Liberalism needs a dose of ancient philosophy. Liberal theorists should stop talking about “rights” and redirect their attention to the broadest questions of human goodness. As they enter into this speculative mode, they should ask themselves whether liberal neutrality is either possible or desirable. Asking this question will cooperate with existing efforts to remedy the widespread apathy and, indeed, ignorance that are characteristic of liberal citizens. The remedy might be found in constructing more satisfying, and thus more demanding, models of citizenship. The creation of attractive models of citizenship will inevitably show that liberal autonomy needs to be supplemented by virtue. All of these important questions should be understood within the framework of the largest, most pressing, and even “eternal” question of whether political engagement must not yield, after all, to philosophy as the highest human activity, and as the fullest realization of our distinctively rational capacities.

Such is the message of neo-Aristotelian theorists to liberal theorists, formulated as audaciously and provocatively as possible. In their illustrious forefather, contemporary Aristotelians have discovered an ally who provides unorthodox, yet attractive, prospects for understanding the relation of politics to ethics, metaphysics, rhetoric, and science. Despite their important differences, contemporary Aristotelians are drawn to Aristotle’s vision of politics as an activity of shared practical consideration of “permanent” human questions, such as, How should we live? Contemporary Aristotelians are critical of the liberal vocabulary of rights, values, preferences, and obligations, arguing that Aristotle’s language of virtue and human flourishing commands greater power in the analysis of political life. Rather than finding themselves embarrassed by Aristotle’s discredited “metaphysical biology,” contemporary Aristotelians value Aristotle’s naturalism for its provision of non-relative standards of human flourishing. They agree, moreover, that Aristotle’s practical philosophy provides a helpful antidote to the narrow rationalism of liberal theory, by taking into account the emotions, character, and historically contingent habits of political actors.

A few quick examples will illustrate the powerful challenges offered by Aristotelian theorists. Stephen Salkever (1974), for example, calls on Aristotle’s understanding of the “naturalness” of politics to raise questions about the modern emphasis on political obligation, legitimacy, and rights. Elsewhere, Salkever (2002) theorizes an Aristotelian “ethics of natural questions” as a deliberative model superior to that offered by the more Kantian exponents of deliberative democracy, such as Habermas. Gerald Mara (1985) argues that the Rawlsian and Habermasian vision of “public reason” and the autonomy of political agents can be helpfully supplemented by the Aristotelian exploration of the
human passions that shape public rhetorical expression. Dissatisfied with the apathy of liberal citizens, and the tameness of liberal accounts of virtue and education, Susan Collins (2006) has revived a specifically Aristotelian model of citizenship, which is the product of authoritative civic education focused on seeking the human good. Perhaps most influentially, Ronald Beiner (1992) has redeployed the Aristotelian concepts of eudaimonia, phronesis, and virtue in order to criticize the subjectivism of liberal “values” and the falseness of liberal neutrality. Beiner’s view is that active, Aristotelian citizenship focused on working out a shared human destiny is the best way to realize, in practice, our higher and distinctively human capacities for judgment.¹

Many of these critics might usefully be called “liberal perfectionists”; they are not revolutionaries, nor are they hostile to the manifest goods offered by the dominant liberal order. They happily acknowledge that liberal society has delivered on the promises of liberalism’s early modern forefathers. They value the goods most prized by liberalism, including material prosperity, toleration of religious and cultural diversity, security and stability, freedom of conscience, a rich private sphere, political equality, and technological (e.g., medical) conquest of nature. With a very few possible exceptions,² no one could be hostile to these extraordinary contributions to the cause of human happiness.

Instead, these theorists insist that liberal theory could be improved and that liberal society could be doing better. We could be working to develop a shared ethical vocabulary, in order to make our own thoughts on human goodness more fully intelligible to ourselves. We could envision politics as the self-respecting sphere in which we take responsibility for our common future. We could give public reasons to one another through the prism of a generally intelligible, if contested, framework of ethical ideas, i.e. the virtues. We could be asking whether “human flourishing” is an objective good to be sought within political dialogue and approximated to within political life. We could explore, in some form or other, the question of whether the virtues themselves are not, in fact, intrinsically desirable for human beings, rather than merely instrumentally useful for the promotion of other political and private ends.

To be sure, liberal theorists themselves have not been slow to respond to the challenges posed by the Aristotelian “time travelers.” The liberal response has had several dimensions. The “conciliatory” dimension, as I would like to call it, consists in the effort to develop a distinctively liberal theory of virtue. Stephen Macedo (1990, 2000) and William Galston (1991), for example, have developed their own liberalized theories of the virtues, centered on civility, deliberative skill, and toleration. As if in response to the “historical turn” of critics, moreover, Peter Berkowitz (1999) has excavated a virtue tradition within the canonical texts of early modern liberalism.

¹ I leave out of account here the equally compelling Aristotelianism of Martha Nussbaum (see Nussbaum 1988 and Nussbaum 1990), because Nussbaum is engaged in what might be called a “legislative,” rather than a critical, effort. Like Rawls, Dworkin, and many other liberal theorists, Nussbaum approaches political theory as a means to guide political practice. By contrast, the Aristotelians mentioned here are engaged in a chiefly critical project. They do not aspire to reconcile Aristotelian theory with liberal theory or politics.
² See, possibly, MacIntyre 1984, MacIntyre 1988.
I hope I will not offend my Stanford hosts, however, if I confess discomfort with many of the conclusions reached by these theorists. Consider, for example, Macedo’s vivid conclusion that “Liberalism holds out the promise, or the threat, of making all the world like California.” (1990: 278) This is the stage of the paper in which contemporary Aristotelians will despairingly cry out, “Exactly!”

From the outlook of contemporary Aristotelianism, Macedo’s remark is interesting for two reasons. First, Macedo indicates that the cultivation of autonomy, perhaps paradoxically, threatens to homogenize the world as we now know it. Every previously distinct and richly diverse town will now become like California, because liberalism, as he rightly points out, puts its universalizing stamp on the entire culture. The promise of richness and diversity held out by liberal autonomy seems paradoxically to be lost by the inexorably universalizing workings of liberal culture.

Second, and more important, Macedo’s conclusion depends upon a surprising – to Aristotelians – neglect of the distinctively human possibility of deliberating about, and even rank-ordering, the manifest goods found in the California life-style. The point is not that California holds out no goods; to the contrary, it is the home of very many great goods. The point is that, to be good, these goods need to be ordered – to be sure, in diverse ways that respect the diverse material circumstances of many local communities of judgment. They need to be made meaningful within a rational discursive context elaborated by the deliberative judgments of citizens who talk with, and listen to, one another. Plato long ago skewered the disordered life of many unrelated goods in putting forward the following characterization of democratic man:

And so he lives on, yielding day by day to the desire at hand. Sometimes he drinks heavily while listening to the flute; at other times, he drinks only water and is on a diet; sometimes he goes in for physical training; at other times, he’s idle and neglects everything; and sometimes he even occupies himself with what he takes to be philosophy. He often engages in politics, leaping up from his seat and saying and doing whatever comes into his mind. If he happens to admire soldiers, he’s carried in that direction, if money-makers, in that one. There’s neither order nor necessity in his life, but he calls it pleasant, free, and blessedly happy, and he follows it for as long as he lives (Republic 561c-d, tr. Grube, rev. Reeve).

Perhaps certain individualists will embrace the picture of individual freedom offered in Plato’s vignette. If we understand the point of Plato’s critique, however, then it will be hard to imagine parents genuinely wishing such a life upon their children. No parent will be happy to have children whose desires have not been shaped by considerable, even painstaking, thought regarding the constituents of human goodness. No parent will look back with pride on his parenting, if he has raised children with disordered desires – desires that are systematically and deliberately disordered because they have been cultivated within a culture whose chief value is maximizing choice. Should we continue

3 This wonderful statement goes to the heart of liberalism’s paradoxical ethos-less ethos; for further commentary, see Beiner 1997, 3-17.
4 See Beiner 1992, 15-38, for a full discussion of “homogenization.”
to devote our theoretical energies to justifying or even celebrating unreconstructed preferences, values, and satisfactions, among Generation X? Or should we, instead, embrace the commonsensical desire to reproduce generations of citizens who are self-disciplined, self-reliant, generous, prudent, and just? What should our public conversations about early education (for example) really look like, in view of the challenge posed by the neo-Aristotelian conviction that autonomy is an achievement?^5

By far the more important liberal reaction to the new Aristotelian “politics of virtue,” however, has been offensive. Liberal theorists have attacked exponents of the politics of virtue for diminishing human freedom, promoting a monistic conception of the good, and espousing elitism. Given initially liberal premises, these criticisms are understandable. Political virtue calls to mind the bellicosity of the Spartan and Roman republics as well as the elitism of the Platonic and Aristotelian utopias. Virtue theorists are not notable exponents of pluralism. Nor is Aristotle a leading theorist of human freedom. Along these lines, then, liberal theorists might worry that any efforts to institute a public education to virtue will – to put the point most provocatively – inevitably transform politics into Robespierre’s tyrannical reign of terror.

