

# The Democratic Soul

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## I.

The first great work of political philosophy in the long tradition of Western thought has come down to us in its original Greek, almost perfectly preserved through twenty five centuries of transmission. This by itself is a miracle of sorts, given the library of works, composed by authors writing in periods much closer to our own, that have disappeared completely or been corrupted beyond repair. And the feeling that there is something miraculous about the preservation of this text must deepen when one considers that it not only contains the first organized examination of many of the most basic questions of political life, but treats them with a depth of understanding that has never been surpassed, and a stylistic genius that remains the standard by which all philosophical compositions are judged. I am speaking, of course, of Plato's Republic, the miraculously wise and beautiful book with which the tradition of Western political philosophy starts.

The Republic is still the book that a student of political philosophy is most likely to encounter at the beginning of his or her study of the field, and its central arguments and images--the myth of the cave, the image of the sun, the proposal to abolish family life, the argument for philosopher-kings--remain required knowledge for anyone who wants to grasp, even in a basic way, the main lines of Western political thought. Even today, a young person reading Plato's Republic for the first time, at such vast distance from the time and circumstances of its creation, is bound to be impressed by its arguments, perhaps even persuaded by them, and to be moved by its unforgettable images.

But there is one feature of the Republic that no modern student can accept, and that must cause the thoughtful reader to reconsider, and in the end, I believe, to reject, the central premise on which its entire argument is based. I have in mind the harsh assessment that Socrates and his companions offer of democratic government, and of the way of life associated with it.

Most of the Republic is devoted to an examination of the conditions under which the very best kind of political regime might emerge, and to a description of its features. Having completed this part of their inquiry, Socrates and his friends turn, toward the end of the Republic, to an exploration of four less good regimes, concluding with the rule of the tyrant, the worst regime of all. In this descent from the best regime to the worst one, democracy comes next to last, after timocracy (which distributes authority on the basis of honor) and oligarchy (rule by the rich). In Socrates' view, only tyranny is less attractive than democracy and farther from the best political scheme.

With rare exceptions, modern readers of the Republic start with a view of democracy sharply different from Socrates' own. For them--for us--democracy is not the next-to-worst system of government, but the very best, the one we most respect and to which we owe our deepest allegiance. To be sure, we often disagree about the exact meaning of democracy and the soundest methods for achieving its ends. We do not all share the same conception of democracy nor the same idea of how best to secure it. But our disagreements are family quarrels among those who embrace the basic principles of liberty, equality and tolerance on which every form of democratic rule is based. In this broad sense, we are all democrats today, and Socrates' ironic skewering of these principles, and of the democratic way of life that rests upon them, cannot help but offend the modern reader who admires the very things that Socrates mocks.

It is possible, of course, to put brackets around the passage in question, to treat Socrates' anti-democratic views as an aristocratic prejudice that has little or nothing to do with the main arguments of the Republic, and in this way to contain the damage the passage does to the credibility of the work as a whole. But this is not an adequate response, nor can it achieve its goal of containment. For if one asks, with any seriousness at all, where we and Socrates differ in our views of democracy, the answer is bound to call into question not just this one passage but the most fundamental assumption on which the entire argument of the Republic is based.

What we value about democracy, above all else, is its commitment to the individual. This is a commitment that Socrates does not--and I believe cannot--share. And those who endorse the value of individuality, as we modern democrats all do, must also reject the methodological premise on which Plato's Republic is founded:

the claim that political order is the analogue and product of psychological order, that order at the level of the city both reflects and derives from order at the level of the soul. The truly individual soul cannot be an orderly soul, in the sense in which Socrates understood this idea. For democrats, who affirm the value of the individual, the greatest challenge of political philosophy is therefore to explain how political order can be derived from psychological disorder, from souls whose individuality makes them disorderly in a deep and defining way--an explanation that cannot be found within the framework of Plato's Republic. The history of post-Platonic political thought, inspired and shaped by the tradition of religious belief from which our democratic commitment to individuality derives, is the history of the search for such an explanation.

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## II.

This is all, of course, much too compressed, and in need of further elaboration. Let me start by describing more carefully the assumed connection between political and psychological order on which the argument of the Republic is based.

Plato's Republic is an extended conversation among Socrates and a small group of friends regarding two questions: first, what does it mean for a person to be just?; and, second, is it better to be just or merely to appear so? Early in the conversation, Socrates proposes that he and his companions shift their inquiry to a larger stage and consider the meaning and value of justice not in the soul of a single person but in the constitution of a whole city instead. Socrates observes that their investigation of justice in the soul is a difficult one, even for those, as he puts it, "who see sharply." He then makes the following famous remark. "If someone had ordered men who don't see very sharply to read little letters from afar and then someone had the thought that the same letters are somewhere else also, but bigger and in a bigger place, I suppose it would look like a godsend to be able to consider the little ones after having read these first, if, of course, they do happen to be the same." The bigger place that Socrates has in mind is the city, a political association composed of many individuals. Socrates proposes that he and his friends first examine the nature of justice in cities, where this quality is displayed on a larger scale and is easier to see, and then, using the justice of cities as a model, return to their original inquiry into the justice of souls, where the essential character of justice, though appearing in smaller letters, is presumed to be the same.

