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Philosophy Social Criticism 2004 30: 745

DOI: 10.1177/0191453704045763

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Jeffrey E. Green

Apathy: the democratic disease

Abstract This essay turns to ancient sources in order to rethink the relationship between political apathy and democracy. If modern democratic theorists place political apathy entirely outside of democracy – either as a destructive limit upon the full realization of a democratic polity, or, more sanguinely, as a pragmatic necessity which tempers democracy so that it may function in a workable yet watered-down form – the ancients conceived of political apathy as a peculiarly democratic phenomenon that was likely to flourish in tandem with the expansion of egalitarian institutional structures and moral ideas. Evidence for the ancient recognition of political apathy as a uniquely democratic kind of affliction centers on, but is not limited to, three main sources. In literature, the Homeric epic, and specifically the story of Achilles, present apathy for politics and commitment to human equality as synonymous forces. In philosophy, one of the main reasons Plato opposes the democratic regime is precisely that it engenders apathy among the citizenry. And in history, Herodotus' account of the first debate on constitutions as well as the ancient democratic practice of election by lot reveal an ancient egalitarian interest in using democracy to quell, rather than encourage, political behavior.

Key words Achilles · apathy · democracy · egalitarianism · *isonomia* · Plato · political participation

As the legal impediments standing in the way of participatory democracy wane, so-called *de facto* structures rise in prominence as obstacles restricting the emergence of a vibrant egalitarian political culture. These include gross inequality and material destitution, the lingering effects of prejudice and discrimination in societies just recently liberated from institutionalized racism, and educational deficits which leave large segments of the populace ill-prepared to actualize an otherwise available civic potential. Beyond these sociological crises hindering the translation of

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 30 nos 5–6 • pp. 745–768

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www.sagepublications.com DOI: 10.1177/0191453704045763

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political rights into political practices, however, there exists one other *de facto* impediment to participatory democracy, namely, political apathy: the freely chosen abdication from politics on the part of those citizens bereft of a taste for civic life. By 'freely chosen', I do not mean to appeal to the exercise of a volitional capacity so much as I mean to distinguish a voluntary non-participation from forms of apoliticism clearly connected to poverty, racial oppression and other modes of tyranny, or serious deprivations of education and culture.

It would obviously be unwise to insist too strongly upon the neatness of the opposition between apathy in which the individual chooses to withdraw from active political life and sociological forms of apoliticism which unburden the individual of responsibility for political silence. A virulent commitment to the distinction would not only get caught up in the aporetic question of human freedom, but would fail to recognize that the border between self-imposed and socially imposed alienation is porous, difficult to locate, and always contested. The consequences of sociological abuse rarely end at the moment the tyrant is overthrown or that material hardship is abated – and it can hardly be doubted that 'when a person is callously oppressed for too long, he is not in a talking mood even when the powerful say they are in a mood to listen'.¹ Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to lose sight of the possibility of political apathy – that is, of a political silence irreducible to failings in morals or economics, but which speaks to the individual's own preference not to actualize civic rights and engage in political practice. Among radical political theorists today there is an unfortunate and unnecessary tendency to forget about political apathy and to assume civic engagement as an essential human endeavor whose absence must denote an underlying sociological evil. Iris Marion Young, for example, defines the failure to participate in the political process as *prima-facie* evidence of domination, thus leaving no conceptual space for a political silence that flourishes within the context of affluence and liberty.² Habermas, hardly less committed than Young to securing a society free from domination, does better when he not only recognizes the possibility of political apathy, but argues that freely chosen political silence lends legitimacy to the work accomplished by those who do activate their civic potential. Because 'a legal duty . . . to make active use of democratic rights has something totalitarian about it', the just society must recognize the personal decision of individuals to withdraw from politics. This means that 'legally granted liberties entitle one to *drop out* of communicative action, to refuse illocutionary obligations; they ground a privacy freed from the burden of reciprocally acknowledged and mutually expected communicative freedom'.³

If we can admit the concept of political apathy into our theoretical vernacular and accept the reality of a freely chosen political silence irreducible to underlying sociological evil, there is still the important

question of how this squandering of political potential relates to democracy. The two leading modern approaches to this question are, by themselves, both unsatisfactory. One approach, the realist apologist view, argues that some level of political apathy is required by democracy because the alternative of full participation in political life is an unrealizable goal whose attempt would lead only to chaos and political disintegration. This view became popular in the aftermath of the two world wars, at a time in which the memory of morally dubious popular mobilizations was both fresh and frightening. A team of political scientists, writing at mid-century, wondered how 'a mass democracy [could] work if all people were deeply involved in politics'. They argued: 'The apathetic segment of America probably has helped to hold the system together and cushioned the shock of disagreement, adjustment and change.'⁴ A more recent exposition of this view holds that democracy is 'not necessarily optimized when it is maximized' and asserts that democracy 'will have a longer life if it has a more balanced existence'. Hence, 'the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of some individuals and groups'.⁵ The problem with this view, even if we were to accept the prudence of its practical application, is its philosophical sterility. It tells us nothing about the nature of political apathy other than its use in subduing an energized politics and reducing the severity of political conflicts and social change. It leaves unanswered the question of why democracy is incapable of the full flowering of its own principles. Nor does it explain how it is that contemporary democracies seem so skilled at yielding the very apathy needed for their preservation.

Against the realist apology for apathy stand participatory democrats who find in political apathy an unambiguous limit to the flourishing of democratic ideals which hinders the realization of a 'true' egalitarian government. Since participationists conceive of democracy as that state of political affairs in which the law's addressees also understand themselves to be the law's authors, political apathy appears as an anti-democratic force that disturbs the identity between ruler and ruled and signifies an effective return to the state of servility. Rousseau, for example, one of the first modern proponents of participatory democracy, believed that the legitimacy of a political society would evaporate in the face of political apathy, claiming that 'the instant a people allows itself to be represented it is no longer free'.⁶ Contemporary defenders of participatory democracy are hardly less virulent than Rousseau in asserting a clear and unequivocal opposition between democracy and apathy.⁷ The problem with the participationist approach, as I will argue below, is that it fails to understand ways in which apathy is consistent with democratic thinking and how equality is a principle fundamental

not only to the system of democratic government, but also to the psychological condition of political indifference. Moreover, a rigid adherence to the participationist insistence on the identity of ruler and ruled has the effect of removing democracy from the pages of history and of restricting it to an ideal that has never before been realized, not even in ancient Athens which itself was no stranger to the squandering of political potential that is all too observable today.⁸

There is also the question of what exactly constitutes civic engagement under the participationist model, for it has often been the case that the commitment to political participation in the abstract has exceeded a precise specification of what an active and engaged citizenry might spend its time doing. Thomas Jefferson, with his proposed system of dividing the young American republic into small wards so as to facilitate political participation among all the citizens, stands as one of the earliest architects of a plan for participatory democracy. Yet Jefferson was at a loss when he considered what purpose the wards might possess beyond tightening the security of the nation. He fell back upon a vague optimism when he asserted: 'begin them only for a single purpose [and they will] soon show for what others they are the best instruments'.⁹ The most noteworthy and eloquent portrayals of the participatory dream – whether Rousseau's romanticization of democracy in Geneva and the Swiss communes in which 'bands of peasants are seen regulating affairs of State under an oak',¹⁰ Tocqueville's idealization of the New England township in the 19th century, or the Community Action Programs hailed by radicals in the 1960s – have never quite escaped the indeterminacy beclouding Jefferson's early scheme.¹¹ Would a participatory democracy concern itself with the mundane administrative matters usually reserved for officialdom or would it become the foundation for a different kind of politics? Does political engagement require a commitment to a specific legislative outcome or can a citizenry be engaged in the absence of problems to solve, a program to achieve, or an ideology to implement?

