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## Crowds and Crowd-Pleasing in Plato

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**Abstract:** Plato's antipathy to crowds is a commonplace that reinforces a prevailing portrait of the Socratic method as a practice that centers on individuals, to the exclusion of crowds and the many. This canonical view, however, comes into tension with the tendency of Plato's Socrates to conduct his dialogues in the presence of collective audiences. I argue that Plato's position on crowds is at once more complex and more ambivalent than has been commonly accepted. I distinguish between two distinct lines of critique that Plato develops against crowds: the argument that the incentive structures that move crowds are un conducive to philosophy; and a more ambiguous argument that crowds tend not to be as amenable to control as their portrayal in the Athenian democratic imaginary seems to promise. Plato's depiction of Socratic practice can be understood as an effort to explore an alternative vision of crowd control.

Plato's political writings contain a number of iconic, damning portrayals of crowds: the ship of state overrun by a mob of quarrelling sailors (*Rep.* 488a–e); the account of the inevitable degeneration of democracy into tyranny (563e–569c); the large gathering of jurors before whom Socrates makes his fateful defense, professing to be estranged from their language and their ways (*Ap.* 17d). The idea that there are pathologies unique to the dynamics of collectives is a recurring motif in Plato's work, and it often stands in contrast with a countervailing image of philosophy as the sober activity of individual thinkers, set far from the madding crowd. Plato's unflattering representations of collective gatherings have led commentators to credit him as the first theorist of crowd behavior, and in particular as the

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prescient thinker who first raised an alarm about the dangers of mobs that have become familiar fixtures in contemporary discussions of populism.<sup>1</sup>

More broadly, such images have often been viewed through the lens of an elitism that has long trailed Plato's reputation. According to one interpretive tradition going back to antiquity,<sup>2</sup> but associated in more recent decades with the work of Leo Strauss and his circles,<sup>3</sup> Plato believed the wisdom of individual philosophers was fundamentally opposed to the groupthink to which crowds are prone, and he opted to direct the true meaning of his works to a select readership separate from the masses. Another line of interpretation extends Plato's suspicion of crowds to a searing critique of the democratic institutions of Athens that were especially vulnerable to the pathologies he diagnosed in collective behavior.<sup>4</sup> On the most forceful versions of this account, Plato equated democracy with mob rule and blamed it for Socrates's death.<sup>5</sup> These traditional portraits have been tempered in recent decades by scholars challenging the view that Plato was a straightforward enemy of democracy,<sup>6</sup> just as increased attention to the literary qualities of his dialogues, set against historical considerations surrounding the rapid rise of literacy in fifth- and fourth-century Athens, has encouraged scholars

<sup>1</sup>J. S. McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti* (London: Routledge, 2010), 3, 26; Anthony R. Brunello, "The Madisonian Republic and Modern Nationalist Populism: Democracy and the Rule of Law," *World Affairs* 181, no. 2 (2018): 116–17.

<sup>2</sup>Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1.4.9–1.5.11; *Tusculan Disputations*, 5.4.11; Alfarabi, "Plato's Laws," trans. Muhsin Mahdi, in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 84–85; Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 152–53; all cited in Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 17–20; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.63.

<sup>3</sup>Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), esp. 34–35; Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 377.

<sup>4</sup>McClelland, *The Crowd*, 28–29; Cinzia Arruza, *A Wolf in the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 122–27; Stanley Rosen, *Plato's "Republic"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 316.

<sup>5</sup>Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966); R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley, *Plato's "Republic"* (London: Macmillan, 1964); Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 71–86; John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 44–45.

<sup>6</sup>S. Sara Monson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Arlene Saxonhouse, "The Socratic Narrative: A Democratic Reading of Plato's Dialogues," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 728–53; J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Anders Dahl Sørensen, *Plato on Democracy and Political Technē* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

to take seriously what Plato might have intended to communicate directly to more ordinary readers, rather than an imagined esoteric audience.<sup>7</sup>

Longstanding notions about the unphilosophical nature of crowds in Plato's thought have, however, largely avoided coming up for reevaluation on the same scale. This article revisits the role of crowds in Plato's work, paying special attention to his portrayal of Socrates's practice of conducting his dialogues before collective audiences. For all of the famous condemnations of collective behavior in Plato's corpus, and our received wisdom to that effect, a regular feature of his dramatization of Socrates's method is the presence of audiences—and indeed, at times, crowds—that gather to witness, and even participate in, Socrates's conversations with individual interlocutors. This tension calls for a renewed inquiry into the precise nature of Plato's supposed aversion to crowds on the one hand, and how, on the other, he envisioned their relationship to the practice of philosophy. While a growing body of literature has steadily expanded our understanding of Plato's views on mass participation,<sup>8</sup> there is room for a systematic study of Plato's theory of crowds at large—considered not merely within the context of Athenian democratic institutions, but as a more general social phenomenon to be accounted for in his vision of philosophic practice. Similarly, much has been written about the dramatic aspects of Plato's dialogues, but relatively little attention has been paid to the role of the crowd in Plato's depictions of Socratic inquiry.

Extending earlier work,<sup>9</sup> I show that Plato's position on crowds is more complex and more ambivalent than has been commonly accepted, suggesting, in particular, that his portrayal of Socratic practice can be understood as an effort to explore an alternative vision of crowd control to that often romanticized in the Athenian democratic imaginary. My argument draws on passages spread across the dialogues, but pays special attention to the *Gorgias*—a work in which both crowds and crowd-pleasing come to be a prominent concern—and to the account of democracy's decline in book 8 of the *Republic*, which I take to be part of an extended critique of a recurring fantasy in Athenian political culture that equated the manipulation of crowds with tyrannical power. In suggesting that a pervasive political ambition of corraling the power of the crowd is reimagined in the way Socrates

<sup>7</sup>Danielle S. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's "Republic"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Joel Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>Matthew Landauer, "Drinking Parties Correctly Ordered: Plato on Mass Participation and the Necessity of Rule," *Journal of Politics* 84 no. 4 (2022): 2011–22; see also Simone Chambers, "Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Has Deliberative Democracy Abandoned Mass Democracy?," *Political Theory* 37, no. 3 (2009): 323–50.

