

Does democracy necessarily rest on relativism? The origins of the debate: Protagoras and Plato

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You will forgive me if I start, anachronistically, with a quote which belongs to a much later time than the authors I shall be dealing with. As I hope to show, it is not out of place because it identifies perfectly the problem and enables me to scatter light on the path I intend to follow. In the Gospel of John, in his confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus says: “And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Regardless of our religious persuasion, it is undeniable that Jesus was a great religious and political innovator as well as an effective speaker. Here he touched upon an issue I intend to examine, only from a political perspective of course (for the religious part I shall be ready in a few decades), namely the political import and the practical effect of truth; more specifically, whether truth does in fact set us free or, on the contrary, freedom rests precisely on the absence of truth. That is to say that a strong philosophical, metaphysical, religious concept of truth inevitably interferes with our freedom and should therefore be banned from the political arena in a liberal democratic State. This latter position has been vociferously maintained by many liberal thinkers in the XXth century, especially in the aftermath of the defeat of Fascism and during the Cold War. But the ghosts of relativism and ‘liberal neutrality’ are still haunting philosophical and political debates all around the world.

Emblematic, in this respect, is the position of the Austrian legal philosopher Hans Kelsen who, in his *Foundations of Democracy* (which appeared in English in *Ethics* in 1955) maintained the existence of a correlation between authoritarianism and strong concepts of truth on the one hand and democracy and weak concepts of truth on the other. He went so far as to say:

“It is just within epistemology and theory of values that the antagonism between philosophical absolutism and philosophical relativism has its seat, which –as I shall try to show–is analogous to the antagonism between autocracy and democracy as they represent political absolutism, on the one hand, and political relativism, on the other, respectively”.¹

Kelsen wrote his reflections on democracy not long after the end of World War Two and amidst the Cold War: it is, thus, no matter of chance that he devotes a long section to scrutinize and chastise the soviet notion of democracy, which, in his opinion, is a perversion of both the word and of the form. Kelsen, however, was not alone in his qualms about the impossible co-existence of truth and liberty. Hannah Arendt rejects the notion of truth itself in politics as “despotic” and precluding debate, which is the essence of political life.² John Rawls, the author of the most refined and successful recent version of political liberalism, states that “Advancing claims about truth is, then, needlessly divisive: it undermines public reason and conflicts with the equal standing in public, political arguments that democracy promises”.³

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¹ H. Kelsen, “Foundations of Democracy” in *Ethics* 66 (1955) pp. 1-101: p. 15.

² “Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character. [...] The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life”: H. Arendt, “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future*, New York, Penguin, 1977, pp. 227-264: p. 241.

³ J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 129.

Many scholars interested in ancient political thought –not only classicists but also political theorists– have expressed similar views and have considered the Sophists, and especially Protagoras, the defenders of individualistic, democratic values; (a notable example is Eric Havelock’s *The liberal temper in Greek politics*, 1957); whereas Plato has been portrayed as maintaining an objective notion of truth which would lead to an autocratic government of ‘those who know’, whose positive or negative aspects are duly emphasized by interpreters according to their ideological options. Thus, Kelsen’s considerations and his dichotomy Relative truth/democracy *vs.* Absolute truth/autocracy are not less interesting today, when relativism is again at the centre of the philosophical and political agenda, examined and pilloried by such different interpreters as the conservative Pope Benedict XVI and the radical philosopher Martha Nussbaum.

If we look back at the origins, at the theoretical “foundations of democracy”, we may observe that the first consistent relativist thinker in the Western tradition of philosophy, the sophist Protagoras, is also a stern supporter of democracy, as it appears from his personal involvement in some aspects of Pericles’ policy (such as his participation in the Pan-Hellenic settlement of Thuri) as well as from literary evidence (such as the Great Myth he tells in Plato’s *Protagoras*). Conversely, we may observe that Protagoras’ arch-enemy and nemesis (in the theoretical field), Plato, believes in the existence of a solid, objective truth behind the unstable appearances caught by our senses; interestingly enough, Plato is also a strong critic of democracy, to which he prefers an aristocratic government ruled by ‘those who know’. Is this evidence enough to conclude that Protagoras’ support for democracy was based on his relativism, or is his political stance based on other considerations? Similarly, is Plato’s belief in the truth of the idea of Good the ground for his anti-democratic, authoritarian political views? More generally, is there a causal relationship between epistemological conception and political option? Does democracy really require a ‘weak’ notion of truth while belief in the possibility of attaining objective Truth inevitably leads to an autocratic power option? Does God, and religion, play any part in all this? I have the impression that the answer to these questions, notwithstanding the deceitful appearances, will be surprising.