If these questions of political ontology have often been overlooked by defenders of participatory democracy, one thing that does seem clear is their faith that there can be no tension between engagement in politics and maintenance of a democratic society. From the participationist perspective, it is almost too obvious to assert that democracy is constituted through the act of political engagement, however defined, and that widespread political apathy therefore must signify the retreat of democracy and its replacement in the form of bureaucracy, *de facto* oligarchy, or tyranny. Yet, it is this commitment to the absolute antagonism between democracy and political apathy – or the absolute affinity between democracy and civic engagement – that I wish to call into question through investigation of the earliest records of egalitarian

thinking and practice in the ancient world. In the literature of Homer, the philosophy of Plato, and the history of Herodotus, political apathy is presented and understood as a *democratic* phenomenon that emerges out of the very egalitarian principles whose full proliferation it simultaneously restricts. Within the modern debate in democratic theory, the realist apologists for apathy clash with strident participationists over whether a certain amount of political apathy is adventitious or corruptive for a democratic society, but, in either case, political apathy is understood as a phenomenon extrinsic to democracy which, whether salutary or delegitimizing, encounters a democratic polity by virtue of happenstance or sociological factors unrelated to political science. For the ancients, however, political apathy was understood as a specifically democratic mode of being-in-the-world. The ancients expected political apathy to emerge within democratic societies – not simply for the tautological reason that only in democracies does the squandering of civic potential arise as an urgent problem, but, more deeply, because they recognized that apathy and democratic governance both rested on a similar set of egalitarian principles.

Achilles' apathy

The *Iliad*, for example, depicts political apathy and egalitarianism as almost synonymous forces which appear, not antagonistically, but with the highest consonance and cooperation. The key figure is Achilles whose withdrawal from war and politics is perhaps the first portrayal of political apathy within the world's literary tradition and whose egalitarian insight into the equality of all fates also makes him one of the very first exponents of a democratic *ethos*. Achilles' apoliticism is complex and varied. Specifically, his apoliticism at the end of Book One is an altogether different phenomenon from his apoliticism in the *Iliad's* central Book Nine. At the end of the first book, Achilles withdraws out of protest. He will no longer fight Trojans or deliberate with those who were fellow Greeks because he believes himself to have been spurned in the distribution of slave-girls. Dishonored and belittled, Achilles decides to make his presence felt by his absence. He resolves to sit on the shores of Troy and to watch the struggle as a spectator. Disappointed in his efforts to win distinction helping the Greek cause, Achilles exiles himself, wishing destruction upon his former allies, so that through Greek defeat he may finally gain an overdue, if perverse, renown. Achilles' outrage at the system of distributive justice practiced at Troy makes it difficult to characterize this initial period of apoliticism as political apathy. So long as Achilles feels himself to have been wronged by a corrupt regime, his political silence does not reflect an

aversion to war and politics themselves, but only to their particular conduct by the general Agamemnon in the 9th year of the campaign at Troy. It is therefore not out of any hostility to struggle as such that Achilles leaves the political community; rather, Achilles continues to wage a silent war through his very refusal to participate. Book One concludes:

Never did he go to the place of assembly, where men win glory, nor ever to war, but allowed his heart to waste away, as he remained there; and he longed for the war cry and battle.¹²

Achilles is not heard from again until the 9th book. But when he is, the situation is altogether different. Now it is apathy, and not protest, that defines his apoliticism. If previously Achilles had sought to win acclaim through his absence, by Book Nine he has come to disdain the struggle for distinction as such. Three eminent Greek leaders visit Achilles in his hut where they find him now as *bard* 'delighting his heart' with a lyre, singing songs of 'the glorious deeds of warriors'.¹³ They return to Achilles the controversial slave-girl and they also bestow upon him treasure, vast property, and titles to rule. Yet Achilles, suddenly and curiously immune to the desire for worldly distinction which had led him to rage in Book One, now announces that he will neither accept the gifts nor return to the struggles of war and politics, but will begin to prepare for his homecoming to Phthia. It is the very elusiveness of Achilles' thinking at this juncture (for what reason does he have not to participate now that the wrongs have been righted and he is duly honored?) that determines the apathetic nature of his apoliticism. Neither oppression, nor material deprivation, nor lack of an education in politics underlies Achilles' apoliticism. Rather, his abstention from political life appears to have no other cause than his own evident preference not to engage in the struggle for distinction. Having been raised by his father to lead an eminently political life, 'to strive for glory in assembly among men' and to 'always be best,' and having acted on the public stage for nine years at Troy, Achilles, in his apathy in Book Nine, appears as a *squanderer* of political potential.¹⁴ With the illegitimacy of Agamemnon's rule corrected, there is no longer any hardship on the basis of which Achilles – the mightiest, youngest, and most beautiful of the Greeks encamped at Troy – might unburden himself of responsibility for his apoliticism.

