

Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, and its Enemies¹

JAMES KIERSTEAD

Abstract

According to Michael King, Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* may be "the most influential book ever to come out of New Zealand." Written in Christchurch in the last years of the Second World War by a Jewish intellectual in exile from Vienna, the book's forthright attack on Plato created a storm of controversy worldwide, and continues to be influential today. In this piece, I want to reintroduce Popper to the current generation of New Zealanders. I look at how the book came to be written in New Zealand, and what Popper thought of the country. I also examine the controversy surrounding the book, and see what we might say about it today, especially in light of subsequent scholarship.

"Just before his death Plato saw in a dream that he became a swan and, leaping from tree to tree, he frustrated the attempts of the bird-catchers to hunt him down." Olympiodorus, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*.²

"The Platonic 'Socrates' of the *Republic* is the embodiment of an unmitigated authoritarianism." Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*.³

Introduction

In the last year of the Second World War, a little-known philosopher called Karl Popper published a work entitled *The Open Society and its Enemies* in two volumes, the first subtitled *The Spell of Plato*, and the second focusing on Hegel and Marx.⁴ It quickly earned praise from leading academics. In the journal *Mind*, Gilbert Ryle, the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy at the University of Oxford, declared:

This is a powerful and important book. . . . Dr. Popper writes with extreme clarity and vigour. His studies in Greek history and Greek thought have obviously been profound and original. Platonic exegesis will never be the same again.⁵

No less a figure than Bertrand Russell (who had recently returned from America to his fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge) agreed. Popper's book was, in fact, a work of first-class importance which ought to be widely read for its masterly criticism of the enemies of democracy, ancient and modern. His attack on Plato, while inorthodox (*sic*), is to my mind thoroughly justified. . . . The book is a vigorous and profound defence of democracy, timely, very interesting, and very well written.⁶

Not all of the attention that Popper's book attracted was admiring, however. In 1950, the formidable Chicago scholar Leo Strauss wrote to his associate Eric Voegelin, asking him to "let me know sometime what you think about Mr. Popper."⁷ Voegelin did not hold back:

[Popper] is not able even approximately to reproduce correctly the contents of one page of Plato. Reading is of no use to him; he is too lacking in knowledge to understand what the author says. . . . Briefly and in sum: Popper's book is a scandal without extenuating circumstances; in its intellectual attitude it is the typical product of a failed intellectual; spiritually one would have to use expressions like rascally,

impertinent, loutish; in terms of technical competence, as a piece in the history of thought, it is dilettantish, and as a result is worthless.⁸

Though Voegelin's letter does seem to have stopped Popper from receiving an appointment at the University of Chicago, it could not prevent Popper's book from being widely influential.⁹ By 2003, Michael King could write in his Penguin *History* that *The Open Society* "may well be most influential book ever to come out of New Zealand."¹⁰

The influence of Popper's book, though, is of a peculiar sort. For a work on the history of philosophy, it has had an unusually strong effect on the real world of politics. The size of this effect would be difficult to measure, of course; what can be said for sure is that the book has been claimed as an influence by democratic reformers from East Germany, through the Middle East, to the Far East (and indeed, its name lives on in the Open Society Institute of Popper's student George Soros).¹¹ At the same time, the reception of Popper's *Open Society* in the academic world is still somewhat mixed. Though assessments of his work continue to be published, criticisms by political theorists are not in short supply.¹² Among professional classicists and ancient philosophers, the criticism has sometimes verged on dismissiveness.¹³ One celebrated ancient historian, Josiah Ober, at the beginning of a chapter on Plato's thought, quickly dispenses of both Popper and Strauss at once:

While each of these approaches has enjoyed considerable popularity in certain circles, neither Popper's nor Strauss's view is widely accepted, or even much noticed, by the bulk of modern Plato scholarship, written by academic philosophers. Historians might like to suppose that Popper and Strauss are generally ignored because their views are demonstrably wrong on historical grounds: Popper's position on Plato-as-reactionary was predicated on now-discredited images of early Greek society as overtly "tribal" and fourth-century Athens as characterized by decline and decay.¹⁴

If I may be allowed an anecdote, I will add that the mixed nature of Popper's reputation was made clear to me only a few weeks before I myself moved to New Zealand, at a dinner following an interdisciplinary seminar on ancient political thought at Stanford. When I mentioned my impending move, the conversation soon turned to New Zealand classicists and philosophers, and in this context the name of Karl Popper was one of the first to come up. Very soon the dinner table was divided: though everyone had heard of Popper, only the political scientists in attendance showed unguarded interest; the classicists were unenthusiastic, and the ancient philosophers (both of them Platonists) were openly hostile. The only person actually to praise Popper was an exchange student from China, who was actively engaged in his country's prodemocracy movement and lauded Popper's insistence that our future is ours for the making.

In this paper, I want first to reintroduce New Zealanders to Karl Popper, perhaps as someone that they might claim as one of their own. This will involve going over the conditions that led to his arrival in this country, and surveying some of his opinions about the place. I also want to go back to the controversy that *The Open Society* caused in the years following its publication, and see what we might say about this controversy today. Since I am first a historian of ancient Greece, and secondly a classicist, I will focus mainly on Popper's depiction of ancient Athenian society, and on his extraordinary attack on Plato. With all that we have learned about both topics in the seventy years since the publication of Popper's book, and with the wisdom of hindsight, what can we say about the fairness of Popper's polemic? And what can we say about its impact? Answering these questions will involve detours into discussions about how we should read Platonic texts, and about the various gradations of authoritarianism

and totalitarianism. I will end this essay by asking what Popper might have missed, and what those of us who are inspired by his idea of the open society might want to turn our efforts to today.

1. *The Open Society: Composition, Reception, Context, and Flaws*

Karl Raimund Popper was born into a Jewish family in Vienna in 1902. His father, a lawyer and book collector, had earned a doctorate in law at the University of Vienna, and by 1928 Karl had earned his own doctorate, in psychology. In 1934, while teaching mathematics and physics at a secondary school, Popper was able to publish his first book, *Logik der Forschung* (or *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, though it would not be translated into English for twenty-five years).¹⁵ This work, which lays the groundwork for the philosophy of science which was to be Popper's major achievement, was published with the aid of the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers dedicated to logical positivism.¹⁶ The book made Popper's name, if only within the esoteric world of the philosophy of logic and mathematics. It also led to his appointment as Lecturer in Philosophy at what was then Canterbury University College of the University of New Zealand in Christchurch. Popper arrived there in March 1937, a year before the absorption of Austria into the Third Reich; *Kristallnacht*, during which almost a hundred synagogues were destroyed in Vienna alone, followed on 9 November, 1938.¹⁷

By that point, Popper and his wife Hennie were far removed, at least geographically, from the horrors of Nazi rule. Indeed, as Popper would later write, New Zealand was “not quite the moon, but after the moon . . . the farthest place in the world”; it was, at any rate, “infinitely remote” from Europe:

In those days New Zealand had no contact with the world except through England, five weeks away. There was no air connection and one could not expect an answer to a letter in less than three months. . . . It was a wonderfully quiet and pleasant atmosphere for work, and I settled down quickly.¹⁸

Popper's 1974 autobiography, *Unended Quest*, from which many of these quotations are taken, provides ample evidence that the philosopher, in his older years, remembered his time in New Zealand with some fondness. As he recalls:

There was no harm in the people: like the British they were decent, friendly, and well disposed . . . I had the impression that New Zealand was the best-governed country in the world, and the most easily governed. . . . I liked New Zealand very much . . . and I was ready to stay there for good.¹⁹

But despite this assertion, by 1945 Popper was preparing to leave New Zealand for good.²⁰ He wrote to E. H. Gombrich:

Dear Ernst, This time we are really off, I think. We have been allotted berths—in two different four-berth cabins, though—on the M.V. “New Zealand Star.” . . . It is a frigate (*sic*), Blue Star Line, carrying normally 12 passengers, and at present (in the same cabins) 30. We are not terribly pleased to pay 320 pounds for the pleasure of spending 5 or 6 very rough weeks in the company of strangers. . . . The passage will be very rough since we sail via Cape Horn—perhaps the roughest spot in the Seven Seas. Our corpses are expected to arrive, by the New Zealand Star, on January 8th or thereabouts. Please receive them kindly.²¹

What lay behind this decision to leave New Zealand after all? The most important factor in Popper's departure was, of course, F. A. Hayek's offer of a Readership at the London School of Economics. "From that moment," writes Popper in *Unended Quest*, "I was impatient to leave New Zealand."²² But we can also find increasing signs of increasing irritability and ill health in the many letters that Popper wrote to Gombrich while he was in New Zealand. In that apparent deterioration in the philosopher's well-being, there were probably two main factors. The first is the heavy emotional commitment that Popper brought to the writing of the *Open Society*. Like his friend Gombrich (also Viennese and Jewish), Popper was profoundly affected by the narrowness of his escape from the Nazis. It is this that lies behind what has struck many subsequent readers as the excessively, almost inexplicably, polemical tone of Popper's critique of Plato.²³ As Popper explains in the preface to the second edition, written in 1950,

Although much of what is contained in this book took shape at an earlier date, the final decision to write it was made in March 1938, on the day I received news of the invasion of Austria. The writing extended into 1943; and the fact that most of the book was written during the grave years when the outcome of the war was uncertain may help to explain why some of its criticism strikes me to-day as more emotional and harsher in tone than I could wish. But it was not the time to mince words—at least, this was what I then felt.²⁴

The second reason for Popper's worsening spirits and health is a more pragmatic one. *The Open Society*, perhaps like all great books, was an almighty struggle to produce and publish. The Poppers grew vegetables to supplement Karl's salary, which, as Hennie wrote in a letter to Gombrich, "is never quite sufficient."²⁵ During what Hennie came to call "the nightmare years," Popper would give his wife handwritten drafts, which she would then type and retype.²⁶ Even after the manuscript had been completed and accepted by Routledge, the Poppers sent several lists of corrections to London via a painfully slow wartime postal service.²⁷ As Popper had predicted about the work's publication, "it will be a colossal job for everybody concerned. It was a colossal job [writing it] here and I was (and am) very ill while doing it."²⁸ And this is to skip over the difficulty that Gombrich had, in the winter and spring of 1943 and 1944, of finding a publisher who would commit to a long and dense work by a little-known thinker.²⁹ But the publishers that rejected *The Open Society* were not the only ones to take a dim view of Popper's work. When he stepped off the New Zealand Star in England in 1946, to be greeted by Gombrich holding the first edition of his book, Karl Popper stepped into an intellectual storm of his own making.³⁰