Let’s start from the very beginning, from where democracy’s long journey began. It is traditional in political theory to bestow on Cleisthenes the honour of being the creator of the first democratic government at Athens, in the year 508 BCE (although the very word *demokratia* appears only later). I will focus only on one of the many interesting details of the context of democracy’s birth: Cleisthenes appears to be the winner of a power competition which takes place after the expulsion from Athens of the tyrant Hippias and his family. The event that set things in motion, the murder of Hippias’ brother Hipparchus, was celebrated in a famous song as delivering Athens free (from the tyrant) and making her *isonomikous*. Freedom is identified with *isonomia*, equality before the law, an equality that, it will soon be added, includes equal possibility to speak (*isegoria*) and possibility to speak up your mind about any topic (*parrhesia*). This is obviously a strong concept of freedom, a “positive concept of liberty” –if we wish to use Isaiah Berlin’s terminology. It is not just freedom from the tyrants but also liberty to do something, namely to participate in the political process.

The two great fifth-century historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, are totally persuaded that freedom brings power and greatness and build their narratives around this persuasion. Herodotus links Athens’ growing power to the chase of the tyrants and, famously, interprets the Greek victory over the Persians as a victory of freedom over servitude. Thucydides is, if possible, even more interesting, none the less because it is certainly against him, and his depiction of democracy, that Plato builds his own pejorative image of democracy. Even a cursory glance at Thucydides’ work shows that he believed in the possibility of attaining historical truth about men’s actions in the past, and especially the recent past. In a methodological passage Thucydides laments men’s lack of accuracy in general when it comes to ascertain events of the past; and elsewhere he is even more specific against some other historians.⁴

⁴ Thucydides I, 20: “Such little pains do most people take in the investigation of truth (*he zētēsis tes aletheias*) and most prefer to accept what is readily at hand”.

Then, if we look at Pericles' laud of the merits of the now well-established democracy at Athens, as it appears in Thucydides' Funeral Speech, we observe that the freedom enjoyed by the Athenian citizen is seen as the foundation for the power of the city, which is displayed in her imperial force. These are all famous passages and I hope that their beauty overcomes that sense of familiarity that notoriously breeds contempt.

"I shall begin with our ancestors: it is both just and proper that they should have the honour of the first mention on an occasion like the present. They dwelt in the country without break in the succession from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valour. [2] And if our more remote ancestors deserve praise, much more do our own fathers, who added to their inheritance the empire which we now possess, and spared no pains to be able to leave their acquisitions to us of the present generation. [3] Lastly, there are few parts of our dominions that have not been augmented by those of us here, who are still more or less in the vigour of life; while the mother country has been furnished by us with everything that can enable her to depend on her own resources whether for war or for peace. [4] That part of our history which tells of the military achievements which gave us our several possessions, or of the ready valour with which either we or our fathers stemmed the tide of Hellenic or foreign aggression, is a theme too familiar to my hearers for me to dilate on, and I shall therefore pass it by. But what was the road by which we reached our position, what the form of government under which our greatness grew, what the national habits out of which it sprang; these are questions which I may try to solve before I proceed to my panegyric upon these men; since I think this to be a subject upon which on the present occasion a speaker may properly dwell, and to which the whole assemblage, whether citizens or foreigners, may listen with advantage".⁵

Athenian exceptionalism? "Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighbouring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favours the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if no social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition".⁶ Pericles then adds that freedom to live the way each citizen prefers is the outcome of the constitution: this is one of the basic values of Athenian democracy.