Strictly speaking, Achilles' apathy is most manifest when Achilles remains silent and absent from the public stage of war and politics and the literary stage of the *Iliad's* narrative. Achilles' apathy is at its peak somewhere immediately before and after Book Nine in which he makes no direct appearance in the epic. When Achilles, in Book Nine, explains his refusal to return to war and politics he is already engaging in the

very behavior he said he would renounce, since to argue for political apathy is a paradoxical act. Nonetheless, what Achilles says to the heralds is significant because it provides insight into the intellectual life of an apathetic. And the only thing more startling than Achilles' refusal to participate in public life is the egalitarian *ethos* upon which his apoliticism is grounded:

An equal fate to the one who stays behind as to the one who struggles well.
In a single honor are held both the low and the high. Death comes alike
to the idle man and to him who works much.¹⁵

Achilles' insight into the equality of all fates is thus coincident with his political apathy. It is only when Achilles withdraws from political assembly with fellow Greeks and from war against Trojans that he recognizes an irrepressible human equality surpassing the divisions of class, caste, and *ethnos*. So long as Achilles had participated in war and politics, he sought to fulfill his father's wish that he be the 'best of the Achaeans' and, so, cultivated value distinctions between himself and others and, by extension, between the low (*kakoi*) and the high (*esthloi*). It is Achilles' abstention from the agonism at the core of war and politics alike that provides the context for his democratic awakening and his resulting incapacity to distinguish between high and low. Linguistically, Achilles' apathy and egalitarianism are more than coincident, they are identical. Achilles uses the very same words to express both his newfound indifference to politics and war and also his recognition of human equality. 'We are all held in a single honor' – thus Achilles will no longer bother himself with winning an ephemeral and false distinction on the public stage. 'We are all held in a single honor' – this is also how Achilles affirms the equality of all fates. Today we are no less familiar with employing the language of equality to express indifference and apathy. For example, the French expression '*Ca m'est égal*', the German '*Das ist mir egal*', or the English 'It's all the same to me' or 'It makes no difference' reveal at the colloquial level the strong tendency to express apathy as a flattening of allegedly incommensurable qualities and as an equalization of supposed differences in quantification.

Now it might be said in objection that the coincidence of Achillean apathy and egalitarianism has limited significance: that its implications for political theory are restricted to a particular kind of politics that is no longer dominant in the modern context. In the Homeric setting, political participation has the unambiguous meaning of striving for personal distinction before one's peers.¹⁶ The central concern of the Homeric hero is to '*aien aristuein kai emmenai allon*' ('always be the best and to rise above others').¹⁷ Indeed, this is the admonition with which Achilles' father Peleus sends his son off to war. Within the confines of an intensely agonistic political ontology, the very idea of a

democratic politics appears as an unstable and potentially contradictory term: democracy derives its meaning from the equality of rights and responsibilities distributed to each of the citizens, yet political behavior consists in the persistent effort to outdo one's fellows and erect meaningful disparities in renown, worth, and excellence. But if one lets go of this ontology and admits of civic engagement irreducible to the desire to win praise for oneself, is not the tension between egalitarianism and political action relaxed? Aristotle, after all, who provides the most systematic and coherent study of politics in the ancient world, extends the meaning of politics beyond the fame-seeking and fixation on greatness of the heroic age. Defining politics in terms of speech, Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, distinguishes between three kinds of speech which occur in the political context.¹⁸ Display, in which the aim is to win or bestow praise and blame, appears as a clear continuation of the Homeric conception of the political sphere as a place where individuals compete for distinction through the performance of great deeds and the eloquent utterance of great words. The other two kinds of speech, however, deliberation over the future and investigation into the past, appear to recognize modes of political experience which are not obviously connected to the desire to outshine one's fellows in excellence. The former speaks to the legislative function of politics, the latter to adjudication. The suggestion would be that if Achilles had conceived of politics in these additional, socially conscientious ways – as an opportunity to ratify norms for future conduct or as a court empowered to arbitrate over competing accounts of the past – then he would have found a way to maintain his engagement in political life even as he forswore the heroic interest in outstripping his compatriots in honors and praise.

Although some commentators have emphasized the importance of the distinction between, on the one hand, a politics of fame-seeking and, on the other hand, a legislative and judicial kind of politics, I think it would be a mistake to insist too strongly on the meaning of this opposition.¹⁹ Even if the spheres of legislation and adjudication are not intended primarily to distribute fame and honor upon their participants, these forms of politics nonetheless do bear important connections to the individual effort to win acclaim before a body of peers. The point is not simply that genuine public servants often do win reputations in their fields, but that the very practices of law-making and litigation are quite similar to the quest for personal glory in the fact that all three manifest themselves as a struggle for distinction. One does not have to adopt a Schmittian phenomenology of the political to admit that the political actor, whether fame-seeker, legislator, or litigant, is engaged in an intensely agonal pursuit, equipped with a relatively clear sense of victory and defeat, striving against competitors, rivals, and opponents. And if one insists upon identifying an essential trait of political experience, the

necessity of struggle is not a bad place to start. It is difficult to see how a person reluctant to win or to distinguish (whether oneself, one's cause, or one's conception of the past) could maintain a political existence. This is not to say that a non-competitive politics is entirely inconceivable – in fact, there are signs that it is increasingly likely in the present age – but it seems, thus far, that politics has always been closely allied to an assertive drive to distinguish the individual, the program, or a binding conception of the past.²⁰ Moreover, although it is probably true that the modern style of politics provides more opportunities for public service which are clearly disconnected from the pursuit of individual fame, it would be an over-extension of charity to presume that the nameless political actors operating in the modern context are also selfless or otherwise immune from the desire for some form of victory. The quest for recognition before one's peers does not exhaust the possibilities for agonism within the political community.²¹ In any case, the close affinity between political practice and agonism makes the story of Achilles, who at certain moments appears as the most fiercely competitive individual who has ever 'lived', relevant not merely for the political science of the ancient world, but for the political theory of today.²²

Another objection to my use of Achilles to expose the coincidence of political apathy and egalitarian thinking would be that the equality of all fates (*isomoira*) need not be limited to an apolitical mantra, but could just as easily be formulated as an ideology upon which a radically redistributivist politics is grounded and organized. The *Iliad* itself contains an alternative expression of egalitarian thinking in which the commitment to a deep and enduring equality leads, not to apathy, but to activism. When Zeus instructs Poseidon to refrain from engagement in the Trojan War, Poseidon initially rejects this command, claiming that he has equal honor (*homotimon*) with Zeus and that fate has decreed to each an equal share (*isomoron*) of the world's dominions.²³ That Poseidon ultimately obeys Zeus and, like Achilles, withdraws from the struggle at Troy does nothing to change the fact that Poseidon invokes the equality of fates as that which motivates and entitles him to participate on the public stage. Recorded history is obviously replete with other examples in which the appeal to equality has inspired an impassioned and radical brand of political activism. In Athens, for example, during the archonship of Solon, leaders of a movement to redistribute land to the poor appealed to the equality of all fates (*isomoira*) not simply as an eternal metaphysical truth, but as a moral principle which demanded economic equality within the material world. It is this materialist conception of the equality of all fates that Solon has in mind when he says that he opposed land redistribution because it did not please him 'to allow the equal division [*isomoira*] of our rich fatherland among the low [*kakoi*] and high [*esthloi*] alike'.²⁴

The examples of Poseidon and the ancient movement for land reform remind us that Achilles' apolitical appeal to the equality of all fates (*isē moira*) by no means exhausts the meaning of egalitarianism. If the apathetic Achilles interprets *isomoira* to mean that all humans are equal in the here-and-now regardless of material differences, political activists have appealed to the equality of all fates to emphasize ongoing *inequalities* in the material world that are in need of immediate, compensatory, political action. I will refrain from making a judgment as to which of these conceptions of *isomoira* represents a more radical brand of egalitarianism (whether the activists for bringing the idea of equality to bear upon the material world or Achilles for refusing to look upon the material world in terms of the *kakoi–esthloi* distinction). And in any case, the fact that the Greek word for fate, *moira*, has the secondary meaning of portion or share suggests the co-originality of the materialistic and idealistic conceptions of *isomoira*. The idealistic variant, which conceives of an ineradicable human equality superceding all worldly distinctions and thereby dissolving the proclivity and passion for politics, may not be the only form that egalitarian thinking can take, but it is nonetheless true that the idea of equality does contain this apolitical potential.