This presumption itself is never tested, even though Socrates introduces it in an explicitly conditional form. In a conversation that subjects so many other hypotheses to rigorous examination, this one is never exposed to critical review. No one ever asks whether justice in cities really is the same thing, writ large, as justice in individual souls. The structural identity of political and psychological justice, of justice at the level of cities and souls, is simply taken for granted, and from the point in Book II where it is first introduced, until the end of the Republic, the assumption of this identity remains the unchallenged premise on which the entire argument of Plato's masterwork is based. Indeed, when Socrates and his friends return to the subject of individual justice midway through Book IV, Socrates asks the others whether "it isn't quite necessary" for them "to agree that the very same forms and dispositions as are in the city" are in the souls of each of us as well, and then answers his own question by asserting that it would be "ridiculous" to think otherwise. In that uncontested judgment we may discern the foundation of Plato's Republic and the limits of its author's intellectual world, indeed, as I shall suggest, the limits of Greek thought generally.

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## III.

As the argument of the Republic unfolds, the relationship between political and psychological justice proves to be even closer than first appears. Not only does the justice of souls look like that of cities. Not only do these two species of justice conform to the same pattern or idea--to use one of the most potent words in the lexicon of Greek philosophy. In the end, Socrates insists, a city can be just only if there is justice in the souls of its individual members, and vice versa. Political and psychological justice are not merely alike in form. Each is also, he argues, a condition of the other's existence, a cause of its coming into being.

At the beginning of his description of the four defective regimes, the ones that are less good than the truly just city whose origin and character are the subject of the central Books of the Republic, Socrates observes that to each of these four regimes there corresponds a particular type of character or soul, and in the discussion that

follows he moves methodically from an analysis of each regime's political constitution to an examination of the character type associated with it. As the reader quickly discovers, however, the relationship between city and soul in these four defective regimes is not a static one. It is not a relation of mere resemblance. It is a doubly dynamic, causal relation as well, each system of rule originating in the emergence of a new character type that demands political recognition, the attainment of which in turn establishes that character type as a norm, as the model to which souls in the new regime are expected to conform.

This same doubly dynamic relation of city to soul, so vividly displayed in the genesis and transformation of the four inferior regimes that Socrates dissects in Books VIII and IX of the Republic, also exists in the best city, where true justice prevails at both the political and psychological levels.

For a city to be truly just, Socrates says, its members must accept their proper places in the civic order, each one practicing the single function for which, in Socrates' words, "his nature [makes] him naturally most fit." A regime is just, on Socrates' view, only when the individuals who compose it "mind their own business" and refrain from meddling in the exercise of functions properly assigned to others, and when, as a result, the supervision and direction of those performing lower functions in the city remain in the control of those who by nature are equipped to guide and direct them.

But for the members of a political association to acknowledge their proper places within it and to accept the hierarchy of supervision this implies, their own individual souls must be in order. The parts of their souls must themselves be in their proper places, each performing its function in a hierarchy of command and without interfering in the business of the others--a condition we are told, at the end of Book IV, that constitutes the true meaning of psychological justice. Only if a person's soul is internally so ordered, only if he does not let the different parts of his soul "meddle with each other" but seeks instead to keep them in their proper relation of subordination, only if he is in this sense inwardly just, will he be disposed to mind what Socrates calls "his external business," and to accept his place in the city to which he belongs, thereby contributing to the establishment of a regime of political justice, which on Socrates' view not only looks like its psychological counterpart but is produced by it as well. And the reverse is equally true. For in order to establish that internal order within the souls of its citizens that constitutes their justice as individuals, a city must deliberately cultivate, through myths and other devices, the belief in a natural hierarchy of command and the acceptance of one's proper place within it that for Socrates is the essence of justice in cities and souls alike. So in the best city too, as well as in the four defective ones, the kind of order that exists at the level of the individual not only resembles the order that characterizes the political community itself, but is a cause of its coming into being and vice versa, the order of cities and souls conforming to the same idea, and dynamically producing each other.

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## IV.

With this as background, let us return to the passage in Book VIII in which Socrates' portrays democracy as the next-to-worst regime and examine his reasons for doing so.

The democratic city that Socrates describes is marked by two features, by the freedom of its citizens and by their attachment to the principle of equality, which they interpret to mean that the many different pursuits of those living in the city cannot be ranked according to their natural dignity or value. The democratic city, Socrates says, is "full of freedom and free speech." Its citizens have license to do as they wish, choosing those activities that happen, for whatever reason, to please them at the moment. All different ways of life, from the sordid to the sublime, flourish in the democratic city, which from the point of view of its citizens looks, in Socrates' words, like "a general store" that contains every imaginable pattern for living. Some choose one pattern, others another, and for a time at least adopt it as a guide, though most move restlessly from activity to activity, pursuing different pleasures with impatient curiosity. Socrates describes the life of the democratic citizen in the following way. "He lives along day by day," Socrates says, "gratifying the desires that occur to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastic, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him; and if he ever admires any soldiers, he turns in that direction; and if it's money-makers, in that one."

