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Democracy in Plato's *Republic*: How Bad Is It Supposed to Be?

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Abstract:

Scholars have typically thought that in the *Republic* democracy is supposed to be worse than timarchy and oligarchy. But lately, certain commentators have denied that it is. Is it, then? I argue that pursuing this question leads us to a dead end, because it is not clear how bad democracy is supposed to be in the *Republic*. Perhaps a debate on this topic would help us answer *other* questions, whatever they might be; but otherwise it would be fruitless. To make my case, I marshal the strongest available evidence that democracy is supposedly *better* than timarchy and oligarchy. Next I lay out the strongest available evidence that democracy is supposedly *worse*. And then I indicate why I think we come to an impasse.

In recent years, certain commentators have argued that Plato's *Republic* is far less hostile to democracy than it has been called. More important, some of them have even denied that in the *Republic* democracy is supposed to be any worse than timarchy or oligarchy.¹ Their claim is significant particularly insofar as it clashes with a conventional view. For a time, at least, Karl Popper had a sizable influence when he painted the *Republic* as radically anti-democratic. And regardless, quite a few scholars have thought the *Republic* is much less friendly to democracy than some of Plato's later works are—particularly the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.² The *Republic* has seemed to mean that only tyranny is worse than democracy. Yet in the *Statesman*, democracy is described as the best of lawless regimes and, apparently, as the best regime that is likely to exist (303a).³ Further, the *Laws* has seemed to postdate the *Statesman* and to endorse a certain regime that presumably is a mix of monarchy and democracy (see 693c-694b; cf. 756e-757a).

So which of these two sides has it right? Does the *Republic* mean that democracy is worse than timarchy and oligarchy, or does it not? My view is that pursuing this question leads us to a dead end, because it is not clear how bad democracy is supposed to be in the *Republic*. Perhaps a debate on this topic would help us answer *other* questions, whatever they might be; but otherwise it would be fruitless.⁴ What I will do here is explain why I think so. Since at least two commentators have denied that in the *Republic* Socrates and his interlocutors *explicitly call* democracy worse than timarchy and oligarchy, I will start by mentioning a few reasons for which I think this is wrongheaded.⁵ Nonetheless, next I will marshal (what I take to be) the strongest

¹ They are Roochnik 2003; Monoson 2000, 115-18. See also Recco 2008; Coby 2003; Prior 2002; Hanasz 1997; Mara 1997; Saxonhouse 1996; 1995; 1994; Euben 1990; Nichols 1987. And see Talisse 2006; 2002; Audard 2005; Villa 2001; Ober 1998; 1996; 1989; Nails 1985, though they tend to pertain far more to Plato's Socrates than to Plato. Much like Recco (2008), Roochnik (79, *passim*) goes so far as to claim that the *Republic* is a "qualified and cautious" *defense* of democracy, and in this he seems influenced by Leo Strauss. See, e.g., Strauss 1964, 131; 1959, 36, though for a contrast with Roochnik see Strauss 1972, 9, 22-23.

² See, e.g., the citations in Rowe 2007a, 27n.1; 2001, 66n.10. These scholars do not necessarily hold the traditional view that when a certain "second-best" city is endorsed at *Laws* 739a3-740c3, the better city is supposed to be the *Republic*'s aristocratic *polis*. I mention this particularly since that view is under attack in a variety of quarters (see, e.g., Simpson 2003; Bobonich 2002; the citations in Rowe 2007a, 28n.2 and in C. Gill 2002, xvi n.4).

³ Herein all references to Platonic dialogues are to the texts in Burnet's edition, and translations of passages in the *Republic* are based on Bloom 1968.

⁴ Schofield (2003, see the last par.) might agree with me on this.

⁵ The two commentators are Monoson (2000, 115-18) and Saxonhouse (1998, 274n.3). In cases herein in which I say or suggest that Socrates and (all) his interlocutors in the dialogue agree with each other on a particular

available evidence that democracy is supposedly *better* than timarchy and oligarchy. Then I will lay out (what I believe is) the strongest available evidence that it supposedly is *worse*.⁶ And I will close by briefly indicating why I think we come to an impasse. As far as I know, much of the evidence I will present has not yet been offered in essays on this topic.