Of course, many thinkers were enormously impressed by Popper's book. Gilbert Ryle went so far as to recommend that "readers should not miss studying the notes collected at the end of the two volumes."³¹ In 1950 Bertrand Russell, perhaps the most widely read British philosopher of his day, published an essay entitled "Philosophy and Politics" that contains spirited attacks on both Plato and Hegel. "That Plato's Republic should have been admired, on its political side, by decent people," writes Russell, "is perhaps the most astonishing example of literary snobbery in all history."³² That Russell, a former neo-Hegelian idealist and a philosopher-mathematician in the Platonic mould, should have gone so far in his denunciations surely owes more to Popper than Russell lets on, although he does mention in passing that the anti-Platonic view "has been brilliantly advocated in a recent book by Dr. K. R. Popper." In a footnote, Russell adds: "The same thesis is maintained in my *History of Western Philosophy*."³³ Even some of the critics of Popper's book had some complimentary things to say, although in the case of John Plamenatz, who would later succeed Isaiah Berlin as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford, these were limited to a number of backhanded

observations, exemplified by the comment that he was “more certain of the ability of the author than of the quality of the book.”³⁴

Indeed, for Plamenatz, in his review of *The Open Society*, it was precisely because “the author is a very able man and writes extremely well” that it was so important “that the reviewer criticize his book at some length and not too gently.”³⁵ Plamenatz’s eschewal of gentleness is on show at various points in his review, as when he says that “both the Socrates and the Plato presented to us by Professor Popper are to a considerable extent creatures of his imagination” and calls Popper’s overall argument “quite fantastic.”³⁶ Near the end of his piece, Plamenatz admitted that he had “mostly found fault with Professor Popper’s book,” but then insisted that “that is because, in my opinion, it has many faults.”³⁷ In response, Ernst Gombrich wrote an indignant letter of complaint, alleging that Plamenatz had made so many errors of interpretation that he failed even to give readers of the *British Journal of Sociology* an accurate picture of his friend’s work. “Instead they are presented with an incoherent selection of mistakes—as it happens, however, not of mistakes made by Professor Popper.”³⁸

The heated tone that the discussion of Popper’s book quickly took on may be explained in a number of ways. One source of heat was the inflammatory prose in which much of *The Open Society* was itself written. This goes beyond the individual throwaway phrases: the accusation that Plato’s literary skill served only to throw a veil over “the complete absence of rational arguments”; the dismissal of one of his inferences as “a crude juggle”; even the description of the ideal of the philosopher-king as “a monument of human smallness.”³⁹ It might be said, in fact, that a polemical tone and a selectiveness with the evidence pervade Popper’s entire treatment of Plato. This is a charge that Popper himself not only would have admitted, but actually embraced. As he writes in his first chapter on Plato:

I must . . . warn the reader not to expect a representation of the whole of Plato’s philosophy, or what may be called a “fair and just” treatment of Platonism. My attitude towards [Plato’s] historicism is one of frank hostility, based upon the conviction that historicism is futile, and worse than that. My survey of the historicist features of Platonism is therefore strongly critical. Although I admire much in Plato’s philosophy . . . I do not take it as my task to add to the countless tributes to his genius.⁴⁰

But for some readers, this programmatic aggressiveness risked undermining the very criticisms to which it was supposed to add vigour. As Gilbert Ryle wrote,

[Dr. Popper’s] comments . . . have a shrillness which detracts from their force. It is right that he should feel passionately. The survival of liberal ideas and liberal practices has been and still is in jeopardy. But it is bad tactics in a champion of the freedom of thought to use the blackguarding idioms characteristic of its enemies. His verdicts are, I think, just, but they would exert a greater influence if they sounded judicial.⁴¹

For Popper’s critics, the tone of the book seemed by turns disappointing, puzzling, and downright dangerous. John Plamenatz:

If to argue like [Professor Popper] should ever become a frequent practice among writers on serious subjects, all cool and rational discussion would quickly come to an end. . . . His manner towards Aristotle is the sort that an unkind man sometimes adopts towards someone whom he believes to be his intellectual inferior; and, as is usual in such cases, it tells us more about the contemner than the object of his contempt. . . . There is here a failure of sympathy . . . on Professor Popper’s part; and he is the poorer for it.⁴²

But if Popper's own polemical tone was one reason for the aggressive reaction his book received in some quarters, another is the veneration in which Plato was still held at the time *The Open Society* was published. Admittedly, this veneration was far from universal. Popper's association of Plato's utopian thought experiments with modern European fascism had even been anticipated by Reinhold Friedrich "Alfred" Hoernlé, the Bonn-born, Oxford-educated thinker who spend the last twenty years of his life in Johannesburg, and whose 1937 Presidential Address to the University of Witwatersrand asked simply "Would Plato have approved of the National-Socialist State?" (The answer, by the way, was "very likely").⁴³ And a few other books and articles, such as those by the US philosophers Warner Fite, Melvin Rader and Edward O. Sisson, and by the British Labour politician Richard Crossman, had attacked Plato from similar angles, although not with the same intensity of focus, nor with anything like the same impact, as Popper's work would have.⁴⁴

But if veneration for Plato was hardly universal, it can fairly be said to have been widespread in the prewar period, especially in the academy. This was the case not only among logicians such as Kurt Gödel, whose Platonism was restricted to a certain way of looking at mathematics, but also among classicists and educationalists, who seemed to think that it was in his *political* thought that Plato had made an especially valuable contribution to future ages.⁴⁵ Among the most influential of these educationalists was Richard Livingstone, who served as the President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford for almost twenty years, and who was made Vice-Chancellor of the University in 1944. In the same year—a year, of course, before the publication of *The Open Society*—Livingstone delivered the Rede Lecture at Cambridge under the title *Plato and Modern Education*.⁴⁶ In his 1946 work *Some Tasks for Education*, he would call Plato's *Republic* "still the greatest of all books on education," and lament that there was nothing in modern educational theory that could compare with it; a statement that may well have been true, though we may doubt, as Popper might have, whether this was entirely to the detriment of modern educational theory.⁴⁷

This veneration for Plato might go some way towards explaining, not only the violence of the reactions of men like Voegelin to *The Open Society*, but also their frequent failure to come to grips with Popper's interpretive claims. A reasoned and sustained engagement with Popper's exegesis would eventually come, in Ronald Levinson's 1953 *In Defence of Plato*.⁴⁸ But both before and after that volume, many commentators were content simply to dismiss Popper as someone whose own political and philosophical views and obvious hostility to Plato made him incapable of treating the Athenian writer fairly.⁴⁹ If we remember the example of men like Livingstone, however, it might occur to us that the danger of being overgenerous to Plato was just as great as the danger of being excessively critical; and we should in any case remember that, as Ryle put it, "hostility is not the only form of partisanship."⁵⁰ The philosopher Renford Bambrough, in a 1962 paper entitled "Plato's Modern Friends and Enemies" puts the point well:

Many of Plato's opponents have done violence to the text from over-zealous concern for their views on the main political and philosophical questions, but so have many of his defenders, and their whitewash is as disfiguring and distorting as the mud of the detractors. . . . It is sometimes mistakenly supposed that only unfavourable criticism of an ancient philosopher can be unhistorical, and that all unfavourable criticism of an ancient philosopher will be unhistorical.⁵¹

In other words, no amount of gesturing towards Popper's own philosophical views is enough in itself to knock down his interpretive claims about Plato. This is not, of course, to say that all Popper's claims about Plato in *The Open Society* are well-founded. So which parts of his argument stand up to scrutiny, and which do not?

Naturally enough, some of Popper's ideas look very dated 70 years after the publication of *The Open Society*. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is Popper's frequent reliance on the idea of tribalism, which plays a number of roles in his book. Philosophically, tribalism is the type of the "closed society" with which Popper contrasts his favoured "open society"; historically, it is what the Greek *polis* emerged out of; and in the context of Popper's exegetical programme, it is what Plato wanted to return to.⁵² "Plato," we are told, "was longing for the lost unity of tribal life," though the claim is not backed up by any references to the philosopher's writings.⁵³

Moreover, as John Plamenatz pointed out, there is quite a difference between the unquestioning acceptance of convention characteristic of Popper's "tribal society" and the detailed and highly theorized planning that is often a feature of totalitarian states.⁵⁴ If Plato had a zeal for rationalizing, utopian planning, as Popper often claimed, how could he also have wanted to bring Athens back into a tribal past?⁵⁵ For the contemporary reader, there is also the problem that the language of tribalism is as discredited in classics as it is in anthropology, at least since the French ancient historian Denis Roussel argued convincingly, in 1976, that there simply *was* no tribal stage of Greek civilization.⁵⁶ There are, then, several reasons to be embarrassed by Popper's statement that "the early Greek tribal society resembles in many respects that of peoples like the Polynesians, the Maoris for instance."⁵⁷

Popper's claims about Plato's desire to return Athens to a tribal stage of development were part of his attempt to paint Plato as a "historicist," and this is a second point on which we might take issue with Popper.⁵⁸ A historicist, to simplify, is someone who believes that the future is not open, but fixed; or, to repeat an expression used by Gilbert Ryle, who believes that history is "not a bus but a tram."⁵⁹ Popper's arguments against historicism may well be valid and worth making; and his reading, in Volume Two of *The Open Society*, of Hegel and Marx as historicists seems difficult to reject.⁶⁰ The problem for the reader of Volume One is that Plato does not make quite as convincing a historicist as Hegel and Marx. As John Plamenatz pointed out, though Plato's dialogues contain occasional speculations about the origins of the *polis*,

he does not derive from [them] any general laws governing the development of human societies. . . . Whereas [Hegel and Marx] used their philosophies of history either to justify the present or to predict the inevitable and imminent coming of the society they thought just, Plato did nothing of the kind. His account of the just society derives from his conception of the proper life for man to live.⁶¹

The distinguished Plato scholar Christopher Taylor has exposed a number of other confusions in Popper's portrait of Plato the historicist.⁶² For Popper, Plato's attitude towards political change was intimately bound up with his metaphysical Theory of Forms (which held that particular objects take their qualities from abstract and eternal entities). In Popper's view, Plato thought that change, since it must take things away from the perfection of the Forms, always constituted deterioration.⁶³ That the best state, "the one that resembles the Form or Idea of the state most closely" was also "the original or primitive form of society."⁶⁴ And moreover, not surprisingly, that all changes in political and social arrangements since the original and best state have been changes for the worse.⁶⁵

Against this, Taylor points out first that we know from a passage in the *Phaedo* that things take on certain qualities because the Forms come to be in them; when a man becomes just, for example, he comes to partake in the Form of justice.⁶⁶ We can see from this that not all change is change away from the Forms; some change brings things closer to some of the Forms. The best state *may* also have been the original and first state, but a passage in the *Republic* makes clear that Plato sees the historical question as of negligible importance compared with the theoretical question of what the best state is.⁶⁷ As for the claim that the whole course of human history has been one long deterioration, it is difficult to square with various episodes in Platonic mythology, such as the reestablishment of civilization after the flood described in the *Laws*.⁶⁸ Taylor caps his remarks on this point with the observation that “obviously, the reason why the ideal state is to remain stable is not that stability is itself the good for a state or even a good at all, but because the ideal state is perfect.”⁶⁹ So much, then, for Plato the historicist.