Plato's critique of apathetic democrats

The notion that political apathy be properly understood, not merely as an obstacle in the way of democracy, but as a psychological condition very much in keeping with egalitarian principles, finds support in the fact that when ancient authors confronted democracy, whether as friend or foe, they usually did so in a fashion that appreciated the positive correlation between apathy and democracy. Within Plato's critique of democracy, for example, there are clear indications of an awareness of the Achillean threat in which an individual is drained of political energies as a consequence of an all-encompassing egalitarianism. Plato's commitment to an ahistorical rationality and to standards of propriety independent of their popularity should not be forgotten as important sources of Plato's antagonism to the democratic regime; indeed, Plato's insistence that the political leader be understood as a trained expert, equivalent to a doctor or a captain of a ship, obviously makes it impossible for him to embrace the democratic notion that rectitude and legitimacy have no other foundation than the *demos* which defines them. Nonetheless, if one looks closely at Plato's critique of democracy, the concern for the apathetic *telos* of the democratic individual figures prominently.

Plato was uniquely well positioned to connect apathy to democracy

because his philosophy insists that the meaning of each political regime exceeds the governmental structure it specifies and also refers to a type of personality likely to flourish within a particular political community.²⁵ For Plato, democracy did not simply designate the social arrangement in which political power originates from the majority, but also marked a way of life likely to be pursued by typical democratic citizens. And what was distinctive about Plato's democratic person was political apathy. The democratic individual

. . . lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand. Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he's idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy. He often engages in politics, leaping up from his seat and saying and doing whatever comes into his mind. If he happens to admire soldiers, he's carried in that direction, if money-makers, in that one. There's neither order nor necessity in his life, but he calls it pleasant, free, blessedly happy, and he follows it for as long as he lives.²⁶

One lives democratically, Plato claims, when one is unable or unwilling to possess stable ethical values, when the question of 'time not mispent' remains unanswered in any sort of durable or consistent manner. The chaotic cycle of inebriation, military exercise, and philosophy symbolizes the equal claims of appetite, spirit (*thumos*), and reason (*logos*) which compete against each other, unsuccessfully, for rule of the democratic person, making the democratic life one of transience, dilettantism, and the attention-deficit disorder. From the perspective of the democratic state, ethical freedom means the permissibility of each citizen choosing a specific conception of the good and, as Pericles explains in the funeral oration, the willingness of each citizen not to be offended by the private pleasures of his neighbor.²⁷ But from the perspective of the individuals whose lives are meant to manifest this freedom, ethical permissibility translates into a lack of all ethics, perpetual experimentation, and, in a phrase that foreshadows Heidegger 2,300 years later, the 'yielding day by day to the desire at hand'.

The equality of all impulses and inclinations within the democratic personality precludes the cultivation and maintenance of *values as such*, since values are always hierarchically organized and specify the relative importance of some concern *vis-à-vis* others. And it is the valuelessness of the democratic individual – the utter incapacity to take a meaningful stand on behalf of a cause or a program and the absolute failure to maintain any durability, consistency, or commitment – that underlies the political apathy of the democratic form of life. Thus, the fact that Plato describes the democratic individual as someone who 'often engages in politics' is hardly inconsistent with political apathy, because the nature

of this democratic brand of engagement is passive and reactive, without direction or order of any kind, and utterly whimsical. Not even the desire to win praise and recognition can orient the haphazard forays of the democratic individual onto the public stage. And in any case, the relativization of politics into one of many commensurable experiences is actually the way in which depoliticalization appears. The passionate opposition to politics, on the other hand, always betrays the very politicization that is sought to be overcome. If political action usually arises as the effort to make a difference in the world through a struggle for distinction (for oneself, one's cause, or one's conception of the past), a virulent apoliticism will try to gain distinction for itself and, in so doing, enter the political space that it seeks to deny. Thus, Epicurus' apolitical dictum, '*lathe biosas*' ('live unnoticed'), violates itself to the extent it expresses an effort to gain an anti-political following and, in so doing, change the world – a contradiction that Plutarch was quick to point out.²⁸ Similarly, Seneca's defense of leisure in *De Otio* contradicts itself when the benefits of a life away from the public are defended on the basis of their capacity to improve the common good.²⁹ Political apathy is at its height not when the private life is *chosen* over the public, but when choice as such is abandoned so that commitment is altogether drained from the individual.³⁰ The best example of an apolitical thinker from the Hellenistic period, therefore, is not one of the countless forgotten followers of Epicurus who preached apoliticism to his friends in the garden, but Epictetus, the stoic philosopher and slave who never rejected politics outright, but rather sought to make political engagement just one of an infinite number of equally meaningless experiences. *Apathia*, the psychological state of an individual liberated from dependence on the external world, was a crucial principle taught by Epictetus and the stoics. The inherently materialistic pursuit of politics was an obvious target for the most doctrinaire stoics, but Epictetus realized that political apathy was best achieved in subtle and indirect fashion. Specifically, Epictetus recognized that an active opposition to politics could be as political as a more straightforward embrace of political life. Thus Epictetus taught:

Remember that it is not only a desire for riches and power that makes you abject and subservient to others, but also a desire for quiet and leisure, and travel and learning. For the value you place on an external object, whatever it may be, makes you subservient to another. What difference does it make, then, whether you desire to be a senator or not to be a senator? Or whether you desire to hold office or not to hold office?

So long as one maintained a strong aversion to the externals from which one sought to be liberated, *apathia* could not be attained. 'Not only is office external to it, but freedom from office too.'³¹ The democratic

individual described by Plato, who neither practices serious politics nor avoids the Assembly altogether, attains this subtle apathy described by one of its greatest teachers.

