democracy had been “rescued and restored to its true countenance.”⁴

In actuality, the geopolitical history of the subsequent thirty years has been far more tumultuous than many had anticipated, and, as suggested in the introduction to this volume, Western-style liberal democracy now seems far less triumphant, and far more in need of justification, than many had foreseen. In the past three decades, much has also transpired in Plato scholarship, and this presents an opportunity. We may be at a good moment to revisit Laski’s intuition that thinking in fundamental terms about popular sovereignty in some sense goes back, or should go back, to Plato. In other words, if the contemporary crises of liberal democracies have necessitated a fundamental rethinking of democratic theory, we may be aided in that task by the renaissance that has occurred in recent decades in the study of Plato, one of the first and most influential writers on democracy.

That at least is my proposal in this chapter. I shall be focusing in particular on Plato’s *Republic* and the exploration of the relationship between knowledge and political rule in that dialogue. Laski’s view that in the *Republic* Plato articulates his “uncompromising rejection” of democratic rule is widespread. On this view, Plato is said to ground his rejection in the thesis that in a well-governed regime, knowledge and political power will coincide. In democracies, by contrast, power will be divorced from knowledge because “general public opinion,” which in principle holds sway in a democracy, will be deficient with regard to knowledge. If we grant, as Tocqueville once suggested, that democracy is the “practical realization” of popular sovereignty, Plato’s position on democracy would, according to this common reading, amount to

³ “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”: Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, 4. There were, of course, many who rejected Fukuyama’s thesis, from Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* to Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, to name just two of the most prominent critiques. But for many in the foreign policy establishment, the ideological victory of Western-style liberal democracy and some version of free-market capitalism was fairly secure, and the real debate was over whether, and if so how actively, the foreign policy of the acknowledged global hegemon should be directed toward accelerating the propagation of the liberal democratic order. For an account of these debates, see H. W. Brands, *What America Owes the World*.

⁴ Diamond and Plattner, “Why the ‘Journal of Democracy’?”, 4.

an unambiguous denial of the legitimacy of popular sovereignty.⁵ By contrast, I will be maintaining that it is neither interpretatively sound nor particularly illuminating to read the *Republic* as Plato's epistocratic manifesto, in which he delegitimizes popular rule in the course of advocating for the coronation of philosophers.⁶ As I hope to show, the *Republic* counsels humility with regard to the place of knowledge in politics, and offers ways to think about political legitimacy in the absence of justificatory knowledge or expertise. More generally, I maintain that the dialogue is best understood as providing a matrix for reflecting on fundamental political questions. What comes to light about democracy in the conversation recounted in the *Republic* is not the illegitimacy of popular sovereignty but rather the centrality of persuasion, the legitimizing power of consent, and the specific character of its myths and educational ideals. In the first part of this chapter, I lay out in more detail what Laski refers to as the "most real problem of modern politics." The central section offers a close reading of the most relevant aspects of the *Republic* and defends the approach I have adumbrated. I close with some remarks on how this reading of Plato may inform our thinking about the contemporary practice and eventual fate of popular self-rule.

Laski's "most real problem" is perhaps best understood as the problem of political legitimacy. We may begin by distinguishing between two conceptions of political legitimacy. In one sense, popular sovereignty encapsulates the belief that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." This is the sense in which, as Charles Taylor has put it, popular sovereignty is "the regnant legitimacy idea of our time."⁷ Virtually all contemporary political regimes in one way or another ground their legitimacy on the claim that they have a mandate from the people. Understood this way, insofar as the people consent, the regime may be considered to be legitimate. While it is true, as Laski points out, that there is a fictive character to popular rule in large modern states, since they invariably rely on some form of representation, still the whole panoply of democratic institutions – central to which, of course,

⁵ The remark from Tocqueville appears in his notes to *Democracy in America*: "Sovereignty of the people and democracy are two perfectly correlative words; the one represents the theoretical idea, the other its practical realization": *Democracy in America* [Nolla Edition], 1:91. There are of course substantial differences between how democracy was institutionalized in classical Athens and how it exists in modern states, perhaps the most significant being the ubiquity of representation in the modern context. This chapter focuses not on the practice of democracy in ancient Athens, but rather on the theoretical account in the *Republic* of the fundamental principles of democratic regimes. On the relationship between modern conceptions of sovereignty (and popular sovereignty in particular) and their ancient precedents, see Chapter 2 by Markovits in this volume. See also Hoekstra, "Athenian Democracy and Popular Tyranny," and Lane, "Popular Sovereignty as Control of Office-Holders."

⁶ For the origin of the term "epistocracy" and its adjectival form, "epistocratic," see the citations later in this chapter.

⁷ Taylor, "Identity and Democracy," 17.

is the franchise – is, in theory at least, designed to ensure that governments are ultimately accountable to the people. To simplify, a government is legitimate, in this sense, to the extent that those institutions are working properly.