Popper also received a great deal of criticism, probably justly, for his rather adventurous reconstructions of Plato’s psychology and motivations.⁷⁰ Popper believes that Plato “betrayed” his teacher Socrates, manipulating and grossly distorting his heritage to his own ambitious ends; that one of Plato’s primary aims in doing philosophy was that of “*arresting all political change*”; and that “the philosopher king is Plato himself, and the *Republic* is Plato’s own claim for kingly power.”⁷¹ It was doubtless statements of this sort that led even Gilbert Ryle to comment “I think myself that there are limits within which the interpretation of allogical motives should be kept and that Dr. Popper is inclined to overstep them.”⁷² Even though connections between Plato’s philosophical writings and more practical political activities are certainly not out of the question, most modern classicists would insist that readings of Plato’s own motives and aims be more attentive to the often complex structure of his dialogues.

2. Defending Plato

But if the complex nature of Plato’s dialogues should cause anyone looking for their author’s motivations and intentions to pause for thought, it has also been seen as a major obstacle in the way of saying anything reliable about Plato’s *beliefs*. In the decades following Popper’s attack on Plato, scholarship outside the UK has moved increasingly away from the midcentury orthodoxy which assumed that Plato’s own views could be found in his dialogues, usually in the words of “mouthpieces” such as Socrates or the Eleatic Stranger.⁷³ Indeed, Plato’s texts have been found to be so irreducibly complex that grave doubts have been raised about the idea that the Athenian was writing *philosophy* at all.

Gerald Press’s review article surveys the various directions in which Plato studies have progressed in the decades since the midcentury analytic orthodoxy was challenged. His piece also contains a magisterial—not to mention rather intimidating—summary of the many arguments that have been levelled against the orthodox approach to Plato. For reasons of space, I have had to leave out the impressive array of references with which he supports his catalogue.

With respect to the arguments of Socrates and Plato’s other seeming mouthpieces, the assumption that they are Plato’s has been called into question by Platonic anonymity, the lack of theoretical justification for taking now Socrates, now someone else to be Plato’s mouthpiece, and by showing that it is in general fallacious to take the argument of characters to be those of their author. It has been shown, on the other hand, that many fallacious arguments in the dialogues, rather than being weaknesses for which Plato ought to be censured, were deliberately used by him to achieve other ends.

The belief that the dialogues are to be understood as straightforward and serious attempts at communicating philosophic doctrine has been challenged by emphasis on the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*, as well as by an increasing appreciation of the prevalence and implications of humour, irony, and play throughout the corpus. Similarly, in contrast with the earlier view of Plato as dogmatically opposed to rhetoric, recent scholarship has found that important use is made of rhetoric in the dialogues.

In line with much of the preceding, the older assumption that the dialogues are or can be interpreted essentially as treatises has been widely criticized on the grounds that it is *prima facie* false, and more specifically that it creates unnecessary interpretive problems, commits the intentionalist fallacy, impoverishes interpretations, and renders Plato's pervasive influence unintelligible. In addition, the dialogues exhibit structures characteristic of expressive forms very different from treatises; in particular, they have been richly interpreted as dramas. Moreover, interpreting the dialogues as if they were treatises written to be read conflicts with recent research about the transition from an oral to a literate culture, and about performative aspects of the dialogues as we have them.⁷⁴

In view of the apparently insurmountable obstacles in the way of analysing what scholars once referred to as "Plato's philosophy," it is no surprise that many Plato scholars in the US and in continental Europe have looked for new approaches to the study of the dialogues. In some quarters, scholars have simply chosen to focus on the historical context or literary form of the dialogues, without necessarily questioning the validity of old-fashioned analytical studies.⁷⁵ Others have been more radical, and these more radical readers (or re-readers) of Plato have fallen (according to Press) into three main schools.⁷⁶

The first is the so-called Tübingen School whose most famous contemporary exponent is perhaps Thomas Szlezak.⁷⁷ Tübingen School scholars claim that, in view of the criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* and the Seventh Letter, it would be foolish to believe that Plato's actual beliefs are to be found in the written texts he left to posterity. Plato's actual beliefs can be discovered, but only in the "unwritten doctrine" that he left to his students. The real purpose of the dialogues we have is not to expound doctrine but to inspire readers to engage in philosophy for themselves. The Chicago School (that looks to Leo Strauss as its founder) agrees that only a naïve reader would assume that Plato's own views can be read straight off from the dialogues. Plato could never have expressed his antidemocratic views openly in classical Athens; because of this, his texts are coded messages for the intelligent interpreter to unpick.⁷⁸ For proponents of the Columbia School (writing in the tradition of Frederick Woodbridge), Plato's dialogues are not meant as philosophy at all; they are best described as dramas, and though they may have a vision, they do not have any message.⁷⁹

How are interpretive issues of this sort relevant to Popper's attack on Plato? After the sharp criticisms of the idea that Plato's own views can be gleaned through the words of a few of the characters in his dialogues, Popper's straightforward readings of Platonic "doctrine" have come to seem naïve. The deemphasizing of the dialogues' philosophical content at the expense of their historical context and literary character makes Popper's concentration on Plato's political ideas look beside the point. And the shrewd and sophisticated readings of Plato's texts against themselves by the Straussians makes Popper seem, in comparison, rather simpleminded. Problems of this sort might now be said to constitute the first line of defence against Popper's attack on Plato.

I believe that this line of defence can be overcome, or at least circumvented, but I have neither the space nor the ability to deal with all of the issues raised in Press's formidable catalogue of errors here. Instead, I will address only a few of the most influential and commonly-raised objections against the orthodox approach to Plato, before moving onto a second, and more substantial, line of defence that has been erected against Popper's assault.

Let us start with so-called "mouthpiece theory," or what Press goes so far as to refer to as "the mouthpiece fallacy."⁸⁰ Now, it is clear at the outset that some formulations of this approach will be more defensible than others. The view that is sometimes attributed to orthodox readers of Plato, that whatever Socrates says in Plato's dialogues is what Plato thought, is obviously absurd; but it is questionable whether this is a view that anyone has ever held. Much more promising, and much more reasonable, is the idea that Plato's own views, with a good deal of caution and circumspection, can on many occasions be glimpsed in what Socrates (and a few other privileged interlocutors) says in the various dialogues.⁸¹ Another way of putting the same idea is to say that, although what Socrates says is not always what Plato thought, it is often good evidence for what Plato thought.

Teasing apart what Plato has Socrates say in his dialogues, and what Plato actually thought, is indeed the whole point of one of the oldest questions in classical studies, the so-called "Socratic Problem."⁸² The difficulty that Press mentions, of "taking now Socrates, now someone else to be Plato's mouthpiece," is not as intractable as it sounds, if we make the reasonable supposition that Plato eventually became disenchanted with some of the ideas he had been developing, and wanted to mark this change in his dialogues by first exposing Socrates to criticism, and then by dispensing with him altogether.⁸³

And Press's statement that "it is in general fallacious to take the argument of characters to be those of their author" is much too strong; though he would probably have been right to say that "it is *often problematic* to take the argument of characters to be those of their author." Of course we cannot automatically conclude that what characters say is what their author thought; but at the same time, there are occasions when we have good reason to think that certain characters have been given special dispensation to speak their authors' minds. (On rare occasions, we may even know for certain that a character's views are identical to those of their creator: this is the case with Philonous in Berkeley's dialogues, whose views are almost exactly the same as those expressed by George Berkeley in his main philosophical treatise.⁸⁴)

Among the many reasons we might have for suspecting that particular characters are voicing views favoured by their author are: the character dominating the conversation, either in terms of the length of their speeches, their control of the direction of the dialogue, or the strength of their arguments; other characters either agreeing with, or being "defeated" by, them; the character's speech being portrayed as clearly more "philosophical" or "rational" than that of other characters.⁸⁵ Of course, all these things may be true of particular characters without their being "mouthpieces" of the author; but it would seem to be the case, at least, that characters of this sort tend to express opinions which their authors found unusually interesting, or worth discussing.⁸⁶ And all these things seem to be true of the Platonic character called Socrates.⁸⁷

The domination of many of Plato's dialogues by this "Socrates" is one reason why we should be cautious about characterizing them as dramas.⁸⁸ This use of this characterization to raise doubts about a link between "Socrates" and Plato seems to go back to Leo Strauss, who opined,

as long ago as 1964, that Plato “conceals his opinions,” that the dialogues “must be read like dramas,” and that the words of Plato’s characters reflect their author’s views no more than the words of Shakespeare’s characters do.⁸⁹ Views of this sort are often repeated, as they are, for example, in an article by James Arieti, first published in 1995:

I would like to toss out the premise of virtually all work on Plato: that he is writing the kind of philosophical work in which the philosopher writes as clearly, as straightforwardly, and as soundly as he can. . . . Instead, I should like to assume that he is writing works of drama—works whose intention is principally to inspire—and that the inspiration in the dialogues is to engagement in a life of the mind, to the doing of philosophy with other people, and not with dead or even lively texts. . . .

Surely Plato held positions. The question is whether we can discern those views with any certainty in the dialogues. I think we can see hints of some positions through the mist of the dialogues, just as we can see hints in the works of Shakespeare, Sophocles, and Euripides of what they thought. But it is not easy.⁹⁰

But there are plenty of ways in which the comparison with Shakespeare is misleading.⁹¹ For a start, a single character dominates a large number of Plato’s dialogues; this is not the case with Shakespeare’s plays.⁹² Moreover, though characters in Shakespeare often say things that are of philosophical interest, they do not engage in systematic philosophical enquiry, either on their own or with others.⁹³ But systematic and cooperative philosophical enquiry does not only happen repeatedly in Plato’s works—it constitutes the lion’s share of the content of almost all of the dialogues.⁹⁴

The fact that the dialogues consist overwhelmingly of specifically philosophical content limits the extent to which we can speak of them as dramas. Of course, they share certain features with drama, and we should be ready to learn from studies which explore the relationship between Plato’s dialogues and other genres that had a prestigious place in the cultural life of classical Athens.⁹⁵ But this is not quite the same thing as saying that philosophical dialogue “must be read” as drama, or that Plato was “writing works of drama.” As Richard Kraut has bluntly pointed out, if Plato had wanted to write dramas he could very well have entered plays at the Festival of Dionysus.⁹⁶

To look at the question another way, let us suppose that Plato’s dialogues are meant primarily as dramas, and not as works of philosophy. What, exactly, are they supposed to dramatize? If they dramatize philosophical conflict and the clash of important personalities in fifth-century Athens, it seems odd that characters often change their minds, come to agreement with Socrates, and work together towards a greater understanding of various issues.⁹⁷ If Plato’s dialogues dramatize this very cooperation, what is the point of them; if they offer a vision rather than a message, what is the content of this vision? Arieti, in the passage quoted above, says that the purpose of the dialogues is to inspire us “to the doing of philosophy.” But it would be a very strange man who wrote long works aimed solely at inspiring others to do philosophy, without taking the prime opportunity presented by the writing of those texts to do some philosophy himself.⁹⁸