<sup>9</sup>Tae-Yeoun Keum, "Why Did Socrates Conduct His Dialogues before an Audience?," *History of Political Thought* 37, no. 3 (2016): 411–37.

chooses to interact with the audiences to his philosophical investigations, I hope to complicate our understanding of the relationship between political and philosophical practice in Plato's thought. Plato did not, as is often assumed, rule out crowds as viable participants in philosophical discussion, at best to be tamed through rhetorical resources external to philosophy. Rather, he sought, in dialogue with an extant political discourse around crowds and their management, novel ways of exploring their potential to contribute to philosophical inquiry as a shared experience.

The argument proceeds in four parts. In the first, I suggest that Socrates's tendency to conduct his dialogues in the presence of an audience complicates the canonical view that Plato is opposed to crowds. I then suggest that there are at least two distinct grounds on which he criticizes crowds: a stronger argument that the incentive structures of crowds are un conducive to philosophy; and a weaker, more ambiguous argument that crowds tend to fall short of the political promise often attributed to them in the Athenian imaginary. This latter critique provides a productive framework for revisiting Plato's account of the degeneration of democracy to tyranny—the subject of the third section—and for reconciling the incongruity between his theoretical reflections on crowds and his depiction of Socratic practice, to which I return in the fourth section. There, I outline three ways in which Socratic audiences contribute to the dynamics of philosophical discussions.

Plato's reflections on the characteristic features of collective gatherings often center on the notion of the crowd (*ochlos*), which is the term I track most frequently here. His references to crowds and, in particular, the expressive noise made by a vocal crowd (*thorubos*), are usually literal in that Plato means a concrete crowd and concrete crowd-noises when his characters bring them up in discussion. But such references also often appear couched in, or at times even used interchangeably with, the more indeterminate language of "the many," "the multitude," and "the majority" (*hoi polloi*, to *plēthos*), which in turn reflects a more general conceptual overlap in ordinary Greek usage between these terms.<sup>10</sup> For instance, as we see in the fourth section, the connotation that crowds are either largely composed of—or tend to display behaviors typical of—the nonelite majority of the general population (*dēmos*) is at work in the accusation in the *Gorgias* that Socrates is guilty of "crowd-pleasing" (*dēmōgorein*) in his speech. Finally, readers may object to my applying the category of the crowd to Socratic audiences, which admittedly vary in size and composition when they are described explicitly at all. While I have marked the instances where they are depicted using some of the aforementioned terms associated with crowds and crowd behavior, they are just as often referred to simply as bystanders or those present (e.g., *hoi parontes*). But I hope what follows can be taken as an effort to take seriously the central idea, thematized extensively across Plato's

<sup>10</sup>See Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), s.v. ὄχλος.

corpus, that the dynamics that come to the fore in engaging an individual are categorically different from those of engaging a collective, and that this in turn has consequential implications for the form that philosophical practice can take.

## 1. The Philosopher and the Crowd

In an influential set of passages in the *Gorgias*, Socrates draws a contrast between speech before crowds and speech directed at individuals, which is then mapped onto a contrast between rhetoric and philosophy. Pressed by Socrates to give an account of rhetoric, Gorgias is cornered into defining it not only as a general art of persuasion, but specifically as “that kind of persuasion . . . which you find in the law-courts and in other such gatherings of crowds [*en toi allois ochlois*]” (*Gorg.* 454b).<sup>11</sup> Gorgias’s claim is that a rhetorician is more effective at this art than even an expert with substantive knowledge—or, at least, “more persuasive in a crowd [*en ge ochlōi*], anyhow” (459a).

Socrates’s well-known rebuttal is that such individuals who make it their profession to persuade crowds are doomed from the outset. A rhetorician does not so much persuade a crowd of new ideas as reinforce fancies it already finds pleasant, much like a pastry baker who beats out a doctor in winning the approval of an audience of children (464d). Socrates’s way of doing philosophy, by contrast, is intensely focused on the individual he is speaking with at any given moment. The *elenchus* is Socrates’s idiosyncratic method of exchanging brisk questions and answers with individual interlocutors (*Gorg.* 449b, 461d–462a; see also 457e–458a), with the aim of exposing the unexamined assumptions underpinning their system of beliefs.<sup>12</sup> In a passage that has become a touchstone for students of the Socratic method, Socrates implores his interlocutor to “try the kind of refutation [*elenchou*]” that the investigation requires: “For I do know how to produce one witness to whatever I’m saying, and that’s the man I’m having a discussion with. The multitude [*pollous*] I disregard. And I do know how to call for a vote from one man, but I don’t even discuss things with the multitude [*pollois*]” (474a–b).<sup>13</sup>

The *Gorgias* has long been understood as a work about privileging philosophical deliberation with individuals over merely political, rhetorical speech directed at crowds.<sup>14</sup> On this interpretation, philosophy is by nature

<sup>11</sup>Quotations of passages from Plato’s dialogues are from the translations in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997). Here, I have modified D. J. Zeyl’s translation of *ochlois*.

<sup>12</sup>For example, Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 111; Richard Robinson, *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15.

<sup>13</sup>Translation modified.