If the first sense of legitimacy pertains to the question of whether or not, in any given state, the people *do* rule, the second pertains to the question of whether or not the people *should* rule: “why are ‘the people’ the ultimate political authority?”⁸ A “philosophic justification of democratic government” would be, effectively, an answer to that question. It would entail giving a reasoned account of why the people should rule. Such a philosophic justification would, according to Laski, have to begin with a refutation of what he claims is Plato’s denial of the value of public opinion. As will become clear in what follows, I have reservations about what Laski imputes to Plato, but I do follow his suggestion that theoretical speculation on democratic legitimacy can be traced back to Plato, and, as I aim to show, I believe that the discussion of legitimacy in the *Republic* will be illuminating for our consideration of some of the “real problems” of modern politics. As I have already intimated, it is in particular the emphasis in the *Republic* on the status of knowledge – its presence and its absence – with regard to both the evaluation and the execution of political rule that I wish to bring to bear on the question of the legitimacy of popular sovereignty and on the prospects for its practical realization in modern democratic states.

Before turning to a closer consideration of Plato, it will be helpful to exhibit more clearly how the status of knowledge emerges as a problem when thinking about the legitimacy of popular sovereignty, and to point up the ongoing vitality of this problem in modern and contemporary political theory. As Laski presents it, “general public opinion” is implicitly contrasted with what we may call “expert knowledge.” Plato is said to deny value to the mere opinions of the general public, which in turn delegitimizes the people’s claim on power, and to assert as legitimate the power of the few who have, or the one who has, the relevant and valuable knowledge. Two aspects of this may be distinguished. The first pertains to the question of whether, and if so to what degree, it is possible within a democracy to set up institutions that bring relevant knowledge to bear on political decision-making while respecting the principle of popular self-rule. This question was at the heart of the early twentieth-century debate between Walter Lippman and John Dewey. Lippman denigrated as “mystical” the belief that “the compounding of individual ignorance in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs,” while Dewey maintained that with appropriate education and channels of open communication, an informed public capable of reasoned self-governance could be achieved.⁹

The central issue debated by Lippman and Dewey nearly a century ago is identified by the authors of a recent Knight Foundation study as “one of the

⁸ Canovan, “The People,” 357. See also the longer treatment of this in Canovan, *The People*.

⁹ Lippman, *The Phantom Public*, 39; Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, and Dewey, “Democracy as a Moral Ideal.” See also the discussion of the Dewey–Lippman debate in Davis’s chapter (Chapter 17) in this volume.

oldest, hardest questions of political philosophy,” namely, “how to ensure that political decisions are grounded in sound knowledge and sound judgment.”¹⁰ The authors of that study present a set of ideals and practices that, they argue, help to ensure the cultivation of “democratic knowledge” and its adoption and deployment for achieving collective ends. Josiah Ober likewise confronts this question in his 2017 book *Demopolis*. Explicitly echoing Plato’s *Republic*, Ober endeavors to construct a city in speech that embodies all the features of what he calls “basic democracy” without incorporating principles typically associated with liberalism. As Ober sees it, an “epistemic democracy” would “bring domain-specific expertise into the process of decision making without ceding political authority to experts or autocrats.”¹¹ To this end, he proposes reliance on a procedure known as “relevant expertise aggregation.” These theorists, and many others, are grappling with the first aspect of the problem we have identified and suggesting actual and potential institutions and practices that would put relevant knowledge in the service of democratic governance.

There is, however, a more radical aspect to the problem. It pertains to the kind of knowledge that would be necessary to make reasoned judgments about foundational principles, including and particularly the principle of popular sovereignty – in other words, the knowledge that would be required to make an informed judgment about the question of whether the people *should* rule. We see this question arise, for example, in contemporary debates about epistocracy, or “the rule of the knowledgeable.”¹² Speaking generally, advocates of epistocracy question, or even outright deny, the legitimacy of the claim that the people should rule. They hold that power should be “formally distributed according to competence, skill, and the good faith to act on that skill,” and that those virtues are not distributed perfectly equally among all people, nor do they inhere in the people, taken collectively, in any relevant sense.¹³ On this view, the optimal political arrangement would distribute power among individuals in proportion to the (uneven) distribution of relevant knowledge. In these discussions, Plato is typically cited as a precedent and proponent of epistocracy.¹⁴

Defenders of democracy, particularly those concerned to rebut epistemic challenges, have often regarded Plato as an enemy of the cause. We have seen

¹⁰ Allen and Pottle, “Democratic Knowledge and the Problem of Faction,” unpaginated.

¹¹ Ober, *Demopolis*, 147.

¹² Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 14. The term “epistocracy” originates with David Estlund, who summarizes the argument as follows: “If some political outcomes count as better than others, then surely some citizens are better (if only less bad) than others with regard to their wisdom and good faith in promoting the better outcomes. If so, this looks like an important reason to leave the decisions up to them. ... [T]he form of government in which they rule might be called epistocracy, and the rulers called epistocrats...”: Estlund, “Why Not Epistocracy?,” 53. It should be noted that Estlund is here characterizing a position he opposes.

¹³ Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 14.