Another special feature of the Athenian way of doing politics is its openness: "we throw open our city to the world". This rebuff is aimed at Sparta and every oligarchical regime, accused of doing politics in a covert way in order to fool the people (same accusation in the Melian dialogue). Democracy is the obverse of *arcana imperii* and secretive politics.

Among the many characterizing features of Athenian regime, Pericles singles out one: "our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuit of industry, are still fair judges of public matters (*tà politikà me endeos gnonai*); for, unlike any other nation, regarding him who takes no part in these duties not as unambitious but as useless, we Athenians are able to judge at all events if we cannot originate, and instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all. Again, in our enterprises we present the singular spectacle of daring and deliberation, each carried to its highest point, and both united in the same persons; although usually decision is the fruit of ignorance, hesitation of reflection".⁷ The *logismos* brings decision to the Athenians.

He then famously concludes that "Athens is the school of Greece. [...] And that this is no mere boast thrown out for the occasion, but plain matter of fact, the power of the state acquired by these habits

⁵ Thucydides II, 36.

⁶ Thucydides II, 37.

⁷ Thucydides II, 40.

proves. [3] For Athens alone of her contemporaries is found when tested to be greater than her reputation, and alone gives no occasion to her assailants to blush at the antagonist by whom they have been worsted, or to her subjects to question her title by merit to rule. [4] Rather, the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours, since we have not left our power without witness, but have shown it by mighty proofs; and far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist, or other of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment only for the impression which they gave to melt at the touch of fact, we have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us”.⁸

Pericles is persuaded that freedom to participate in government and in the discussions that precede decision is the foundation of Athenian power. Underlying this view is the conception that every citizen is able to give his contribution to the decision-making process in virtue of his singular, peculiar knowledge and competence. This implies that in democracy all citizens are on an equal footing, they are politically equal. In Josh Ober’s phrasing, knowledge is dispersed, and deliberation among the vastest amount of people is the best way to arrive at the ‘true’ solution of a practical problem, namely the optimal solution. Democracy is, in this perspective, the most efficient regime in that it enables the dispersed knowledge to become manifest and help to find ‘the truth of the matter’, the best course of action. All citizens are equal in deliberation without regard to their social station. We should note that this equality of political capacity among citizens that is presupposed in democracy is also confirmed *per contrarium* by the Melian Dialogue: there the Athenian envoys object to the Melians that it is only among equals that it is possible to speak of justice –or to deliberate in general, we may add.

In Pericles’ view democracy is ‘truly’ the best form of government; he has no doubt about it: the greatness and power of the city testify it and materially support his words. He therefore does not believe in a ‘weak’ notion of truth nor do all the supporters of democracy: democratic institutions and democratic practices show that democratic leaders believe in the truth of certain fundamental values such as freedom to participate in government and equality of speech. They also believe that these values are the foundation of the greatness of the democratic regime.

Let’s now turn to Protagoras, a famous sophist, relativist a supporter of democracy. He started by discarding the notion of the importance of the divine for human affairs, which he did in the famous opening lines of his work *On the Gods*:

“Concerning the gods, I cannot verify that they exist or that they do not exist nor what their shape is; for many are the obstacles that prevent our knowledge: not only the obscurity [of the problem] but also the brevity of human life.” (DK80 B4)

This is a profession of agnosticism, an admission of the limitations of the human mind and of human life. It is not atheistic: atheism is philosophically unsophisticated, unworthy of such a thinker as Protagoras, for it maintains that we can attain the truth about God: God does not exist (and in some versions God does not exist but is evil!). God is an article of faith and his existence cannot be argued for or against. In Protagorean terms, the existence of the gods cannot be verified and any truth is necessary human; man is the measure of all things and the gods are silent –as Cynthia Farrar effectively put it.⁹ Any knowledge, value or political action must therefore rest on purely human standards: the gods abandon the city, they don’t care about human beings and they can’t be taken as models. Nor can any system of morality be built upon the premise of their existence; or non-existence.