<sup>14</sup>Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73, 79; J. Peter Euben, “Reading Democracy,” in *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies*,

an enterprise centered on individuals. Something about engaging a crowd obstructs a process crucial to philosophy, so that speaking to a crowd ultimately amounts to speaking to those without knowledge, for the sake of mere gratification rather than for knowledge or the related task of improving the soul of the listener. This canonical portrait of the individualistic nature of philosophy is perhaps the most cogent way of drawing out the significance of Socrates's effort to distance his method from crowds and the many. But it is not a particularly accurate representation of Plato's portrayal of his actual practice.

Socrates often conducts his dialogues in settings that allow for an audience.<sup>15</sup> His encounters famously take place in the agora (*Ap.* 17c; see also *Parmenides*) or nearby (*Euthyphro*, *Menexenus*, *Theages*), but also in wrestling schools (*Charmides*, *Lysis*) and gymnasia (*Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*), well-attended parties at private residences (*Protagoras*, *Parmenides*), several of which are occasioned by large public festivals (*Republic*, *Symposium*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Hippias Minor*).<sup>16</sup> Some of the dialogues take place in unnamed spaces where Socrates inherits an audience—or part of an audience—that had gathered to witness a prior performance or exhibition (*Gorgias*, *Laches*, *Hippias Minor*). In other cases, Socrates brings his own group of companions to the scene (*Parm.* 127c; *Euthyd.* 274b; see *Clitoph.* 409a, 409d, 410a). At his trial, he makes several references to the bystanders present during his customary interrogations of individuals (*Ap.* 21c–d, 22b–c, 23a). Although the size of Socrates's audiences tends to be variable and indeterminate, it does not appear unusual for them to get large and even boisterous. At times, crowds figure explicitly in a dialogue's dramatic setup (*Charm.* 154a; *Lach.* 183d). In the *Euthydemus*, Crito repeatedly notes that “there was such a crowd standing around you that when I came up and wanted to listen, I couldn't hear anything distinctly,” even though he “stood quite close” (*Euthyd.* 271a, 304d).

How are we to understand Socrates's choice to routinely put his practice at risk of being mixed up with such crowds? One possible answer is that he makes no such choice at all, but that being around a variety of informal gatherings—large and small, in public spaces and private residences, among strangers and among friends and acquaintances—was simply an

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*Ancient and Modern*, ed. Josiah Ober and Charles W. Hedrick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 327–60; Gary Remer, “Cicero and the Ethics of Deliberative Rhetoric,” in *Talking Democracy*, ed. Gary Remer, Benedetto Fontana, and Cary J. Nederman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 218; see also Christina H. Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato's "Gorgias" and the Politics of Shame* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 33.

<sup>15</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 39.

<sup>16</sup>For a catalog of the settings of the dialogues, see Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), appendix 1.



unavoidable feature of public life in Athens. The audiences to Socrates's conversations, then, may be little more than a distracting, but largely inescapable, nuisance in the background of his practice, so that he first has to break away from the larger group and carve out private moments with his interlocutors in order to properly engage in philosophy. For instance, in *Hippias Minor*, one of the dialogues that takes place in the aftermath of a prior exhibition, Socrates reports having previously "hesitated to ask questions" because there was "a great crowd inside," but is now willing to engage the eponymous sophist in dialogue, "since there are fewer of us" (*Hipp. Min.* 364b).<sup>17</sup> In the *Protagoras*, Socrates describes the crowd at the house of Callias as a literal opponent of his own project. As Protagoras's speech generates "a noisy round of applause," Socrates likens their combined effect to the sensation of being hit by a good boxer: "Everything went black and I was reeling from Protagoras' oratory and the others' clamor" (*Prot.* 339d–e, see also 334c; *Euthyd.* 276c–d, 303b).<sup>18</sup>

For every instance in which a crowd of audience members appears to be a distraction for the philosophical investigation, however, there is arguably a countervailing moment in the Platonic corpus in which such a crowd seems to play a more ambivalent role. If the audience in the *Protagoras* rallies boisterously around Socrates's opponent with a "noisy round of applause [*thorubon*]" that leaves him momentarily stunned, in the *Gorgias*, it is precisely the "commotion [*thorubou*]" of the audience that ultimately prevents the rhetorician from abandoning the discussion prematurely (*Gorg.* 458c). Whereas there are multiple instances in the *Gorgias* in which an interlocutor attempts to avoid answering Socrates's questions by suggesting that he ask someone else in the audience instead, no one in the crowd takes up these invitations to step in (458e, 473e, see 458c), even though it is generally not uncommon in Socratic dialogues for interlocutors to emerge from the audience to take over from a previous interlocutor. When Socrates finds himself knocked out by Protagoras's speech and the audience's applause, however, he turns to someone in the crowd, Prodicus, "to stall for time to consider" the lines of poetry Protagoras has thrown at him (*Prot.* 339e–341e).

The audiences and occasional crowds that witness Socrates's investigations are not simply an unavoidable form of background noise to be tuned out. Rather, the choice between conversing before groups or in private is very much a live question for Socrates, and there are circumstances in which he consciously opts for an audience. Certainly in those dialogues in which the

<sup>17</sup>Translation modified.

<sup>18</sup>A similar dynamic may be at play in that fraught moment in the *Gorgias* in which Socrates claims to make the individual interlocutor the sole priority of his elenchus while disregarding the many (*Gorg.* 474a–b). The immediate catalyst to this remark is a provocation by Polus, who challenges him to consult the gathered crowd to see if "any one of these people" does not find his statements ridiculous (473e). Socrates's disavowal of the many in favor of the "one witness" to his discourse is also in this instance a refusal of Polus's suggestion of audience involvement.

format of discussion becomes a pronounced topic of dispute between Socrates and his interlocutors, the question whether to speak before an audience seems to be as much an issue as his famous requirement that the conversation be kept to short questions and answers. In the *Protagoras*, the first matter to be decided when Socrates approaches the sophist is whether they should converse “alone or in the presence of others”; Protagoras chooses the latter (*Prot.* 316b–c). The *Euthydemus*—which shares many of the concerns about method raised in the *Protagoras*—concludes with the ambiguous verdict, first suggested ironically by Socrates, then affirmed more seriously by Crito, that it is inadvisable “to be willing to argue. . . in front of a large crowd” (*Euthyd.* 305b). In both these instances, the question of conversing before audiences arises against the understanding that there are dangers to conducting philosophical discussions in front of a crowd. At the same time, these passages also present the decision as a deliberate methodological choice for Socrates and his interlocutors to make. And if the settings and descriptive accounts of Socrates’s conversations are any indication, he seems to err on the side of keeping the audience.