Exponents of virtue politics would do well to pay attention to these important criticisms. Looking to the ancient world for political guidance might indeed create disturbing problems, if ancient virtue theory necessarily carries with it any traces of the ancients’ bellicosity, sexism, monism, elitism, or political tyranny. Even though I remain mindful of such worries, however, I want to argue that there is at least one form of ancient virtue politics that remains largely immune to such criticisms. This is the virtue-enriched political ideology of democratic Athens. The Athenians’ democratic brand of “virtue politics” provides an even more useful critical and political language for us than the prevailing Aristotelian alternative.

When I speak of the Athenians’ specifically democratic virtue politics, I mean the conceptions of political virtue that can be recovered from Athenian democratic ideology. The major source for this ideology is the corpus of Attic oratory. This corpus of roughly 150 speeches is widely acknowledged to be the most direct point of access to the democratic ideology and mentality of ancient Athens. These deliberative, forensic, and epideictic speeches were written and delivered by members of the Athenian elite to popular audiences consisting of ordinary Athenian citizens. As Ober (1989) has argued, these speeches were not instruments of elite rhetorical power over the Athenian demos. Instead, they show members of the elite competing with one another for the favor of

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^6 To my knowledge, only one other theorist has taken this approach to ancient virtue: see Wallach 1994, which discusses Athenian democratic virtue and its relation to America’s democratic possibilities. There are numerous differences between my approach and that of Wallach, but the central difference is that Wallach’s conception of democratic virtue comes from two texts that are arguably critical of democracy and that were certainly written by two of democracy’s foremost opponents. The texts are Pericles’ Funeral Oration from Thucydides’ History and Protagoras’ “Great Speech” from Plato’s Protagoras. These texts provide not only an all-too-minimal account of democratic virtue, but also an account that is not democratic in origin. I approach the democrats’ politics of virtue through studying the Athenian orators, who provide us, as I shall argue, with a nearly ideal source-base from which to study democratic ideology and thought.
ordinary citizens. These speeches express a democratic ideology that promoted freedom, equality, and other characteristically popular ideals. They provide evidence of how popular ideals were publicly expressed within an institutional and cultural framework that truly promoted “people-power.”

In turning to democratic ideology, I do not wish utterly to abandon the profound political understanding made available to us by the rejuvenated Aristotle. Yet there are several – four, to be precise – ways in which the democratic virtue politics is more useful than Aristotle for “moderns” who are dissatisfied with, or are somehow inclined to reform, liberal and democratic life as we know it.

First, and most important, the Athenians embraced freedom as a cardinal political ideal. Amidst his searing criticisms of “ancient freedom,” even Benjamin Constant praised the democratic Athenians for respecting both the freedom of active political participation and the freedom from intrusion by the political authorities into what would now be called “private” life. It is of particular interest for modern liberal democrats, as heirs to the great liberal tradition of freedom, to understand how the Athenians’ language of political virtue could be balanced against and combined with an ideal of political and personal freedom. Instead of meditating, like their modern counterparts (Hobbes, Locke, etc.), on the relationship between freedom and political obligation, the Athenian democrats sought to work out a coherent synthesis of freedom and political virtue. The Athenians’ synthesis of freedom and virtue should recommend their case to us over the potentially competing claims to our attention made by either the Aristotelian or republican traditions of virtue.

Second, by contrast with the Aristotelian tradition of virtue, the Athenians’ democratic politics of virtue was forged within a self-consciously egalitarian political world. Athenian democratic politics was dedicated to both the ideology and practice of political equality. The legitimate worries about Aristotelian elitism are completely out of place when we turn to the Athenian example. The Athenians’ emphatic respect for freedom and equality shows, in short, that they produced a genuinely democratic politics of virtue. By contrast, Aristotle is normally understood to be a critic of democracy. As John Wallach (1992) has argued, it may be difficult to detach Aristotelian theory from the elitist and anti-democratic philosophical thought-world in which it was initially created.

Third, although contemporary Aristotelians have, I think, successfully defended their virtue theories from the charge of monism, this type of criticism has no traction at all in the case of democratic virtue theory. As Nussbaum (2002) has correctly understood, Aristotelian virtue theory is “thick but vague.” By comparison, Athenian virtue theory is both thicker and vaguer. Thicker, in that the Athenians had a less speculative and much more concrete sense of the contexts in which their vocabulary should be applied. Vaguer, in that the Athenians did not even come close to recommending a particular type of life – e.g., the philosophical – as best. To the extent that the Athenians did “valorize” a

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7 This is why a recent historical work on the relationship between freedom and obligation in classical Athens, studied through the prism of Rawlsian political theory, strikes me as profoundly anachronistic: see Liddel 2007.
particular type of life, they (like Aristotle) emphasized a life that involved significant political participation. By contrast with Aristotle, however, they certainly did not teach, for example, that philosophical lives had to be publicly acknowledged as highest and most divine.

Fourth, by comparison with the Aristotelian alternative, analysis of Athenian political ideology brings us much more closely into contact with issues raised by real political life. Central among these issues is the relationship between leaders and ordinary citizens, and their respective virtues. Can leaders have distinctive virtues in a democracy without compromising the ideal of political equality? This type of question also raises the related issue of political competition, about which the Athenians developed a robustly descriptive and normative language of ethical evaluation. How were the Athenians both to regulate excessive political rivalries and to promote desirable competition oriented toward the common good? The Athenian democrats show us how the politics of virtue works in real time. By contrast, we find no Aristotelian discussion of political leadership and only the vaguest analysis of political competition. Aristotle self-consciously confined himself, for theoretical reasons, to the imprecision that is everywhere characteristic of his practical philosophy. His own analysis of virtue in politics, while useful, lacks the detail and the historical concreteness that virtue theorists tend to find most valuable.

Beyond these improvements upon neo-Aristotelian theory, there is yet another feature that recommends the Athenian case to our attention. The Athenians’ democratic politics of virtue also makes contact with both ancient and contemporary philosophical theories of virtue ethics. As a result, the Athenian case should be of great interest to philosophical theorists of virtue ethics who wish to find an array of practical examples, legal cases, and political deliberations illustrating real-life, but also philosophically interesting, analyses of the virtues and vices. It does not go too far to say, in fact, that the Platonic and Aristotelian theories of virtue grew out of the democratic ideology of virtue. As I hope to show, the Athenians developed a model of the virtues in action that was based on a highly plausible vision of human psychology, including a credible representation of rationality, the passions, the role of education, and character formation within society. The Athenians offer us a democratized, yet still philosophically respectable, version of the ancient politics of virtue.

In light of these extraordinary promises, I propose to offer an extended analysis of Athenian democratic virtue as presented in the rich corpus of Attic oratory. Before turning to this analysis (in Section III), I begin by stating more clearly what I mean by “virtue theory.” Because of the Athenians’ own contact with the philosophical tradition, I find it most helpful to present “virtue theory” as it has been reconstructed by “virtue ethicists” working within the Aristotelian tradition, broadly construed (Section I). The Athenians were not philosophers, to be sure, but their presentation of virtue and vice can be meaningfully illuminated by the virtue ethical tradition. I then offer several criticisms of Aristotelian and republican traditions of “virtue politics” (Section II), before moving on to my own analysis of Athenian democratic virtue. As a liberal, and as a basically realistic person, I have no hopes or desires that the Athenian democracy’s politics of
virtue should set in motion a theoretical or practical revolution. But I hope to show, in
detail, that democratic Athenians provided an attractive critical language with which to
approach the many problems, as well as hopeful prospects, of contemporary liberal
political theory and political life.

I. Virtue Theory: A Sketch

“Virtue ethics” has recently recommended itself to a variety of normative ethical
theorists, who argue that virtue (as opposed to duties or consequences) provides the
clearest and most plausible standard for evaluating moral behavior, as well as the best
way of accounting for and explaining our basic moral intuitions. Virtue (aretē in Greek)
is a praiseworthy, enduring character trait (hexis), which disposes a person to make good
moral choices for the right reasons.8 Virtue requires habit-formation and emotional
education but is identical with neither habit nor emotion. To be sure, virtuous agents
must act well with a full heart and with pleasure, rather than against their emotions or
desires. Yet, in addition to possessing good habits and a healthy emotional life, the
virtuous agent also rationally appreciates the grounds of his moral choices. He can
rationally explain the intrinsic nobility of his behavior. Thus, virtue ethics presents a
complex and realistic view of our moral psychology: the ways in which our emotions,
desires, lasting states of character, and practical reason function together to produce
correct moral behavior. In focusing on individual psychology and prudence, virtue
ethical approaches give priority to moral agents over individual acts or specific rules of
behavior.