Even once it is admitted that Plato’s dialogues tend to have an irreducible (and rather large) core of philosophical content, there are plenty of arguments to be had about how exactly we should interpret Plato’s philosophy. This is the final argument that I want to discuss in the first, methodological line of defence against Popper’s attack on Plato: that the way Popper went

about extracting Plato's views from his dialogues was hopelessly simplistic. And certainly, Straussian interpretation is a sophisticated business. But what reason do we have for thinking that Plato would have taken the trouble of hiding his views behind the language of his dialogues? Strauss seems to have thought that Plato could never have openly expressed his dissident opinions about the Athenian democracy in view of the hegemony, ideological and otherwise, of that regime.⁹⁹ And yet, as Kraut and others have pointed out, he regularly does so, sometimes quite explicitly.¹⁰⁰

In any case, the assumption that Plato's dialogues do not quite mean what they say, but are some sort of coded message, starts us down a perilous interpretative path. It is perilous path in this sense: once we start looking beyond the texts themselves for various sorts of hidden meanings, it becomes very difficult to find any criteria by which we might judge the various sorts of hidden meanings that emerge.¹⁰¹ Elevating certain passages or texts into interpretive keys does not help much either, since there always seem to be other passages and texts that contradict them, and little reason to privilege one or a few of them over the others.¹⁰² In the end, there seems no real option other than to do the hard, unglamorous work of interpretation using a few, simple and timeworn assumptions as aids: that there was a man called Plato who had some more or less consistent ideas that changed to some extent over time, and who expressed (or explored) these ideas through philosophical dialogues featuring a small number of especially impressive characters. As Kraut concludes, deflatingly but surely correctly:

Our best chance of understanding Plato is therefore to begin with the assumption that in each dialogue he uses his principal interlocutor to support or oppose certain conclusions by means of certain arguments because he, Plato, supports or opposes those conclusions for those reasons. . . . It is fair to say that this is the approach adopted by a great many scholars, and that it has considerably enhanced our understanding of the dialogues. This methodological principle is not an a priori assumption about how Plato must be read, but is rather a successful working hypothesis suggested by an intelligent reading of the text and confirmed by its fruitfulness.¹⁰³

Given the history of Plato criticism over the last half century, I would be very foolish indeed to think that my arguments (mostly borrowed from Kraut) would settle the issue.¹⁰⁴ So what could we say to the hard-boiled skeptic, who might still insist that Socrates does not speak for Plato, Plato was not a philosopher, and that even if he was, he was probably not saying what it seems like he is saying? R. M. Hare has given us a clue, by labelling two of the different philosophical approaches found in the dialogues—the systematic, doctrine-building approach and the questioning, Socratic approach—the work of “Pato” and “Lato” respectively.¹⁰⁵ I would now like to introduce “Plato”—a fictional character to whom we can attribute the many ideas about politics and the ideal state found in the dialogues that come down to us under the name of Plato. Because whatever we think of “mouthpiece theory,” of the nature of the Platonic dialogue, or about how we should read the ideas in them, the fact remains that there is a set of more or less coherent ideas about politics in them, and these ideas have been very influential.

Anyone, then, who has remained unpersuaded by my brief and unsystematic onslaught against unorthodox ways of reading Plato is free simply to replace all instances of the word Plato in what follows with “Plato.” This will allow us to move on to the second line of defence that has been erected against Popper's attack on Plato: that his reading of the political theory found in Plato's dialogues is wrong. More specifically, Plato's ideal state was not authoritarian or totalitarian, at least not in the sense that Popper claimed it was. And this, of course, must be a

central issue in any assessment of Karl Popper's contribution: is his main charge, that Plato was an enemy of the open society, an unfair one?

We should note at the outset the precise content of Popper's main claim. He says that Plato is an enemy of the open society, and calls Plato's politics "purely totalitarian" and his "Socrates" "the embodiment of an unmitigated authoritarianism."¹⁰⁶ What he seems at pains not to do is to call Plato either a Nazi or a Fascist.¹⁰⁷ Even in the 1950 preface to the second edition, in which an emotional link between the events of the war and the writing of the book is strongly implied, there is a reminder that "neither the war nor any other contemporary event was explicitly mentioned in the book."¹⁰⁸ This is important, since Popper was sometimes lumped in with other writers, such as Bertrand Russell or Richard Crossman, who chose to link Plato and Hitler more directly.¹⁰⁹

In fact, the debate about Plato and contemporary politics that preceded Popper's intervention was *more* focused on comparisons between Plato's utopias and twentieth-century fascist regimes than it was subsequently, not less. Alfred Hoernlé's address, for example, presents a detailed comparison of the ideal city of the *Republic* with Nazi Germany. For Hoernlé, the differences between the Platonic and the National Socialist ideals are irrelevant; what matters is that both regimes have no scruples about imposing these ideals coercively, and indoctrinating younger generations in them.¹¹⁰ And Hoernlé bolstered his claims about the similarity of Kallipolis and the Third Reich by referring to a number of books written by Germans sympathetic to the Nazi cause that explicitly appealed to Plato's writings.¹¹¹

Indeed, appeals of this sort were so common that the British philosopher H. B. Acton could state, matter-of-factly, in 1938, "In Germany the claim is sometimes made that National Socialism incorporates the best of Plato's political theory."¹¹² The fact that actual National Socialists (even learned ones) really did claim the support of Plato's theories is important, since it shows that Popper's way of attacking contemporary totalitarianism—by criticizing an ancient thinker—was less unexpected or unjustified than it might now seem. And the claim that Plato was some sort of proto-fascist was hardly an absurd one in itself. Even Acton, who disagreed with it, admitted that "whereas it would be merely laughable to claim that Jesus or Kant were exponents of the fascist philosophy, there is no such glaring incongruity with respect to Plato."¹¹³

Nonetheless, there were some serious problems with the strong thesis that Plato would have been quite happy in 1930s Germany. For Acton, the main hallmarks of fascism were irrationalism and relativism, two ideas which are "wholly lacking from Plato's thought"; besides this, the fascist worship of war for its own sake is explicitly contradicted by a passage in Plato's *Laws*, where war is said to be not an intrinsic good, but a necessary evil.¹¹⁴ For G. R. Morrow, an expert on the *Laws*, the Plato that emerges both from that text and from the *Seventh Letter* is a thinker whose main concern is to defend the rule of law against the arbitrary whims of a tyrant (or, as readers in 1941 might have inferred, of a *Führer*).¹¹⁵ For the English Platonist G. C. Field, the key point was that "a critic of democracy is not necessarily a Nazi or a Fascist, and the defenders of democracy would be very ill-advised to dismiss reasoned criticism of it by a simple reference to one or other of these contemporary views."¹¹⁶

It would be difficult for anyone perusing the pre-Popper debate about Plato's politics to deny the judiciousness of Field's advice. Acton, Morrow, and Field probably had the best of their argument with the likes of Hoernlé, Crossman, Fite, and Rader, and this is very likely due to

the simple fact that the claim that Plato was a Fascist, or Hitler a Platonist, was overambitious. In striving to find detailed similarities—even, in some cases, identity—between an ancient thought experiment and a modern regime, Plato’s prewar critics exposed their arguments to refutation and falsification on a whole range of fronts. This might explain why Popper took care to shield his own critique of Plato from the same types of counterattack. Instead, he presented ancient and modern totalitarianism as in the same intellectual “tradition”—a tradition in which Plato happened to be an important early figure.¹¹⁷

Popper, then, did not present Plato as a Fascist or a Nazi, so any justifiable doubts that we might have about that claim need not affect our assessment of his *Open Society*.¹¹⁸ At the same time, he did present Plato as having developed certain ideas which undergirded contemporary totalitarianism. And, given his reference to Plato’s thought as “*unmitigated* authoritarianism,” and his description of it as “*purely* totalitarian,” it would seem that Popper thought of Plato as a totalitarian of a relatively extreme kind. How defensible is this characterization? And how much should the precise flavour or temperature of Plato’s authoritarianism matter?

The question of exactly what type of totalitarian Plato was is the subject of Christopher Taylor’s careful analysis. For Taylor, there are several varieties of totalitarianism. In the most extreme kind, “the purposes and well-being of individuals are totally subordinated to those of the state.”¹¹⁹ In the most moderate sort of totalitarianism, “the function and aim of the state is simply to promote the welfare of its citizens.”¹²⁰ At the same time, the different varieties of totalitarianism are united by an authoritarian decision-making structure and an ideology that pervades all aspects of life.¹²¹

Taylor makes a persuasive case both that Popper presented Plato as an extreme totalitarian, and that he was wrong to do so—in other words, that Plato’s utopias fulfil the conditions for only the most moderate type of totalitarianism. On the first point, we have a number of statements by Popper that encourage us to think that for Plato, “*The criterion of morality is the interest of the state.*”¹²² On the second point, there are a number of considerations that make clear that Plato’s ideal city, both in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, is one in which the state is judged to be good insofar as it helps its citizens flourish, and not the other way around.

As Taylor points out, one of Socrates’ main endeavours in the *Republic* is to demonstrate that justice is in itself of value to the person who possesses it, irrespective of what use a person’s being just may be to anyone else.¹²³ But if Plato were a totalitarian of the most extreme sort, he would surely want to insist that a citizen’s being just was only worthwhile insofar as this condition fostered some interest of the state. This he does not do; on the contrary, he tells us that justice for the individual is a harmonious soul; that justice is like health, an intrinsic good to its possessor; and that the just man, whose soul is truly in harmony, enjoys the best sort of pleasures.¹²⁴ A just soul may help us in constructing the just state, but there are plenty of reasons to desire the former other than to get us closer to the latter.¹²⁵

As for the *Laws*, for Taylor there is only one passage that comes close to suggesting the subordination of individual ends to the ends of the state, and in his quotation of it Popper commits an important sin of omission.¹²⁶ In this passage, in Popper’s translation, the Athenian Stranger tells us that in the best state,

Everything possible has been done to eradicate from our life everywhere and in every way all that is private and individual. . . . Our very eyes and ears and hands seem to see, to hear, and to act, as if they belonged not to individuals but to the community.

All men are moulded to be unanimous in the utmost degree in bestowing praise and blame, and they even rejoice and grieve about the same things, and at the same time. And all the laws are perfected for unifying the city to the utmost.¹²⁷

Taylor does not dispute the translation. But he points out a sentence that Popper does not quote in its entirety, which runs (in Taylor's rendering):

That sort of city, whether inhabited by gods or several children of gods [is such that] in living that sort of life, they inhabit it *euphrainomenoi*, i.e. enjoying themselves.¹²⁸

Taylor concludes that by omitting some of this sentence, Popper conveys "the entirely false impression that in this passage Plato advocates the suppression of individuality for a collective good, when he quite plainly . . . says that the suppression of individuality brings the pleasantest life for the individual."¹²⁹

Taylor's arguments are well taken and well supported by evidence from Plato's texts. We should probably agree with him that Plato is not the extreme totalitarian that Popper presents us with. On the other hand, it is worth noticing that Taylor begins his article by accepting that "the ideal state of the *Republic* is a totalitarian state," and even "an instance of extreme authoritarianism" (though it is not, as we have seen, an instance of extreme totalitarianism).¹³⁰ This kind of admission is surprisingly common in the writings of Plato's defenders.