This revised picture of Socratic practice does not sit easily with his rejection of crowds—both professed and reputed—for the purposes of his philosophical project. For one, it reopens the question of what exactly Plato intended his readers to find so problematic about them.

## 2. Bad Incentives and Unmet Promises

One relatively simple way of making sense of Socrates’s claim in the *Gorgias* to exclude crowds from the province of his philosophical elenchus is to understand him to be suggesting that crowds are structurally unsuited to the pursuit and recognition of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> We might call this the *bad incentives* account of what makes a crowd problematic for philosophy: it is simply easier to engage its members in conversation about topics that give them pleasure than to do the hard work of making them think.

Built into this line of thought is the idea, common throughout the Platonic corpus, that large gatherings have a tendency to gravitate toward lowest-common-denominator preferences. It may be the case, as ancient authors often assume, that there are statistically fewer wise and thoughtful individuals in the world than those with unreflective dispositions. For a crowd drawn from a typical population, then, it is far easier for the ignorant many to strong-arm and shout over the enlightened few as they steer discussion in favor of their own interests.<sup>20</sup> But it is just as likely that Plato believed these dynamics plagued crowds regardless of their composition, and it was

<sup>19</sup>See also *Phaedr.* 260c.

<sup>20</sup>Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 125–26.



rather the nature of collective gatherings as such that undermined each individual's capacity to engage in that inner "dialogue of myself with myself" which Hannah Arendt, commenting on Socratic practice, thought so crucial to the philosophical process.<sup>21</sup> If, as Socrates suggests in the *Republic*, the part with which we reason is smaller than the other components of an individual soul (*Rep.* 442c, 442a), this relative difference between the rational and nonrational sources of motivation is multiplied in collective settings. In aggregate, the combined pull of nonrational impulses in a crowd can hence rapidly overwhelm that of the rational. What Arendt once wrote about the unphilosophical majority in Plato's thought can just as well apply to otherwise respectable individuals who find themselves part of a crowd: not that they "kno[w] nothing of the pathos of wonder, but much rather that they refuse to endure it."<sup>22</sup>

Plato knew well the struggle that philosophical thinking faces against the swell of a crowd pushing the flow of conversation away from it. In book 6 of the *Republic*, it becomes the basis of Socrates's verdict that "the multitude [*plēthos*]"—as well as those "private individuals who associate with the crowd [*ochlōi*] and try to please them"—will necessarily stand in opposition to philosophy (*Rep.* 494a).<sup>23</sup> Contrasting the effect of "private training" on a potentially virtuous mind with "the contrary education he received from the mob" (492c–e), Socrates paints a vivid picture of crowd dynamics:

Whenever the multitude [*polloī*] are sitting together in assemblies, courts, theaters, army camps, or in some other public gathering of the crowd, they object very loudly and excessively to some of the things that are said or done and approve others in the same way, shouting and clapping, so that the very rocks and surroundings echo the din of their praise or blame and double it. . . . What private training can hold out and not be swept away by that kind of praise or blame and be carried by the flood wherever it goes, so that he'll say that the same things are beautiful or ugly as the crowd does, follow the same way of life as they do, and be the same sort of person as they are? (492b–c)

Here, the crowd is a corrupting influence: a group whose collective whims are at once arbitrary and primitive, so that seeking to control or to tame them all is akin to learning the "moods and appetites of a huge, strong beast" (493a). In turn, crowds are adept at amplifying these same whims in a particularly loud manner, so that the quiet voice of an individual's effort to think for oneself is "swept away" before it has had a chance to be heard.

The critique that the incentive structures in a crowd are stacked against philosophy may be familiar to students of Plato. But Plato's corpus also contains a different, and comparatively underexplored, set of reasons for Socrates's professed suspicion of crowds and of speech directed at them. We might

<sup>21</sup> Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," 89.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>23</sup> Translation modified.

call this the *unmet promises* account, where the problem is not so much that crowds necessarily present an obstruction to philosophy, but rather that the act of engaging them does not deliver on its promised appeal. In the *Gorgias*—and, as we will see, the *Republic* as well—crowds figure into the imaginations of the politically ambitious as powerful entities that are amenable to control by those who approach them with the right set of skills. Discrediting this cultural trope forms a large part of Socrates’s project in these dialogues.

Remarkably, the case that Socrates builds against crowds in the *Gorgias* arises from Gorgias’s pivotal concession to the qualifier that a rhetorician, as opposed to an expert, is naturally at home in crowds—especially, but not exclusively, those that form in political gatherings (*Gorg.* 452e, 454b, 456c, 457a, 459a). But Gorgias’s original conception of rhetoric is more general in its target audience and less amoral in purpose than allowed by the neat oppositions developed later in the dialogue. On the account Gorgias initially tries to give, rhetoric can and should ideally be used for just ends (456c–457b), and it can also be directed at individuals—as in his example of persuading individual patients to accept the prescribed treatment where doctors have failed to do so (456b).<sup>24</sup> His purpose in designating crowds as a natural audience for rhetoric is, rather, to make a point about its potential power: being able to move crowds is a distinctive mark of rhetoric’s usefulness. Many commentators rightly follow Plato’s cues in the dialogue in locating the upshot of such a skill in the possibility of usurping the power of the demos and its institutionalized incarnations in democratic Athens (459a, 452e, 466b, 486a–c, 500c).<sup>25</sup> But the power to successfully manage crowds is in and of itself impressive because they are distinctly complicated entities, with their own idiosyncratic dynamics and group psychology. The promise that Gorgias sees in the act of engaging a crowd in speech is the potential for winning over an especially complex political agent, which in turn confers an extra duty of responsibility upon the speaker capable of doing so.