Plato suggests that what is problematic about democracy is that there is a tension between its social and individual manifestations. From the perspective of the city, democracy characterizes that regime in which the entire citizen body finds itself with the power to determine the norms that will govern the political community. On the individual level, however, the democratic personality refers precisely to the abdication of social responsibility, to the inability to place oneself solidly behind a goal or a conception of the common good, to the failure to behave with the modicum of selfsameness and durability required by serious political action. If the severity of this tension between the democratic state and the democratic personality was tempered for Plato by the fact that the typical democratic individual nonetheless engaged in an occasionalist and fatuous brand of politics, it seems that the force of Plato's analysis would only be stronger in the modern context in which the conditions of mass society greatly restrict the potential for a haphazard and light-hearted style of political participation. We live without the agora or assembly into which a citizen might stroll and, in so doing, casually activate his or her political being. The absence of a physical space constituting the *demos* has the consequence that the modern must be much more clear when he or she is being political and must enter politics through choice, commitment, and the willingness to take on a semi-permanent identity. In the absence of a clearly delineated and easily accessible political space in which citizens can speak 'whatever comes to their mind', presentday democrats are less able to maintain the capacity for a frivolous and unabashedly inconsequential mode of political action – unless, of course, one includes political spectatorship, in which one merely watches and opines over political events, as a form of civic participation. In any case, the point is clear enough: Plato understood the democratic individual to be apathetic toward a serious politics organized around a cause, a legislative outcome, or the drive for recognition and acclaim. The incessant fluctuation of the democratic individual's tastes and resolutions precluded even the most minimal level of commitment which must characterize the participation of the serious political actor.

Herodotus' account of the apolitical democratic wish

What if Plato was correct in conceiving of political apathy not merely as an obstacle in the way of democracy, but, additionally, as a psychological condition likely to flourish in tandem with the expansion of

egalitarian government? Would the coincidence of democracy and political apathy necessitate the abandonment of the democratic dream on the basis that the democratic life erodes the political energies needed to maintain a democratic state? Or might the theoretical purity and moral appeal of democracy somehow live on in the face of the identification of political apathy as a distinctly democratic disease? It seems that if one takes seriously the theoretical link between political indifference and egalitarian government, then the participationist model of democracy becomes deeply problematic. As it is, the participationist goal of full civic engagement already demands more from democracy than it has ever before been able to muster. If one supplies the additional insight that there is actually something *democratic* about the decision to abstain from politics, then the goal of participatory democracy becomes not merely ambitious, but flawed and contradictory. In any case, it is not my purpose here to reject the aim of participatory democracy – for, even if there is a uniquely democratic proclivity for political apathy, it may be that this condition can be overcome through education and the willingness to conceive of civic engagement in new ways. Of course, the participatory model hardly exhausts the possibilities for democratic organization. For an alternative model, one need look no further than the first coherent presentation of the democratic dream within political theory: the debate on constitutions reported by Herodotus. Here egalitarian government is conceived in a fashion that is entirely consistent with the expectation that political apathy would flourish within an egalitarian society.

The crucial passage comes from Book Three in which Herodotus relates the rise of Persian power in the East. Following the overthrow of the pseudo-Smerdis at the hands of seven co-conspirators, Persia is left without a form of government as no clear successor has emerged from the political shuffling. This leads to a debate among the conspirators over which form of government they should institute, thereby bringing the central question of the ‘best regime’ into the tradition of recorded political thought.³² Three speeches follow, each supporting a different form of government: egalitarian, oligarchic, and autocratic. When Otanes rises to defend the egalitarian form of government, he supports a vision of the democratic promise that is fundamentally at odds with the modern conception of democracy. Otanes supports egalitarian government, not because it will make subjects into rulers through extending monarchical autonomy to the entire citizenry, but rather because it will abate the competitive passions that had hitherto been so fundamental to the political experience. He declares that government in the hands of the majority ‘does none of those things that single rulers do’.³³ And what characterizes the politics of single rulers is an unquenchable agonial energy, an irrepressible urge for distinction and

self-aggrandizement which leads to arrogance (*hubris*) and envy (*phthonos*).³⁴ If democracy is idealized today, it is because it is seen as that form of government in which there is an identity between the rulers and the ruled so that the law's addressees can also understand themselves to be the law's authors. The important suggestion from Herodotus' debate on constitutions, however, is that the very notion of rule – even when it is evenly distributed in the form of *collective* authorship and autonomy – is a value of kings.

Otanes idealizes egalitarian government not simply as an equitable distribution of political privileges, but as a radical alteration of what is at stake in the practice of politics. It is not by chance, for example, that the word Otanes uses to describe the form of government he promotes is not *democratia* (the rule of the people), but *isonomia* (equality before the law). The difference is important because it reflects perfectly Otanes' desire for egalitarian government to be something other than a community of kings, ruling and legislating together. Democracy shares with the two other primary forms of government (oligarchy and monarchy) the fact that it is a form of rule (*kratos*). *Isonomia*, on the other hand, does not derive its meaning from the idea of rule. Otanes' egalitarian vision in which one 'neither rules nor is ruled' is, of course, the exact opposite of the far more familiar conception of politics as an arena in which one both rules and is ruled.³⁵

The three central institutional features of *isonomia*, as articulated by Otanes and implemented by the first egalitarian regimes, are: election of magistrates by lot, the examination of public officials following their term of service, and the power of the Assembly to deliberate upon all questions of public policy.³⁶ It is the final of these characteristics – the empowerment of the Assembly – that tends to dominate modern interpretations of the significance of ancient Greek democracy.³⁷ This emphasis on the decision-making capacity of the Assembly is by no means misplaced, but it ought to be complemented by an appreciation of the key innovation of election by lot. As I have said, isonomy is doubly opposed to other forms of government, for not only does isonomy place power in the people, but it seeks to make the political experience something other than one of rule and politics something other than a means of self-determination. And it is election by lot that achieves this second anti-political goal of ancient egalitarian government.³⁸ Election by lot is the most anti-political of political structures because it circumvents the competition for offices and honors, disconnecting positions of leadership from human effort and the machinations of party, faction, or demagogue. The agonism that figures so prominently within an electoral style of politics has little function when the selection of leaders depends upon the free play of chance. The heroic *ethos*, 'to always be best' and 'to strive for glory in assembly among men', struggles to find political significance

in the isonomic context. Insofar as political power always manifests itself in a division between rulers and ruled, officials and everyday citizens, those entitled to command and those forced to obey, the brute fact of government is always a violation of the principle of equality and the aim of an unhierarchical society. The achievement of the ancient egalitarians was their insight that the very desire for legitimate power could itself turn oppressive and undemocratic if it led to the forgetting of the inherently inequalitarian nature of government. In place of a more optimistic ideal of autonomy and authorship, in which politics could be conceived as a potent symbol of a community's identity or as a history-making vessel through which 'the people' could determine its own fate, the ancient egalitarians opted for a pessimistic model which accepted the tension between governance and equality as insurmountable.³⁹ The procedure of election by lot signified a stubborn refusal to believe that the power-holder might ever embody a legitimate reflection of the people's character or that the officiate class might lead the community in a way that could truthfully be said to be its own. The acceptance of the unbridgeable gap separating the representative from the represented was supposed to limit this distance and prevent its elongation at the hands of those who were over-zealous and unrealistic in their desire to close it altogether. Election by lot meant giving up on a perfect consonance between ruler and ruled and, thus, a parallel refusal to trust that any individual or party could ever rightfully claim to occupy the seats of power. Beneath this principled opposition to the unavoidable inequalitarianism of politics, therefore, was a realistic and pragmatic acceptance of political power as an admittedly unmanageable and threatening force in the world. Election by lot arose as an attempt to solve the problem that government is a practical necessity yet a powerful threat to egalitarian principles.