I. Better than timarchy and oligarchy

To begin with, when in Books VIII and IX Socrates and his interlocutors catalogue three unjust regimes and souls that lead to tyranny—the timarchic, the oligarchic, and the democratic, in that order—on their terms each of these regimes is worse than the previous. It does not work to deny that, as certain commentators have. Among other reasons, in one passage in Book IX Socrates asks Glaucon to “choose now for me who in your opinion is first in happiness, and who second, *and the others in order, five in all . . .*” (580b1-3),⁷ and Glaucon replies that “with respect to *virtue and vice*, and happiness and its opposite” he ranks the five regimes—aristocracy, timarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny—“in the very order in which they came on stage” (b5-7; see also all of 580a9-c8). Plus, that is in line with other elements of the dialogue, such as the schema of approximation that has already emerged at that point in the conversation. In Book VIII, Socrates and his interlocutors agree (547c8, d3, d8, and 548c3-4) that timarchy is “a certain middle between aristocracy and oligarchy,” such that timarchy “imitates” (**mimh/setai**: 547d1, d8) both aristocracy and oligarchy in certain respects; timarchy is an “amalgam” (**memeigme/nhn**: 548c3; **me/meiktai**: c5) containing elements of both of the two regimes which it stands between within the chain of events that lead to tyranny. And the rest of the conversation in Books VIII and IX about unjust regimes also suggests that oligarchy imitates both timarchy and democracy in various respects, that democracy is a similar sort of amalgam with respect to oligarchy and tyranny, and that every *other* regime within the chain of events that lead to tyranny is *also* a similar sort of amalgam with respect to the two regimes *it* stands between.⁸ A schema of approximation thus emerges in which the closer a particular regime is to tyranny in the chain of events that lead to tyranny, the more closely that particular regime approximates tyranny and, in turn, the worse that particular regime is.⁹

point, I mean that after one character makes a claim, either none of the characters ever voices any reservations about it or every character who does voice reservations ends up voicing his assent and never retracts it.

⁶ Below for the most part I do not defend my view that the evidence and counter-evidence I focus on are the strongest we can offer, since I think doing so would get tedious (though for problems with Roochnik 2003, see, e.g., Pappas 2004). For the same sort of reason, I cite few essays on this issue in which certain pieces of the evidence have been offered. But I have gleaned a lot of from various work not mentioned above or below, such as Estlund 2008; 1997; 1993; Annas 2005; Santas 2007; 2001; Rosenstock 1994.

⁷ Notice: this is the question Socrates asks, so it does not matter much that at 580b8-c4 he says only that the aristocratic man is the happiest and that the tyrannical man is the most wretched. Monoson (2000, 118) overreaches in claiming that at 580b8-c4 Socrates “does not endorse the entire ranking.” Her other evidence also is relatively meager. E.g., following Saxonhouse (1998, 274n.3), she says that “a word for ‘decline’ does not appear in” the discussion of regimes in Book 8. “We instead hear of ‘changes’ (*metaballei*, 545d), ‘movement’ (*kinēthēnai*, 545d), and ‘mistaken’ (*hēmartēmenas*, 544a) regimes” (115-16).

⁸ I recognize that perhaps on the account in the *Republic* oligarchy does not stand *directly* adjacent to timarchy and democracy, democracy does not stand directly adjacent to oligarchy and tyranny, etc. At 544d1-4, Socrates explicitly refers to “dynasties” (**dunastei=ai**: d1), “purchased kingdoms” (**w)nhtai/ basilei=ai**: d1), and “certain regimes of the sort” which he maintains are not strictly the aristocracy, timarchy, oligarchy, democracy, or tyranny, but are somewhere among those five other regimes (**metacu/ . . . tou/twn pou/ ei)sin**: d2). Regardless, though, the four unjust regimes approximate one another at least indirectly and to some degree.