Building on their robust accounts of moral psychology, virtue ethicists locate virtue
within a theory of the agent’s overall good. Indeed, the central question of virtue ethics is,
How should one live? Typically, the response that one should live virtuously is
grounded in the belief that acting upon virtuous dispositions is an intrinsic part of the
agent’s own happiness or flourishing, which the Greeks called eudaimonia. To
substantiate the connection between character and eudaimonia, virtue theorists have
recourse to a normative conception of nature: human flourishing consists in the activities
of our properly developed, distinctively human, and natural capacities for moral and
intellectual virtue. These natural capacities are social in orientation. We are naturally
inclined, as human beings, to participate in group projects, to care about the well-being of
others, and to deliberate with members of our community about justice.

Because they emphasize our natural sociability, virtue theories are not, as some have
claimed (Hurka 2001: 219-255), committed to egoism. To use the ancient Greek idiom,
the virtuous person behaves morally for the sake of the noble or fine (to kalon). Intrinsic
concern for nobility was expressed in acting justly, generously, and thoughtfully out of
care for others per se. Equally, the virtuous agent could live with self-respect only if he

8 This section is based on my own readings in virtue ethical theory in the ancient and mediaeval traditions,
supplemented by the helpful accounts of Annas 1993, Annas 1998, Hursthouse 1999, Hursthouse 2003,
Crisp 1996, as well as the studies cited in the next section. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of
Greek texts are my own, though I have consulted published translations, especially the volumes of the Loeb
Classical Library, in preparing my own translations.
was such a person as to care deeply about others for their own sake. He acts, on particular occasions, with the thought that he wants to benefit others, as (for example) Aristotle made abundantly clear in his discussion of friendship (cf. EN 1155b31, 1166a2-4, with Kraut 1989: 78-86). In reflecting on his virtuous behavior, he is proud to be the kind of person who characteristically behaves justly, generously, honestly, and moderately in the right way and for the right reasons.

II. Virtue Politics: Prospects and Criticisms

Is it possible to extend the foregoing characterization of virtue theory to politics? The example of democratic Athens shows that the answer is yes. Classical Athenian democrats looked to the virtues to provide normative standards of moral appraisal. They emphasized practical judgment, the proper ordering of emotion, and the intrinsic value of the virtues as constituents of an overall desirable, flourishing condition of both individuals and the city. Accordingly, my own presentation of the Athenians’ “virtue politics” will focus on the democratic understandings of character, education, emotion, practical reason, and human flourishing, as they were represented in popular oratory of the fourth century BC.

Despite the evident attractions of virtue theory for political philosophy, however, specialists in virtue ethics have not extended the theory to politics. Politics plays almost no role in the flurry of recent studies of ancient (Gardiner 2005, Gill 2005, Casey 1990, White 2002, Prior 1991) and modern (Darwell 2003, Statman 1997) virtue theory, despite the nearly universal ancient acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of ethics and politics. Aristotle’s political theory, for example, was self-consciously informed by his ethical theory of the virtues (EN 10.9). Aristotle’s “best polis” enables citizens to live flourishing human lives, through helping them develop their natural capacities for theoretical reflection, practical reasoning, and proper, or “healthy,” moral decision-making and praxis. It is arguably possible, indeed, to read Aristotle as sympathetically envisioning democracy as “a set of possibilities” in which the development of individual virtue could play a critical role in politics (Salkever 1990: 219-226, 237-44).

Yet, despite their attraction to Aristotle’s ethics, virtue theorists have hesitated to resuscitate Aristotelian political theory, because, even if Aristotle is the forefather of virtue ethics, his politics may be too elitist to be a positive resource for us (Crisp and Slote 1997). Despite ambitious recent attempts to democratize Aristotle (Ober 2005, Frank 2005), and despite Aristotle’s own optimism that democracies might be improved through inculcating virtue in citizens (Salkever 1990: 219-226; Frank 2005), I, too, find Aristotle elitist in three ways. First, Aristotle’s politics of virtue demanded an extremely high level of virtue among all citizens of his best polis. Aristotle’s “best polis” (Politics 7-8) is a special aristocracy, a community of those who have cultivated their moral and intellectual powers to a highly advanced degree. It is unclear whether, in Aristotle’s view, most people have the requisite moral talents. Second, along the same lines, some of Aristotle’s particular virtues, such as “greatness of soul” (megalopsuchia), are quintessentially inappropriate to democratic politics, because the great-souled man (ho megalopsuchos), for example, regards himself as superior to others and rightly (according
to Aristotle) takes no serious account of his inferiors. As the Athenian democrats would have recognized instantly, the “superiority complex” of the great-souled man is an affront to democratic equality. Third, Aristotle’s politics of virtue requires extended leisure, which would rule out the participation of ordinary citizens – and possibly, in a pre-mechanized world, rule out all but the most exploitative classes. In these respects, Aristotle offers an aristocratic model of “virtue politics” that directly conflicts with our, and the Athenians’, democratic aspirations.

This evaluation of Aristotle might also cast negative light on the republican traditions of civic virtue, since Aristotle has long, and with some legitimacy, been considered the father of the republican tradition (Pocock 1975). However, the developed republican theories of Polybius, Cicero, Livy, Sallust, and their early modern followers, arguably provide a different, non-Aristotelian, and more plausible theory of civic virtue. The chief attraction of their theories is their egalitarianism. Modern “civic humanists” such as Hannah Arendt, as well as contemporary “civic republicans” (Pettit 1997, Skinner 1998), have, indeed, turned to this tradition in order to understand how the civic virtues might contribute to an attractive picture of republican freedom.

By comparison with the Athenian politics of virtue, however, the republican tradition faces distinctive problems of its own. The ancient republican virtues have rightly been criticized for furthering the causes of sexism and bellicosity (Salkever 1990: 165-204). (Even so, it is worth noting that certain contemporary republicans still lay claim to heroic self-overcoming, obedience, manliness, reverence for tradition, and respect for the authority of leaders (see Pangle 1998 and, on manliness, Mansfield 2006).) Perhaps cooperating with traditional republican militarism, the republican tradition – even in its most “updated” forms – tends to reflect the conservative Roman virtues, such as obedience, respect for authority, deference, and traditionalism. These qualities have often been counted as virtues because they support representative institutions. As Benjamin Barber has said, however, “The trouble with representative institutions is that they often turn the act of sovereign authorization into an act of civic deauthorization. … Under the representative system, leaders turn electors into followers; and the correct posture for followers is deference.” (Barber 1998: 98).

It takes substantial work for republican theorists to think their way out of such quandaries. Rejecting deference and docility, for example, Barber himself urges that the appropriate republican remedy for citizen passivity is to develop civic competence and to promote democratic participation (Barber 1984; Barber 1998: 109-110; cf. Sandel 1996). Such a move would be true to the traditional republican view that freedom consists in self-government. At the same time, though, Barber also endorses analogies for leadership that would have been understandably repugnant to ancient Athenians. The “facilitating leader,” he declares, is “more the teacher than the administrator, the judge than the legislator, the therapist than the surgeon” (Barber 1998: 103). However, Athenian citizens, like their modern liberal counterparts, would bristle at the thought of being “improved” by a civic therapist. Despite its claims to egalitarianism, the republican tradition has always promoted hierarchies of political participation based on a belief in unequal political talent.
Other civic republicans, however, such as Philip Pettit (1997) and Quentin Skinner (1978, 1998), advocate civic virtues and civic involvement on the grounds that they promote freedom conceived as either non-domination or non-interference or both. Like their liberal interlocutors (Galston 1991: 213-237, Macedo 1990), civic republicans typically emphasize the instrumental value of civic virtues in maintaining free institutions. They have thus moved a great distance away from traditional republicanism. They do not believe that states should recognize any possible intrinsic rewards of virtue, on the grounds either that states should not promote a comprehensive vision of the good, or that states should promote only the good of freedom as non-domination. These are both essentially liberal views and subject to the criticisms of liberalism made earlier. From within the Athenian democratic outlook, moreover, these views are subject to even more exacting criticism. The liberalized “civic republican” view involves a neutral position on judgments of value that is either unrealistic or unattractive (e.g., Beiner 1992, Sandel 1996). Civic republicans such as Pettit place too little emphasis on the cultivation of the individual judgment of citizens. Civic republicans also take a strongly instrumental view of civic virtue, which may not capture our genuine aspirations to exercise the virtues for their own sake.