¹⁴ See Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 14; Ober, *Demopolis*, 179; Grayling, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 17, 124.

that Laski invokes Plato as the arch antidemocratic, whose “uncompromising rejection of the democratic system” must be refuted if there is to be a philosophical justification for democratic government. This view of Plato was widespread in the twentieth century, propounded most vehemently by Karl Popper. Popper portrays Plato as an enemy of the “open society” and argues that Plato’s “poisonous writing” turns his readers against democracy.¹⁵ For both Laski and Popper, and many others, Plato is an advocate of what Popper calls “sophocracy,” or “the rule of learnedness”: “the ruler of Plato’s state should be a possessor of knowledge, a ‘fully qualified philosopher.’”¹⁶ Plato is said to denigrate democracy because it entrusts political power to those who do not possess knowledge. The source of his mistake is said to be his tacit belief that “political power is ‘essentially’ unchecked,” which is to say, “sovereign.” Once that belief is in place, the only important question is “Who is to be the sovereign?,” and this leads virtually inevitably, as Popper sees it, to the conclusion that philosophers should be kings. In positing that “the fundamental problem of politics” is expressed in the question “Who shall rule the state?,” Plato “created a lasting confusion in political philosophy.”¹⁷

Popper’s focus on the question “Who shall rule the state?” obscures a prior and more fundamental question about the availability of knowledge, not only the practical knowledge of how to govern but also the theoretical knowledge that one would have to have in order to answer the question “Who shall rule?”. This prior question, I maintain, is the deeper concern in the *Republic*. To anticipate what is to come, I shall be arguing that the *Republic*, on its own terms, cannot be positing that philosophers should rule, and that the dialogue gives no assurance that the knowledge that would be necessary to conclude that philosophers should rule is available to humans. Even if it were to be, it is not clear as a practical matter how its attainment could be facilitated, and it remains *ex hypothesi* unascertainable whether or not any person who would have such knowledge, the genuine philosopher, would decide in favor of epistocracy. This argument emerges from a close reading of Plato’s text, informed by interpretative approaches that have been developed and refined in the years since Popper’s book appeared. It is to this that we now turn.

II

In the past three decades, scholars have increasingly acknowledged that Plato’s use of the dialogue form introduces ineluctable doubt regarding whether a statement of any given speaker, or even a point agreed upon by more than one

¹⁵ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 35.

¹⁶ Neither “sophocracy” nor “epistocracy” appears in the *Republic*; they are neologisms formed on the pattern Socrates uses to refer to each of the regime types he discusses. In his account, the hypothetical best regime is identified as an “aristocracy,” or rule of or by “the best.”

¹⁷ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 120–21.

speaker, can be ascribed to the text as a whole or to its author. Nevertheless, many commentators persist in ascribing to Plato beliefs and convictions that are espoused by one or another of his characters, and often enough, views that are not even claimed by any character, but are merely proposed for consideration or that occur within the formulation of a question. To discuss this matter in detail would take us far afield, so for present purposes I shall simply advert to a pivotal essay by Michael Frede that makes the essential point succinctly:

However committed the fictional questioner or respondent of the dialogue may be, nothing follows from this about the commitment of the author of the dialogue; Plato even in the least aporetic and most dogmatic dialogues remains at a radical distance from the views and arguments of the fictional characters of the dialogue.¹⁸

While I do not pursue here in any depth the ramifications of this hermeneutical principle, accepting it, as I think one should, already casts doubt on the view that the *Republic* should be read in any straightforward way as a defense on Plato's part of epistocracy.

The most frequently cited textual evidence for the claim that Plato believes that philosophers should rule comes in Book Five, where Socrates recounts his contention that:

unless ... the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide ... there is no rest from the ills for the cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I think for human kind, nor will the regime we have now described in speech ever come forth from nature.¹⁹

We may note first that the remark is attributed by Socrates to himself, in the context of recounting (to whom, we aren't told) a conversation he had had the day before. It is the fate of this claim within the conceit of the dialogue that concerns us. Socrates and his interlocutors have agreed to "make a city in speech" (369c), a city that is "perfectly good" (427e). It is in the context of considering how such a city "in speech" may come to be in deed – how the theory, as it were, could be put into practice – that Socrates moots the idea of a sophocracy or epistocracy. When Adeimantus subsequently challenges Socrates with the hypothetical objection that philosophers are either vicious or useless (487b–d), and so couldn't possibly be the rulers of the city that would be "perfectly good," Socrates explains that the objector in this case would have

¹⁸ Frede, "Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form," 214. Other commentators who share this basic outlook include Strauss, *City and Man*; Roachnik, *Tragedy of Reason*; Ausland, "On Reading Plato Mimetically"; Blondell, *Play of Characters in Plato's Dialogues*; Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*; McNeill, *An Image of the Soul in Speech*; and Ferrari, "Plato the Writer." For a range of approaches to the general issue of how to interpret the dialogues, see Griswold, *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings*; Klagge and Smith, *Methods of Interpreting Plato*; and Press, *Who Speaks for Plato?*

¹⁹ (473d–e). See also 499b–c, 540d, 543a. All passages from the *Republic* are cited from the translation by Allan Bloom.

in mind pretenders to philosophy, not true philosophers. The philosophers to whom he is referring when he proposes that philosophers should rule are “lovers of the sight of truth” who have their “understanding truly turned toward the things that *are*” and have “no leisure to look down toward the affairs of human beings” (500b–c). Already we see here the intimation of a practical problem, for if the philosophers are not concerned with the affairs of human beings, it is hard to imagine how they could conceivably govern human beings. The problem becomes more explicit later in the dialogue, a point to which I shall return.