Of course, it must be remembered that the actual implementation of this anti-political conception of democracy never attained the idealization which surrounded it. In Athens, for example, the full proliferation of election by lot was always held in check by the popular selection of military leaders and economic administrators.⁴⁰ In the funeral oration, Pericles, who himself owed his longevity in office to the fact that he was a general re-elected by popular vote year after year, boasts of the Athenian democracy that 'we do not let our system of rotating public offices undermine our judgment of a candidate's virtue' – thus reminding us that even within political cultures organized around the lottery, there were often lengthy and complex nomination processes which served to screen those who might be randomly selected.⁴¹ And Thucydides' own reflection about the Athenian democracy in the time of Pericles – that it was 'in name a democracy, but in fact a government by its first man' – only further emphasizes the point that in practice isonomic structures

might be similar to monarchy.⁴² The Athenian writer commonly known as the 'Old Oligarch' explained that although the lottery provided each citizen with equal access to the council and the courts:

The people do not ask that the offices which bring safety to the people if managed well, and danger to all if managed poorly, be open to everyone: they don't think they should be given access by lot to positions of general or cavalry commander. For the people know that it is more beneficial for them not to hold these offices, but to let the most capable men hold them.⁴³

Moreover, if the philosophical and moral appeal of *isonomia* resided in its attempt to de-politicize the *polis* through quelling the passions for ruling and being-ruled, the fact remains that in reality *isonomia* was often no more than a euphemism used by popular leaders to describe the rule of the masses.⁴⁴

These limitations restricting the full proliferation of election by lot need not conceal the philosophical insight contained within it: namely, that an egalitarian society can find powerful institutional support in the free play of chance. Just as the insurmountable human equality recognized by Achilles is grounded on the shared fate of death, so does election by lot seek to harness the egalitarian potential of fatalism through the replication and institutionalization of fate as a foundational governmental structure. If modern democratic government accepts a supposedly inevitable agonism, and grounds its political science on the hope that 'ambition [might be] made to counteract ambition', ancient egalitarian government found its philosophical and institutional point of departure in what was wholly outside of human control and machination.⁴⁵ Today it is common for democratic theorists to criticize the present state of democratic affairs on the basis that the political community is losing control over the forces that shape it and succumbing to fate.⁴⁶ For the ancients, however, it was precisely the unpredictability and a-humanity of fate that made it the most suitable basis upon which to erect egalitarian political regimes. To ground government on the ungovernability of fate – this was the paradoxical yet perfectly understandable procedure adopted by the ancients in the effort to confront the equally paradoxical task of reconciling the necessity of government with the desire of establishing an egalitarian society. Modern democracy seeks to make individuals kings, whereas ancient *isonomia* sought to divest kings of any conceivable title to superiority.

Conclusion

Against both the realist apology for apathy as a necessary relaxant of the political system and the participationists' unequivocal opposition to

apathy, I have tried to present a conception of the relationship between apathy and democracy which attends to the inter-relation and shared egalitarian foundation of these two core concepts. The fact that Achilles becomes a democrat only once he is outside of the political community, that Plato worried about the apathetic tendencies of the democratic individual, and that the earliest presentation of egalitarian government sought to reduce the sphere of agonism, competition, and struggle – all of this suggests that political apathy is something more than a limit to the practice of democracy, but is also consistent with an egalitarian *ethos*. The modern optimism that equality might be secured through active participation in political life would have struck the ancients as a rather strange and counter-intuitive ideal. Surely, there was an appreciation for the capacity of law and law-making to carve out a space of equality in a world otherwise characterized by gross disparities in power, wealth, and privilege. Aristotle, for example, credits the *polis* for bringing together otherwise unequal individuals into a limited and circumscribed sphere of legal equality.⁴⁷ But to expect that the activity that went on within this space might also cohere with egalitarian principles – this notion would have been inconceivable to the ancients. A life lived in respect of human equality found itself in tension with the political life devoted to the distinction of oneself, one's cause, or one's conception of the past.

Harvard University, USA

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Notes

- 1 Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 371.
- 2 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 38. ('Domination consists in institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions.')
- 3 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 120, 130.
- 4 Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 322.
- 5 Samuel P. Huntington, 'The United States', in *The Crisis of Democracy*, ed. Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 113–15.
- 6 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, III.15; 'L'instant qu'un peuple se donne des représentants, il n'est plus libre'.

- 7 See, for example, Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 4th edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 91 ('We see our choice as a choice between being citizens or being slaves'); Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick, *Power and Empowerment* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 32–3 ('The illiberal and, indeed, antidemocratic propensity of ordinary men and women is an undeniable fact that must be confronted').
- 8 Josiah Ober, for example, estimates that in 4th-century Athens, only 6,000–8,000 attended the Assembly out of a civic body of about 30,000; see his *The Athenian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 23. Robert Dahl provides additional evidence supporting the suggestion that 'there are grounds for believing that only a rather small minority of citizens attended the meetings of the Assembly'; see his *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 11, 345.
- 9 Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 2 February 1816; see *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb (Washington, DC: 1904), vol. 14, pp. 421–3.
- 10 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, IV.1.
- 11 For an example of a political theorist leveling the charge of emptiness against defenders of an abstract participatory politics, see Hannah Pitkin, 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public', *Political Theory* 9 (1981): 327–52.
- 12 Homer, *The Iliad*, I, 490–2; trans. A. T. Murray, rev. William F. Wyatt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 49–51.
- 13 *ibid.*, IX, 186–9. Twice in the first four lines of his re-emergence in Book Nine, Achilles is described as 'being delighted' (*terpomenon*) – a clear contrast to the rage and dissatisfaction that had characterized his initial conduct in Book One.
- 14 Homer, *Iliad*, IX, 427; XI, 784.
- 15 *ibid.*, IX, 318–20. ἰση οἶρα ἐνοντι, καὶ εἰ ἀλα τὶς πολεῖ ζοί. ἐν δὲ ἡ τὶ ἡ ἐν κακός ἦδε καὶ ἐσθλός. κατθαν ὁ ὡς ὁ τ' ἀεργός ἀνηρ ὁ τε πολλὰ εοργώς.
- 16 The centrality of the pursuit of fame to Greek culture persisted well beyond the archaic Greek civilization and the time of Homer. Solon was only expressing the norm when he wondered: 'If the longing for fame were to be banished from life, what would be left worth having?' Lucian, *Anacharsis*, 15f.; cit. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. Oswyn Murray, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 389–90, n. 37.
- 17 Homer, *The Iliad*, VI, 208; XI, 784. Both Glaucus and Achilles are sent to war by their fathers with these words. Numerous commentators have identified this line as the most fundamental principle of Greek life. See, for example, Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. Sheila Stern (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 140; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 41.
- 18 Aristotle's twin formulations of the essence of the human being – that he or she is a 'political animal' and a 'being possessing speech' – are complementary concepts. Aristotle's political and linguistic definitions of the

human being follow in immediate succession: ‘But obviously man is a political animal in a sense in which a bee is not, or any other gregarious animal. Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech.’ *Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair, rev. and re-presented Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 60, 1253a7.