It remains a mystery to me what could have followed such a dramatic (and drastic) opening statement, to enable Protagoras to write an entire book...

⁸ Thucydides II, 41.

⁹ C. Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988: p. 51.

Anyway, let's now have a look at the famous statement which opened, again in dramatic style, Protagoras' other famous work: the *Truth*.¹⁰

“Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.” (DK80 B1)

There are many extraordinarily interesting features about this famous statement. One is directly linked to Protagoras' persuasion about the gods: man is the measure “of things that are not, that they are not”. Man is the measure also of non-existence. Human beings must make decisions at their own risk, about the non-existence of the gods, for instance; and, as Pascal would put it, if God does exist, I would not like to be in your shoes...

When we read it on the background of Plato's *Theaetetus*, Protagoras' statement reveals that truth is relative to each percipient subject, so that the Truth does not exist, but rather there are as many truths as there are percipient beings. In Socrates' faithful paraphrase: “as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you –you and I each being a man” (152a). There is thus an identification of *phantasia*, *aisthesis* and *episteme*. Consistently with his belief in the impossibility of knowing the gods, Protagoras maintains that our knowledge is limited to the phenomenal realm. He argues for an empiricist approach and is not a sceptic, because he believes that every sensation is true for those who experience it: it is only knowledge of substance that is precluded to human beings. Again, he is not an absolute subjectivist (he believes there is an objective reality, which is known by men only through their subjective experience) nor an idealist: reality is not created by men nor is it a world of ideas; *esse non est percipi*.

A typical way to refute relativism is to point out that it is self-refuting (and self-defeating). This line of attack was already tried in antiquity by Plato and Aristotle. The former, in the *Theaetetus*, shows that if we mean seriously that “everything is true”, then also the obverse “nothing is true” is true and with it Protagoras' theory; the latter, in the *Metaphysics*, disposes even more quickly of Protagoras because he thinks that Protagoras' saying entails a rejection of the principle of non-contradiction: the result is that the search for truth would become like “chasing a flying bird” and, in the end, we don't have time to spend with such people as the relativists because they are obviously not serious. In modern times, we could maintain that the cultural relativist who believes that all values are equivalent for their supporters, inside their cultures, entails the right for cannibals to eat relativists! And some malicious cultural chauvinist could point out that even French deconstructionists à la Foucault prefer oysters and champagne to fried locusts and the comfort of the Bay Area to the slums of Phnom Penh. Nobody in actuality lives like a relativist!

Let's see how Protagoras replies to these charges. In the ‘Apology of Protagoras’ the sophist reiterates his position on knowledge, and then adds some elements which combine his epistemological view with a moral and political stance. He argues that

1. “Each one of us –the single individual- is the measure both of what is and of what is not”; then he adds
2. “But there are countless differences between men for just this very reason, that different things both are and appear to be to different subjects”;
3. Some of these semblances (*phantasmata*, representations) are “better” (*beltio*) than others, although in no way “truer” (*alethestera*) –as some maintain out of ignorance (167b).

Each person is the judge (*krites*: 160c) of what is relatively to himself and therefore no-one judges what is false: epistemological relativism is unavoidable but has practical limits, because some opinions are better, more useful than others, although not truer: from the realm of knowledge and theory we have shifted almost imperceptibly to that of practice. It is in this realm of practice that the existence of

¹⁰ At the beginning: *Theaetetus* 152a. *Truth* as a title: 152c; 161c.

wisdom and of wise men can be maintained: “the man I call wise is the man who can change the appearances –the man who in any case where bad things both appear and are for one of us, works a change and makes good things appear and be for him” (166d). The wise man, identified with the sophist, operates as a physician, turning bad states of mind (or the soul) in better states, which enable his listeners and students to have better perceptions, using words instead of drugs: he cannot persuade people they are wrong (because there is no right or wrong as far as truth is concerned) but he can make them change attitude (*hexis*), thus moulding good citizens.