The first major difficulty, however, arises immediately after Socrates and Adeimantus have reaffirmed their agreement that the city they have founded in speech is best in theory and that, though exceedingly difficult, it is not impossible for it to come into being in deed, that is, to be realized in the spatiotemporal world. Socrates at that point says that they next must discuss, “in what way and as a result of what studies and practices the saviors will take their place within our regime” (502d). Several important things become clear in the ensuing discussion of the education of the philosopher-guardians that unfolds at the end of Book Six and into Book Seven. First, what ultimately legitimates the claim to political power on behalf of philosophers is the knowledge of what Socrates calls “the *idea* of the good.” Without knowledge of this highest object of study, all other knowledge claims are just opinions, the accuracy of which is uncertain. This of course would include any claims about the political good, common good, collective ends, and so on. As Socrates puts it, “if we don’t know it [the idea of the good] and should have ever so much knowledge of the rest without this, you know that it’s no profit to us ...” (505a) and “no one will adequately know the just and fair things themselves before this is known” (506a).

On Socrates’ own account, then, in order to qualify as true philosophers in the relevant sense, in the sense that would legitimate political authority, the persons in question would need to have access to this knowledge, and they would need to be able to grasp with their minds the idea of the good (see 505e–506a). Moreover, since the idea of the good is the grounding of all secure knowledge – it is “the cause of knowledge and truth” (508e) – only a true philosopher, only one who knows the idea of the good, would be capable of answering the question “should philosophers rule?” or, more generally the question, “who should rule?” Equally importantly, Socrates responds to his interlocutors’ entreaties by saying that his own opinions about the idea of the good are “out of the range of our present thrust” (506e). It is noteworthy that he refers to his “opinions about,” not his “knowledge of,” this idea, and that he had just prior to this said, “we don’t have sufficient knowledge” of the idea of the good (505a). Nowhere in the remaining books does Socrates reverse himself on this question. It seems abundantly clear, in other words, that neither Socrates nor anyone else claims that the founders of the city in speech – Socrates included – possess knowledge of the good; in fact, it is suggested

that at best, Socrates may have some “opinions” about it. We are compelled to conclude that, on the very terms agreed on by the interlocutors, they are in no position to know whether philosophers should rule.

Even if we set aside these qualifications, doubt persists about the availability to humans of the knowledge that is said to be required to legitimate epistocracy, and about the practicality of facilitating the education that would be necessary to acquire it. I shall briefly mention three reasons for doubt. First, when Socrates introduces the idea of the good, employing the analogy of the sun, he observes that “not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also “existence and being” are present as a consequence of it. The good, he emphasizes, “isn’t being, but is still beyond being” (509b). It is a deeply enigmatic passage, but one may at least acknowledge that it is not at all obvious what it would mean to “know” something that is “beyond being.” Second, Socrates makes clear that the obligation of the philosophers to serve as rulers pertains only to philosophers who have been reared in and educated by a “perfectly good” city. Those who come to be in other cities would be free to pursue philosophy undisturbed, with no obligation to rule, and the suggestion is that they would in fact chose to do so (520a–b). As a practical matter, then, for an epistocracy ever to come into being, it would, paradoxically, require the preexistence of an epistocracy. Socrates highlights this conundrum when he observes that, if somehow philosophers were to come to power in an imperfect city, and were to want to sustain their rule, they would have to resort to extreme measures: “all those in the city who happen to be older than ten they will send out to the country; and taking over their children, they will rear them ... in their own manners and law” (540a–41e). Finally, we may note that the image of the cave in Book Seven puts a sharp point on the doubts we have raised. When Glaucon says, “it’s a strange image ... and strange prisoners you’re telling of,” Socrates responds by saying, “they’re like us” (515a), indicating that he and his interlocutors dwell in the realm of shadowy opinion, without access to the knowledge that is represented metaphorically as the world outside the cave. They may well conclude – indeed they already have so concluded, earlier in the conversation – that the perfectly good city is the one ruled by philosophers, but their opinion on this is itself not grounded in secure knowledge. If we accept the terms of the image, there is no reason given to suppose that what Socrates and his interlocutors opine that a philosopher should do will necessarily correspond to what a true philosopher knows he should do. We noted earlier a curious moment in which Socrates observes that philosophers have “no leisure to look down toward the affairs of human beings” (500b–c). The difficulty hinted at there is made explicit later, when Socrates indicates that it will be the job of the founders of the perfectly good city to “compel” philosophers to take up the mantle of rulership, even if they would prefer to stay out of politics and to spend their time philosophizing. Socrates suggests that the founders will not thereby be committing an injustice against the philosophers, but given what we have just reviewed, it is

patently clear that in any dispute between the philosophers and the founders, the former would have to be in the right. There is, in other words, no way for the founders to know that the philosopher would turn out to be an epistocrat and would agree with them that he should rule.²⁰