In the mind of the democratic citizen, of the “all-various” man as Socrates calls him, “full of the greatest number of dispositions,” no distinctions of inherent worth exist among these different pursuits. He does not divide the desires that motive them into the “necessary” and the “unnecessary,” the beneficial and destructive. He considers them all equally legitimate and worthy of pursuit, and rejects the idea that they can be ranked in some definitive order of value. Above all, he believes in freedom and equality. These are the principles that guide his life, that define the soul of the democratic citizen, and they are reflected in the constitution of his city, where slaves and masters, men and women, children and adults, teachers and students all behave as equals, and the rulers are chosen by lot--the only method, we are led to conclude, that does not entail the acknowledgment of a rank order among those selected.

How much this portrait looks like us! Do we not believe, passionately, in the very things that define the democratic way of life, in freedom and equality? Are we not devoted to the idea that each of us must be free to choose the life that seems to him or her the best? Are we not profoundly sympathetic to the claim that there can be no fixed and authoritative ranking of these choices according to the degree to which they approach the one true conception of how human beings should live? Are the lives we live not strikingly like the one that Socrates caricatures as the democratic norm: full of restless energy, and insatiable curiosity, devoted to a multitude of heterogenous pursuits--to music and drinking and dieting and exercise and politics and study--that form no overall pattern?

In his account of democracy, Socrates shows us how we live today. He holds a mirror up to our lives. His contempt for democracy is a contempt for us, and if we are honest with our- selves we must admit the truth of what he says. Our democratic culture is shallow, inconstant and vulgar, driven by fashion and fad, shameless in its refusal to acknowledge the distinction of better and worse and the authority that flows from it. But all of this we accept for the sake of an ideal that Socrates does not recognize, and could not have recognized, given the metaphysical assumptions on which his political philosophy rests. We accept the pathologies of democracy as the necessary if sometimes unappealing consequence of our commitment to the ideal of individuality--the ideal of being or becoming an individual. For us, this goal is supremely important, and we love our democracy, with all its flaws, because it honors this goal and makes it its central value.

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## V.

The idea of individuality, to which we assign such importance, has two distinct but related components. The first is the notion of singularity, and the second that of invention, or more exactly, of self-invention.

To be an individual means, first, to be a unique presence in the world, a person whose biography constitutes an original and distinct story, unprecedented and unrepeatable in all of time, a singular trajectory between the common points of birth and death. For us, individuality implies a distinctiveness in living that sets one apart from others--from all others--and that stamps one's mortal career as something perfectly particular and uniquely one's own. The opposite condition we call conformity, the condition of being indistinguishable from others, and to it we assign a strongly negative value.

The second component of our concept of individuality is the idea of self-invention. To be an individual one must lead a singular life. But this by itself is not enough. It is merely a necessary, not a sufficient, condition of individuality. In addition, one must be the author of that life, the source of invention from which its distinctiveness flows. One must lead a life that is unique and that uniqueness itself must be the consequence not of some accidental combination of forces working from without--in the way that the uniqueness of every wave on the beach is produced by a singular combination of wind and water--but the upshot of a series of choices and actions for which the person living the life is him or herself responsible. The uniqueness of my life must have its source in me, and only if it does will it possess an individuality of the sort we judge morally valuable. This kind of self-invention has been called by different names. Some philosophers call it autonomy, and others authenticity, but whatever name we give it, it is an essential feature of the concept of individuality to which we assign such prestige.

We all know, of course, that most lives resemble one another in many ways, that their uniqueness is limited and in certain cases difficult to discern. Our habits, attitudes and interests are very much alike, and the lives we lead quite similar as well. We all also know that our lives are to a large degree the product of forces and

circumstances beyond our control, and that moments of genuine self-invention are rare and their consequences of limited scope. In these respects, our lives typically fall far short of the ideal of individuality, lacking both the uniqueness and the self-invention this ideal implies. But even though we know this, and accept it as a fact of life, the ideal of individuality retains for us its prestige and appeal. Despite the shortfall between its demands and our achievements, this ideal remains the moral benchmark by which we judge our lives and the lives of others, and its tenacity as an ideal is an even more impressive fact than our consistent failure to achieve it.

The moral appeal of democracy as a form of government is, for us, tied to the moral appeal of the ideal of individuality, of the ambition to be, or to become, through acts of self-invention, a person with a biography uniquely one's own. One of the fundamental aims of democratic rule is to provide a framework of laws and institutions, and in the view of many, a system of material support, to enable those living within this framework, and drawing on this support, to pursue the ideal of individuality as fully as they can. Democracy implies a maximum of freedom, which permits each of us to chart our own distinctive course in life in a spirit of self-invention, and it tolerantly abstains from enforcing any hierarchy of public values by which the worth of different lives might be judged--something that would contradict the ideal of self-invention in a fundamental way. In these respects, democracy serves our ideal of individuality by providing the best--indeed, the only--organized form of collective life within which to pursue it. But these characteristics of democratic rule, which we admire and value because of their connection to the ideal of individuality, are the very ones that Socrates finds so ridiculous, and the reason he does is that this ideal itself is one his deepest metaphysical beliefs render not only valueless but unthinkable--incapable of being thought. Let me explain.