- 19 Arendt, for example, limits her conception of agonistic politics to the self-oriented pursuits of display, the drive for recognition and immortalization, and the performance of great words and speeches. She suggests that legislation is somehow non-agonistic. She speaks, for instance, of the tremendous influence within Greek antiquity of ‘the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one’s self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states. An outstanding symptom of this prevailing influence is that the Greeks, in distinction from all later developments, did not count legislating among the political activities’ (*Human Condition*, p. 194). Against Arendt, I suggest that legislation is a modern-day example of the agonal spirit, perhaps a more sublimated form than the pursuit of glory, but an intensely competitive practice nonetheless.
- 20 As an example of the search for a non-agonistic brand of politics, see Iris Marion Young, ‘Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy’, in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 120–35. Derrida also contemplates the possibility of a new kind of politics which emerges out of the very depoliticalization threatening the familiar, agonistic variant. Romantically, Derrida wonders: ‘Would it still make sense to speak of democracy when it would no longer be a question (no longer in question as to what is essential and constitutive) of country, nation, even of State or citizen – in other words, *if at least one still keeps to the accepted use of this word*, when it would no longer be a political question? . . . On the one hand, we seem to be confirming . . . an essential and necessary depoliticalization. This depoliticalization would no longer necessarily be the neuter or negative indifference to all forms of the social bond, of the community, of friendship. On the other hand, through this depoliticalization, which would apply only to the fundamental and dominant concept of the political, through this *genealogical* deconstruction of the political (and through it to the democratic), one would seem to think, interpret and implement another politics, another democracy.’ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), p. 104.
- 21 Weber, for example, refuses to acknowledge the selfless political actor: ‘First of all the career of politics grants a feeling of power. The knowledge of influencing men, of participating in power over them, and above all, the feeling of holding in one’s hands a nerve fiber of historically important events can elevate the professional politician above everyday routine even when he is placed in formally modest positions.’ Even those engaged in the struggle for material equality are not free from the fundamental agonism of politics: ‘He who wants to establish absolute justice on earth by force requires a

- following, a human “machine.” He must hold out the necessary internal and external premiums, heavenly or worldly reward, to this “machine” or else the machine will not function. Under the conditions of the modern class struggle, the internal premiums consist of the satisfying of hatred and the craving for revenge; above all, resentment and the need for pseudo-ethical self-righteousness: the opponents must be slandered and accused of heresy. The external rewards are adventure, victory, booty, power, and spoils . . . We shall not be deceived about this by verbiage; the materialist interpretation of history is no cab to be taken at will; it does not stop short of the promoters of revolutions.’ Max Weber, ‘Politics as a Vocation’, in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 115, 125.
- 22 The character of Achilles is itself an important example of the fluidity of personal glory and the common good as competing goals organizing the conduct of the political individual. In the period before his apathy, Achilles engages in a style of politics familiar to the modern observer when he oversees an investigation into the cause of the malady afflicting the Greek army at the commencement of the *Iliad*. If Achilles spends the middle part of the epic in the dubious position of wishing destruction upon the Greeks so that he might receive his proper renown, at the beginning of the *Iliad*, when he exposes the fact that Agamemnon’s insolence is the cause of the pestilence plaguing the Greeks, he finds himself in the felicitous situation occupied by any political actor who believes that his policies are truly better than those of his opponents; for under such circumstances, there is no difference between personal and public advantage.
- 23 Homer, *Iliad*, IV, 186, 209.
- 24 Solon, W 34: *Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists*, ed. and trans. Michael Gagarin and Paul Woodruff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 27.
- 25 That there is such a thing as a democratic personality, that the importance of a political form is not exhausted by the regime that it designates, that the ideology shaping a state’s constitution might also shape the habits and the mores of the individual’s constitution – these observations of the interpenetration between city and soul were a matter of course for Plato, but they lie hidden for the most part within contemporary democratic theory which tends to separate morality (*what is right for us*) from ethics (*what is good or authentic for me*). One does not have to accept Plato’s metaphysical claim that there is a fundamental isomorphism between city and soul, morality and ethics, politics and personality, to recognize that a form of politics may possess significance beyond the type of government that it designates. Because government tends to be a highly dominant and prominent institution within any given society, it is likely that the principles and values upon which government is organized will also intrude upon the thinking, philosophy and mores of the individuals living in and around the political community. If an economic system can shape the tastes and the behavior of the people to whom it is applied – so that capitalism encourages competition, a taste for newness and innovation, and an ethic of work – it seems reasonable to expect the political principles upon which a society’s

government is organized to possess this same extra-disciplinary power. It is difficult to imagine, for example, a resilient monarchical regime that did not also encourage feudal tendencies such as a pronounced social hierarchy, the commitment to deference and loyalty, and a *noblesse oblige* grounding the reciprocation of duties and obligations. Plato invites us to consider governmental principles not merely as the free expression of a certain group of people, but also as a positive force that in turn shapes the proclivities and educates the values of the people living under a particular regime.