Protagoras’ very wording reveals a shift from the realm of knowledge (*theoria, aletheia*) to that of practice (*praxis*). There certainly exists wisdom (*sophia*) and the wise man (*sophos aner*) but they are relative to the domain of practice. Therefore, we ought to be accurate: when we face contrasting, and contradictory, views we must not say that someone is wiser than someone else, because knowledge is perception, which is always true for the percipient subject; likewise, when we face moral disagreement we cannot say that someone is right and someone else is wrong, for their beliefs are true for them. Instead, we must operate a change from a condition (*hexis*) to another, because a healthy condition is better than illness. This is why the sophist works like a physician, because he does not try to persuade the ill person that what he perceives as cold is in fact warm; instead, he tries to heal him, to change his condition, his bodily state. This is the civilizing mission of the sophist and the all-important role of education for human beings: it changes (*metaballein*, repeated many times) the disposition of a human being, so that something that appears (and is) bad seems (and is) good (166d). Education (*paideia*) transforms man, making him change from a worse to a better disposition; the analogy with the physician also reveals that the sophist is a wise man and deserves to be paid for his service. For it is the sophist, through his educational role, who creates ‘civilized’ men and rhetoricians, who in turn persuade the city to adopt the most useful laws for the citizens:

“Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just.” (*Theaetetus* 167c)

Protagoras thus identifies what is just (*dikaion*) with what is legal (*nomimon*) and is the first author who attributes a leading social function to the educated man and, accordingly, an educational role to the sophist. This position is in line with the one that emerges from the *Protagoras*, where the sophist maintains the possibility to teach virtue in the beginning of the dialogue and in the conclusion establishes a divergence of *arête* and *episteme*, a position that is antithetical to Socrates’ ethical intellectualism. We may conclude that Protagoras argued for four, connected, doctrines:

1. At the foundation lies a *theological agnosticism*: there is no connection between the human and the divine realm; the gods, whatever we may think about their existence, are not interested in human transactions and we cannot draw inspiration from them; there is nothing we can say about the destiny of the human soul in a possible afterlife so the divine cannot be the foundation of morality.
2. If there is no absolute we can refer to, no eternal substance, we can’t but fall back on an *epistemological relativism*. Every opinion is true because man, each single man, is the measure of everything relative to himself.
3. From these premises an *ethical pragmatism and consequentialism* follow: some judgments are better than others –although not truer-, i.e. have better practical results or consequences.
4. Also *political conventionalism* and *legal positivism* follow: there is no univocal definition of justice, but rather every city adopts the institutions it deems most suitable to create virtuous citizens; virtue itself, just like the law, accordingly changes from city to city.

I believe that the importance Protagoras attributed to the *kairos* is definitively connected to this position: the right chance, the opportune moment must be judged by each single man, and he will be able to judge best if he has been correctly educated.

There is no truth or general rule in politics as well as in life because on every topic two opposing arguments can be advanced: the choice, the decision between competing truths rests with each man and in this resides both the greatness and the tragedy of human life. However, cities and human beings can live with that; if correctness, *orthotes*, is the problem, the sophist and the educated man are the solution. For judging from his experience, the sophist can suggest to a city the most convenient political arrangements in order to mould good citizens. Again, in so doing, the sophist acts as a physician, who studies the symptoms of an illness as well as the constitution of the patient and adapts the treatment to the circumstances: there is no general rule; rather the “judgement resides in perception” of the single case, as we read in [Hippocrates] *De antiqua medicina* 9. The physician is guided by an un-stated, obvious premise: health is better than disease. Likewise, to keep up the analogy, the sophist has seen that civil strife is like an ailment in the body politic and he will resort to his technique to prevent its insurgence inside a city. Harmony, *homonoia*, political friendship constitutes the natural, healthy condition of the city. *Stasis*, turmoil, faction conflict disrupts this harmony and the sophist’s task is to restore the order inside the community.

One might object, in a Platonic fashion, that Protagoras leaves us devoid of a firm standard, a solid foundation, for the validity of our moral values and political arrangements: there is no objective, universal foundation behind them. But Protagoras, a self-described technician, would retort “So what? It works!” –which is a perfectly appropriate answer for the expert of any epoch who does not have any pretension of universal knowledge and works in the realm of practice. And this is exactly why in matters of practical importance we trust the expert –be it a general, a sailor or a physician- although we all entertain our ideas about strategy, voyaging and diets.