III. The Democratic Model

The democratic Athenians provide an improvement upon – or at the very least a strong challenge to – all the previously canvassed accounts of civic virtue. By contrast with Aristotle’s aristocratic model, the Athenians cultivated excellence of character and practical reasoning in all citizens, including the very poor; and they could rationally explain why their egalitarian extension of virtue was possible. The Athenians’ “virtue politics” makes clear, moreover, that civic republicans do not sufficiently emphasize individual judgment, autonomy, flexibility, the willingness to take initiative, and an openness to innovation – in other words, the virtues of a more radical, more truly egalitarian, more individualistic, and – in a word – more democratic conception of the virtues. By contrast with liberal theorists of virtue, moreover, the Athenians illustrate how substantive judgments about human goodness can be presented in public life without compromising freedom. And by contrast with both republican and liberal theorists, but in agreement with Aristotle, the Athenians could plausibly explain why the exercise of virtue was intrinsically valuable for the moral agent, as well as useful for his community.

If we as modern democrats value the autonomous exercise of the virtues, but also aspire to temper individualism and innovation with moderation and respect for others, then our

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9 Despite the efforts of civic republicans, especially Skinner 1998, to distinguish republican non-domination from liberal non-interference within the broadest streams of modern political thought, there is more overlap among “liberal” and “republican” theorists than the contemporary exponents of republicanism admit. Consider this passage from paragraph 57 of (the presumably very liberal) Second Treatise of John Locke: “But Freedom is not, as we are told, Liberty for every Man to do what he lists: (For who could be free, when every other Man’s Humour might domineer over him?) But a Liberty to dispose, and order, as he lists, his Person, Actions, Possessions, and his whole Property, within the Allowance of those Laws under which he is; and therein not to be subject to the arbitrary Will of another, but freely follow his own” (Laslett ed., p.306).
best bet for finding the resources for a meaningfully democratic “virtue politics” comes neither from Aristotle nor from the republican theorists, but rather from the radical, individualistic Athenian democracy. Like the republicans, the Athenians valued patriotism, loyalty to the city, and democratic leadership, but, through cultivating the good judgment of citizens as individuals, the Athenians were able to unite their traditional patriotic virtues with the virtues of autonomy and innovation, so as to produce an attractive and distinctively democratic model of virtue politics. Democratic virtue politics provided both for public-spirited motives for action and for the private choices and friendships of individuals aspiring to lead a well-conceived, flourishing life.

The proper balance could be attained only through the citizens’ individual judgments of complex particulars. As virtue theorists rightly emphasize, a central component of the exercise of virtue is rational judgment in particular situations of moral complexity. To a much greater extent than the aristocratic and republican models, the Athenian democracy strove to develop the rational faculties of each individual citizen and called forth each citizen’s practical judgment in complex deliberations. In its emphasis on individual judgment, the Athenian democracy promoted a radically egalitarian form of intellectual autonomy, which should prove attractive to contemporary theorists who value autonomy, self-reliance, and individuality.

In traveling backwards in time to ancient Athens, however, one must ever keep in mind the differences between the classical Athenian democracy and our own, so as to avoid any naïve faith that Athenian ideology or praxis could easily be brought to bear on our own political life (Constant 1819, Holmes 1979). Classical Athens was a slave-holding polis with a citizen body of roughly 60,000 adult men at its height; it practiced no separation of “church” and “state”; it was pre-Christian and polytheistic and had no knowledge of the 17th-century religious and political controversies in which liberal ideology was initially forged; it excluded women from political life; it was a direct democracy; and it placed a very high, some would say excessively high, value on political participation.

Yet, for all these differences, classical Athens can be educational for us, because, as a democracy, its chief values were freedom and equality; it took justice to be the “first virtue of social institutions” as well as one of the chief virtues of individuals; it valued the rule of impartial law; it envisioned citizen participation, public deliberation, and reflective patriotism as democratic ideals; and it respected the distinction between public and private. The Athenian political community had thick moral and educational commitments that were, nonetheless, not parts of a thoroughly “monistic” conception of the good. And the Athenians had standards that were flexible, capacious, and dependent upon individual judgment in particular circumstances. None of this is to say that we should take over the Athenians’ values for ourselves without revision. We cannot do so. But we can find in the Athenian virtue politics a practical, and largely successful, example of the attempt to square virtue politics with freedom. This alone should make the Athenian case good to “think with.”

III.A. Negative Evaluations of Democracy
By now, even sympathetic readers of the present essay might have conjured up doubts about my claim that Athenian democracy provides interesting, but hitherto unexplored, resources for the development of a truly democratic politics of virtue. If my arguments hold water, then why haven’t political thinkers looked to classical Athens previously? The genuine proof of my claim can lie only in the detailed investigation undertaken in Sections III.B, III.C, and III.D. But it is possible, even at this stage, to offer an “error theory.” Theorists have avoided using the Athenian case as exemplary because of the ancient philosophers’ and ancient republicans’ suspicion of democratic freedom. More precisely, ancient philosophers and ancient republicans wondered how the Athenians could ever have aspired to provide an education to virtue, given their democratic inclination to locate freedom at the top of their table of social values. Critics of democracy accused democrats of fostering an overly tolerant, indulgent lifestyle that shunned any rigorous cultivation of virtue (Ober 1998, Roberts 1994). Ancient democracy was truly “people-power,” but that was precisely the problem: as a Herodotean character explains, “The masses are a feckless lot – nowhere will you find more ignorance or irresponsibility or violence” (3.81, tr. De Selincourt, rev. Marincola).

In the writings of Plato, among others, such criticisms were elevated to a systematic critique of the democrats’ neglect of virtue. In the Republic, for example, Plato criticized democracy for its tolerance toward criminals (558a), for its lack of attention to moral education (558b), and for its development of an excessively appetitive and disorderly citizenry (561b-d). To the extent that the Athenian Empire was a projection of specifically democratic power, these problems were amplified to an extraordinary degree by the Athenians’ successful fifth-century imperialism. In the Platonic Gorgias, Socrates criticized Athens’ leaders for indulging the citizens’ self-destructive desires for “harbors and dockyards and walls and tribute and other such nonsense without justice and temperance.” Although the Athenians viewed these possessions as a sign of their greatness, they had in fact acquired something more like a “tumor, scabbed over and festering,” which would lead inevitably to a “fit of weakness” (518e-519a, tr. Allen). Examples from Platonism and other ancient philosophical traditions could readily be multiplied. The central point is that the democrats’ inattention to virtue, and their overemphasis on freedom, established a self-defeating, and even self-destructive, politics that eventually led Athens to ruin. The narrative of Athenian moral degeneration had its origins in the centuries when democratic Athenians were self-consciously striving to assert their own vision of the politics of virtue.

Even more important, as critics of the democrats’ inattention to virtue, were the ancient forefathers of republic theory. Republican theorists (even today!) have always set up an opposition between the republican cultivation of civic virtue – particularly the Spartan and Roman virtues of austerity, discipline, order, and respect for tradition – to the disorder and rashness of (direct) democracy. As an admirer of Rome, for example, the second-century BC historian Polybius advanced his case by criticizing Athenian democracy on the grounds that its “national character” was unstable, its populace was “headstrong and spiteful,” and its decisions were made on the basis of the “random impulses” of the “masses” (Histories, 6.44, tr. Scott-Kilvert). For Polybius, the
democratic character contrasts with the republican courage and self-discipline of the Spartans (6.48) and the still more impressive bravery, patriotism, honesty, and self-control of the Romans (6.53-56). The American Founders, picking up on Polybian and Ciceronian topoi, often praised the “manly spirit” and nobility of the new American republic, anxiously distinguishing its brand of politics from that of the turbulent, factious, and oppressive ancient democracies (e.g., Federalist 10, Federalist 14).

III.B. Honoring the Virtues of Leaders in Democratic Athens

Democratic Athenians had a straightforward response to all of these charges: no contest. For the Athenians legitimately saw themselves as fostering both individual autonomy and initiative, on the one hand, and self-control, orderliness, and respect for law on the other. They also viewed democratic practice as the school of civic virtue.