The point that Socrates repeatedly makes, both in the ensuing rebuttal of Gorgias’s position and in his response to his subsequent interlocutors, is that the idea that crowds can be persuaded by rhetoricians—let alone persuaded toward beneficial ends—is an illusion. Socrates’s critique is largely an observation about the realities of the power dynamic between

<sup>24</sup>Plato, *Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 216. Roslyn Weiss reads the productive partnership between Gorgias and his brother, one of the doctors in this example, as a potential model for the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. Roslyn Weiss, “Oh, Brother! The Fraternity of Rhetoric and Philosophy in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Interpretation* 30, no. 2 (2003): 195–206.

<sup>25</sup>Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 195–97; Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts*, 42–43; Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, 120. See also *Prot.* 318e–319a.

such speakers and a crowd: when a rhetorician believes himself to be persuading his audience, he is offering nothing more than flattery to the entity that is actually in control. The political urgency of this observation comes to be all the more pronounced when, later in the dialogue, Polus and Callicles abandon Gorgias's claim that rhetoric brings responsibilities that tether it to justice and focus only on the political power it seems to promise. If a rhetorician's aim is to captivate a crowd for just long enough to manipulate them toward some instrumental end, it poses no real problem that he trades in flattery rather than in true persuasion. This is exactly how demagogues are able to sway crowds in the assembly and the courts for popular approval, and for Polus, it is comparable to the power wielded by a tyrant (466c).<sup>26</sup>

Polus's and Callicles's continued insistence on viewing the control of crowds as a pathway to political power can be read as a testament to the seductiveness of the very trope that Socrates sets out to disarm.<sup>27</sup> The problem with crowds, for Socrates, is that they keep featuring in a tired blueprint of political ambition, even though, upon examination, they are far less vulnerable to being manipulated into subjugation than his interlocutors assume.

### 3. The Critique of Democracy Revisited

We have seen two distinct lines of critique that Plato develops against crowds: a more familiar account of their structural incompatibility with philosophy, and a separate account of a misleading fantasy commonly associated with them in Athenian political culture. Teasing out these two discrete threads of Plato's theoretical treatment of crowds better positions us to revisit his critique of democracy, which is often looped in as a key reference point in standard portraits of his views on collective behavior.

Plato's view of democracy is often understood in terms not dissimilar to the diagnosis inadvertently voiced by Polus and Callicles, according to which the crowds granted political outlets in democracies are vulnerable to capture by enterprising demagogues, who may subsequently become tyrants. For many readers of the *Republic*, this is more or less the trajectory by which Socrates believes democracies turn into tyrannies.<sup>28</sup> But while crowds do play a vital

<sup>26</sup>On this image of tyranny as a specifically democratic fantasy, see Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Peroerts*, 111–13; Matthew Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel: Accountability and Advice in Ancient Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), e.g., 165. See also Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Stick and Glue: The Function of Tyranny in Fifth-Century Athenian Democracy," in *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and Its Discontents in Ancient Greece*, ed. Kathryn A. Morgan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 59–93.

<sup>27</sup>On the difficulty Socrates has persuading his interlocutors, see Landauer, *Dangerous Counsel*, 158.

<sup>28</sup>John R. Wallach, *The Platonic Political Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 298–99; A. E. Taylor, "The Decline and Fall of the State in *Republic*, VIII," *Mind* 48 no. 189 (1939): 36.

part in Socrates's portrayal of this transition, the account he gives in book 8 of the *Republic* does not affirm Polus's and Callicles's fantasy that crowds can be controlled and manipulated for individual gain. Rather, the famous passages depicting the decline of democracy can be read as an elaborate version of his critique of crowds as entities that do not live up to such fantasies of control.

In book 8, democracy degenerates into tyranny through the agency of a demagogue who—as Polus and Callicles imagine the real political potential of rhetoric—is skilled at manipulating crowds. Of the three factions that Socrates believes necessarily exist in a democracy—an idle class, a class of moneymakers, and “the people [*dēmos*]”—crowds figure into the first and third (564c–566a). The idle class, composed of a swarm of politically enterprising “drones” hovering around the speakers in democratic venues, provokes the other two factions and pits them against each other (564d, see 552c). The otherwise neutral class of the *demos*, now politically mobilized against the moneymaking class, assists the would-be tyrant's rise to power when “a leader of the people” comes to “dominat[e] a docile mob [*ochlon*]” into prosecuting assorted individuals in the courts on false charges (565c–e).

The path of this tyrant seems to encapsulate just that promise of power that motivates Polus's and Callicles's ambitions to court crowds. Just as, on Polus's account, a skillful rhetorician who has captured the crowds of the assembly and courts determines the fates of any individuals he chooses to persecute (*Gorg.* 466c), so too the demagogue of the *Republic* gains his power from turning the crowd on political rivals and scapegoats in the law-courts.<sup>29</sup> Whereas Socrates insists throughout the *Gorgias* that crowds cannot be controlled in the way rhetoricians and their supporters imagine, book 8 of the *Republic* depicts the political successes of a demagogue who enters public life with no other qualifications than the claim “that he wishes the majority [*tōi plēthei*] well,” his willingness to make promises, and his ability to manipulate the crowd (*Rep.* 558b–c).