It is noteworthy in this context that the Old Oligarch attributes to the Athenian rabble wisdom enough to not engage in those activities or holding those magistracies which imply specialized knowledge and could result in harm to the people: “These they leave in the hands of the most capable” (*dynatotatoi*).¹¹

And here comes the Platonic objection, based on the difference between what-is-good and what-appears-to-be-good: they both motivate us to act, and, for instance, in the practical realm we may recur to a medicine man or a healer instead of a physician when we are sick. The medicine man and the physician are two kinds of experts, in the same field, in different cultures. The truth of their expertise is unassailable within each culture; but a modern pupil of Protagoras would argue that in practice physicians heal more people than medicine men (and this is still the case even in certain parts of Italy very much rumoured of lately!)

One may wonder what this all amounts to in the practical realm. We may look again at Plato’s *Protagoras* to find a tentative answer. Here the sophist offers to his listeners the choice of a delightful myth or a rational argument and opts for delivering a beautiful mythical narration in order to be more entertaining. The choice of *myth* over *logos* is prompted by the convivial atmosphere in Callias’ house but Protagoras could as well have recurred to his logical and argumentative skills. He is able to charm and persuade at the same time, a marvellous display of the skills he may use in his profession: his duty is not only to be right (always a tricky notion with a relativist) but also, and above all, to be effective. He tells Socrates that his job is to teach prudence in affairs private as well as public; listening to him, Socrates will learn to set his own house in order in the best way, and he will be able to speak and act for the best in the affairs of the State. Socrates interprets this as meaning that Protagoras teaches the art of politics, and that he promises to make men good citizens. Let’s also remember that the question at issue between Protagoras and Socrates is whether virtue can be taught and the sophist’s position is that

¹¹ [Xenophon], *The Constitution of the Athenians* 3.

human beings are by nature endowed with the potentiality for virtue but this has to be cultivated through education. The conclusion of the myth is that all men are by nature endowed with the two qualities, or virtues, of ‘respect’ and ‘justice’ which make them ‘political beings’, apt to rule and to be ruled; as a consequence, democracy is the most ‘natural’ and most efficient form of government because it reflects in its laws and institutions that equality of capacity that exists in nature: it does not exclude any citizen endowed with political art (*politikè technè*) from participating in politics. This is the kind of ‘truth’, or rather vision, that Protagoras can consistently claim to belong to his baggage of expertise; this knowledge, which issues from his experience as a man-of-the-world, can be serviceable to political entities. Experience –he may argue effectively- shows that a democratic city is more powerful and its citizens are happier than in any other political arrangement. He could have stated, just like Thucydides, that the city’s power is the proof of the goodness of the Athenian constitutional system. Or, to look at a contemporary debate, a Protagorean author may argue that it does not matter whether “human rights” are objectively true or rather an invention of Western society. “The truth does not explain much” –he might retort, quoting Nancy Cartwright. What is important is the result: they work! Citizens of democratic states that respect human rights are happier and the states are more prosperous and powerful, as it is testified by obvious evidence: people flee other states to come here! This is the ‘truth’ of the matter.

Notwithstanding Plato, and notwithstanding many Platonic interpreters, there does not seem to be a contradiction between democracy and a strong concept of truth nor are they mutually exclusive.

Let’s now turn to Plato, let’s examine what is the actual foundation for his criticism of democracy and for his preference for an aristocratic regime, or rather a philosophical aristocracy. Beforehand, however, let me remind you that Plato struggled all his life with Protagoras’s thought (as is testified by his final answer, which we find in his last work, the *Laws*, where he states that “God is for us the best measure of all things”); and that he builds his perfect city in deliberate opposition to Thucydides’ portrayal of democracy.¹² And I wish to add another word of caution: Plato is not just a critic of democracy but of all existing forms of government of his time: he is no oligarch; he does not prefer the few to the many *per se*. All existing regimes are flawed –some more, some less: there is a hierarchy- because they all show the prevalence of one part of the population over the other; there is no harmony, no unity in them. That harmony and unity that characterises Plato’s perfect city and sets it apart from all others.