Our best sources for unearthing the democratic virtues are the popular genres of classical Athenian literature, including comedy, tragedy, and oratory, along with publicly funded inscriptions carved into stone. Perhaps the most “demotic” conceptions can be elicited from such inscriptions, since they provided the most unmediated access we have to the voice of the Athenian people. These inscriptions enable us to identify the “cardinal virtues” of the classical Athenian democracy (Whitehead 1993). Chief among these were the virtues of piety, moderation, good order, patriotism, and, in general, “manly virtue” (andragathia). This latter was a catch-all democratic coinage that captured the essential qualities held up for admiration by the Athenian community (Pritchett 1974: 280-83). Its sexist implications are undeniable and regrettable. Yet, to the extent that its core concept was the virtue of courage, it implied less the hotheaded bellicosity of the republican tradition than a thoughtful, rationally informed exercise of inner fortitude (Balot 2001, 2003, forthcoming). This emphasis on thoughtfulness and judgment gives the Athenians’ virtues, altogether, a distinctive cast. To dig more deeply into the Athenians’ ways of locating these virtues in the good life, we must turn to the narratives and analyses found in literary sources, particularly fourth-century Attic oratory.

Like the inscriptions, the Attic orators often focus on the Athenian aristocracy, and they ascribe virtue chiefly to those of high social and political standing. Yet they still offer a specifically democratic conception of the virtues, because, as we shall see, even the highest-level Athenian leaders presented themselves as “middling” (metrios) citizens whose outlook and even lifestyle corresponded fully to those of their ordinary fellow citizens (Ober 1989; Morris 2000). Legally, of course, the Athenian aristocrats were politically equal to their social and economic inferiors. They were, as a result, held strictly accountable to the ordinary citizens. And their virtues were held to be exemplary, rather than different in kind from those of other citizens. Thus, despite necessarily cultivating good leaders, Athens was far less hierarchical than Sparta or Rome, antiquity’s two most famous republics. It was also less hierarchical than most modern democratic nation-states, including the Republic theorized by the American Founders.

To understand the Athenian speeches and inscriptions together, let us examine two speeches in which Aeschines and Demosthenes, toward the end of their careers, debated
their respective services to the city. The occasion was perfect for such a retrospective. In 336 BC, an Athenian citizen, Ctesiphon, had moved that Demosthenes be awarded a golden crown for his leadership after the Athenians’ defeat at the Battle of Chaeronea (338 BC). Aeschines attacked this motion as illegal, but, for reasons that remain unclear, the case came to trial only six years later. Despite the technical nature of Aeschines’ charges, Aeschines’ main purpose was to discredit the honorific presentation of Demosthenes as singularly virtuous and useful to the city (Aesch. 3.49-50). In scrutinizing Demosthenes’ character, Aeschines was not interested in specific actions, but rather in criticizing Demosthenes’ career and life as a whole, including his private life (3.51-53, 3.77-78). The real object of the trial was to figure out what kind of man Demosthenes was (cf. Dem. 18.297-323), and by extension what kind of city Athens aspired to be when it honored such men (3.247). In response, Demosthenes delivered his On the Crown, an extended analysis of his virtues and Aeschines’ vices. A cross-section of ordinary democratic citizens, including the very poor, was called upon to analyze the arguments of these leaders, to reflect on their conceptions of virtue and vice, and to render judgment as self-conscious political equals.

In his criticisms of the original motion, Aeschines exhorted the ordinary citizens to exercise their rational judgment regarding the standards of virtue and vice. He criticized contemporary Athenians for awarding crowns too easily, on the basis of habit rather than careful thought and deliberation (3.178), and out of deference to self-aggrandizing leaders, rather than appropriate self-respect (3.183-187). Virtue was a social practice of character penetrated by the rational judgments of Athenian citizen-equals. The citizens’ judgments were particularly important because awards for virtue had to satisfy objective, non-relative standards which the community as a whole discovered through collective practical reasoning. As Aeschines declared, “[F]or those who claim a crown, the standard is virtue itself (autēn tēn aretēn)” (Aesch. 3.189, tr. Adams). However, making judgments had political and ethical significance that went beyond the particular verdict in question. In its honorific practices, the democratic community played a critical role in stimulating virtue (3.180) and in maintaining the civic loyalty of Athens’ best citizens (3.47), or, if it judged badly, in corrupting decent people (3.180). Democratic honorific practices both depended on, and helped to educate, the citizens’ capacities to make rational judgments within, and in support of, their own deliberately chosen ethical frameworks.

To explain his conception of the cardinal democratic virtues, Aeschines enumerated the characteristics of the demotic (tōi dēmotikōi) and moderate (sōphroni) man (not leader), by contrast with those of the typically worthless oligarchic man (ton oligarchikon anthrōpon kai phaulon) (Aesch. 3.168-170). He took himself to be outlining the distinctively democratic features of such virtues. The praiseworthy democratic citizen, he argued, must be a man of good judgment (eugnōmona). He must also possess durable states of character that enable him to serve the demos wholeheartedly, without being emotionally distracted by the competing claims of his family, his own excessive desires for money or luxury, or fear for his own safety (3.169-170). The truly virtuous democrat should not face internal conflict tending to make him disloyal, and therefore perfect
This demanding criterion—wholeheartedness based on internal psychological order—depended both upon a correctly ordered set of emotions and upon a cluster of allied virtues that shored up the citizen’s self-conscious dedication to the political community. The democratic man, Aeschines said, have the courage to act and speak on behalf of the people, so as to avoid preferring his own narrowly construed good to the city’s welfare (e.g., 3.160, 3.163, 3.167, 3.170, 3.175-76, 3.214). All the Attic orators emphasized the citizens’ appropriate emotional responses, such as feeling a proper degree of anger toward the hostile behavior of other states (Dem. 8.57) and toward non-virtuous fellow citizens (Lys. 10.28-29, 18.19), feeling a sense of shame that motivates honorable behavior (Dem. 8.51, 17.23), and feeling appropriate levels of fear (Dem. 11.15-16, 15.23). In this trial particularly, Demosthenes reproached Aeschines for not having the same normatively appropriate feelings as the ordinary citizens (18.292); Aeschines rejoiced, for example, when others grieved over the Athenians’ defeat at Chaeronea (18.286-287). By contrast, the Athenian demos chose Demosthenes to deliver the funeral oration over those who had died at Chaeronea because they recognized that Demosthenes would not feign grief like an actor, but rather “feel pain together with them in his soul” (tēi psuchēi sunalgein) (18.287).

Throughout his speech, Demosthenes recalled the honorific terminology of Ctesiphon’s original motion in order to pinpoint the wholeheartedness of his democratic virtue. He had always acted with eunoia (loyalty, patriotism) and prothumia (eagerness, zeal) on behalf of the city (18.57, 18.110; 18.286; cf. 18.312). Prothumia consisted in a willingness to take initiative, to accept personal responsibility, and to stand up and pursue the city’s welfare actively, in the right way, and for the right reasons (cf. Dem. 38.26). Prothumia might initially appear to be an odd virtue, but it captures, in a way characteristic of virtue ethical frameworks, the combination of properly ordered emotions, states of character, and well-informed practical reasoning.

To prove his point, Demosthenes told the story of his own courage (18.72, 18.136, 18.173), integrity (18.62-65), intelligence (18.69-71), and nobility (18.69-70) in encouraging the Athenians to live up to the city’s highest ideals of noble self-sacrifice, generosity toward others, and protection of the Greek community as a whole (18.53-109, 18.160-251; cf. Yunis 2001). In all his political actions, moreover, Demosthenes was supported by the noble character and rational deliberations of the Athenian citizens themselves (18.86). Thus, in response to Aeschines’ criticisms of his character, Demosthenes accepted the demanding standard of showing that his entire life conformed to the standards of loyalty, zeal, courage, and nobility, because he, too, accepted that noble character traits must be deep and abiding features of character, exhibited over the course of one’s life as a whole (e.g., Dem. 18.10, 18.297-323).

If the Athenian account is to hold any promise for us, however, then the ancient democrats must explain why the virtues, as such, not only benefited the city, but also contributed to the virtuous agent’s own flourishing. In the rhetorical context, of course,
Demosthenes could not appeal to his own self-interest in explaining the value of virtue. Yet, in the course of his narrative, Demosthenes shows that he clearly regarded virtue as an intrinsic part of his own and the city’s flourishing. Specifically, Demosthenes showed that his and the city’s self-respect depended on behaving nobly, because nobility was central to their self-image, all the way down and without remainder (18.95-101). In reviewing the decision to fight Philip at Chaeronea, Demosthenes argued that, despite the eventual Athenian defeat, the decision to go to war was correct, in light of the city’s self-image and thus its own properly understood self-interests (18.174-180, 18.199-210). Even if defeat had been certain at the outset, the city nonetheless had to go to war for its own freedom, as a matter of pride, nobility, and self-respect. This thought explains why virtue was intrinsically a part of living well: the Athenians could not live with self-respect unless they did things “worthy of the city,” as they often put it, whatever the consequences (18.178).