It seems now sufficiently clear that there is little textual support for the view that the *Republic* is a sophocratic or epistocratic manifesto. Far from purporting to offer a conclusive argument for “the rule of learnedness,” the dialogue proposes that the knowledge that would be necessary to provide an authoritative answer to the question, “who should rule?,” is at best exceedingly difficult to attain, and perhaps simply inaccessible to human beings. It is Thrasymachus, after all, not Socrates (let alone Plato) who introduces the notion that there could be a precise science (*epistêmê*) of rule (340e). Socrates, for his part, draws a sharp distinction between the founders of the city in speech – himself, Glaucon, and Adeimantus – who have only uncertain opinions about the matters they discuss, and the would-be philosopher-kings, who would by definition have secure knowledge about such things. What is most significant for present concerns is to recognize that the difference in the status of knowledge in these two disparate worlds is reflected in the political organization of each. In the hypothetical city in speech epistocracy is legitimate because the hypothesis itself stipulates that a knowledge-based authoritative answer to the question about who should rule is available. Indeed, in such a city, epistocracy would be the only legitimate regime. For the founders, however, who lack this knowledge – at the very least, there is no suggestion that any of them possesses it – a genuine epistocracy would be impossible, and any claim to power made on epistocratic principles would be illegitimate. To speak precisely, it would be tyrannical. The founders – Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus – form among themselves a discursive community, directed toward a shared goal, and operating on a principle of consent. If in the city in speech precise knowledge (*epistêmê*) underwrites legitimacy, in the community of the founders, by contrast, legitimacy derives from agreement. Recognizing the distinction between the community of interlocutors and the citizenry of the city in speech in turn serves as a reminder that the participants in this dialogue are citizens of a democracy – Athens – who have limited knowledge, differing capacities, individual proclivities, and at times divergent views, and who are engaged in a wide-ranging conversation about political things. They in other words, and not the hypothetical citizens of the city in speech, are most “like us.”

III

In the balance of this chapter, I shall consider, in a more speculative mode, some ways in which the *Republic*, understood along the lines I have suggested, may inform our thinking about the principle of popular sovereignty and the prospects for its actualization in contemporary democracies. Perhaps most

²⁰ Thanks to David McNeill for calling my attention to the last point.

interesting here is the question with which we began, Laski's concern about the justification or legitimacy of what Tocqueville refers to as the "dogma" of popular sovereignty.²¹ As discussed above, one may usefully distinguish between the questions "do the people rule?" and "should the people rule?" It is with regard to the latter question, I want to suggest, that the *Republic* provides a useful matrix for thought. Those who read the *Republic* as a defense of epistocracy conclude that the dialogue answers the second question unambiguously in the negative: not the people but those with knowledge should rule.²² The problem, as we have seen, is that no one in the dialogue – and this includes Socrates – is portrayed as having the requisite knowledge to reach that conclusion with certainty. What, then, does the dialogue have to offer us in our own considerations of political matters, generally, and popular sovereignty, in particular?

A text that may legitimately be considered "a possession for all time," as Thucydides described his aspiration for his own work, exists not outside of time, but within it. It belongs, so to speak, to the times, which are perpetually changing, even if in some important sense the text itself does not change. The vitality of interpretation emerges from the interaction between the fixed text and its ever-changing interpreters. Only through fidelity to the former can its meaning emerge, even if what it means at any given time, to any given community of readers, depends also on the way it is received.²³ In my view, the *Republic* does provide resources for a defense of the desirability of democracy, but this does not necessarily make Plato a defender of democracy. If we consider the *Republic* as a kind of thought experiment, Plato may best be regarded as a critical spectator, a deliberate provocateur, and a thoughtful interlocutor.²⁴

²¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2010), 1:91.

²² "Plato, along with other ancient and modern critics, argued that democracy's commitment to liberty and equality necessarily leads citizens to pursue arbitrary desires rather than real interests, and to make choices based on false opinion rather than knowledge. The critics conclude that democracy is inherently anti-epistemic and that only a nondemocratic regime could make policy favorable to people's real interests." Ober, *Demopolis*, 14. See also Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 14.

²³ Decisive here, of course, is what "fidelity" means, and that is no simple matter. Its opposite would be "betrayal," a word that comes to English through French, from the Latin verb "tradere," meaning "hand over." (It is the same root from which comes the word "tradition.") All interpretation, in this sense, is a betrayal in the root sense, a handing over or conveyance of meaning. But the more current connotation of "disloyalty" is helpful to bear in mind. To be legitimate an interpretation must be loyal to the text. While I have endeavored to exhibit such loyalty in the reading of the *Republic* I have offered here, it is important to acknowledge that the difference between conveying the meaning and betraying the original is always a contested issue. Though beyond the scope of this chapter, it would be interesting to compare legitimacy as a political principle with legitimacy as a hermeneutical principle, particularly with reference to the doctrine of popular sovereignty.