H. B. Acton goes so far as to state, in the first paragraph of his article, that "no one would deny a strong likeness between some details of Plato's teaching and some details of *fascism*" (my emphasis); "the question," for Acton, was "whether these likenesses are merely accidental, or are due to some deep-seated similarity of outlook."¹³¹ G. C. Field similarly, but more moderately, admits at the outset that the charge that Plato "was not a democrat, and disbelieved in democracy" was "certainly true"; what Field went on to question was not the idea that Plato disliked democracy, but the assumption that this "was necessarily a sign of mental depravity."¹³²

Now, in making these admissions, Plato's apologists clearly hoped to demonstrate a certain scholarly moderation, a levelheadedness that they found to be dismayingly absent in the writings of many of Plato's critics. And perhaps they succeeded. Nonetheless, their admissions seem to me to give away rather a lot. In particular, it strikes me that Karl Popper himself would have been quite happy with the statement that Plato, though an authoritarian and even a totalitarian, was not an extreme totalitarian. An acceptance that Plato's philosophy bore some resemblance to fascism would have been more than he was hoping for; but he probably would not have been terribly upset with it. And Popper was ready to argue the merits of democracy against its doubters.¹³³ But one of the main purposes of Volume 1 of Popper's book was to show that Plato was hostile to the open society, and this is a claim that very few of Popper's critics have even contested.¹³⁴

Of course, for the scholar of Plato, and for those interested in Greek political thought more generally, it is important to determine exactly what sort of antidemocratic or authoritarian ideas Plato was espousing. And in assessing the quality of the exegetical work of Karl Popper, it is obviously helpful to have an idea of how accurate his description of Plato's views was. When it comes to judgments about Popper's impact, though, his exaggerations and excesses might need to be seen in a different light. Because it may well be that Popper's most important contribution was bursting the bubble of the complacent Plato worship that had been carried out

for decades by men such as Livingstone. And in bursting that bubble, a little sharpness may have been all to the good. So leaving aside now the correctness of Popper's precise claims, let us try to reach a few conclusions about his impact on the way we think about Plato.

3. Popper's Contribution—And what he Missed

As I have just suggested, Popper's greatest contribution was to problematize the reception of Plato's political philosophy, and in particular the political philosophy contained in the *Republic*. Popper certainly did not convince everyone of all the details of his case, as we have seen; and, as we have seen, his arguments against Plato contain a number of confusions and misapprehensions. But his attack was successful in rebalancing the conversation about Plato's politics both inside and outside of the academy. After Popper, it would no longer be possible to claim, as Field did in 1944, that "the very idea of labelling and dismissing the arguments of a great thinker as just 'right' or 'wrong'" was "a mark of superficial thinking."¹³⁵ (Of course, it is hard to see how thinkers come to be called "great" if it is not through readers examining their arguments and considering whether they strike them as true or not.) And it would seem increasingly difficult to argue, as men such as Richard Livingstone did, that what justified Plato's central place in our education system was the positive value—rather than the pedagogic usefulness—of his ideas.¹³⁶

Indeed, we have learned from Gerald Press that it is to the years following the Second World War that we should date the beginning of the revolution in Plato studies whose effects are still very much noticeable today.¹³⁷ And I would like to propose that this revolution was motivated and driven forward partly by the need to find new and better reasons for the continued study of Plato. The need for new reasons had come about, quite obviously, because the old reasons for studying Plato had been discredited. It was difficult to hold the *Republic* up as a model for future policy makers after so much damage had been done by regimes which seemed to echo many of its fundamental principles. And Karl Popper, with his mixture of scholarship and invective, played a key role in driving that message home.

If I am right that the postwar revolution in Platonic studies was partly a response to the head-on attack on Plato's politics that had been carried out by Popper and others, this might also go some way towards explaining the precise course (or courses) that the antianalytic revolution took. Popper's attack was focused overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, on the *Republic*; and postwar research moved increasingly to deemphasize that work, which had previously stood virtually unchallenged as Plato's "masterpiece."¹³⁸ The *Laws* (whose ideal city of Magnesia is usually seen as less authoritarian than the *Republic*'s Kallipolis) became an increasingly popular subject of analysis, and its status vis-à-vis other Platonic dialogues rose steadily.¹³⁹ But dialogues that had little at all to say about politics, such as the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, though they had never been ignored, also seemed to grow in popularity and importance.¹⁴⁰

Along with this shift towards the more literary dialogues came the shift towards more literary ways of reading Plato that we have already discussed. This, of course, was not entirely an attempt to escape the force of the argument against Plato's politics; scholars who joined in this movement had perfectly respectable interpretive reasons for doing so. And yet it is, at the very least, suggestive that this shift took place soon after the debate on Plato's politics had erupted. I could make similar points about the eagerness, common to many schools of Plato studies, to deny that the words of "Socrates" had anything much to do with the thoughts of Plato, that Plato was doing philosophy at all, and that Plato's dialogues were intended as a clear exposition

of some ideas that their author found worth examining. Some denials of this kind might be found in earlier works, but they certainly became more frequent, and more heated, after the 1950s.

We may, then, owe the revolution in Platonic studies of the last half century partly to the forthrightness of Popper's attack. At the same time, though, we should remember that Popper, in contrast to some of predecessors, took great care to avoid calling Plato a Fascist or a Nazi—indeed, he seems to have avoided using those words at all. This, surprisingly, may count as another of Popper's key contributions. Despite the emotional tone of his argument, and despite its many extravagances, Popper's central claim about Plato—that he had totalitarian ideas—is less ambitious, and more moderate, than the accusations of men like Hoernlé. Popper wisely did not seek to prove point-to-point correspondences between Plato's ideal states and contemporary regimes. Moreover, his contempt for Plato's weaker arguments was tempered by (or at least combined with) a respect for what he referred to as the Athenian philosopher's "overwhelming intellectual achievement."¹⁴¹

In his 1944 article, Field stated that "anyone who thinks that it is impossible to learn valuable lessons from the arguments of [a great] thinker, even when he disagrees with him, is displaying a sad lack of capacity for philosophical thought."¹⁴² The point might strike us as both true and important; but it seems clear that it would not apply to Karl Popper. Popper changed the case against Plato from the accusation that the philosopher was a kind of fascist, to the allegation that he had an important role in an intellectual tradition which, many centuries later, played a part in bringing fascism into being.

As Popper wrote in the preface to the second edition, though the book made no mention of the war, "it was an attempt to understand those events and their background."¹⁴³ This echoed the statement in the introduction that the book "tries to contribute to our understanding of totalitarianism."¹⁴⁴ At least in his own eyes, Popper's focus was on *understanding* Plato. True, he sought to understand Plato mainly because he saw him as an enemy of the open society; but the reason he devoted a whole volume to Plato was because he saw the Athenian as not just another critic of democracy, but as an especially powerful and influential one, and therefore one that was particularly worth understanding and responding to.

There is one final way in which Popper moved the debate away from contemporary regimes and towards the intellectual foundations of authoritarianism. The prewar attack on Plato had mainly accused him of being a sort of fascist. The attacks often came from men of the left, such as Richard Crossman; and Plato's defenders were often men, like G. C. Field, who found nothing unusual or surprising in criticisms of democracy. Field himself suggested that "a good deal" of the recent criticism of Plato had come from "those who have been influenced by or are sympathetic towards the doctrine of Marxian Communism." And he recommended "that they try . . . changing their line of approach to Plato, and presenting him as a forerunner of Marx."¹⁴⁵

Now, Field's recommendation was very likely neither sincere nor well intentioned. It was almost certainly meant as an ironic comment on the anti-Platonists' position: here they were calling Plato's politics fascist, when it was probably just as close to communism, a creed to which many of them were sympathetic! Nonetheless, it is arguable that Karl Popper called Field's bluff by taking up his challenge of associating Plato as much with communism as fascism.¹⁴⁶

He also went further, pairing Plato and Marx as the two most dangerous enemies of the open society in the two volumes of his work.¹⁴⁷ Even in 1945, Popper was as concerned with the rising influence of the Soviets as he was with the waning power of the Nazis.¹⁴⁸ But the Plato and Marx that emerge from his work are not a right wing and a left wing critic of democracy, but two philosophers who shared ideas that, time and time again, would be taken up by opponents of the open society.¹⁴⁹ Popper seemed keen to make clear to potential readers of the *Open Society* that it was not a partisan work; hence his refusal to accept his friend Friedrich Hayek's offer to write a preface for the work "because it would brand the book and myself."¹⁵⁰

If Popper encouraged us to see Plato as an absolutist first and foremost, and not as a right wing absolutist, I want to turn finally to what I think Popper missed in his critique of Plato, the enemy of democracy. To put it in a nutshell, what I think Popper missed in his critique of Plato was ancient democracy. Popper took it as his main task to identify and criticize what he saw as the totalitarian tendency in Plato's thought, and he did that job well (if far from perfectly). But he largely ignored the positive example of the particular democracy that had roused Plato's critical ire—the direct democracy of the classical Athenians.

Indeed, when Popper speaks of the open society he is referring, first and foremost, to a sort of liberalism. At one point, he defines the open society simply as "the society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions."¹⁵¹ Individual freedom is thus the hallmark of Popper's ideal city. Democracy is a secondary concern, though if we look carefully we can see that liberalism and democracy are in fact linked in Popper's system. They are linked because in the open society, in contrast to tribal society, people realize that social and political arrangements are not natural but conventional. To ignore convention on a personal level would be an exercise of personal liberty; to change convention on a societal scale would be an act of democratic will.

But when we look at what Popper has to say about democracy (which is any case relatively little compared to what he has to say about the open society) we find that his conception of popular rule is rather minimalist.¹⁵² Popper's account of democracy bears some striking similarities to the elitist theory of another Austrian émigré, Joseph Schumpeter, that had found an influential expression in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, a book published only three years before the *Open Society*. For Schumpeter, ordinary people are too ignorant to play a part in politics; the point of democracy is simply to allow them to choose between competing members of the elite.¹⁵³

Perhaps surprisingly, Popper agreed. Democracy is simply the type of government "of which we can get rid without bloodshed."¹⁵⁴ And this is all we can expect, since "although 'the people' may influence the actions of their rulers by the threat of dismissal, they never rule themselves in any concrete, practical sense."¹⁵⁵ In line with this, institutions such as elections are not, for Popper, ways of allowing the people to rule, but nothing more than "reasonably effective institutional safeguards against tyranny."¹⁵⁶

Now, this conception of democracy is hardly an absurd one. But it is strikingly distant from the democratic polity that Plato was taking aim at in his dialogues. Most scholars would now accept that the Athenian *dēmos* or people did not limit itself to choosing leaders; instead, the people themselves both made and enacted state policy through various participatory institutions such as the Assembly, the randomly selected Council, and the people's courts.¹⁵⁷ In Popper's view, democracy does not require the active participation of the people, but only their passive imprimatur. But as G. C. Field pointed out, "one of the cardinal virtues" of the *Republic*'s

Kallipolis is precisely the “general agreement throughout the city” as to who should “do the actual work of governing.”¹⁵⁸ If Field is right, Popper’s own vision of democracy may be closer to the ideal of the man he was criticizing than it is to the polity we might have expected him to be defending!