- 26 Plato, *Republic*, 561c–d. Here I follow the translation of G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), p. 232. These lines recall Achilles. In his apathy in Book Nine, Achilles drinks and plays the lyre. At other times, he is engaged as a soldier committed to a life of struggle, striving for distinction on the public stage. Sometimes he plays the role of a politician, participating in assemblies, and deliberating over the common good. Like the democratic person, Achilles fluctuates endlessly in his commitments. At one moment, Achilles chooses the short life of glory, then he rejects this choice, then he returns again to battle. Achilles wavers between going home and staying at Troy, an uncertainty that leaves him in a nether-region of idleness and neglect. Sometimes he speaks of the equality of all humans – rejecting the distinction between Greek and Trojan, the brave and the cowardly, the honored and the low – while at other times the reality of these divisions propels him to action. The one difference is that Achilles seems to have avoided the pleasant happiness which Plato assigns to the democratic individual.
- 27 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II.37.
- 28 Plutarch, ‘Is “Live Unknown” a Wise Precept?’, in *Moralia*, trans. Benedict Einarson and Phillip H. De Lacy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), vol. 14, p. 232, 1128–30. Plutarch says, ‘But not even the author of the precept wished to be unknown, as he made the very statement to escape from being unknown, dishonestly courting fame as a person of no ordinary wisdom by his advice to seek obscurity’; 1128B.
- 29 The remnants of Seneca’s treatise stand as an extended version of Epicurus’ short phrase and, as such, journey into the paradoxical realm of anti-politics. Seneca embraces retirement from public life so that one can concern oneself fully with the more significant and valuable matters of philosophy. In retirement, the wise man will investigate ‘what lies beyond this world’ and seek ‘knowledge of things immortal’. Yet, if the value of what lies beyond the world, and thus beyond politics, is what leads the philosopher away from politics, Seneca cannot persist in the unworldliness of what he describes, and he goes on to *justify* the retreat from public life on the basis of its public benefit. Seneca introduces the *usefulness* of political silence. ‘What is required, you see, of any man is that he should be of use to other men – if possible, to many; failing that, to a few; failing that, to those nearest him; failing that, to himself.’ By this, Seneca means not only to justify political silence on the basis of the corruption of political regimes, but also to demand of retirement from public life that it produce advantages for the common good. Retirement, Seneca says, has a duty to display itself, thus recalling the agonial urge to distinguish oneself in public that is

- central to war and politics alike. 'Virtue is an incomplete and feeble good when wasted on a retirement without activity never displaying what it has learned.' When he cites the philosophers Zeno and Chrysippus, who accomplished more in retirement than they would have done had they 'commanded armies, held public office, and passed laws', Seneca at once de-values public service in comparison with the private pursuit of philosophy yet relies on a notion of the common good to explain what makes philosophy superior to politics. Seneca supports retirement from political life not out of an incapacity to think in terms of benefit and harm, but because the common advantage can be secured by such a retreat. John M. Cooper and J. F. Procope (eds), *Seneca: Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 172–80.
- 30 When Achilles is at the height of his political apathy – both before and after his moral outburst in Book Nine – he does not speak out against the war or the conduct of the Greek Assembly, but watches the struggle as a spectacle. Although he repeatedly announces an intention to leave Troy and return to the private sphere, the fact remains that the apathetic Achilles never makes good on this promise and, instead, lingers in the intermediate space between public and private carved out by his political indifference. Rather than homecoming, the image that best depicts political apathy is the one of Achilles as he stands high atop his black ships docked on the shores of Troy, back turned to his native Phthia, gaze still fixed on the war he said he would renounce.
- 31 Epictetus, *The Discourses*, trans. Robin Hard (London: Everyman, 1995), pp. 248, 250 [IV.4.i, ii, xxiii].
- 32 Pindar, however, does refer to the threefold distinction between the rule of the one, the few, and the many. *Pythian Odes*, 2.86–8.
- 33 Herodotus, *Histories*, III.80.
- 34 *ibid.*
- 35 See, for example, Aristotle, *Politics*.
- 36 Gregory Vlastos, 'Isonomia', *American Journal of Philology* 74 (1953): 337.
- 37 Ober, for example, locates a key source of democratic power in the popular control of public speech and places great emphasis on the fact that elites operating within the Athenian Assembly could always be shouted down by the assembled citizens (*The Athenian Revolution*, pp. 23–4). Also see R. K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chapter 4, for the argument that the Assembly maintained true sovereignty under the Athenian democracy.
- 38 Aristotle makes it clear that the random rotation of offices stems out of a democratic wish to avoid ruling and being ruled altogether. Aristotle claims that a fundamental principle of the democratic constitution is the desire to live as one likes 'and from it has come the ideal of not being ruled, not by anybody at all if possible, or at least only in turn'. *Politics*, 1317b.14–16.
- 39 Some commentators have suggested that the *polis* was in fact understood to represent the character of the people. Hansen, for example, claims that 'in a democratic *polis*, especially Athens, government and citizens largely coincided, primarily through the institution of the Assembly of the People,

and the dominant ideology was that the *polis* was the people (*demos*): it manifests itself, for example, in all surviving treaties, where the state of Athens is called *ho demos ho Athenaiion*, “the people of the Athenians”.⁴⁰ Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, trans. J. A. Crook (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 59. This view does nothing to challenge the fact that *individuals* were not understood to embody the interests or character of the people and that politics, insofar as it is devoted to the selection of leaders, was not conceived as representative in the most literal sense of the word.

- 40 See, for example, Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, XLIV.4, LXI.1. Ober, however, downplays the significance of the popularly elected military and financial officers: ‘Although annually elected (rather than lotteried) generals (in the fifth century) and elected financial magistrates (in the fourth century) were indeed important players in the government, they had limited decision-making power.’ *Athenian Revolution*, p. 25.
- 41 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II.37. Aristotle reports that in the time of Solon all magistrates were chosen by lot from an elected short list (*Athenian Constitution*, VIII.1) and that from the period between 487 and 403 BC archons were selected by lot from an elected short list (*Athenian Constitution*, XXII.5). Moreover, Gagarin and Woodruff note that ‘individual merit was undoubtedly a factor in the advance screening of candidates for selection’ in their *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 94. And Hansen reports that in Athens ‘after selection [by lot] the candidates all had to undergo *dokimasia*, which, after 403/2, was reformed so as to give the People’s Court the opportunity to reject on the spot anyone who might be suspected of oligarchic tendencies’; *Athenian Democracy*, pp. 236–7.
- 42 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, II.65.9.
- 43 ‘Old Oligarch’, I, 2. Here I follow the translation of Gagarin and Woodruff in *Early Greek Political Thought*, p. 134.
- 44 Thucydides, for example, notes the tendency of party leaders engaged in factional strife to rely upon the ‘fair-sounding names’ of isonomy and aristocracy to designate what was really democracy and oligarchy. *History of the Peloponnesian War*, III.82.8.
- 45 *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), no. 51 [James Madison].
- 46 Michael Sandel, for example, worries that contemporary American democracy suffers from ‘the fear that, individually and collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives’. *Democracy’s Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 1.
- 47 Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1133a.13–31. Aristotle remarks that a political or commercial association ‘is formed not from two doctors but from a doctor and a farmer, and in general from parties that are different and not equal, but which must be equated’. Aristotle at once recognizes the fundamental importance of equality to the political enterprise, yet also that this equality is of a limited nature, for it depends on preserving the significance of inequality outside the realm of law. It is precisely this extra-nomotic inequality that the apathetic Achilles cannot recognize and which, consequently, de-motivates his interest in politics.