⁹ Moreover, in Book VIII the comments about oligarchy and the oligarchic *psuchē* are more biting than the remarks about timarchy and the timarchic man are, and in Books VI and VIII the remarks about democracy and the

Since this is how the discussion goes, there is, of course, strong indication that in the *Republic* Plato thinks democracy is worse than timarchy and oligarchy. Nonetheless, as surprising as this is, we also have considerable evidence that he does *not* think this and, in fact, that he means for the discussion to point to democracy's *superiority* over timarchy and oligarchy. To be sure, if Socrates and his interlocutors suggest that democracy is superior, this apparently is inadvertent on their part (or, at least, on the part of Socrates' interlocutors: perhaps Socrates is sufficiently clued in). But regardless, it might be what *Plato* intends.¹⁰ Here is why.

In the picture that Socrates and his interlocutors paint together, the timarchic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical souls engendered by timarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny are disordered as a result of being out of reason's full control. In *all* of these *psuchai*, reason is overpowered by mainly either spiritedness or appetite: tyrannical souls are not *radically* different from their timarchic, oligarchic, and democratic counterparts, but represent only a more extreme case of degeneration. But curiously, part of the very sense in which democracy is said to be worse than timarchy and oligarchy might also make it *better* than they are. Socrates and his interlocutors agree in Book VIII that there is "license in [a democratic city] to do *whatever* one wants" (**e)cousi/a e)n au)th=I poiei=n o/(ti tij bou/letai**: 557b5-6). In fact, they even agree (562b12-c3) that "surely in a city under a democracy you would hear that [freedom] is the finest thing it has. . . ." No doubt, for them that feature of a democratic city manifests the extent to which democratic souls are degenerate—ruled by base desires and barely restrained by reason. Yet if *every* citizen (557b8) in a democratic city has license, then citizens who are philosophers do. Whereas citizens under a timarchy or oligarchy have to do what the rulers think is most conducive to amassing or maintaining honor or wealth, philosophical citizens under a democracy may philosophize freely, even searching for the just city together, as Socrates and his interlocutors do in the *Republic*. And in a city where citizens can freely philosophize with one another, there is a much greater chance that someone will gain wisdom, if no one already has it, and that if someone already has it he can help other suitable souls gain it.

All of that might be neither here nor there were it not for certain elements of the *Republic* that hint strongly at the consideration I just mentioned. Most important, in Book VIII Socrates says not only that a democracy is "a convenient place to look for a regime" (557d1-2), but also that "it's probably *necessary* [**a)nagkai=on**] for a man who wishes to organize a city [**po/lin kataskeua/zein**], *as we were just doing*, to go to a city under a democracy" (d5-7). There is little ambiguity in this claim. In short, though elsewhere Socrates overtly indicates that democracy is worse than timarchy and oligarchy, he also is explicit in talking about democratic freedom and in saying that democracy is advantageous.

Admittedly, Socrates and Adeimantus may speak sarcastically at certain points in their discussion of democracy at 557b-558c.¹¹ But to speak sarcastically is to mean the *opposite* of what one says, and Socrates and his interlocutors are unlikely to mean that democracy *never*

democratic soul are in large part more disparaging than the comments about oligarchy and the oligarchic man are. Cf. with one another especially 547e1, 548a6-7, b4-6, e6-7, 549a1-2, 550e4-8, 551a1-11 in relation to timarchy, 552a4-b1, d1-2, d4-5 in relation to oligarchy, and 559a3-7, c3-5, **a)nwfelw~n** at 561a3, plus the passages discussed below, in relation to democracy.