In fact, it is far from certain that Plato would have disliked modern representative democracies quite as violently as he disliked ancient direct democracy.¹⁵⁹ This is partly because a key element in his political theory—one that Popper underplays—is the idea that politics should be undertaken by political experts. I cannot provide a full analysis of this feature of Plato’s thinking, but I will quote a few excerpts from the *Statesman*, which together offer as clear an encapsulation of it as I know of. With regard to political authority, the Eleatic Stranger says, “the criterion in these things must not be the few, nor the many, nor consent nor the lack of it, nor poverty nor wealth, but some kind of knowledge (*epistēmē*).”¹⁶⁰ He goes on to note that such knowledge cannot be found in the mass of the people, but should only be sought in “some one man, or two, or extremely few.”¹⁶¹

Rather disturbingly, Popper’s theory of democracy is not a world away from being able to incorporate the Platonic perspective on political expertise. If democracy has nothing to do with popular participation in politics, but only requires that the people can choose elite leaders, why should these elite leaders not be experts? But as Field points out, “we have made a considerable concession” to Plato as soon as “we have accepted the view that a large part of the work of government really does demand a degree of special knowledge and concentrated attention which cannot be possible for the great majority of the population.”¹⁶²

Popper’s failure to counter one of the central thrusts of the Platonic attack on democracy represents, I would argue, a major missed opportunity. There are two possible responses to this challenge that Popper might have made; to be fair to him, neither of them would have been a particularly easy argument to make at the time when he was writing, but both responses might have been attempted. The first response draws on the example of Athenian democracy, and the second on political science and political theory. Both arguments are crucial today, with the example of an apparently successful and technocratic China looming in the background.¹⁶³

Popper of course had available to him the basic facts about Athenian government and society. He might, then, have used classical Athens as an example of how a direct democratic society can indeed compete with autocratic and oligarchic rivals with some success. That he did not was no doubt partly due to the hold of traditional historiography, which cherry-picked certain episodes (such as the destruction of the Sicilian expedition) to suggest that the classical Athenian state performed badly.¹⁶⁴ More recently, scholars have shown that, over the long term, and across a range of measures, democratic Athens emerges as one of the most successful of the Greek *poleis*.¹⁶⁵ This may have been to some extent a result of the democratic system; even if it was not, Athens’s example demonstrates clearly that the notion that any viable state has to be run solely by experts is wrong.

Popper might also have made the more general, and more ambitious argument that Plato’s emphasis on expert leaders was misplaced. Here a number of paths were open to him. He might have developed the intuition of Socrates’s rival in Plato’s *Protagoras* that politics simply is not a field of expertise in the way that ship building, for example, is—it involves moral judgments, and when it comes to moral judgments there are no real experts.¹⁶⁶ He might have pointed out that the distinction between the rule of the masses and the rule of experts presents us with a

false dichotomy, since democracies regularly incorporate expert knowledge in a way that remains consistent with popular rule.

And he might have argued that, given the right conditions, large groups of citizens working together are in fact not inferior in solving various sorts of problems to small groups of experts. But this last argument has only started to seem plausible in recent years, partly because of real world experiments in mass collaboration, and in part because of pioneering research into collective decision-making.¹⁶⁷

Whatever opportunities were missed in Popper's *Open Society*, it is becoming increasingly clear with every year that passes that the work will outlive the controversy it caused in the middle of the twentieth century. Written by an Austrian Jew who fled Hitler to find a temporary refuge in New Zealand, it was attacked and praised in equal measure by some of the leading intellectual lights of the day. The book certainly has its flaws—Athens was never tribal, Plato was never a historicist, and there is no evidence he ever dreamed of being a philosopher-king. But the force and focus of Popper's arguments changed the way we think about Plato, encouraging debate rather than worship, but also moderating and intellectualizing the controversy over Plato's totalitarianism. Popper went too far in presenting Plato as an extreme totalitarian, but the thesis that Plato's dialogues contain authoritarian ideas has yet to be refuted.

This, of course, is to bracket interpretive objections that—I have proposed—were motivated partly by a desire to shield Plato from the direct force of Popper's attack. I have discussed these issues already at length. But I will make one further comment on this point before the end of this essay. In deemphasizing Plato the historical figure, Plato the philosopher, and Plato's specifically *political* philosophy, we are at risk not only of making interpretive errors, but of not according Plato's ideas the respect they deserve. In my opinion, it is all to the good that Platonic scholarship, with the work of Richard Kraut and others, is now moving back towards an approach that, while acknowledging Plato as a literary artist, also takes him seriously as a political philosopher. In this, I would argue, contemporary Plato scholars are following the example of Karl Popper, whose head-on assault always implied a measure of respect for his Greek predecessor as perhaps the most formidable theorist of absolutism. As Plamenatz perceived:

Professor Popper is himself, in his own peculiar way, an admirer of Plato; his attack on him is too vehement and very probably unjust, but it is neither petty nor mean; he has felt the greatness of Plato, and has been under his spell.

As someone who has also, at times, been under the philosopher's spell, I want to close this paper by emphasizing that recognizing that Plato's dialogues contain a great deal of ideal political theory need not mean ignoring the fact that they also contain many other things as well; nor does a forthright rejection of Plato's autocratic politics necessarily entail a rejection of Plato's views on other subjects. As someone who regularly uses Plato in my teaching, I am acutely aware of the literary beauty and argumentative ingenuity of his texts, as well as of their usefulness as a way in to the glittering intellectual life of fifth-century Athens. At the same time, I am glad that, partly because of the influence of the *Open Society*, the study of Plato has reached a stage in which uncritical veneration is a thing of the distant past. Just as I am sure that literary readings of the dialogues will continue to be produced, it is my sincere hope—and not just for professional reasons—that the argument about Plato's politics has a long future ahead of it. But this is partly because, since the Second World War, that argument has been conducted on a more or less equal footing. And it is in this modest yet significant sense that

Karl Popper, during his time in New Zealand, can truly be said to have broken the spell of Plato.

¹ A version of this paper was delivered at the conference Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society, which took place in Wellington in September 2014. I thank the conference organizers for stimulating me to write about this topic. I also thank Simon Perris, Barrie Paskins, and Matt Simonton for allowing me to discuss this paper at them, as well as two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their comments.

² Leendert Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1962), 1.29–35; quoted in Gerald Press, “The State of the Question in the Study of Plato,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* no. 34 (1996): 310.

³ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Vol. 1: *The Spell of Plato*. Vol. 2: *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 1945), 1.131.

⁴ Popper, *Open Society*. It is safe to say that, despite Popper’s opinion that his first book was “surprisingly successful” (Karl Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* [La Salle: Open Court, 1974], 107) he was little known before *The Open Society* outside the small elite community of philosophers of science—although this circle did contain some prominent figures (on Popper’s encounters in these circles in the 1930s, see Popper, *Unended Quest*, 107–10).

⁵ Gilbert Ryle, review of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, by Karl Popper, *Mind* 57 (1948): 167, 172.

⁶ This “appreciation” was written by Russell in response to a written request by Popper (now lost) for help in securing an American publisher. Parts of Russell’s appreciation subsequently appeared on the back cover of Routledge’s 1947 UK reprint of Popper’s book, as well as on the first US edition, published by Princeton University Press in 1950. For details of the exchange, see Ivor Grattan-Guinness, “Russell and Karl Popper: Their Personal Contacts,” *Russell: The Journal of the Bertrand Russell Archives* 12 (1992): 5; the full text of Russell’s appreciation is on pp. 10–11. Russell was a longstanding supporter of Popper, and even wrote in support of his appointment to Canterbury College in 1936; for the reference, see again Grattan-Guinness, “Russell and Popper,” 5, n. 2.

⁷ Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, 1950, in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1993), 66–67. Strauss may not have been asking the question with an entirely open mind. His letter continues: “He gave a lecture here, on the task of social philosophy, that was beneath contempt: it was the most washed-out, lifeless positivism trying to whistle in the dark, linked to a complete inability to think ‘rationally,’ although it passed itself off as ‘rationalism’—it was very bad. I cannot imagine that such a man ever wrote something that was worthwhile reading, and yet it appears to be a professional duty to become familiar with his productions.”

⁸ Eric Voegelin to Leo Strauss, 1950, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, ed. Emberley and Cooper, 69.

⁹ Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, 1950, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, ed. Emberley and Cooper, 69: “I have never thanked you for your interesting letter dated 18.4. In confidence I would like to tell you that I showed your letter to my friend Kurt Riezler, who was thereby encouraged to throw his not inconsiderable influence into the balance against Popper’s probable appointment here. You thereby helped to prevent a scandal.” For the lasting influence of Popper’s book, see e.g. Raphael Sassower, *Popper’s Legacy: Rethinking Politics, Economics and Science* (London: Acumen, 2006), 13–50 (esp. 13, “an event more than just a book”) and the next two notes.

¹⁰ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003), 502.

¹¹ On the influence of Popper’s political ideas in East Germany, see Rachael Knight, “Popper in the Poison Cupboards: The Resonance of his Political Works in the Former GDR”; in Iran, Ali Paya, “Popper in Iran”; and in Japan, Kiichi Tachibana, “Can the Japanese Learn to Welcome Criticism Openly?”; all in *Karl Popper: A Centenary Assessment*, ed. Ian Jarvie, Karl Milford, and David Miller (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). For Popper’s influence in China, see William Newton-Smith and Jiang Tianji, eds, *Popper in China* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹² Recent collections of essays on Popper include Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralong, eds. *Popper's Open Society after Fifty Years: The Continuing Relevance of Karl Popper* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Jarvie, Milford, and Miller, eds. *Karl Popper*. For criticisms of Popper's account of democracy, see e.g. Geoffrey Stokes, "Karl Popper's Realist/Revisionist Theory of Democracy," in Jarvie, Milford, and Miller, eds. *Karl Popper*.

¹³ E.g. Christopher Taylor, "Plato's Totalitarianism," *Polis* 5 (1986): 287. "Despite, or perhaps because of, the emotional intensity of Popper's polemic, he is remarkably short on documentation."

¹⁴ Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 157. Ober is right to criticize Popper's views about early Greek "tribalism"—an issue we shall return to. On the other hand, I am unable to find references in Popper to the decline and decay of fourth-century Athens. Popper's view that Plato saw all political change as decay is ably refuted by Taylor, "Plato's Totalitarianism," 284–85.