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## VI.

Midway through Book V of the Republic, Socrates' most intelligent and devoted student raises a question that Socrates calls "the biggest, and most difficult" question of all. Let us concede, Glaucon says, that the ideal city--the truly just city--is precisely as Socrates depicts it. Let us accept everything he says about it. How, Glaucon asks, can this ideal city ever become a real city? How might it actually come into being? Socrates' famous answer, of course, is that true justice can be realized on earth only if "philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize," only if "political power and philosophy coincide." This "paradoxical" reply, as Socrates calls it, immediately raises a further question. How are we to know who the true philosophers are, and to distinguish them from those who are not? This is the central question of the Republic, and the lengthy discussion that follows, regarding the selection and training of philosopher-kings, depends upon Socrates' answer to it.

The true philosopher, Socrates tells us, can best be distinguished by contrasting his beliefs and attitudes with those of another sort of person, who Socrates calls the lover of sights and sounds. The lover of sights and sounds has a passion for the theater and for the drama of public life. He is constantly running around, as Glaucon puts it, from one spectacle to the next. What he loves about the world, above all else, is its dazzling variety, its infinite combinations of noises and colors and shapes, the endless parade of individuals and events that cross the world's stage in such staggering profusion. The attention of the lover of sights and sounds is fixed, as we might say, on the surface of the world, whose ever-changing appearance is to him a source of constant entertainment and delight. By contrast, Socrates says, the attention of the true philosopher, of the person he describes as a lover "of the sight of the truth," is fixed not on the surface of things, but on the changeless forms that are reflected or embodied in the world of transient beings. The true philosopher looks through the superficial world of sights and sounds to the eternal forms behind it, and it is with these forms and not their images or reflections that he is in love.

According to Socrates, these enduring forms are the only things that are genuinely real in the everchanging world of sights and sounds. A beautiful vase, for example, possesses reality on Socrates' view only to the extent that it participates in or exemplifies the form of beauty itself. To that extent, it shares in the reality of the form it reflects. But of course no vase can participate in beauty completely. Every "real" vase, as we normally but wrongheadedly describe it, is marked by imperfections and by a liability to decay which the form of beauty itself--changeless and perfect--can never possess, and to the extent it deviates from the form of beauty, a "real" vase, in our ordinary parlance, becomes unreal in Socrates' opposing conception of what truly has being and what does not.

This conception turns our ordinary view of the world on its head. It reverses the common understanding of reality. Yet it possesses great philosophical appeal, for it helps to make sense of our most basic habits of speech, which depend upon the capacity to talk intelligibly about the common properties of different individuals--to say, for example, that two vases are beautiful, or two cities just, or two soldiers courageous. Only the forms of things, on Socrates' view, permit us to make such judgments and to express them in words. And only they, he insists, possess reality because only they last forever. For Socrates, eternity alone is real, and hence only the forms of individual things are real because only they never die. Individual vases and cities and soldiers come and go. They bloom and disappear. Their individuality is transient. It comes into being and passes away again, under the mortal sign of time, and is to that extent unreal. To direct one's attention to the forms of things is therefore to be concerned with what is real in them, but to attend to their individuality, to be excited by the differences among the various things that belong to the same category or class, to love the diversity of beautiful vases or just cities or courageous soldiers rather than the one thing they share in common is, on Socrates' view, to turn away from what is real to what is unreal and possesses no being at all.

With this claim we come to what is perhaps the deepest premise of Plato's philosophy, and of Aristotle's too for that matter: the equation of reality--of being--with form, and the consequent denial of reality to individuals, or more precisely, the denial of reality to all that makes them individuals, and not just exemplars of the timeless and unblemished forms they imperfectly and temporarily embody. From this premise many of the most distinctive features of Plato's philosophy flow, for example, his insistence that our love of individual human beings is a lesser and confused form of our love of the general qualities they represent, and his description of the activity of founding political communities as a kind of craftsmanship, whose success is to be judged solely by the resemblance of the product to the blueprint the craftsman has followed, rather than as a type of artistry, whose success is measured, in part at least, by the novelty and singularity of its results.

Plato's equation of form and being is also the source of his negative view of democracy. For us, democracy is made attractive and legitimate by its commitment to the ideal of individuality. We justify democracy on the grounds that it establishes the best framework within which to pursue the goal of becoming an individual, a person with a distinct and self-created career. This goal is, for us, a morally and spiritually compelling one, and the closer we come to achieving it the more fully we feel we have lived. The closer we come to being individuals, the more real our lives become, in contrast to the unreal (or, as we often say, inauthentic) lives of those who follow the herd and take their directions from others.

For Plato, this judgment is not merely wrong. It is unintelligible. To pursue individuality is, on a Platonic view, to pursue that element in us that lacks reality. It is to turn away from the only things that possess reality, the forms that lie beyond change and corruption, and to chase after unreality instead. It is to turn our attention from being to non-being, and while Plato recognized that most men and women--all the lovers of sights and sounds--are in fact more attached to the world of things that come into being and pass away than they are to the realm of imperishable forms, he would have considered a view that deliberately elevates the pursuit of individuality to a position of supreme moral and political importance metaphysically absurd. He would have thought it a view that turns the relationship of being and nothingness upside down.