¹⁰ My claim here should not seem altogether radical. As many of the most prominent Anglo-American scholars now do, I am simply *taking seriously the possibility* that Socrates does not (always) speak for Plato in the *Republic*. See, e.g., Rowe 2007b; 2006b, especially 23; 2006a, e.g. 8; 2003b, 116-17; McCabe 2006; Schofield 2006, 16-19; 1996, 51; Annas 2004, 32; 2003b, 9-10, 25-42; 2003a, 1190, 1191; 1999, 10; Frede 1998; Cooper 1997, xviii-xxv; M. Gill 1996, 5n.3; Kahn 1996.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., 557c4-5, 558c2 with b5-c1, 562a4-6.

allows the license they describe. If they speak sarcastically, one claim they might negate is simply the claim (562b12-c3) that *democratic* freedom is the be-all and end-all of goods.¹² On their terms another different sort of freedom is more important—namely, the freedom which the soul has in being ruled by reason and in thus being spared from enslavement to spiritedness or appetite.

I also acknowledge that even if Socrates is sincere in claiming that democracy has an advantage, his reason for making this claim is far from clear. For that matter, he might indicate to his interlocutors that democracy is advantageous not because of the *freedom* it allows, but because of a certain *byproduct* that this freedom has; for he says that democracy is advantageous because “thanks to its license, it *contains all species of regimes*” (557d4), meaning—perhaps—that thanks to democratic freedom, citizens under a democracy display a wide range of behavior that provides useful patterns (557e1; cf. 409c3-d5) to work with when philosophizing.¹³

But my point still holds. If Plato believes that democracy is advantageous, then he (and Socrates, too) might have more reasons for holding this view than just the reason that Socrates offers in the dialogue. Regardless of what reason Socrates offers, this passage (557b-558c) can prompt readers to notice how congenial democratic freedom is to philosophers. And that is significant, partly because this passage can thus work in concert with many other parts of the *Republic*, where Socrates and his interlocutors make claims that timocratic, oligarchic, or tyrannical rulers might deem subversive and respond to harshly.¹⁴

Besides, the fact remains that when Socrates offers a reason for saying that democracy is advantageous, it is quite difficult to make out what this reason is. The reason he offers might even be that democracy has a principled commitment to ensuring equality—in other words, to making sure that all citizens are treated as if they have equal *standing* with one another, meaning that they are treated as if no citizen can rightfully be subordinated to any other citizen, such that there are no *degrees* of citizenship. And it matters if democracy does have such a commitment—in other words, if it is dedicated to doing so much more than just aggregating preferences. In the Athens of Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates is sentenced to death, of course, on grounds that can seem pretty shaky. Yet if the democracy of Plato’s *Republic* is committed to ensuring equality in the sense I just named, it might violate that commitment if it allowed a philosopher to be executed merely for acting like a philosopher; for in allowing the execution, perhaps by its own standard democracy would let the philosopher be treated as subordinate to other citizens. In working to ensure equality, democracy might aim to limit every citizen’s freedom just enough to limit all citizens’ freedom equally—that is, it might aim to operate on something like John Stuart Mill’s harm principle. And if that *is* the aim, then presumably citizens are forbidden from murdering one another, for example, but acting like a philosopher might be within the limits that the democracy sets whenever it abides by its own standard. Granted, acting like a philosopher might

¹² Perhaps Annas (1981, 299) is right that under the sort of democracy conceived in the *Republic* there is “no universally recognized common good”; e.g., perhaps freedom is regarded as just *instrumentally* good, allowing a man to seek whatever he happens to think is *ultimately* good. Nonetheless, at 562b12-c3 Socrates and Adeimantus effectively agree that freedom is “what *democracy* defines as good” (ο(\\ dhmokrati/a o(ri/zetai a)gaqo/n: b9) and, again, that “surely in a city under a democracy you would hear that this is the finest thing [ka//liston] it has, and that for this reason it is the only regime worth living in for anyone who is by nature free” (b12-c2).

¹³ I.e., Monoson (2000, 167) might be wrong that the idea at 557d4-7 is that “a democracy sustains the kind of openness that allows all regimes to be tried out *in speech*.” Perhaps, instead, the idea is that democratic men shift among the dispositions that are characteristic of aristocratic (561d2), timocratic (d4), oligarchic (d4-5), and tyrannical souls (see the **pa=sin h)/qesin** at 557c6). Cf. especially Lear 2001, 185-86.