¹⁵ Karl Popper, *Logik der Forschung* (Vienna: Springer, 1934), eventually translated as *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959). For Popper's father (and his library), see Popper, *Unended Quest*, 10–11; for Popper's own doctorate, and for his school teaching, see Popper, *Unended Quest*, 72–78.

¹⁶ For Popper's complicated relationship with the Vienna Circle, see Popper, *Unended Quest*, 87–90.

¹⁷ Appointment and arrival in New Zealand: Popper, *Unended Quest*, 111.

¹⁸ David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument between Two Great Philosophers* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 213; Popper, *Unended Quest*, 112.

¹⁹ Popper, *Unended Quest*, 112, 120.

²⁰ It is impossible to arrive at any precise estimate of the influence Popper had on New Zealand through his teaching, though he did have some notable students (for example the philosopher Peter Munz). At the same time, his record as a classroom teacher was mixed; ironically enough, this was partly because of an authoritarian streak he could show in the classroom! See the recollections from New Zealanders who studied with Popper collected in David Cohen, "Giving Karl Popper his Props: Scholars Reflect on the Controversial Philosopher 100 years after his Birth," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (26 July, 2002), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Giving-Karl-Popper-His-Props/20664>.

²¹ Quoted in Ernst Gombrich, "The Open Society—A Comment," *The British Journal of Sociology* 3 (1952): 26–27.

²² Popper, *Unended Quest*, 120.

²³ Admittedly, Popper was not the first to denounce Plato's politics. Guy Field, "On Misunderstanding Plato," *Philosophy* 19 (1944): 302–12 had already accused Benjamin Farrington (*Science and Politics in the Ancient World* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1939]) of criticizing Plato "very intemperately." But Popper's attack on Plato, in its length and sustained fury, was exceptional.

²⁴ Popper, *Open Society* 1.viii.

²⁵ Quoted in Ernst Gombrich, "Personal Recollections of the Publication of *The Open Society*," in Jarvie and Pralong, *After Fifty Years*, 20.

²⁶ Gombrich, "Personal Recollections," 20.

²⁷ Gombrich, "Personal Recollections," 23–24.

²⁸ Quoted in Gombrich, "Personal Recollections," 24.

²⁹ Gombrich, "Personal Recollections," 23.

³⁰ Gombrich, "Personal Recollections," 27.

³¹ Ryle, review, 172.

³² Bertrand Russell, "Philosophy and Politics," in *Unpopular Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), 16.

³³ Russell, "Philosophy and Politics," 15. For Russell's relationship with Popper see note 6 above.

³⁴ John Plamenatz, review of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, by Karl Popper, *The British Journal of Sociology* 4 (1952): 264.

³⁵ Plamenatz, review, 273.

³⁶ Plamenatz, review, 267.

³⁷ Plamenatz, review, 273.

³⁸ Gombrich, "A Comment," 360.

Journal of New Zealand Studies NS28 (2019), 2–28 <https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.v0iNS28.5418>

-
- ³⁹ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.42, 97, 156.
- ⁴⁰ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.33–34.
- ⁴¹ Ryle, review, 171. Ryle’s comments here come in his discussion of Popper’s treatment of Hegelianism, but seem to apply equally to the rest of the work.
- ⁴² Plamenatz, review, 267.
- ⁴³ Alfred Hoernlé, “Would Plato Have Approved of the National–Socialist State?” *Philosophy* 13 (1938): 166–82.
- ⁴⁴ Warner Fite, *The Platonic Legend* (New York: Scribner, 1934); Melvin Rader, *No Compromise: The Conflict between Two Worlds* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); Edward Sisson, “Human Nature and the Present Crisis,” *Philosophical Review* 49 (1940): 142–62; Richard Crossman, *Plato Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939). See also the attacks on Plato in Farrington, *Science and Politics*.
- ⁴⁵ For Gödel’s Platonism, see e.g. Richard Tieszen, *After Gödel: Platonism and Rationalism in Mathematics and Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ⁴⁶ Richard Livingstone, *Plato and Modern Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944).
- ⁴⁷ Richard Livingstone, *Some Tasks for Education* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), 33.
- ⁴⁸ Ronald Levinson, *In Defense of Plato* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1953).
- ⁴⁹ Field was already complaining (with reference to Fite, *Legend*, and Farrington, *Science and Politics*) that Plato “has been treated, not as a serious thinker to be understood, but as an enemy to be attacked” (“Misunderstanding,” 49). But the two attitudes need not be mutually exclusive.
- ⁵⁰ Ryle, review, 170.
- ⁵¹ Renford Bambrough, “Plato’s Modern Friends and Enemies,” *Philosophy* 37 (1962), 99–100.
- ⁵² For early Greek “tribalism,” see Popper, *Open Society*, esp. 1.59–66, 171–75. For Popper, the move from a tribal and closed society to a “democratic” and open one was linked to a cognitive change from “naïve monism” (in which people took conventions to be natural and unalterable) to “critical dualism” (in which certain conventions were revealed to be merely conventional, and therefore open to criticism and change).
- ⁵³ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.80.
- ⁵⁴ Plamenatz, review, 271.
- ⁵⁵ For Plato’s “utopian [social] engineering” (contrasted with Popper’s preferred “piecemeal engineering”), see esp. Popper, *Open Society*, 1.157–68.
- ⁵⁶ Denis Roussel, *Tribu et Cité: Etudes sur les Groupes Sociaux dans les Cités Grecques aux Époques Archaique et Classique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976).
- ⁵⁷ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.171.
- ⁵⁸ For “historicism,” see Popper, *Open Society*, 1.7–10. For Plato as a historicist, see esp. 1.35–56.
- ⁵⁹ For Popper’s fullest account of “historicism” see “The Poverty of Historicism” I–II, *Economica* 11 (1944), 86–103, 119–37; and III, *Economica* 12 (1945), 69–89; all reprinted together as *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1957). Ryle, review, 167.
- ⁶⁰ Popper, *Open Society*, II.
- ⁶¹ Plamenatz, review, 266.
- ⁶² Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 285–86.
- ⁶³ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.35–36: the Forms are the “starting points of all the changes in our world”; but “if the starting point of all change is perfect and good, then change can only be a movement that leads away from the perfect and good.”
- ⁶⁴ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.39.
- ⁶⁵ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.38: the theory of Forms explained what Plato saw as “the historical tendency to degenerate shown by man and society.”
- ⁶⁶ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 285, n. 11; *Phaedo* 102d–e.
- ⁶⁷ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 286, n. 12; *Rep.* 499c–d.
- ⁶⁸ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 286; *Laws* 677b–678c.
- ⁶⁹ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 286.
- ⁷⁰ See e.g. the reservations of Plamenatz, review, 264–65.

⁷¹ For Plato's betrayal of Socrates, see Popper, *Open Society*, 1.194–97, esp. 194; arresting change (emphasis in the original), 21; Plato the would-be philosopher-king, 153.

⁷² Ryle, review, 169.

⁷³ For the midcentury orthodoxy, see Press 1996, 311–12.

⁷⁴ Press, "State of the Question," 313–14.

⁷⁵ I take this to be the attitude of scholars such as Andrea Nightingale: see her *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷⁶ Press, "State of the Question," 314–15.

⁷⁷ See esp. Thomas Szlezak, *Platon lessen* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1993) translated as *Reading Plato* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷⁸ See esp. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964). For a lively and concise (if highly critical) survey of Strauss' views, see Myles Burnyeat, "Sphinx without a Secret," *New York Review of Books* 32 (1985), 30–36.

⁷⁹ E.g. Frederick Woodbridge, *The Son of Apollo: Themes of Plato* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929).

⁸⁰ For "mouthpiece theory" see Harry Berger, Jr., "Levels of Discourse in Plato's Dialogues," in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); for "the mouthpiece fallacy" see Press, "State of the Question," 315.

⁸¹ It is fair to say that analytic readers of Plato have become more cautious and circumspect in this regard since scholars from outside that tradition started raising objections; and to that extent the contribution to the study of Plato of the latter has been salutary.

⁸² Of course, this also includes the question of what the historical Socrates thought (as opposed to the "Socrates" who appears in Plato's dialogues). For questions like that, Christopher Taylor, *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) is a good place to start.

⁸³ Socrates is exposed to increasing criticism in the *Parmenides*, is a junior figure in the *Statesman*, and is absent in the *Laws*. In the last two of these dialogues, he is replaced as the dominant interlocutor by the Eleatic and Athenian Strangers, respectively.

⁸⁴ *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713); *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). Berkeley's choice of the dialogue form was clearly influenced by Plato. That he also chose to make one of his characters the transparent mouthpiece of his own convictions is, I would say, suggestive.

⁸⁵ For a clear example, see Mr. Propter in Aldous Huxley's 1939 novel *After Many a Summer*, another case in which we happen to *know* that that the character is expressing views held by the author at the time.

⁸⁶ So, in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924), the characters Settembrini and Naphta might both be said to direct, dominate, and "win" the conversations in various parts of the novel. But the fact that Naphta takes over the dominant position from Settembrini, before both cede this place to other characters, clearly signals that neither is to be taken as the authoritative voice of the novel as a whole. This is a very different situation from most Platonic dialogues.

⁸⁷ Full references to episodes in Plato that back up this point would fill a whole page. But many of the early dialogues portray Socrates as clearly the most insightful thinker among any number of philosophical novices (*Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*). Middle dialogues frequently show Socrates dominating and defeating a celebrated intellectual antagonist (the clearest example is the *Gorgias*, and the *Protagoras* is arguably another instance). In the later dialogues Socrates fades away, but his place is often taken by similarly dominant interlocutors (in the *Statesman* and the *Laws*).

⁸⁸ Plays tend not to be dominated in this way by a single character: even the title characters of *Hamlet* or *King Lear* are not quite on the level of Socrates. Of course, there are always exceptions, such as Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). (Though on such occasions critics tend to complain that the play is less of a drama than a tract.)

⁸⁹ Strauss, *City and Man*, 59; quotations and paraphrase from Berger, "Levels of Discourse," 289.

⁹⁰ James Arieti, "How to Read a Platonic Dialogue," in *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*, ed. Francisco Gonzalez (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 275, 283.