We may start with a visual aid: if we take a panoramic look at the whole of the *Republic*, it strikes us that the most conspicuous absence in Plato’s ideal city is the lack of an *agorà*, of a meeting place where to deliberate, a sign that public deliberation by the people is not viewed as conducive to the best decisions. These are taken by those who know, who are inevitably very few because knowledge is by Plato conceived as a difficult ascent from a reign of appearances to which we have been habituated since birth and for which we may even have developed a form of attachment: the usual humdrum everyday life has its comforting features: we don’t have to sail perilous seas and we can predict fairly well what is going to happen. Regularities are reassuring and there is a *sophia* also in the cave (516c), albeit a degraded one.

Central role of the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*.

1. The *sophia* in the cave is illusion, as are the honours that accompany it. Plato agrees with Protagoras: if we judge by what appears to our senses, the result is a world characterized by change and instability. We should therefore distrust our senses and rely on our reason.
2. Wisdom and knowledge are the result of an ascent that starts in violence (*bia*) and works only for very few because it is difficult. 494a: it is impossible for the multitude to be philosophic.

¹² Two obvious and conspicuous examples: Socrates’ definition of justice is “minding one’s own business”, *apolypragmosyne*, which is the opposite of the virtue that identifies Athenian democracy: *polypragmosyne*, the ability to do many things at one time. Then the sedition in words, the transformation of the meaning of words, in Thucydides III, 82 and in Plato, *Republic* VIII, 560d-561a.

The masses cannot have access to knowledge: they are not only unable to; they are also uninterested in embarking in the long journey that takes from familiar to unknown shores. Cfr. 491b. This creates a hierarchy of knowledge, an aristocracy of virtue not a traditional aristocracy of blood. Democracy bestows equality to equal and unequal people alike (558c); there is liberty (*eleutheria*), freedom of speech (*parrhesia*) and licence (*exousia*) for everyone to enjoy 557b. criticism of election by lot. The insistence on equality brings ‘formlessness’ according to Saxonhouse, democracy lacks capacity to categorize and discriminate.¹³

3. Only God knows the truth (516b) and the path to truth is reversed: not down from God through the poet to all mankind/hearers; but up from the bottom, each person for himself.
4. Truth is ‘erotic’, it appeals to the philosopher, who is described as the “lover of truth” (501d). However, as we learn from the *Symposium*, *eros* is a desire, a longing for what we do not possess: we are neither wise nor completely ignorant. Plato’s ‘truth’ is then less monolithic than we usually suppose. Evidence also from the *Politicus* 300a, where existing laws, put down by experts, can be revised by those who possess “political science”. Acquisition of knowledge can replace existing knowledge.¹⁴ Neither Socrates nor Plato were in fact enemies of the ‘open society’. Since Grote and Mill, we are well aware that Socrates used the weapon of *elenchos* in order to question the ‘unchallenged truths’, or opinions, of his fellow-citizens; and the dialectic method proceeds by testing assumptions and hypotheses until we reach a firm truth.
5. Truth is of the essence for those who want to act wisely in private as well as in public matters (517c). But there are dangers in the truth coming from those who live in opinion.
6. The truth-tellers are derided, scorned for their apparent lack of vision and often killed (517a). it seems that abandoning the cave is done individual by individual through the *technē tes periagoghes* (518d).

The perfect city is built according to the truth discovered by the philosopher. In the *Politicus* the Eleatic Stranger talks about the “imitation of the truth”, the constitutions that imitate the true one. Plato remarks often that “it is by virtue of its smallest class and minutest part of itself, and the wisdom that resides therein, in the part which takes the lead and rules, that a city established on principles of nature would be wise as a whole. And as it appears [429a] these are by nature the fewest, the class to which it pertains to partake of the knowledge which alone of all forms of knowledge deserves the name of wisdom.”