¹⁴ This is a point that Roochnik (2003), Monoson (2000), and Saxonhouse (1996) often return to.

be out of bounds if, say, philosophers genuinely corrupt the youth, as Socrates is charged with doing. But if Socrates is the hero that Plato can often seem to present him as, and if we are to think he is representative of philosophers,¹⁵ then perhaps philosophers are supposed to be innocuous enough.

Certainly, it can seem odd to talk about *principled* equality and freedom in this context, but my suggestion is less anachronistic than we might think.¹⁶ Plus, a quintessential feature of the democratic man in the *Republic* is that he holds a view on which a wide range of urges are worth indulging, including not only *necessary* desires, but also certain *unnecessary* desires (560d2-561a5, 561b2-6, c3-5, 562b11-c3). And from that view, it would be a relatively short step to an ethic which says that not only *his* desires, but also *everyone else's* desires are worth indulging. That might be the ethic at work when democracy “dispens[es] a certain equality [i]so/thta/” to equals and unequals alike,” as Socrates and his interlocutors agree it does (558c3-7, quoting c5-6). Admittedly, Socrates and his interlocutors do not specify what this equality is. But most likely, the idea is at least that each citizen under democracy gets one vote, so as to have the same access to political power that all other citizens have. And if so, perhaps what undergirds the criterion for distributing votes is some commitment to equal standing.

At any rate, the *Republic* might, indeed, mean that philosophers are better off under a democracy than under a timarchy or oligarchy. And if it does, then democracy might supposedly be better than timarchy and oligarchy. No doubt, when various commentators *deny* that democracy is supposed to be *worse* than timarchy and oligarchy, their claim can be surprising. But perhaps it is not farfetched after all.

II. Worse than timarchy and oligarchy

Enough, though, about that. Let me now offer a reason that democracy might supposedly be *worse* than timarchy and oligarchy. In doing so, I will simply point to some evidence that philosophers, in fact, are *not* better off under the *Republic's* democracy than under its timarchy or oligarchy. As I noted above, part of the very sense in which democracy is said to be worse than timarchy and oligarchy might also make it better—namely, if democratic souls are as degenerate as they are said to be, then unintentionally they might foster and preserve political freedom that is particularly conducive to philosophizing. Yet if philosophers are supposedly *not*

¹⁵ For Kraut (1973, 213), e.g., a philosopher in the *Republic* is “one who knows Forms.” But if that definition is operative in the *Republic*, so is another definition—familiar from the *Lysis* (218a2-b6), *Phaedrus* (278d3-6), and *Symposium* (e.g., 199e6-200b3, 204a1-7)—on which philosophers strive after knowledge by virtue of lacking it. See especially *Republic* 475b8-10 and 485a10-b4 with, e.g., Morrison 2007, 236-38 and the far more extreme Rowe 2003a.

¹⁶ Perhaps Scott (2000, 36-37) would call it misguided for other reasons, though I am in line with Annas (1981, 135), e.g. Samaras (2002, 22n.18), among others, might regard my suggestion as anachronistic. And we might want to say that a commitment to equal standing has to rest on a notion of rights, and that no ancient Greek ever had such a notion (see, e.g., Ober 1996, 87). But see especially Miller 1995, 93-117. Plus, in Plato's day, at the least there might have been a notion of “dignity” (see Ober 1996, 101) or of what citizens owe one another, what governments owe citizens, etc. Further, in relation to the idea of limiting freedom for the purpose of ensuring equal liberty, see especially Ober 1998, 6, 40, 144, 179-83; 1996, 86-106. And on the notion of a social contract in, e.g., the *Crito* and *Republic*, see, e.g., Shields 2006, 71, 72; Heinaman 2004, 380n.3; 2002, 320n.23; Dahl 1999, 213; Irwin 1995, 182-83; Ober 1998, 143 219, 221, 241-43; 1996, 163, 168-70, 174, 176-87; 1989; Kahn 1981, though also Kamtekar 2004, 166-68. Finally, bear in mind how clear it is that there is supposed to be a breach between actual Athenian democracy and the democracy envisioned, say, at *Republic* 563b4-d1 (see, e.g., Samaras 2002, 63-64; Saxonhouse 1998, 274; Ober 1996, 63-64, 90-91, 114, 178; Roberts 1995, 263-66; Annas 1981, 300; cf. Anton 1998).

better off under a democracy, then presumably the idea is that democracy on balance *is* worse than timarchy and oligarchy—worse, that is, because of how degenerate democratic men are.