- ⁹¹ Without enumerating them, Burnyeat (“Sphinx,” 342) has grasped the main point: “Plato’s distancing of himself from his characters is quite different from Shakespeare’s.”
- ⁹² No doubt a few characters, such as Falstaff, appear in more than one play, but none of them takes the starring role in the bulk of Shakespeare’s oeuvre in the way that Socrates does in Plato’s.
- ⁹³ So there is quite a difference, for example, between Helena’s speech on love in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1.1.237–62), and Socrates’s speech on love in the *Symposium* (201a–212a).
- ⁹⁴ The *Apology* may be one exception—although it, too, contains some philosophical content.
- ⁹⁵ Such as Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*.
- ⁹⁶ Richard Kraut, “Introduction to the Study of Plato,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 25.
- ⁹⁷ Kraut, “Introduction,” 26, who uses the example of Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*.
- ⁹⁸ Esp. since most people who encourage others to take up some activity enjoy doing it themselves.
- ⁹⁹ Burnyeat, “Sphinx.”
- ¹⁰⁰ Kraut’s example (“Introduction,” 28) is *Rep.* 555b–565e. Others abound; Popper’s *Open Society* is, in some ways, a compendium of antidemocratic ideas that, whether Plato himself held them or not, he apparently had no qualms about including in his published works.
- ¹⁰¹ Kraut, “Introduction,” 29.
- ¹⁰² So for example the criticisms of writing in the *Phaedrus* or *Seventh Letter* should be balanced by the use of written preludes in the ideal city of the *Laws*—surely a sign that Plato thought that written texts could sometimes have an educational function. And we should remember that texts outside the dialogues (such as the *Seventh Letter*) are no more free of interpretative problems than the dialogues themselves (not to mention problems of authenticity). For these and other points along these lines, see Richard Kraut, “Plato,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* online (2013).
- ¹⁰³ Kraut, “Introduction,” 29.
- ¹⁰⁴ Kraut, “Introduction,” 25–30 is the best concise rebuttal to the antianalytic schools in Plato studies. Kraut, “Plato,” performs the same task at greater length and in more detail.
- ¹⁰⁵ Richard Hare, *Plato*, Past Masters Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 28.
- ¹⁰⁶ Popper, *Open Society*, vol. 1: title page and *passim*, 169, 131.
- ¹⁰⁷ In fact, neither “nazism” nor “fascism” feature in the index.
- ¹⁰⁸ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.viii.
- ¹⁰⁹ As he is in e.g. Erich Unger, “Contemporary Anti-Platonism,” *The Cambridge Journal* (1949). For attempts to establish direct links between Plato and the Nazis, see Russell, “Philosophy and Politics,” 16 (such as Plato’s literary skill that “Liberals never noticed his reactionary tendencies until his disciples Lenin and Hitler had supplied them with a practical exegesis”); and Crossman, *Plato Today*, 282 (if Plato found himself in Nazi Germany he would “offer his services”), quoted by an outraged Unger, “Anti-Platonism,” 644.
- ¹¹⁰ Hoernlé, “Would Plato Have Approved?”
- ¹¹¹ Theodor von der Pfordten, “Das Beamtenideal bei Plato und seine Bedeutung für die Gegenwart,” *Annalen des Deutschen Reichs für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* (1920) (by a civil servant who would die in the failed Munich coup three year later); Hans Günter, *Platon als Hüter des Lebens: Platons Zucht- und Erziehungsgedanken und deren Bedeutung für die Gegenwart* (Munich: Lehmann, 1928) (Plato’s eugenics and nazi theories of race); Hans Grunsky, *Seele und Staat: Die Psychologischen Grundlagen des Nationalsozialistischen Siegs über den Bürgerlichen und Bolschewistischen Menschen* (Berlin: Junker and Dünnhaupt, 1935) (the nazi soul and state, by a scholar who was appointed as a Professor at Munich with the support of the party). To these might be added a number of other titles mentioned in Glenn Morrow, “Plato and the Rule of Law,” *The Philosophical Review* 50 (1941): 105, n. 1.
- ¹¹² Harry Acton, “The Alleged Fascism of Plato,” *Philosophy* 13 (1938), 302.
- ¹¹³ Acton, “Alleged Fascism,” 302.
- ¹¹⁴ Acton, “Alleged Fascism,” 307–08; *Laws* 628.
- ¹¹⁵ Morrow, “Rule of Law,” 106–07 (on the subordination of all magistrates to the laws, see esp. *Laws* 715c–e.) Morrow’s *Plato’s Cretan City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960) would prove a seminal reconsideration of the *Laws*.
- ¹¹⁶ Field, “Misunderstanding,” 51.

¹¹⁷ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.1: “What we call nowadays totalitarianism belongs to a tradition which is just as old or just as young as our civilization itself.”

¹¹⁸ The closest that Popper comes in associating Plato with an actual fascist regime (at least as far as I can tell) is when in his 1961 reply to Ronald Levinson, he insists that the term *archon* “is properly and precisely translated by the English word *leader* (or the Latin *dux* or the Italian *il duce*)” (Popper, *Open Society*, 1.334). But, of course, *il duce* is not *il Duce*, nor is one necessarily a reference to the other. Otherwise, vague references to e.g. “the similarity between the Platonic system of justice and the theory and practice of modern totalitarianism” (5) are all we get.

¹¹⁹ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 282.

¹²⁰ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 283.

¹²¹ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 280.

¹²² Popper, *Open Society*, 1.107. Emphasis in the original.

¹²³ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 286.

¹²⁴ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 287; 443c–d, 444a–445b, 586e–587a.

¹²⁵ The just man will tend to his own field of expertise, thus helping the city achieve its own ideal of justice: 441d–e.

¹²⁶ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 287, where he also dismisses two other passages that Popper cites from the *Laws* in support of his view.

¹²⁷ *Laws* 739c; Popper, *Open Society*, 1.102–03.

¹²⁸ *Laws* 739d–e; Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 288.

¹²⁹ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 288.

¹³⁰ Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” 281.

¹³¹ Acton, “Alleged Fascism,” 302.

¹³² Field, “Misunderstanding,” 50–51.

¹³³ As any reader will notice immediately, Popper’s *Open Society* intersperses among criticisms of the “enemies” of the “open society” the author’s own arguments in favour of it.

¹³⁴ E.g. Popper, *Open Society*, 1.34.

¹³⁵ Field, “Misunderstanding,” 50.

¹³⁶ For the centrality of Plato (esp. the *Republic*) to elite education in Britain, see Hoernlé, “Would Plato Have Approved?” 166: “Like all my generation at Oxford . . . I received my first introduction to the Philosophical Theory of the State through the reading of Plato’s *Republic*.”

¹³⁷ Press, “State of the Question,” 312: “Beginning in the late 1950s, important criticisms of the prevailing views were articulated . . . and the literary and dramatic orientations began to have greater influence.”

¹³⁸ The entry for the *Republic* in the “Index of Platonic passages” (Popper, *Open Society*, vol. 1) is by far the longest (though the entry for the *Laws* is clearly in second place). For the *Republic* as Plato’s masterpiece, see e.g. Unger’s complaint (“Anti-Platonism,” 646) that Popper and Crossman had misrepresented “a work which up till now did not seem to have many equals in world literature.”

¹³⁹ Note how Morrow’s “Rule of Law” shifts the debate from the *Republic* to the *Laws* with the clear aim of defending Plato from his detractors (see esp. 106: “But the *Republic* is not the only work that Plato wrote on politics. The Plato of my title is the Plato of the *Laws*, a Plato who has been very much overshadowed in modern times by his younger self.”) Important postwar work on the *Laws* includes Morrow, *Cretan City*, and Chris Bobonich, *Plato’s Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

¹⁴⁰ Recent work on the *Symposium* includes Frisbee Sheffield, *Plato’s Symposium: The Ethics of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). We have already seen how the *Phaedrus* was a key text for various antianalytic schools. Of course, another reason these texts gained popularity was because of the broader postwar scholarly interest in the issues they discuss, especially sexuality on the one hand, and writing and orality on the other.

¹⁴¹ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.viii (in the 1950 preface).

¹⁴² Field, “Misunderstanding,” 50.

¹⁴³ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.viii.

¹⁴⁴ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.1.

¹⁴⁵ Field, “Misunderstanding,” 61.

¹⁴⁶ There is an (ample) entry in the index of Popper, *Open Society*, vol. 1 for “communism,” although the pages cited tend to refer to common ownership in Kallipolis, rather than to Soviet-style communism. But see also the entry for “collectivism.”

¹⁴⁷ Hegel, of course, takes up much less of Popper, *Open Society*, vol. 2 than Marx.

¹⁴⁸ Popper states in the 1950 preface (*Open Society*, 1.viii) that the book was an attempt to understand, as well as the events of the war, “some of the issues that were likely to arise after the war was won.” And he explains, “The expectation that Marxism would become a major problem was the reason for treating it at some length.”

¹⁴⁹ Such as historicism. Popper (*Open Society*, 1.164–65) singles out utopian radicalism as an important shared element in the thought of both men: “Both Plato and Marx are dreaming of the apocalyptic revolution which will radically transfigure the whole social world.”

¹⁵⁰ The quotation is from a letter to Gombrich, quoted in Gombrich, “Personal Recollections,” 26.

¹⁵¹ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.173.

¹⁵² The main discussion of democracy in Popper, *Open Society*, 1 is confined to 124–25; there are also some remarks about it at 125–27.

¹⁵³ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942).

¹⁵⁴ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.124.

¹⁵⁵ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.125.

¹⁵⁶ Popper, *Open Society*, 1.125.

¹⁵⁷ Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) was instrumental in turning the tide against those who saw Athenian democracy as a covert oligarchy. The best introduction to Athenian democratic institutions is Mogens Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Nelson: Oklahoma University Press, 1991).

¹⁵⁸ Field, “Misunderstanding,” 51.

¹⁵⁹ Though Field (“Misunderstanding,” 50) thinks Plato would have said that our representative democracy “did contain a considerable element of democracy, and that his criticisms would apply just in so far as this element was effective.”

¹⁶⁰ *Pol.* 292c. Popper (*Open Society*, 1.283) quotes this passage, but misses its importance; his discussion of it is bound up with his quixotic attempt to show that Plato wanted to make himself philosopher-king of Athens.

¹⁶¹ *Pol.* 292e–293a: ἓνα τινὰ καὶ δύο καὶ παντάπασιν ὀλίγους. As it often does, καὶ here means “or.”

¹⁶² Field, “Misunderstanding,” 52. Field goes on to opine, on the same page, that in allowing political experts to hold considerable power, our representative systems constitute “a compromise between—or perhaps a synthesis of—Greek democratic ideas and Plato’s criticism of them.”

¹⁶³ See the recent book by Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), which appeals to both Confucius and Plato to argue in favour of Chinese-style “meritocracy.”

¹⁶⁴ For the traditional, hostile historiography on Athens, see esp. Jennifer Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Popper shows some awareness of this tradition (in particular, the antidemocratic bias of Eduard Meyer) at *Open Society*, 1.296–97.

¹⁶⁵ Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 39–79.

¹⁶⁶ I take this to be the point of Protagoras’s “Great Speech” (320c–328d); see my essay, “Protagoras’s Cooperative Know-How,” in Marquez, ed. *Democratic Moments* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). The brief mentions of Protagoras in Popper, *Open Society*, 1 (e.g. 65–67) are mainly concerned with the views of the historical sophist on nature and convention, not with the views on democracy expressed in Plato’s dialogue.

¹⁶⁷ For real world experiments in collaborative decision-making, see Dan Tapscott and Anthony Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Penguin, 2006); for examples of pioneering research, see Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).