On the other hand, these passages ultimately affirm Socrates's warnings in the *Gorgias* about how illusory control of a crowd may prove. Even though tyranny arises when a leader takes control of a “docile mob” of the *demos*, his command over it is short-lived because the tyrant must always come up with novelties—debt cancellations, land reforms, wars—in order to appease the *demos* and convince them that they need him (565e–566a, 566d–e). His warmongering, in particular, is bound to generate resentment on the part of the very people whose support he had once captured. Having gotten rid of his political rivals, the tyrant must either “live with the inferior majority [*phalōn tōn pollōn*], even though they hate him, or not . . . live at all” (567d).

But the tyrant's seeming control over the crowd is illusory for a second, more self-referential, reason. Famously, the tyrant in the *Republic* suffers not

<sup>29</sup>On the absence of the assembly from book 8, see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “Democracy, Equality, and Eidê: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998): 275.

only from the external threats of his associates who might turn on him, but also from the internal clamoring of his unbridled appetites. These appetites are explicitly analogous to the buzzing “drones” that crop up in unhealthy cities: the soul of a would-be tyrant has a “violent crowd of desires that has nested within him” (573e). In a complex sequence of passages, the city-soul analogy reduplicates itself as Socrates describes a degenerating soul as itself having a city within it. The fall of the “citadael [*akropolis*] of the young man’s soul” occurs when, emptied of true guardians, it comes to be occupied by a multitude of ever-growing desires (560b). The new occupants of this city-within-a-soul “close the gates of the royal walls within him” to the ambassadors of sound advice, and instead welcome in from exile a host of vices alongside their “vast chorus of followers” (560c–d), who eventually come to rally around a single great drone (572e).

When many such souls come together and, “aided by the foolishness of the people . . . creat[e] a tyrant” (575c), the multitude who has put him in power is left in a condition of double subjugation. It is obeying a tyrant who is, in turn, obeying both the tyrant in his soul “and the unruly mob around it [*ton peri auton thorubon*]” (575a). The idea that a skillful individual can gain tyrannical control over a crowd is deceptive, not just because such control will be fleeting, but because a regress occurs: a tyrant who seemingly pulls off this feat is actually obeying a crowd of desires, which is in turn obeying an internal tyrant.

A number of lessons can be drawn from reading Socrates’s account of democracy’s degeneration as an extension of his efforts elsewhere to refute a recurring conception of the manipulability of crowds in the cultural imagination. First, Plato’s critical reflections on crowd dynamics may not be easily boiled down to one dominant theory. Rather, both the lines of critique I have identified here can be found in overlapping texts. The continuity of Plato’s development of the *unmet promises* account across the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* suggests this was a theme he was at least as invested in exploring, if not more, than the better-known—and more straightforward—*bad incentives* explanation of the problematic nature of crowds.

Plato’s preoccupation with the former critique reflects, at one level, a real concern that insufficiently nuanced understandings of crowd dynamics were driving entrepreneurial individuals to agitate and politicize an elusive entity they were consistently underestimating. At another level, however, it introduces an important ambiguity to what we might ultimately take to be his prescription with regard to crowds. Unlike the bad incentives account, which is an uncomplicated claim about the unsuitability of crowds for philosophical engagement, the unmet promises account only issues a warning about their treacherousness and complexity. Even if crowds are not so easily tamed after all, Socrates’s critique still leaves open the question whether the ideal of controlled engagement with them is an aspiration that ought to be abandoned altogether. Indeed, versions of that aspiration arguably can be glimpsed even in political visions proposed by Plato’s

philosophical characters. Commentators have suggested that the *Gorgias*'s concluding vision of a "true oratory" that improves the soul of anyone it addresses could have either individual or collective audiences as its target (*Gorg.* 517a).<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the *Laws* contains a curious passage in which the Athenian Stranger, while tracing the origins of Athenian cultural decline to the licentious behavior of crowds at musical performances, simultaneously appears to romanticize a prior period in Athens's history when it was possible for "children, their attendants and the general crowd [*tōi pleistōi ochlōi*]" to be brought under an appropriate measure of control at such venues (700c–d).<sup>31</sup>

In diagnosing the tendency of crowds to underdeliver on the promises projected onto them, Plato can be understood to advance a double-sided critique. It paints, on the one hand, a picture of tyranny laying out the extreme political consequences of falling for such promises. But it also grants a substantial amount of leeway for Plato to examine, on his own terms, alternative ways of envisioning how crowds may be managed constructively. Exploring this possibility, it seems, is precisely what is at stake in his depiction of Socratic practice.

#### 4. Socratic Audiences and the Practice of Philosophy

Socrates is savvy at handling an audience—a feature of his practice that has drawn the notice not only of Plato's readers but of Socrates's own interlocutors in the dialogues.<sup>32</sup> The most dramatic instance of such testimony appears late in the *Gorgias*, when Callicles accuses Socrates of "acting like a true crowd-pleaser [*dēmēgoros*]," "playing to the crowd [*dēmēgoreis*]," and "bringing the discussion to . . . crowd-pleasing vulgarities [*dēmēgorika*]" (*Gorg.* 482c–e; see also 494c). *Dēmēgorein* and its cognates—the set of words regularly translated as "crowd-pleasing"—are derived from *dēmos*, the people, and are closely related to "demagogue."<sup>33</sup> Here, Callicles's remarks form a complex insult: in part a retaliation to Socrates's suggestive allusions to his love life,<sup>34</sup> and in part—as commentators have pointed out—an

<sup>30</sup>Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts*, 51. See also the discussion of the possibility of persuading "the many," "the masses," and "the people" in Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, 170–71; as well as the potentially spurious *Alc.* 114b, and the discussion of this passage in David Lévy, "Socrates' Versatile Rhetoric and the Soul of the Crowd," *Rhetorica* 38 no. 2 (2020): 135–55.