But of course Plato does not even entertain the possibility--which seems so obvious to us --that the pursuit of individuality might be defined as something good in itself, and the fact that he does not reveals how deeply his own view of democracy is shaped by the metaphysical equation of form and being. For this equation rules that possibility out. It is a possibility that lies beyond the horizon of Plato's thought, as the nature of his attack on democracy makes clear to a modern reader for whom the value of individuality goes without saying.

According to Socrates, democracy is characterized by the dazzling variety of ways of life it encompasses and allows. "It contains," he says, "all species of regimes," both at the political level, in the factions that struggle incessantly for control of the city, and at the psychological level, in the restless souls of its citizens. Democracy is, in Socrates' phrase, a "many-colored" regime, and especially attractive on this account to those living in it, who rush around from one activity to the next, drawn first to this way of life and then to that, just like the lovers of sights and sounds that Socrates describes in Book V of the Republic. Indeed, democracy is, on Socrates' view, the political scheme that best fits the attitudes and desires of the lovers of sights and sounds, the regime that best expresses their own conception of what is valuable and real. For just like their lives, which are filled up with all sorts of different things and which in their unsteadiness reflect the transient splendor of the superficial world on which the attention of the lovers of sights and sounds is fastened, democracy itself is

characterized by fluidity and impermanence as it moves from the control of one faction to that of another. Failing to love the forms, the lovers of sights and sounds lead lives that are formless, and in this respect the formlessness of democracy, where the lovers of sights and sounds are most at home, mirrors perfectly their own existence--or perhaps it would be better to say, their non-existence, for if anything is clear in the long argument of the Republic, it is that the lovers of sights and sounds dwell in the realm of non-being and live lives as unreal as the changeable and varied things to which they are so attached.

Democracy mirrors the formless lives of its most representative citizens, and to the extent it does, it lacks reality too. Like the lives of its citizens, the democratic city is characterized by mobility, change, transience, variety, freedom, experimentation, and individuality--and, hence, on Plato's view, by non-being. We accept the value of these things, and of the democratic institutions that promote them. But for Plato to have done so, he would have had to abandon the equation of form and being so fundamental to his thought. He would have had to have a radically different conception of reality. He would, in a word, have had to be not a Greek, but a Jew or Christian.

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## VII.

I shall return to this last thought in a moment. But before we leave Plato, I must gather up the threads of my argument and explain why, for a modern reader, a proper understanding of the reasons for Socrates' attack on democracy--a form of government whose appeal rests on the acceptance of a proposition that Plato would have found metaphysically absurd--must also lead one to abandon the methodological claim on which the entire argument of the Republic is based, the claim that political order and psychological order are analogous and mutually conditional.

This principle is the product of a train of thought whose implicit logic might be expressed roughly as follows. Every political community is a gathering of men and women in accordance with some ruling principle of order, in accordance with what Socrates calls the community's "regime" (the term we use to translate the Greek word politeia, which is also sometimes translated as "republic" and is the original title of the dialogue known by that name). A community's regime gives it its shape or form, and with this, its political reality. A group of men and women who happen merely to live in the same place, but whose relations are not governed by any principle of order, who are neighbors in a physical sense but not the citizens of a shared regime, do not constitute a political community, whose very being Socrates equates with the organizing form that gathers its constituent elements--the men and women living in it--into a unified whole. It is the regime, or as we would say today the constitution, of a political community that makes it such, that confers reality upon it, and that distinguishes it from those formless collections of human beings which in the strict sense possess no political reality at all.

This much follows from the fundamental equation of form and being. But something else follows as well. For political communities must come from somewhere, and this can only be from the men and women who compose them. More precisely, the thing that makes these communities real--the regimes that give them their political reality--can only come from what is real in their individual members, and so long as we equate reality with form, what is real in the members of a political community can also only be the forms that shape their souls, the internal regimes that provide the organizing structure of their psyches. The individuality of the citizens of a political community can, on this equation, have no reality at all. Their individuality is literally nothing, and if we further assume, as Plato did, that something cannot come from nothing, then what is real in a city can only come from what is real in the souls of its citizens, the reality of both residing in the regimes that give them their respective shapes.

Indeed, a Platonist must go further and say that the kind of reality--the nature of the regime--must also be the same at both levels, at the level of the city and of the soul, for otherwise it would be necessary to assume that one sort of being can arise from another sort which it is not, and that again would be to assume (what Plato thought impossible) that something can come from nothing. Do you suppose, Socrates asks at the beginning of his review of the four imperfect regimes, that they could arise "from an oak or [from] rocks"? It is meant to be a ridiculous question. These regimes can only arise, he reminds his listeners, from the "dispositions" of the people living in them, from the regimes that inform their souls. Something real can only come from something else that is real, and one kind of reality cannot come from another--any more than the form of a human political community can come from that of an oak, or rocks. The same equation of form and being that

prevents Socrates and his companions from recognizing in democracy the thing we value most about it--its devotion to the idea of individuality, to the project of living a unique and self-defined life--thus also entails the presumed analogy of political and psychological order on which the whole argument of the Republic is based.