²⁴ For a similar approach to the dialogues by a contributor to this volume, see Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity*, 7: "Rather than hold Socrates up as a friend or foe of democracy, my primary goal is to examine Plato's dialogues as a resource for thinking about our own democracy (taking care to not overstate similarities between our situations)."

To be sure, philosopher-kingship is never portrayed in the *Republic* as impossible or undesirable. Socrates seems committed to holding open the possibility that true philosophers can come to be, even in imperfect regimes, and he insists that, however unlikely, it is not impossible for a true philosopher to attain power. Although we have seen that the interlocutors are not qualified to say whether such a regime would be best, that possibility is certainly not foreclosed. However, in the absence of genuine knowledge of the good, we are left with competing answers to the question, “who should rule?,” and with diverse and differing accounts of the political good. Under such conditions, a tolerant and plural democracy may well be regarded as the least bad option. Moreover, what Socrates identifies as the chief characteristics of democracy – *freedom* and *equality* – may in this light be regarded as virtues. If genuine knowledge is unattainable, or at least at present unattained, it may well be that the best option is a regime in which competing claims about the political good are, to the extent possible and certainly for the purposes of argument, treated *equally*, and adherents to each view are *free* to pursue the way of life dictated by their understanding of the good and to advocate in public debate for its desirability. As noted above, within the conceit of the *Republic*, these are the conditions that obtain not for the hypothetical citizens of the city in speech, but for the interlocutors. Recall that at the start of the dialogue Socrates recounts how Polemarchus (presumably playfully) insists that Socrates and Glaucon must “either prove stronger than these men or stay here,” to which Socrates responds, “‘Isn’t there still one other possibility ...,’ I said, ‘our persuading you that you must let us go?’” A brief debate ensues, which concludes with Socrates declaring, in the language of the Athenian assembly, “if it is so resolved, that is how we must act.”²⁵ This opening scene sets the tone: the interlocutors constitute a rudimentary democracy. Here debate and persuasion replace violence and physical compulsion, and authority is established through consent.

Democracy is, as Socrates says, “probably the fairest [or, “most beautiful”] of the regimes,” and while there is surely some irony in this remark, it is often the case in Plato’s dialogues that an ironic remark is not merely an assertion of the opposite of what is actually said, but rather a signal that the matter at hand calls for further reflection. Socrates also says at this point that in a democracy especially, “all sorts of human beings come to be” and that it is “a convenient place to look for a regime.” If there is beauty in democracy, it may in part consist in this diversity, and in the fact that it is welcoming to people like Socrates and his interlocutors – and perhaps, people “like us” – who wish to compare different options as they reflect on forms of government and consider how to realize their aspirations (557c–d).

²⁵ See the translator’s note: “At the end of this scene, which is a dramatic prefiguration of the whole political problem, Socrates uses this word as it was used in the political assembly to announce that the sovereign authority had passed a law or decree. It is the expression with which the laws begin, ‘It is resolved by [literally, ‘it seems to’] the Athenian people ...’”, 441n6.

If democracy is, in this sense at least, presented as desirable in the *Republic*, it is also shown to be unstable and precarious. Moreover, a sharp irony of Socrates' account is that precisely those characteristics – freedom and equality – that make democracy well suited to circumstances in which philosophical knowledge is absent or relatively inaccessible, are also liabilities, and make a democratic regime particularly vulnerable to the rise of tyranny. As Socrates tells it, the democratic populace becomes so enamored of freedom that any constraint implemented by responsible leaders is felt as oppression, and so favor falls on “rulers who are like the ruled” (562d). Eventually, acting on their devotion to freedom and equality, the citizens end up “paying no attention to the laws, written or unwritten, in order that they may avoid having any master at all” (563d). The core democratic virtues are destabilizing in another sense as well. Absent an authoritative account of the political good, competing *opinions* about the good enjoy, as it were, political equality – no one belief is officially favored over another – and citizens are free to believe what they wish. This plurality of values, Socrates suggests, makes the populace more susceptible to manipulation by a demagogue, who can exacerbate factionalism for his own ends. By appealing to the interests of individual classes or groups, these factions come into conflict with one another. Each faction's claim on equality and assertion of freedom comes at the expense of the city's collective commitment to those values – and so, as Socrates says, “the greatest and most savage slavery” proceeds from “the extreme of freedom” (564a).

Perhaps most significant for our concerns, the argument of the *Republic* helps us to discern and articulate a certain paradox in the principle of popular sovereignty. The underlying question here is whether the right to rule can be established on the basis of reason and knowledge rather than on the basis of coercive force. We see that, in a plural democracy with a diversity of views about the political good, there are competing claimants to the right to rule. As Socrates presents them, this includes the wisest, the most honorable, the most wealthy, and the people as a whole. If this fundamental political question – the very question of legitimacy – can in fact be adjudicated on the basis of reason and knowledge, then it would seem that the ultimate power, or sovereignty, would rightfully belong to the one who knows. In that case, it would be the wise, and not the people, who should rule. If, on the other hand, the would-be adjudicator is not in possession of such knowledge – as is true in the case of the founders in the *Republic* – it seems the power to resolve competing claims will lie with the people, but it must also be acknowledged that in such a scenario power is not legitimated on the basis of reason and knowledge.