<sup>31</sup>Translation modified.

<sup>32</sup>Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 107; Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts*, 40.

<sup>33</sup>Melissa Lane, "The Origins of the Statesman-Demagogue Distinction in and after Ancient Athens," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 2 (2012): 179–200.

<sup>34</sup>Ober, *Political Dissent*, 205.



indictment of paying lip service to popular morality, which Callicles memorably goes on to criticize.<sup>35</sup>

But one overlooked way of reading this passage is to take Callicles's allegation of crowd-pleasing as a commentary on Socrates's manner of conducting the discussion at hand. For all of Socrates's claims to be focusing on the individual while paying no attention to the many, there is much in the content of his speech—gossipy hints about his interlocutors' love lives and deference to conventional morals—that are the kinds of topics crowds can be expected to like and that will score points with the audience that has gathered to witness their exchange. Callicles's charge throws a spotlight on the ambiguous nature of Socrates's analyses of crowds and those who hope to gain power over them. If Callicles is right, Socrates is not only more sanguine than he lets on about having philosophical discussions in the presence of a larger group, but appears to be engaged in the very pursuit he has been denouncing as a fool's errand. This would also mean that he opens himself up to the same line of reproach he levies against those who presume to think they have any modicum of control over the crowds they deal with.

Granted, there are important ways in which Socrates can distinguish his activity from both crowd-pleasing and the ambitions of his interlocutors. Unlike those who believe the crowd can be controlled and directed toward their own power, Socrates can easily disclaim any interest in such tyrannical ambitions. Elsewhere in the *Gorgias*, he also claims knowledge of—and a special commitment to—that which is truly beneficial for his audience, which acts as a safeguard against the pressures rhetoricians face to simply say the things the crowd wants to hear (481e–482a). And whereas the political fantasies he seeks to debunk have tended to fixate on the crowds that dominate formal institutions of popular rule, Socrates's audiences are informal and spontaneous, and do not always amount to a crowd. Even at their largest, their numbers had to have been in the dozens rather than the hundreds, and they congregated in a wide range of spaces spanning the public and the private. Certainly, the audiences in the dialogues set in private homes would have been from a more elite and self-selecting demographic than that typically courted by demagogues in the assembly and courts. Even so, Callicles's characterization of Socrates's interactions with his audience as a form of crowd engagement helps us see the continuity between his practice and the opening in his theory for idealizing alternative visions of crowd control. This allows us to reframe our understanding of Socrates's philosophic practice as an open-ended effort to engage collective audiences so as to avoid their pathologies, while locating and harnessing their constructive potential.

The Socratic audience has, for one thing, the capacity to police the discussion and to keep it on track. It can stand in as a collective memory noting and retaining what the interlocutors say, so that they are under pressure not to

<sup>35</sup>*Gorgias and Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 142.

contradict their prior remarks (*Gorg.* 482d).<sup>36</sup> In a more concrete sense, the audience can physically detain interlocutors who attempt to abandon the discussion before it has run its course. This is true, for instance, of the noisy crowd that pressures Gorgias into staying when he cites consideration for “the people who are present here” as an excuse to leave (458c), as well as of the group of anonymous bystanders at the house of Cephalus that prevents Thrasymachus from departing after delivering his monologue (*Rep.* 344d). In the *Protagoras*, Socrates himself is physically stopped from leaving as Callias, lobbying on behalf of the sizeable group assembled at his house, appeals to their collective interest in having the philosopher continue to take part in their discussions (*Prot.* 335d).

Socratic audiences can also oversee the format of the discussion itself. Callias’s plea in the *Protagoras* for Socrates to stay sets off responses from other members of the gathering as they deliberate over how the conversation ought to proceed, with individual proposals drawing expressions of approval from the group as a whole (337c, 338b, 338e). When it is proposed that a moderator be chosen to “monitor” Socrates and Protagoras in dialogue, Socrates assigns this task to the audience. Addressing the group collectively, he suggests that if Protagoras does not answer when it is his turn to do so, “you [*humeis*] and I will unite in urgently requesting him, as you have requested me, not to ruin our conference. This will not require any one supervisor, since you will all supervise together” (337d–e). The audience makes good on their agreement. Not only does it succeed in pressuring a reluctant Protagoras to agree to the proposed format of discussion (337e), members of the group reemerge later to keep their own from leading the inquiry astray. When, in response to Socrates’s long analysis of an ode by Simonides, an audience member competitively attempts to offer his own interpretation, Alcibiades emerges from the audience to stop him, in the interest of limiting the discussion to “what Socrates and Protagoras agreed upon” (347b). Alcibiades returns later to pull Callias into adjudicating whether Protagoras is participating constructively in the discussion—a move that results in Protagoras answering Socrates’s questions out of the embarrassment brought about “by Alcibiades’ words, not to mention the insistence of Callias and practically the whole company” (348c).

Of course, pressuring reluctant interlocutors to stay, or to abide by a given format, is no guarantee of a constructive philosophical investigation. Arguably, such situations can backfire, resulting in impasses in which Socrates is left contending with a barely cooperative interlocutor.<sup>37</sup> But a

<sup>36</sup>Markovits has compared Socratic audiences to the *periestēkotes* or *corona*, the informal audiences who often played a disciplinary role in Athenian court proceedings. Markovits, *Politics of Sincerity*, 101; see also Adriaan M. Lanni, “Spectator Sport or Serious Politics? *Oi Periesthikotes* and the Athenian Lawcourts,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997): 183–89.