A modern reader who believes in the value of individuality, and in the value of democracy as the form of government best suited to promote it, is therefore compelled to ask a question which Socrates' assumption of a structural identity between the order of cities and that of souls makes impossible to answer, and which a modern reader can begin to answer only by rejecting this assumption itself. The question is, how can individual men and women be gathered into a democratic state? Democracy is surely a regime in Plato's sense. It is a principle, or set of principles, for the arrangement of a community's affairs; it is an ordering idea. But if we think of the men and women who belong to a democratic regime as individuals, not just in the sense that they happen to be distinct from one another, but in the deeper and more important sense that they are seized by the ambition to be individuals, living lives whose significance and worth flows from their self-defined uniqueness, then we must abandon the notion, central to Plato's argument, that the order of their political regime is analogous to, or derivable from, the order of their own souls. We must abandon this notion because the soul of the truly democratic man or woman--the one for whom individuality is an ideal--cannot be thought of as possessing a defining order at all, because the democratic soul is defined not by its order, as Plato thought all souls must be, but by its resistance to definition in accordance with any principle of order instead.

Put abstractly, this may sound like an extravagant claim, but it lies at the heart of many of our most familiar modern beliefs. It lies at the heart, for example, of our concept of personal love, which insists that true love can never be captured or explained by a list of the beloved's general qualities, but is always directed toward an inexpressible uniqueness that starts where lists of this sort leave off. It lies at the heart of our concept of the work of art, whose true artistry resides in that indefinable residue of individual achievement that remains when all its general properties have been catalogued. And it lies at the heart of our notion of fulfillment in living, which for us includes, among other things, the achievement of a self-created distinctness that transcends all formal definition. These are all familiar features of our moral civilization, and they all flow, in one way or another, from the positive value we place on individuality, on a condition that for us is paradoxically defined by its transcendence of definitions, by its irreducibility to ordering forms, by its disorderliness in a deep and constitutive sense.

For Plato, this would have seemed a kind of madness. Plato of course understood the nature of conflict in the human soul--he was one of the keenest observers of such conflict the world has ever known--but the notion that the highest achievement of a human soul lies in the attainment of an individuality that transcends any possible combination of forms would have struck him as absurd, given the equation of form and being on which his conception of the world was based. For those of us who accept this idea, the challenge thus arises of explaining how democratic government, which is a species of political order, can be established and sustained by men and women whose moral and spiritual dignity flows from their disorderly individuality, how political order can be derived from disorderly souls. This is not a challenge that Plato had to face. It is not a challenge he would even have recognized. But our commitment to individuality puts it squarely before us, and we can meet it only by rejecting the claim that political and psychological order are analogous and interdependent, the claim on which the argument of the Republic as a whole is founded. Modern readers who reflect on their democratic beliefs will rediscover in these beliefs their commitment to individuality, and if they reflect on this commitment will be led to reject not only Socrates' account of democratic rule but the methodological premise on which Plato's political philosophy is constructed. They will discover a challenge that Plato could not see, and in doing so be compelled to find a new and non-Platonic way to meet it-- a new and non-Platonic way of linking soul and city, or as we would say, individual and state.

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## VIII.

We modern readers of the Republic share a belief in the value of individuality, a belief that to Plato would have been utterly unintelligible. Nothing separates his mental world from ours as fundamentally as this. But where does our belief in the value of the individual come from? I have already hinted at the answer. Our modern, secular commitment to individuality, and to the democratic way of life that honors and promotes it, derives not from the great pagan philosophies of the ancient world, which all accepted Plato's equation of form and being with one degree of self-awareness or another, but from the tradition of religious belief that first challenged this

equation in a radical way by insisting on that most un-Greek of all ideas, the idea of creation from nothing.

In the creation story of the ancient Jews, God is portrayed as a world-transcending power who brings the universe into being from nothing. Unlike the demiurge of Plato's late dialogue, the Timaeus, who makes the world by imposing a system of pre-existing forms on a shapeless mass of pre-existing matter--just as any craftsman makes an artifact by shaping some already given material in accordance with a blueprint or plan--the creator God of Genesis confronts nothing that exists in advance of His own act of creation, neither raw material, whose resistance to His creative efforts God is constrained to accept, nor a pre-existing plan that He must follow if His creation is to have an intelligible shape. The difficulties of conceiving such a perfectly unconstrained act of creation are enormous, perhaps insuperable, and many of the most persistent questions with which Jews and Christians and Muslims have grappled over the centuries are the product of these difficulties (for example, the question of whether the laws of nature were fixed in God's mind before he created the world, or brought into being as part of that creation itself). But however great the puzzles to which their belief in God's radically free creation of the world gives rise, the affirmation of this belief has remained for all the descendants of the ancient Israelites a matter of supreme importance, for it is only the idea of such an act, voluntary and unconstrained, that does justice to their conception of God's supreme power, to a divine omnipotence that even Plato's demiurge cannot approach. No idea is more central to the traditions of Jewish and Christian and Muslim belief, and none seemed more absurd to those philosophically cultured Greeks who first encountered it two millennia ago.