On what basis, then, if any, is popular self-rule and the principle of consent legitimated? To cite Canovan again, “why are ‘the people’ the ultimate political authority?”²⁶ The discussion of the noble lie in the *Republic* may provide an approach to this question (414b–15d). While a detailed analysis cannot be

²⁶ Canovan, “The People,” 357.

conducted here, we may make a few observations. First, Socrates indicates that such lies – one might also call them myths – come into being “in case of need.” Socrates shows why his city-in-speech requires such a myth, but we may ask whether modern democracies are also in need of such myths, and if so, why.²⁷ Second, Socrates notes that his lie would “persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, then the rest of the city.” In a regime of popular self-government, if legitimating myths are required, who would need to believe in them? And who, if anyone, could be exempt from such belief? Finally, Socrates concocts a myth that accounts for both the heterogeneity or stratification and the unity of the city in speech, and that unity, based on autochthony, asserts both familial bonds and geographical boundaries. Do the “stories of peoplehood” in modern democracies require similar features? These questions lay out a field of inquiry that can and should be approached in a variety of ways, employing theoretical and empirical methods drawn from a range of disciplines. Some examples may be found in subsequent chapters of this volume.²⁸

If, as suggested above, the *Republic* is best regarded in this connection as providing neither an attack on democracy nor a defense of it, but rather a matrix for thinking about the principle of popular rule (as well as other principles of political organization), it may be particularly valuable for the light it sheds on debates between democracy’s critics and its defenders. Consider again the epistocratic critique of democracy, as for example proposed by Jason Brennan. “I contend that the choice between democracy and epistocracy,” writes Brennan, “is instrumental. It ultimately comes down to which system would perform better in the real world.”²⁹ Brennan argues that although “we do not yet have sufficient evidence to definitely favor epistocracy over democracy, ... there are ... good grounds to presume that some feasible form of epistocracy would in fact outperform democracy” (16). He makes clear that he is not advocating for anything like a “philosopher king or guardian class,” (14) and rejects the idea that the case for the superiority of epistocracy rests on the claim that “when some citizens have greater knowledge or reliability, this justifies granting them political authority over those with lesser knowledge” (17). His more modest claim is that, “when some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others” (18). Yet, the question raised by the *Republic* is not so easily avoided, for the simple reason that, even accepting Brennan’s caveats, the “performance” of regimes and the morality, wisdom, and competence

²⁷ It is worth noting that in *Demopolis*, Josiah Ober emphasizes that the city-in-speech at the center of his own thought experiment “is certainly not to be premised on the *Republic*’s Noble Lies” because “the citizens-in-training must have rational reasons... to embrace the values that they are taught,” *Demopolis*, 71–72. But whether it is possible to dispense entirely with legitimating myths remains an open question. See Canovan, “The People” and Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, as well as the chapters in the present volume by Evrigenis, Boyd, and Smith.

²⁸ Again, see Chapters 3, 4, and 15 by Evrigenis, Boyd, and Smith, respectively.

²⁹ Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 16.

of potential officeholders would still need to be evaluated, and the authority of the person or body of persons making those evaluations would still need to be legitimated. If that legitimacy is based on a claim to knowledge about the political good, then that claim in turn must be defended. As my discussion above has sought to show, the *Republic* makes clear what such a defense would entail, and it casts profound doubt on whether it could be successful. If, on the other hand, the instrumental defense of epistocracy does not rely on some knowledge claim to ground the legitimacy of judgments about the performance of the government or the fitness of its officeholders, then it is hard to see how anything other than the popular will could conceivably legitimate such judgments. Such an outcome would hardly constitute an argument “against democracy,” but rather a tacit endorsement of it, and in that case, one would again be confronted with the fundamental questions raised in the *Republic* about democracy in comparison with other types of regimes.

By way of counterexample, we may consider the contemporary defense of democracy put forward by Josiah Ober in *Demopolis*. Ober rejects the epistocratic claim that the legitimacy of political power is grounded in knowledge. “Epistocracy goes wrong,” he writes, “because it wrongly supposes that, because there are experts in domains relevant to politics, there are also general experts in politics” (145). No one, in Ober’s view, has or could have the knowledge that would be necessary to legitimize the right to rule. Ober is deliberately minimalist in his defense of democracy. To that end, he separates out democracy from liberalism, arguing that his aim is to defend the former, what he calls “basic democracy,” which in his view could be compatible with either liberalism or illiberalism: “My hope is to show that democracy in and of itself effectively promotes various desirable conditions of existence, and that it does so quite independently of liberalism or any other theory of moral value” (xiv). Yet, it remains unclear how conditions may be determined to be desirable, or undesirable, without some account to moral value. To ensure that citizens of the Demopolis – Ober’s name for the hypothetical city he envisions – will be committed to democracy, Ober proposes a regime of civic education that inculcates devotion to “democratic goods,” among them “the free exercise of constitutive human capacities, political freedom, political equality, and civic dignity” (74). The preeminence of these values, it must be noted, are not up for debate in *Demopolis*, nor is it up to the *demos* to determine what values belong on the list. Moreover, no argument is put forth in support of any individual or group of individuals having the requisite knowledge to adjudicate such questions, for, as noted, there are no “general experts in politics.” It seems, in other words, that the most difficult questions raised in the *Republic* about the relationship between knowledge and political authority are not addressed in this account. Here we may recall, and slightly repurpose, Laski’s contention that “the philosophic justification of democracy” must begin with, or at least at some point ought eventually to confront, the challenge articulated in Plato’s dialogue.