Knowledge of what is good for the city and for your fellow citizens does not come from debate among people equally endowed with political virtue. It stems from knowledge of the ‘idea of Good’, which is grasped with difficulty, by very few people and entails a replacement of the ordinary world we live in. Plato, like Gorgias, believes that we cannot communicate ‘being’, nor truth; it has to be grasped individually (Socratic method that elicits truth out of a single individual).

The goal of the city becomes one for all citizens: using a common virtue (*sophrosyne*) to create harmony. Making people happy according to the level of happiness they can attain (421a-c). Paradox: the knowledge of truth allows the possessors to tell lies, albeit noble lies. Plato distinguishes between “noble lie” and “true lie”; the latter is a condition of ignorance in the soul typical of those who live in a world of illusion and lies; the former is told by those who actually know the truth and are allowed to lie for political reasons. Indeed a ‘noble lie’ rests at the very foundation of the Platonic perfect city. There are ‘noble lies’ even in the *kallipolis* because it is a human city, not a city of gods. Plato too recurs to the medical analogy: the statesman is like a physician who can dispense lies like medicines according to the

¹³ A.W. Saxonhouse, “Democracy, Equality and Eidê: a Radical View from Book 8 of Plato’s Republic” in *American Political Science Review* 92 (1998) pp. 273-283.

¹⁴ Christopher Rowe has pointed out clearly the absurdity of considering the laws of a city untouchable, according to Plato: this is exactly the view that led to the killing of Socrates and is not in fact embraced by Plato. See C. J. Rowe, “Killing Socrates: Plato’s Later Thoughts on Democracy” in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121 (2001) pp. 63-76.

needs.¹⁵ God, on the other hand, does not lie. We should assimilate ourselves to God as much as we can, knowing that the Gods exist, they care about human beings and they will reward the just and punish the unjust (*Rep.* X).

This is in fact one of the most delicate points, namely the notion of God and its role in Plato's thought.

1) In the background we have to recall that Socrates was sentenced to death for not believing in the gods of the city (among other accusations). He spoke of his *daimon*.

2) In Plato's dialogues all the traditional Olympic gods are mentioned and, even when their portrait is questioned (as in the *Republic*), their existence is never questioned.

3) Plato appears to believe in the existence of a God as reason in the universe. The Demiurge puts order into the world and interferes in history. In the *Republic* we hear that "nothing imperfect can be the measure of anything"; and in the *Laws* we learn that "God is for us the best measure of all things".

Notwithstanding appearances, Plato seems to advocate religious tolerance or at least require only conformism.

Possible objection: *Laws* X and provisions against atheism. But John Locke too believed that atheists should not be tolerated.

My conclusion is that Protagoras and Pericles, as portrayed by Thucydides, both believed in a strong concept of truth, they believed that the Athenian democratic system was truly the best and most natural way of conducting human affairs and the most conducive to creating good and happy citizens as well as a powerful city. Their defence of democracy is based on a pragmatic notion of truth and on the belief that deliberation among equal individuals is conducive to the best knowledge of what to do. Plato, on the other hand, is a critic of democracy because he believes that ordinary people are unqualified to make political judgments for they do not have access to real knowledge. He believes that human beings are by nature, and then by education, unequal and debate among them is therefore useless and even dangerous. It is a false antithesis between strong and weak notions of truth. The real alternative is between truth accessible to everybody and truth accessible only to few; between a view of knowledge as dispersed among citizens and a view of knowledge as the sole possession of one or very few persons who struggled to achieve it and are, by that very possession, set apart from their fellow human beings. A view of human nature as equally endowed with the virtues that enable someone to do political activity and an anti-egalitarian view of human nature, according to which men are born unequally endowed for politics. Accordingly, these authors present different views on the role of deliberation, albeit among educated people, to arrive at the best political decisions: for Pericles and Protagoras is essential, for Plato is useless.

"The problem with democracy –James Bryce wrote to A.V. Dicey- is to assume that every man has an opinion". Plato would have consented and wryly added "And when they do, most of the times it is the wrong one!"

¹⁵ Plato, *Republic* 389b; 414b;459d.