This idea was obviously important for Demosthenes’ present argument against Aeschines, since his advice had led to the Athenians’ devastating defeat at Chaeronea. Yet such sentiments were common in Attic oratory and were typically fleshed out in a speaker’s emphasis on protecting “our fatherland, our life, our customs, our liberty, and all things of that sort,” as well as ancestral traditions and graves (Dem. 14.32), even if this meant death in combat. Living with self-respect was a necessity for free Athenian democrats, because without it life would be slavish and thus worthless, a disgrace in the sight of the Athenians’ ancestors (Dem. 8.51, 11.22, 13.35, 17.3; cf. Williams 1993).

In order further to explain the intrinsic goodness of virtue, Demosthenes declared that his loyalty to the city was so deeply entrenched and valuable as to be natural (18.321; cf. Aesch. 3.275 and Loraux 1986: 150-55, 172-74). He did not mean that virtue came easily or without benefit of civic education, or that he viewed himself as part of an organic whole, like a limb moved by the body politic. Rather, Demosthenes’ self-conception, all the way down, was that of a rationally ordered individual who voluntarily conferred benefits on his city, out of a rational appreciation that his own flourishing condition depended on his exercise of the civic virtues (cf. Balot 2001). He summed up his own naturalistic understanding of virtue by admiringly evoking the natural sociability of the outstandingly virtuous Athenians of the past:

They [Our forefathers] did not think life worth living, unless they could live freely. For each one of them thought that he had been born not only to his father and mother, but also to his fatherland. What is the difference? That the one who thinks he has been born only to his parents waits around for death when it comes, all on its own, on the appointed day, whereas the one born to his fatherland will die willingly in order to avoid seeing his native land enslaved, and he will consider the violence and dishonor which an enslaved polis must suffer to be more fearful than death. (Dem. 18.205).

Two points militate against the idea that Demosthenes’ admiration for the ancestors’ patriotism had either totalitarian or chauvinistic implications. First, as he says, every one
of the ancestors was born both to his parents and to the city, and so he properly balanced private with public concerns, as an intrinsic feature of the sort of man he was. According to Demosthenes, every one of the ancestors maintained the proper balance between public and private through his own reasoned judgments about what self-respect required of him. Second, as Alisdair MacIntyre has argued, we should distinguish between those dedicated to their fatherland for the sake of its noble ideals and those dedicated to their fatherland simply or chiefly because it is theirs (MacIntyre 1995: 210-211).

Demosthenes was certainly no cosmopolitan idealist recommending a way of life for all and sundry to follow, whatever their cultural background; yet his idealistic account of Athens’s justice and nobility (e.g., 18.203-205; cf. 18.66-68 with Yunis 2001: 150-51, 221-222) also reduces the potentially chauvinistic implications of his dedication to the city. Like Demosthenes, the Athenians’ ancestors were not blind supporters of the city, come what may. Instead, they furthered the cause of the city because they self-consciously believed that Athens was committed to justice, security, and benevolence throughout the Greek world.

One might also criticize the Athenians’ self-image, as expressed in these speeches, as self-serving or ideological, or as simply phony and unrealistic in practice. Yet, even if the Athenians failed to live up to their own ideals, and even if they, like all other political agents, consulted their own self-interests too eagerly, their normative virtue politics is promising for two reasons. First, their language of the virtues helped them understand and appraise the psychological structure – including emotions, character, and practical reasoning – of political motivations in a more realistic way than conceptions of political morality based on duties, utility, or consequences pure and simple. Second, their virtue politics enabled them to explain how virtuous political behavior was also beneficial to individual political agents, through the medium of concepts of self-respect and nobility. Individuals believed, plausibly and reasonably, that they could live with self-respect only if they showed appropriate care for others and for their political community.

Finally, if modern democrats are interested in finding liberal democratic resources in Athenian political ideology, then they might reasonably wish to soften the Athenians’ apparent emphasis on the “primacy of politics” (cf. Rahe 1992, Constant 1819). Note, however, that the preceding discussion has examined the speeches of dedicated career politicians. These men voluntarily chose politics as a vocation and were discussing their lives in a forensic context that led them to emphasize patriotism. There were certainly other discussions of Athenian life in which the private goods of friendship, intellectual cultivation, and family life were prominent themes. And, as Josiah Ober has argued, Athenian society was one of “thin coherence” rather than thick identification (Ober 2005). Like certain contemporary republican theorists (Sandel 1998: 323-27), the Athenians regarded political engagement as one among many essential elements of a flourishing life. In an “updated” form, perhaps, this view would suggest that the relative primacy of politics ought itself to be a matter of individual and public deliberation.

III.C. Virtues of Athens’ Democratic Citizenry
If leaders were supposed to be exemplary moral and political agents, then can we also find ways in which the democratic virtues were visible in the citizenry at large? If the Athenians did not envision ordinary citizens as virtuous, then we will be left either with Aristotle’s aristocratic account or with the hierarchical republican models. The Athenians managed this problem through exemplarity: the fourth-century Athenian speeches regarded the leaders’ virtues as applicable to ordinary citizens, too. Using the famous ship-of-state image, for example, Demosthenes exhorted his fellow citizens, “So long as the ship is safe, whether it is large or small, then it is necessary for the sailor and the pilot and every man in succession to work zealously, and to see to it that no one capsizes the ship either voluntarily or through negligence” (Dem. 9.69). The exemplarity of the leaders’ other virtues is also illustrated (for example) by the prominence accorded to the ordinary citizens’ courageous acts of patriotism throughout the corpus of Attic oratory (e.g., Lys. 10.24-25, Dem. 4.42-43, Dem. 60.25-26, Hyp. 6.24-25).

Even though democratic citizens admired many virtues, including justice (*dikē* or *dikaiosunē*), piety (*eusebeia*), and military courage (*andreia*) (cf. Whitehead 1993), it is worth concentrating on apparent cases of conflict among the virtues. Examining the apparently antithetical virtues of order and autonomy will help us uncover the importance of practical reasoning in the democratic conception of virtue. Considering this pair of “virtuous opposites” also offers us an exceptional opportunity to see how the ancient democratic polis both utilized virtue as a mode of social control and recognized in virtue the means to promote voluntary individual effort and the production of new ideas.

As if responding to democracy’s “law and order”-hungry critics, democratic litigants frequently made reference to the “good order” (*kosmos*) of the normatively decent (*metrios*) democratic citizen. In his well-known defense speech, for example, a certain Euphiletus explained to an Athenian jury that he had rebuked his wife’s adulterer for lawlessly indulging his desires, rather than choosing “to obey the laws and to be orderly (*kosmios einai*)” (Lys. 1.26). Euphiletus explicitly exhorted the jurors to feel appropriate anger and indignation on his behalf, and, contrary to democracy’s critics, he remarked on the unlikelihood of their being tolerant in responding to such outrageous criminals (1.1-2). The entire community had a stake in enforcing standards of orderliness in individual souls, because only thus could the citizens defend the laws against established wrongdoers (Lys. 1.16-17, 1.47-50). The jurors’ normative anger in rendering severe, yet fair, verdicts would make citizens more disciplined and orderly (*kosmiōterous* or *sōphronesterous*) in the future (Lys. 14.9-14, 15.10).

In a parallel argument focused on the consequences of private pleasure-seeking, Aeschines charged his rival Timarchus with prostitution and argued that his contempt for the law and for self-control had conditioned his soul to be disorderly and his lifestyle to be correspondingly immoderate (Aesch. 1.189; Roisman 2005: 192-99; Fisher 2001: 115). Excessive pleasure-seeking tends to destroy democracy, unless the ordinary citizens educate the young to virtue (Aesch. 1.189-91). These cases show that good order (*kosmos*) and moderation (*sōphrosunē*) were virtues that called forth a sense of shame. If they lacked psychological order, but had not been thoroughly corrupted, Athenians would be embarrassed when they failed to live up to rationally informed social ideals of good
order. In this way, the democratic virtues were a means for the community to hold individuals accountable for their behavior (cf. Lys. 3.45). Shame-driven accountability was a last resort, to be deployed only after the Athenians had done their best to educate individuals properly, with a view to their voluntarily embracing the city’s laws and unpublished norms.

Yet, alongside the punitive implications of these latter two evocations of “good order,” explicit discussions of psychological order also had a positive, productive dimension. Fortified by the democratic understanding of good order, individuals had the cognitive resources to understand what it meant to live with self-respect. For example, a certain Mantitheus tried to withstand his scrutiny for office by demonstrating his courage and military discipline, which he described with reference to good order: “I never fell short on any other expedition, or when I was assigned to guard-duty; I have always adhered to my practice of marching out in the front rank and retreating in the last. On the basis of such evidence, you must judge which citizens carry out their civic duties with a proper concern for honor (philotimōs) and in an orderly way (kosmiōs)” (Lys. 16.18). In this case, Mantitheus overcame his fear of death and fought courageously and energetically, as a sign of his well-functioning soul and his psychological commitment to the city. Psychological order, as we saw in Demosthenes’ case, was a prerequisite of the internal harmony that enabled individuals to exert themselves wholeheartedly in civic causes with which they had good reasons to identify.