I close with some remarks on education in relation to popular self-rule. It is of course no accident that a foundational work of political philosophy would be so centrally concerned with education. Not only is a large portion of the conversation recounted in the *Republic* explicitly dedicated to the topic – a long stretch of Books Two and Three and all of Book Seven – but the drama of the dialogue itself turns on the enactment of education, with Socrates as teacher and Glaucon and Adeimantus as his pupils. Moreover, it is acknowledged that both subjects and rulers are prepared for their roles in the political life of the community through education, and this is true as much in regimes of popular self-rule, where subject and ruler are in principle one and the same, as it is in any other regime.

We have seen that one of the essential characteristics of democratic regimes as presented in the *Republic* is a diversity of beliefs about what constitutes the good, whether regarded as the “political good” or the “good life.” Indeed, what is recognized as constituting the common good in such regimes is precisely and only those features that sustain the genesis and coexistence of a plurality of differing conceptions of good politics or the good life. Democracy is also characterized as unstable, as perpetually in danger of sliding into tyranny. Throughout his account of the decline of regimes, Socrates emphasizes the role that is played by the failure on the part of the ruling elite to properly educate the younger generation. In a democratic regime, in particular, the lack of agreement on what ought to be valued – aside from equality and freedom – and hence, on what ought to be taught, is an acute challenge for education.³⁰

The *Republic* is not an educational handbook, but it is both a meditation on the topic and a dramatization of education in action. Perhaps its deepest teaching in this regard is humility. So much about the dialogue, about Plato’s writing in general, and about Plato’s Socrates, points toward the importance of intellectual humility, by which I mean the persistent effort to keep present to mind the limits of one’s knowledge.³¹ This cannot help but sound ironic, given

³⁰ The chapters in this volume by Perrin and Mellow and by Davis discuss education and civic discourse in a contemporary liberal democracy both within and outside of formal academic settings.

³¹ Over the past twenty years a growing body of academic literature has developed that is focused on intellectual humility, and while Plato is not absent from this discourse, a reinvigorated engagement with the dialogues would be beneficial. Noteworthy about the way humility is portrayed in Plato’s dialogues is the corresponding capacity, also exemplified by Socrates, to identify the deficiencies in deficient arguments (see, e.g., *Apology* 21b–23b). Socratic humility is informed by an orientation toward the political good, which is conceived as in principle knowable, even if unknown, and as not dependent on or reducible to individual or group preference. Within a liberal democracy, humility understood in this way would emphasize the importance of debate, deliberation, open-mindedness, and the search for the common good, and would de-emphasize value pluralism, individual autonomy, and the cultivation of competition between factions for power and influence. For a discussion of humility and democratic politics, see Neblo and Israelson, “A Humble Form of Government.” For an overview of the contemporary literature on intellectual humility, see *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, edited by Alfano, Lynch, and Tanesini.

the sheer scope and quality of Plato's corpus, the magnitude of his influence, and the dialectical sophistication of his primary protagonist. Yet, as we have seen, at the heart of the *Republic* is the absence of knowledge about what matters most – without, it must be noted, any diminishment in the passionate desire to know. The turning points in so many Platonic dialogues are marked by the *elenchus* and the experience of *aporia* – meaning that they are moments at which what is not known (what one desires to know) becomes apparent both to the character and to the reader. Socrates, despite all his apparent mastery, is perpetually proclaiming his ignorance.

While the educational program that is envisioned by Socrates and his friends in the course of the *Republic* is designed to prepare auxiliaries and guardians for their roles in a kingdom ruled by philosophers, the education enacted in the drama of the dialogue occurs between citizens in a democracy, and as such, it may have some exemplary power for us. Certainly in contemporary liberal democracies, in which contestation over what constitutes good politics and a good life can be fierce, cultivating intellectual humility through education, ideally not only of children, might well be beneficial. The depiction of democracy in the *Republic* and the account given of the threat posed by incipient tyranny, together suggest that while the inherent momentum of the regime is toward ever-greater freedom and equality, the consequence is an ever-diminishing sense of a common good that would promote social cohesion and protect the people against demagogic manipulation and a slide into autocracy. The suggestion for educators of all kinds who find themselves living in democratic states may be that the search for a common good – however long and hard the road, to borrow a Platonic metaphor – ought to be a priority. To speculate in more detail on how that could be done is the task for another occasion, but I submit for consideration that reading the *Republic* together might not be a bad place to start.