<sup>37</sup>Seth Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 5; Michael Frede, “Plato’s Arguments and the Dialogue

second important contribution that Socrates's audiences also make is creating opportunities for interlocutors to recede into the larger group to recover from the strain of being the focus of Socratic examination. Evidence of such instances is admittedly rare—not all recalcitrant Socratic interlocutors are won over in a meaningful way—but the dramatic trajectories of Gorgias and Thrasymachus are especially telling examples. Both, as we have seen, are prevented by the audience from leaving; both intervene at later points in the discussion after having been silent members of the audience for some time.

Though Thrasymachus ceases to be Socrates's primary interlocutor at the end of book 1 of the *Republic*, he briefly reenters the discussion in book 5, when Adeimantus and Polemarchus intervene to ask Socrates to elaborate on what will become the long digression spanning books 5–7. Voting in favor of the conversational detour, Thrasymachus speaks both on behalf of the group and as a defender of the inquiry itself, urging Socrates to “take this as the resolution of all of us” (450a), and reminding him that they are there not “to search for gold” but instead “to listen to an argument” (450b). The parallel moments when Gorgias makes his reappearance are even more striking. At a point in the dialogue where Callicles resists answering Socrates, Gorgias comes out of the crowd to ask him to cooperate, insisting that answering will be for “our benefit too, so that the discussion may be carried through” (*Gorg.* 497b). Similarly, when Socrates later offers to terminate the exchange, Gorgias suggests on behalf of the audience that Socrates “must finish the discussion” and that it seems “the others think so, too” (506b; see 463a–464b).

In both these examples, something transformative appears to have happened to Gorgias and Thrasymachus since their earlier attempts to quit the discussion. Where each might previously have been concerned about saving face in front of the audience, both now express an investment in how the philosophical investigation unfolds. Both their interventions appeal to a discursive ideal that Socrates professes elsewhere of being committed to “testing the argument” no matter what collateral damage this ends up inflicting on those individuals who also end up getting tested in the process (*Prot.* 33c; see *Gorg.* 454c). Moreover, they make these appeals while presenting their positions as representative of that of the group. One way of explaining these moments is to attribute Gorgias's and Thrasymachus's changes of heart—and the shift in their priorities—to their experiences following the philosophical investigation as silent, but invested, audience members.<sup>38</sup> Being part of the Socratic audience can offer a more

Form,” in “Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues,” ed. J. C. Klagge and N. D. Smith, supp. vol., *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (1992): 210.

<sup>38</sup>Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's “Gorgias”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 41.

capacious vantage point on the discussion that may not be readily available to Socrates's interlocutor in the heat of the moment. Experiencing both roles certainly makes it easier to make the case, as Gorgias does, that seeing the discussion through is for their collective benefit.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, Socratic audiences have the elusive but crucial capacity to lend a sense of occasion to the experience of philosophy. As we have seen, Socrates was wary of the propensity of crowds to amplify passions so that—as he puts it in the *Republic*—"the very rocks and surroundings echo the din of their praise or blame" (*Rep.* 492c). But when there is enthusiasm and sincere interest brewing for how a particular philosophical inquiry will develop, this too is a feeling that can multiply and spread. The *Euthydemus*, for instance, ends with the climactic coming together of a crowded audience that had initially been divided between Socrates's supporters and those of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Whereas previously it was only the latter faction that "made such an enthusiastic uproar," the entire group comes to unite in a rowdy show of approval for Socrates's interlocutors, so that "it almost seemed as if the pillars of the Lyceum applauded" (*Euthyd.* 303b).

In many ways this scene presents a cautionary instance of the infectious enthusiasm of a crowd working in favor of a pair of skilled, but morally vacuous, sophists. At the same time, it offers a mirror image of an experience that seems implicit in many other Socratic dialogues, in which audiences and even occasional interlocutors are ostensibly captivated by Socrates's way of doing philosophy. Several of these dialogues have complex, nested narrative frames in which someone who was a witness to Socrates's conversation reconstructs it much later, attesting not only to the monumentality the encounter has gained in cultural memory, but also to the charged atmosphere at the event itself—where those in the crowd might have taken satisfaction in the knowledge that they would later be able to say, *I was there*.<sup>40</sup> Something of that energy appears to be captured in the complex moment in the *Gorgias* when the noisy outburst of the crowd compels Gorgias to stay. "You yourselves hear the commotion [*thorubos*] these men are making. . . they want to hear anything you have to say," Chaerephon tells Gorgias and Socrates. "And as for myself," he continues, though he may as well be speaking for the whole crowd, "I hope I'll never be so busy that I'd forego discussions such as this, conducted in the way this one is, because I find it more practical to do something else" (*Gorg.* 458c).

## Conclusion

It is a commonplace that crowds were held in contempt by Plato, who took them to be little more than unruly mobs, fickle and yet prone to capture by

<sup>39</sup>Keum, "Why Did Socrates Conduct," 433–35.

<sup>40</sup>Diskin Clay, *Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 23–32.

tyrants, doomed to bad judgments like the sentencing of Socrates. I have complicated this view by showing that Plato did not have a single theory of crowd behavior and its possibilities, but instead offers a heterogeneous theory that helps frame his depiction of philosophical practice. The role extended to the audiences of Socrates's dialogues suggests that Plato was sober minded about both the serious hazards of engaging crowds as well as their potential to make a positive contribution to the practice of philosophy. This might leave us at an unsatisfying impasse, in which we are left to contend with an unresolved tension between Plato's unsparing diagnoses of the realities of crowd management, on the one hand, and his paradoxical attachment to the possibility of harnessing their potential, on the other. The seeming gap in Plato's political thought between ideal and reality, theory and practice, has sometimes been read through a tragic lens, with special focus on themes like Socrates's ultimate failure to persuade the crowd at his own trial and Plato's reservations about the limitations of Socrates's method. But I hope to have also shown the extent to which Plato was invested in a different idea of philosophy as a public practice: as a site of ambivalence, perhaps, but also of openness, experimentation, and innovation.