Many consequences flow from the idea of creation ex nihilo. Two are of particular importance for our purposes here. The first is that, with this idea, individuals acquire a dignity--a reality--they could never possess within the framework of Greek thought, predicated, as it was, on the equation of form and being. If God has made everything in the world, all its forms and all its matter too, and not merely stamped a set of pre-existing shapes on a body of already-given matter, then the individuality of every individual in the world--the absolute uniqueness of every sparrow and elm and human being--must itself be a product of God's creative act, something God brought into being along with the rest of the world, and hence must share in the reality and meaning of His creation as a whole. For Plato, the individuality of things has no reality at all; only their common properties--their forms--have reality, intelligibility and value. The idea of creation ex nihilo reverses this judgment and compels us to assign reality and value to individuals as well, whose uniqueness is as much a part of God's creation as the formal laws of mathematics, and therefore as deserving of our curiosity and respect.

A second consequence of this idea is its revolutionary impact on our understanding of human freedom. Plato's Republic is centrally concerned with human freedom. But for Plato freedom means ordering one's life in the right way, and that means, in accordance with the proper forms, above all, the form of justice. Freedom, for Plato, is literally a kind of conformity. By contrast, in the creation story of the Jews and Christians and Muslims, God's freedom resides in his absolute independence of any antecedent system of forms, and to the extent that we human beings think of ourselves as having been made in God's image, our freedom must resemble His in this crucial respect. Our freedom, too, must consist in the exercise of an unconstrained power of creation. The name we give this power is "will," a concept that has no real counterpart in Greek philosophy. On this view, to be free is to exercise one's will, to say "yes" to one thing and "no" to another, and even if the standards of conduct to which one says "yes" and "no" are themselves fixed in advance, even if justice and courage and beauty are eternal and unchanging in their meaning, our assent to them--or rejection of them--is always freely given, and it is this freedom, and this alone, that gives our actions their spiritual meaning on a religiously inspired view of the world that starts with God's creation ex nihilo and that defines our spirituality in terms of its resemblance to His. Socrates said, "to know the good is to do the good." St. Paul cried out in anguish, "I do not what I want, but the very thing I hate." Behind these statements lie two fundamentally different conceptions of freedom, and the revolution in thought that separates them is a second consequence of the idea of creation from nothing.

Our modern notion of individuality, and the value we assign it, derives, as I have said, from two connected propositions: first, that it is the uniqueness of a person's life which gives it its meaning and reality; and second, that this uniqueness must be self-invented to have moral or spiritual worth. To be indistinguishable from others, to be a conformist who follows the crowd, is on our view to be a "nobody" whose life lacks authenticity--and who to that extent we judge not to exist at all, except in a shadowy and unreal way, a judgment that exactly reverses the Platonic equation of individuality with non-being. These beliefs, which for us possess

such a self-evident plausibility, first become intelligible with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, from which the reality of every individual's uniqueness follows, and with the invitation to view our human spirituality as the image of God's own, as having its source in a capacity for self-direction, a freedom of the will, which though accompanied in us by limitations that God lacks, is within these limits as unconstrained as the power of divine creation it reenacts on earth. The idea of creation from nothing undermines the metaphysical premise of Plato's philosophy, and prepares the way for our modern understanding of individuality, and with that, our belief in the moral and spiritual value of democracy. The religious tradition from which this idea derives has faded into the background of our democratic civilization, and left behind a thoroughly secular morality that no longer betrays its theological inspiration. But the traces of this theology, and of the revolution in thought it produced, may still be glimpsed in the various answers that modern political philosophers have sought to provide to the question of how the relation between a democratic state and its citizens should be conceived, a relation that Plato understood as one of analogy but which our religiously derived belief in the reality and value of the individual compels us to describe in a fundamentally different way.

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## IX.

Many of the most familiar, and influential, modern answers to the question of how we should conceive the relationship between a political community and the human beings who compose it draw deeply on religious ideas, whether they recognize this or not, and cannot be understood apart from the radical reevaluation of individuality which the doctrine of creation from nothing entailed. To catalogue and investigate all the ways in which modern political philosophers draw from the armory of religious ideas in their effort to explain the relation of individual to state, would be the work of a lifetime. Let me therefore mention just one, which may be of particular interest to some here.

Today one hears a great deal of talk, especially in our universities, about the value of diversity. Indeed, in certain quarters, diversity is on its way to becoming not just a value but a supreme value, the yardstick by which all others are measured. From a commitment to the value of diversity there follows a certain conception of what political communities are for: they are for the cultivation of diversity, which some consider the highest and most valuable function that such communities perform. On this view, a state is not merely the guarantor of public order, protecting the rights of its citizens to live in private as they wish. It is also the guardian of an organized space for the display and celebration of diversity, whose aim is to promote the moral pleasure that citizens take in the diverse attitudes and achievements of others as well as in the pursuit of their own plans of life. This is the highest moral ambition of the state, and when that ambition is fulfilled, when the endlessly diverse human beings who are its citizens have been gathered into a community of mutual enjoyment and respect, the state reaches a goal that America's great prophet of diversity, Walt Whitman, describes as nearly divine.