Whether the virtues of good order were held to be a constraint or a catalyst, the examples we have just examined show that, in their political life, democratic Athenians paid due attention to the psychological formation of citizens. The healthy political functioning of the city depended on the civic education of citizens and then the maintenance of their souls in a proper and healthy condition. The intimate connection between healthy politics and rationally ordered souls is illustrated in the frequent argument that the disorderly behavior of a single individual could irrevocably damage the good order embodied in Athenian law and maintained by the citizens’ good nature, public-spirited habits, and civic friendship (Dem. 25.20-26; Lyc. 1.147-48). As a result, democratic Athenians had strong motivations to reform disorderly souls, and, at the limit, to punish disorderly behavior. No audience member of Demosthenes’ speech against Aristogeiton could accept the philosophers’ charge that democracy was overly tolerant:

Consider, by the gods: if everyone in the city acted with the daring and shamelessness of Aristogeiton, and calculated, like this man, that in a democracy everyone can say and do whatever he wishes, bar nothing, if only he neglects his general reputation in doing such things, and that no one will execute him straightaway for any wrongdoing; if, with these ideas in mind, a citizen who failed to obtain an office by lot or to be elected should seek to be on a par with the one chosen or elected, and to share in the same honors, and if, altogether, neither the young nor the old should do their duty, but each one, driving all order from his life, should take up his own wish as law, as first principle, as everything – if we acted this way, could we govern the city? What? Would the laws have any
authority? How much violence, arrogance, and lawlessness do you think would arise in the city each and every day? (Dem. 25.25-26).

Athenians saw themselves as cultivating virtue in the souls of all mature citizens and young, prospective citizens, through the demos’ public activities – the activities, in particular, of rendering verdicts, of honoring and punishing, praising and blaming, and erecting exemplars and bugbears (Lyc. 1.117-119; Dem. 15.35; Dem. 19.343; Dem. 25.8-10; Aesch. 3.245; cf. Plato, Rep. 492a). Because these activities inculcated the correct emotional responses in citizens, responses which they were supposed to have learned first in the family (Dem. 54.23), democratic Athenians did not portray the virtues of good order (kosmos) and moderation (sōphrosunē) as burdensome, but rather as dispositions that they exercised voluntarily in the belief that these dispositions were crucial to their and their city’s well-being.

For all the public approval they received from the demos, however, the virtues of Eunomia (or “Orderliness”) were traditionally the pillars of conservative social regimes such as Sparta. By contrast with the conservative republican traditions, however, democrats viewed good order not as an expression of deference or obedience, but rather as an expression of a thoughtfully ordered soul, one informed by self-conscious beliefs about what a good life consists in. To see how good order was integrated within a democratic paradigm of the virtues, let us consider the Athenian democracy’s cultivation of the virtues of individuality and autonomy. In the case of these virtues, too, democracy’s critics argued vociferously that democratic voters were sheep-like followers of their leaders (Hdt. 5.97), that the democratic majority tyrannized over and silenced the wiser minority (Thuc. 6.13, 6.24; cf. Dem. Pr. 50.1), and that democratic citizens could understand political life only as the instrumental means to satisfy pre-existing, and a fortiori uneducated, desires (Plato, Gorgias 518e-519d).

The democratic Athenians responded to these criticisms through locating the virtues of individual citizens within well-functioning egalitarian institutions. For example, the very premise of Athenian public deliberation was the potentially equal contribution that all citizens could make to public discussion: hence the traditional question, before all Assemblies of citizens, “Who wishes to speak?” (Dem. 18.170, 18.191; Aesch. 1.23-24, 3.4, 3.220-221). This practice made sense only because the community expected individuals, personally, to reflect upon matters of public concern and then to bring forward their judgments for public consideration (Balot 2004, Monoson 2000).

Far from being zombies controlled by manipulative leaders, the democrats were individually responsible for understanding group problems and articulating possible solutions. In one striking example, Demosthenes distinguished carefully between hierarchical relationships among military commanders and rank-and-file soldiers, on the one hand, and the participatory ethos of the Athenian Assembly, where, he said, “each one of you yourselves is a general” (Pr. 50.3, tr. DeWitt and DeWitt). Aeschines, similarly, argued that “the private citizen rules like a king in a polis governed by democratic law and voting” (3.233; cf. Dem. 10.40-41). Demosthenes, finally, urged that “the many,” and especially the oldest among the ordinary citizens, had a special
obligation to show good sense in public deliberations, even beyond the practical wisdom expected of career politicians (Dem. Pr. 45.2).

Democratic deliberation depended upon courage, frankness, honesty, civic trust, and the willingness of each citizen to accept responsibility for the development and execution of political policy. Demosthenes envisioned the brave (andreios) and useful (chrēsimos) citizen as ”whoever often opposes your wishes for the sake of what is best, and never speaks to win favor, but to promote your best interests, and chooses that policy in which chance rather than calculation has more power, and yet makes himself accountable to you for both” (8.69, tr. Vince [adapted]; cf. 10.54). When all pistons and cylinders were firing correctly in the hearts of each citizen, Athenian politics was highly successful, because each citizen recognized the importance of individual effort and acted accordingly (Dem. 14.15). The democratic polis worked best when individuals acted as “their own agents” and took responsibility for themselves (Dem. 3.14-17), and then accepted the corresponding rewards for their own actions (Dem. 13.19-23). Self-reliance was a key democratic virtue (Dem. 13.3-4). It followed that no one was to blame for the Athenians’ lack of prudence and political failures other than the citizens themselves (Dem. 10.75-76).

In all of these ways, the democrats effectively answered the critics’ charges that voters were sheep-like followers and that they engaged in politics purely in order to satisfy unreconstructed preferences. No: democrats thought for themselves and self-consciously formulated their own plans for leading good lives, not with reference to pre-political desires, as in Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, and the modern liberal tradition, but rather with reference to the non-relative standards of virtue that they had themselves deliberately arrived at in conversation with fellow citizens.

Good order, then, went “all the way down” in the souls of citizens, but it did not conflict with the democrats’ individualism, their openness to revision, and their imaginative, deliberate engagement in politics. Rather, in both state and soul, the Athenian democrats reflectively fashioned a harmonious balance of the virtues of individuality and of moderation and good order. Yet one might object that this account of the democratic virtues collapses, in the end, into the version offered by contemporary republican and liberal theorists, in that it regards the virtues as merely instrumentally useful in helping us maintain democratic institutions (Pettit 1997, Galston 1991, Macedo 1990).

But this was not the Athenian democratic way. In On the Crown, Demosthenes proposed that, despite failure at the Battle of Chaeronea, both he and the Athenians collectively had to live up to their highest ideals, in order to live with self-respect. Such a conception was common throughout deliberative and forensic oratory. This conception was often represented in the terminology of doing the things that were “worthy of” (axia) oneself, the city, and the ancestors (Dem. 13.32-33, 14.41, 18.96-99, 20.119, 48.2, 60.27; Aesch. 2.113, 3.247; Hyp. 6.3; Lyc. 1.104, 1.110; cf. Thuc. 2.41-42, 7.69). As individuals and as a group, the Athenians had to do things that were worthy of themselves – or, in other words, they worked hard to become the actors of ideas that were truly their own.
One finds a particularly helpful reflection of this combination of acting on behalf of the city and living well in one’s own right in Herodotus’ story about the wise Athenian lawgiver Solon (chief magistrate in Athens in 594 BC). Solon once remarked that the happiest of men was Tellus the Athenian. When asked why, he said simply the following:

Tellus lived in a flourishing city and had fine, noble sons, and he saw their children born and all surviving; and he led a flourishing life by our standards, and had a very distinguished death: for when the Athenians were fighting against their neighbors in Eleusis, he fought for the city and made a rout of the enemy and died very nobly, and the Athenians buried him at public expense in just the place where he fell, and they paid him great honors (Hdt. 1.30.4-5).

This short narrative encapsulates the preceding arguments for the interconnectedness of individual happiness and orientation toward the good of others. Tellus was the sort of man to carry out his civic duties virtuously, to live and die for what was meaningful in his life, and to be honored for his virtuous behavior and thus to become a stimulus to the virtuous behavior of others. He was truly the son of both his family and the city. If the accounts of the Athenians orators are credible, then we should imagine that Tellus arrived at his private and public commitments reflectively, voluntarily, and self-consciously.