In Book VI, for example, Socrates and his interlocutors agree (494a4-5, a6-7) that “it’s impossible that a multitude be philosophic,” and that as a result “those who philosophize are necessarily blamed by them.” Especially when Socrates then starts to speak of the “mob” (ο/xlwl: 494a9), it is evident that the discussion here is focused mainly on democracy, under which the majority rules, of course. And he and his interlocutors talk about the influence the mob has on souls that are naturally philosophic—namely, it tends to turn them away from philosophy (490e ff.). For Socrates and his interlocutors, there still may be certain naturally philosophic souls that turn to philosophy in spite of the mob (492e6-493a3). But the idea is that only an act of a god can spare these souls from corruption. More important, the idea is also that when someone persuades a philosophic young man to take up philosophy, the mob stops at nothing to reclaim that young man. It even targets the person who has persuaded this young man, and in doing so it organizes “private plots and public trials” (494d9-495a1, quoting 494e6-7). Obviously, there might be an allusion here to the formal charges brought against Socrates, either the character in the Platonic dialogues or also the historical figure. And in short, this part of the *Republic* suggests that philosophers under a democracy face a serious threat—namely, the threat that a young philosophic soul will want to join them in philosophizing, whereupon the philosophers will be attacked.¹⁷ So perhaps we are to think that democracy is not an entirely successful means of securing the political freedom it promises.

And perhaps we are also to go much farther than that. Suppose it *is* the case that a democratic regime would violate its own commitment in letting a philosopher be executed just for acting like a philosopher. Even then, we can think of a point that is much like one from Plato’s *Crito*:¹⁸ even if democratic *laws* are hospitable to philosophers, democratic *men* may turn out not to be. If a majority tries to have the philosopher executed, and meanwhile a minority criticizes the effort, the criticisms might fall on deaf ears, even if the minority offers sound arguments. After all, at the least, if the democratic ethic says that *everyone’s* desires, and not just one’s own, are worth indulging, then there must be a certain point where *democratic* members of the mob do not reason very well. In attacking a philosopher just for acting like a philosopher, they encroach on other citizens’ freedom, patently violating the democratic ethic and the strictures of democracy. So perhaps either they are deeply akratic or they have somehow managed to overlook or ignore the nature of what they are doing.¹⁹ Perhaps they have had to

¹⁷ This seems to me a much greater threat than, e.g., that which 488a7-489a2 suggests.

¹⁸ In the picture Socrates paints in the *Crito*, the laws point out to him that it is not they, but men who have wronged him (54b9-c2).

¹⁹ I simply bracket certain complex questions here. But Carone (2001) may well be right that in the account in the *Republic* “reason is ‘overpowered’ not in the sense that the agent performs [an] action while at the same time strongly believing that he should not, but in the sense that, at that moment, his reason has been weakened and come to adopt” beliefs that accommodate the prevailing part of the soul (138; citing *Republic* 560d1-7 with 444e2; and 589a1, 590c3). One possibility is that reason is weakened, on Socrates and his interlocutors’ terms, inasmuch as its dictates have been “washed out” (ε)kplu/nai: 430a5-6) by pleasure, pain, fear, or also desire (see 429d4-430b9 with, e.g., Moss 2005, 154; cf. Cooper 2001, 113n.18) such that reason is less well equipped to resist the seductive power of the lower parts of the soul. Cf. Shields 2001; Rowe’s (e.g., 2004b; 2004a, 269n.10) view that spiritedness and appetite “recruit” reason. Shades of Carone’s view also appear in, e.g., Kahn 1996, 255, 260 (though Kahn says that “in the *Republic* Plato does not deny *akrasia*,” 254; cf. 243-45). Carone’s claim, of course, contradicts the “standard” account, as she (2001, 117) and Shields (2001, 139) call it, of how *akrasia* is viewed in the *Republic*. See, e.g., Bobonich 2002, 235-57; 2001; Parry 1996, 93-94, 158-62; Irwin 1995; Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 90n.25, 98n.35; Penner 1990; 1971; Kahn 1987; Reeve 1988, 131-35, especially 134.