Here we have a political ideal that is exactly the opposite of the one proposed in the *Republic*. Plato's ideal city is marked not by the celebration of diversity, but by its systematic repression instead, by the ordered arrangement of all citizens in accordance with a single master principle and the functional hierarchy it entails. For Plato, the movement toward diversity is not a movement toward reality. It is a movement in the opposite direction, toward nothingness or non-being, and the idea, so appealing to many Americans today, that diversity is a value, something good and worthy of respect, would have struck Plato as completely absurd, given the fundamental equation of reality and form on which his political philosophy was premised.

For Whitman, and for us, the belief that diversity has value and that the highest purpose of the state is to promote its exuberant expression and joyful appreciation--beliefs so commonplace in our contemporary culture that we scarcely even recognize them as such--are the secular byproducts of that radical reevaluation of individuality entailed by the religious doctrine of creation from nothing, a teaching whose implications could never be absorbed within the limits of Greek thought. For once it is granted that the absolute distinctness of every individual is something real in its own right--a proposition foreign to the whole spirit of Platonic philosophy but required by the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*--the way is open to the celebration of diversity as something divine, as the revelation of the Creator in his creatures, and to a view of the state as a union of individuals gathered for the purpose of enjoying their own diversity. Today this view has immense popularity in the United States. In certain circles, one might even say, it is the dominant view of the relation of individual to state. And though it has lost all reference to the religious doctrine that first gave it credence, this view, now so

thoroughly secularized and disenchanting, has its true source not in the philosophy of Plato or any other classical thinker, where one will search in vain for a recognition of the value of the individual on which our modern appreciation of diversity, and our modern reverence for democracy, are based, but in the commanding Word of that omnipotent Lord of Creation whose prophets first declared, to the amusement of their Greek critics, that the God to whom they prayed had made the world from nothing.

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## X.

As I near the end of my lecture I fear that I may be leaving you in a mood of self-confidence, of self-congratulation even, and that is something I would like to use my last words to try to correct.

We modern men and women believe in the value of individuality, the value of living a life uniquely one's own, and because we believe this, we must reject Socrates' negative assessment of democracy and the organizing assumption on which the Republic is based: the assumption that the order of a political community mirrors the order in the souls of its citizens and can derive from no other source. Socrates' inability to recognize the value of individuality and our inability to deny it leads him to count democracy as the next-to-worst regime and us to rank it as the best. That is the main point I have tried to establish this afternoon.

But let the point be granted. It does not follow that we must regard everything about democracy--the turmoil and vulgarity and all the rest--as something good. Nor does it follow that Socrates' criticisms of democracy have no bearing on our situation and leave us with no disturbing questions to confront. In fact they do, and even after we have understood the metaphysical divide that separates him from us, and grasped the consequences of this divide for the methods and agenda of political thought, these questions remain to be addressed.

I shall close by mentioning one such question, to my mind the most important of them all. You will recall that Socrates attacks democracy, among other reasons, for its failure to discriminate between two sorts of desires, the necessary and the unnecessary. To grant that desires can be classified in this way is to concede that different lives may be ranked, and judged better or worse, according to the kind of desire those living them seek to fulfill. That is of course a fundamental premise of the Republic, indeed of Platonism generally, and it might seem that we cannot grant this premise without compromising our ideal of individuality, an ideal that locates the value of a person's life in something other than its conformity to a standard of right living defined by reference to a hierarchy of more and less worthy desires. Indeed, it might seem that our commitment to individuality requires that we reject the very idea of a standard of right living, as Socrates understood it. But can we in fact do without such a standard altogether? We recognize, and employ, standards for evaluating human achievement in a wide range of specialized activities, from cooking to statecraft. Must we--can we--forsake the use of such standards when it comes to the comprehensive activity of living? Of two lives, each unique and self-directed, can we never say that one comes closer to the goal of human fulfillment, that it has more of worth in it, and is worthier on that account?

We live in a civilization in which the power of reason, in the form of science, is accepted without question on a scale unprecedented in human history. And yet our ideal of individuality, the organizing principle of our moral and political life, seems to rule out the search for a reasoned answer to the question of how we might discriminate between necessary and unnecessary desires, and define the goal of right living for human beings. It seems to rule this question out, but in the end, I believe, we cannot and should not suppress it. We cannot avoid it completely. It is true that the answer Socrates gives to the question is no longer available to us. We must find a different answer, one that is compatible with our commitment to individuality, the commitment that most profoundly separates his intellectual world from ours. Twenty five centuries later, this still remains to be done. It remains a task before us. And though there is nothing in Plato's Republic, the wisest and most beautiful book we possess, that makes its distance from us as clear as Socrates' violent attack on democracy, there is also nothing that reminds us as forcefully of the question of reason's relation to freedom, a question that we, the sons and daughters of the modern world, shaped by Greek ideas as well as by the revelation that dispelled them, have yet to fully confront.

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