III.D. Cultivating the Citizens’ Practical Judgment

Consider, however, that the democratic virtues of individualism and good order oriented citizens in different directions – the one toward innovation and self-reliance, the other toward the reliable exercise of collectively defined functions. It is at this point that we can recognize the importance of practical reasoning in the exercise of virtue. Cultivating good judgment in the citizenry was a pressing political and personal necessity. How were good order and individualism supposed to be appropriately aligned within the souls of individuals? There is obviously no prescription one could offer, in advance of particular situations, to guide individuals in their efforts to balance their proper virtues. Instead, democratic virtue politics, like the virtue theory of the philosophers, relied on the good judgment of virtuous citizens to “thread the needle” between excess and deficiency in the world of rapidly changing “ultimate particulars.” In this way the Athenians erected a hierarchy of virtue which placed practical wisdom at the top, as the architectonic virtue that exercised overarching control over the others.

Demosthenes argued such points particularly clearly in his deliberative speeches on the city’s foreign policy. He urged his fellow citizens to temper their benevolence (philanthrōpia) toward other cities by consideration of their own well-being: while he admires taking risks for the benefit of others, he also assumes that “it is the work of sensible men (sōphronōn anthrōpōn) to give equal consideration to their own affairs as to those of others, so as to be not only benevolent but also sensible (noun echontes)” (Dem. Pr. 16). Such prudence, which is capable of balancing apparently antithetical virtues, was held to be cultivated in all citizens within the family and through “working the
“machine” (Ober 2001) of democratic government. Lest we think that democratic leaders were somehow undemocratically “teaching” their fellow citizens, Demosthenes emphasizes that precisely the opposite is the case: leaders must be guided by the noble ambitions, judgments, and sentiments of the ordinary citizens (Dem. 13.31, 36).

What held true in the deliberative Assembly also held true in the popular law-courts of Athens. In the vast majority of legal cases, Athenians expressed “not only a normative belief that a wide variety of contextual information was often relevant to reaching a just decision, but also a political commitment to maximizing the discretion wielded by popular juries” (Lanni 2006, 4). “Working the machine” cultivated the practical judgment of citizens in a variety of institutional forums, but mostly clearly in the Athenians’ popular jury-courts.

In these courts, all Athenian citizens, as political equals, were invited to judge complex arguments without benefit of legal experts and without benefit of rigorous legal definitions enshrined in a precise law-code. Take, for example, the speech of 347/6 BC, in which Demosthenes brought Meidias to trial for punching him in the nose at the Festival of Dionysos. Throughout the speech, Demosthenes railed against Meidias’ *hubris* – an ethical abstraction that means “arrogant overreaching,” often with the intent of doing physical harm. Whether or not Demosthenes specifically indicted Meidias under the laws against *hubris* (i.e., in a *graphê hubreôs*), jurors had to judge individually whether Demosthenes was right to apply this condemnatory language to these particular circumstances. To make his case convincing, Demosthenes offered a narrative of his previous victimization at the hands of Meidias (starting at 21.77), as well as detailing Meidias’ generally aggressive behavior toward others (21.83-102), in order to show that Meidias’ punch constituted culminating evidence of his settled disposition to abuse others.

Demosthenes recognized that the jury would have to consider his case on the merits, in light of the local norms governing ethical and legal concepts such as *hubris*. As a result, he invited the jury to reflect upon the meaning of *hubris* by referring to exemplary cases:

Many people know that Euaion the brother of Leodamas killed Boiotus at a public banquet and gathering because he had received a single blow. The blow itself did not cause the anger so much as the dishonor. For a free man being hit, though terrible, is not the point – rather, it’s being hit with *hubris*. The man who strikes another could do many things, men of Athens, some of which the victim might not be able to communicate to another man, such as his attacker’s gesture, the look in his eye, the tone of his voice, when he strikes with *hubris* or out of hatred, with the fists or on the cheek. These things stir up a man and make him crazy, when he is unaccustomed to being treated abusively. Men of Athens, no one, in reporting these things, would be able to convey the outrage to his audience, in the strikingly clear way it appeared in truth and in the deed itself to the victim and to onlookers. Men of Athens, consider by Zeus and the other gods, and reckon up amongst yourselves how much greater is the
anger that I would rightly feel, having suffered such things at Meidias’ hands, than that Euaion felt then, at the time he killed Boiotus. He was struck by someone he knew who was drunk at the time, before six or seven witnesses, whom he also knew, who would have denounced the one man for what he did, and praised the other for controlling and restraining himself after being hit, even though he had gone to a house for dinner voluntarily. I, on the other hand, was outraged by a sober enemy, early in the morning, a man acting arrogantly and not because he was drunk, before many foreigners and citizens, even though I was in a temple and had, as chorus-leader, to be there. Men of Athens, I think that I judged sensibly, or rather blessedly, when I held back then and was not driven to do anything desperate. Yet I can easily understand the behavior of Euaion and all those who come to their own defense when they are dishonored. (Dem. 21.71-74).

This passage illustrates many facets of the workings of virtue politics in democratic Athens. First, Demosthenes called upon the jury of ordinary Athenian citizens to observe the situation carefully, to mull things over, and to reflect upon the distinctiveness of this particular situation. Since there were no consultations with a judge, or private deliberations among jury-members, it was up to the individual jurors themselves to weigh facts and values judiciously and to render verdicts based on their own individual, albeit socially informed, understandings of the virtues and vices. The Athenian citizens themselves had to judge whether and how virtue-terms could be truly and properly used to describe Demosthenes’ behavior (cf. 19.57).

Second, the jury had also to form a judgment of Demosthenes’ emotional response to being punched: was his level of anger and his intuitive reasoning appropriate, or perhaps deficient in some way? Just as the wise man (phronimos) of Aristotelian virtue theory had to make a judgment about courageous, moderate, and just behavior amidst the rapidly evolving world of particulars, so too did the Athenian jury need, finally, to make just such a judgment about the narratives they had heard, and even to act as the final and legitimate authority within the city on questions of virtue and vice. Service on the jury-court was both an exercise of practical reasoning and an excellent way for jurors to educate themselves in political virtue and vice, through becoming acquainted with a broad range of moral possibilities as well as forms of ethical reasoning.

“Virtue politics” was not reserved for members of the elite. Athens’s politics of virtue was truly populist, in that the democratic virtues applied to the entire citizen body and were evaluated by the entire citizen body. In no other, non-democratic tradition do we find such an emphasis on practical reasoning, egalitarianism, and individualism as we find in the democratic virtue politics of Athens. And, as a fuller account would indicate, we must imagine these emphases as being even stronger and more radical in the Athenians’ local politics, since it was there that Athenian citizens participated, day in and day out, in the exercise and cultivation of virtue and practical reasoning, all with a view, as we have seen, to attaining to eudaimonia, or human flourishing.
IV. Conclusion

Obviously, there is no way that the lifestyle of Tellus the Athenian could legitimately be recommended by modern democratic nation-states, for such a recommendation would involve promoting far too thickly comprehensive a conception of the good. Yet, even in the pluralistic modern democracies, it is plausible to suggest that public arguments and judgments based on a belief in the intrinsic and instrumental value of justice, courage, kindness, patriotism, and so forth should be legitimate, because no one on any point of the political spectrum could object to the goodness of these virtues, or to the self-respecting life that they make possible. This is one of the reasons that, in fact, the language of virtue still has popular currency in political rhetoric in the world’s developed democracies. Political theorists should take the point and ask why this language is still so powerful. If they do pursue this line of reasoning, then their task – or at least one of their tasks – will be to draw out the ethical and political implications of this language. Political theorists can improve political language by helping us become more intelligible to ourselves and more in touch with our own democratic intuitions, or rather with the demands and ramifications of our own democratic commitments.

To be sure, the question of which virtues are worth cultivating should itself be a subject of discussion, as should the question of how much political engagement is adequate or necessary for a good life (cf. Sandel 1998: 323-27). As Ronald Beiner has persuasively argued, we would be better off if we, as citizens, accepted the responsibility publicly to express critical judgments about what constitutes human flourishing (Beiner 1992: 39-79). It is to our detriment that we exclude such topics from the public forum, or, even worse, that we uncritically accept substantive visions of the good (such as liberal maximization of choice or market-driven consumerism) presented as simply neutral, procedural standards. The rigorously and radically egalitarian virtues of the Athenian democracy, suitably updated, might provide us with more life-affirming concepts and more appropriate political starting-points, as we think seriously about the sorts of lives we want to lead, and the sorts of people we want to become.
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