convince themselves that there is some way in which the philosopher is a danger to the *polis*, such that to let him keep doing what he does would be to treat other citizens as subordinate to *him*. We might think here again of Plato's *Apology* and the charge that Socrates corrupts the youth. Even if most Athenians hate Socrates, his accusers apparently would not make much headway in saying just that Athens would be more pleasant without him in it.

In any case, if democratic men are capable of such deep *akrasia* or blindness—if they can so thoroughly preempt the guidance of reason—an ominous picture appears. And the picture is especially dim in light of certain remarks in Books VI and VIII. Take, for example, the description in Book VIII of the young oligarchic man who turns democratic. When his unnecessary desires finally overtake his soul (560b7-8), he develops “false and boasting *logoi* and opinions” (c2). After that point, he won't hear of anything that would aid the oligarchic faction within him. His oligarchic elders in his family might advise or scold him (cf. 559e9-560a3), but “those boasting *logoi* close the gates of the kingly wall within him . . .” (560c7-8). And they do so even if the young man regains a few oligarchic scruples (561a8-b3; cf. 560d2-7). Even then, he is utterly dismissive of true *logos* (561b7-c4). In other words, when he hears true *logos*, as we are told, he shakes his head (**(a)naneu&ei**: c3).

The point I mean to make is simple enough: perhaps democratic members of the *mob* will simply shake *their* heads if someone tells them they are violating their own ethic in attacking a philosopher just for acting like a philosopher.²⁰ In light of the threat that that *is* what they will do, we have plenty of reason to doubt that in the *Republic* democracy is supposedly better than timarchy and oligarchy.

III. Conclusion

Nevertheless, we also are not warranted in saying that timarchy and oligarchy are supposedly *worse* than democracy. Now, again, if philosophers are not supposed to be better off under a democracy than under a timarchy or oligarchy, then presumably the idea is that democracy *is* worse than those other two regimes. And just now, I pointed to some evidence that philosophers, indeed, are supposed to be no better off under the *Republic*'s democracy. Yet it is not clear whether we are to think that this evidence carries the day. There are a number of reasons, and too many to name here. But one of them, anyway, is that Socrates and his interlocutors end up agreeing (500d10-e5, 501c4-502a3), at least tentatively, that non-philosophers could be persuaded that philosophers are useful.²¹ And here, as elsewhere, the trickiness of all of this should be easy enough to see. For at this point, we can ask: Does it matter that when Socrates and his interlocutors make their claim about persuading the non-philosopher, they do so specifically in the context of discussing *the aristocratic city*, rather than democracy? And the answer is not clear enough. As a matter of fact, this whole issue—the issue of how bad democracy is supposed to be in the *Republic*—is pretty murky. It is murky enough, I submit, that to pursue it is to head down a blind alley.

²⁰ Granted, to whatever extent or at whatever point democracy violated one of its own commitments, it might be not just a *bad* democracy, but a *non-democracy*—so we might want to say that nothing *democratic* would pose a danger of the sort I refer to here. But even if a democracy will cease to be a democracy once philosophers are attacked for being philosophers, the fact remains that *within a democracy* philosophers will face the danger of being attacked in this way.

²¹ And e.g., 488a7-489d6 differs from a certain passage that appears a bit later in Book VI—viz., 494d9-495a1—insofar as the later passage presents life under a democracy as far more dangerous for philosophers than the earlier passage does.

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