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Plato, Vaccines and Democratic Auto-immunization

> 'That wisdom and control should, if possible, come from within; failing that it must be imposed from without' – Plato, *The Republic*

> '…a society in which power, law and knowledge are exposed to a radical indetermination, a society that has become the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure' – Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*

Ever since Plato left the cave of every day life and reluctantly returned, dazzled by the form of good, to explain to the community how to 'act rationally in either public or private,'[1] one might be forgiven for questioning Socrates' attempt 'to combine the practice of philosophy and politics'. While Socrates sees 'the philosopher' as 'better qualified' (520b) to do the job, as long as philosophy allows itself to be dazzled by the universality of Truth or Justice, will it not remain blind to the endless negotiations and accommodations that are the very stuff of democratic politics? Indeed, in its claims to establish universal truths that transcend every particular context, isn't there something anti-democratic about philosophy? Perhaps it was such a feeling that prompted Jacques Derrida to wonder aloud 'why are there so few democrat philosophers…from Plato to Heidegger…?'[2]

In this paper I want to explore this centuries old tension between philosophy and democracy. In the first section I will approach this through Tom Sorrel's paper[3] on the

[1] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London, Penguin, 1987), 517c.
[2] Derrida, *Rogues*, p.88.
[3] Sorell, 'Public Health, Parental Choice and Expert Knowledge: the strange case of the MMR vaccine'. As far as I know this is an unpublished manuscript. It was made available in a *Democracy and Knowledge Reader* produced by Jagiellonian University for a 2 week workshop July 2007. Page references will refer to this reader.

recent controversy in the UK surrounding the safety of the measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine. This paper skilfully brings out the tensions between democracy and knowledge through a concrete example, with Sorrel giving what could be termed a Platonic defence of knowledge in the face of democratic demands. This opens up the broader issue of the fraught relationship between democracy and philosophy, and here, drawing on Michael Walzer's paper 'Philosophy and Democracy'[4] I attempt to defend democracy from philosophy's claims of context-transcending truths. In the concluding section I address the question of how democratic politics is possible if one gives up the idea of a universal truth informing political practice.

I. Reflexive Modernity and the MMR Scare

The transformation of society from a 'simple modernity' into a 'reflexive modernity' or from a traditional society to a 'post-traditionally society', as described by sociologists such as Ulrick Beck and Anthony Giddens, seems to have become the common sense picture of the social reality of democratic societies. While we were once secure in the belief of technological progress and had faith on the institutional safeguards to manage the risks involved, we now find ourselves living through a reflexive modernity only too aware of emerging risks – ecological crises, developments in the fields of medicine, genetic engineering etc – which seem to run ahead of expert systems and institutions. This in turn has contributed to the emergence of a generalized doubt where individuals increasingly find themselves confronted with the necessity of making decisions about their health, diet, lifestyle in a situation of ambivalence and uncertainty that can no longer be relieved by simply deferring to expert knowledge.

Indeed, it is precisely the advances in our knowledge - not only scientific developments and technological innovations but also the globalized networks of communication that spread such knowledge – that have paradoxically propelled this uncertainty. Consequently expert systems are increasingly called upon to justify

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themselves publicly, to respond to the concerns of the individual and give a democratic account of themselves. Institutions and forums become constructed around the doubts of the individual who no longer passively defers to the expert's authority but demands justification. In this reflexive modernity the individual's trust must be actively built, not automatically expected.

The buzz words of the Blair government - choice, selection, flexibility – were all supposedly geared toward giving greater autonomy and responsibility to the individual. As a result the institutions of society, on this picture, are in a process of being shaped from below. For many this is a much welcomed democratization of increasing areas of society, transforming the traditional top down relation between expert and individual into one in which greater autonomy is granted to the individual affected by certain policies. Chantal Mouffe summarises this picture well:

> In a post-traditional context where institutions have become reflexive, the propositions of the experts are opened to critique by the citizens and passive trust is not enough, trust must become active. To generate active trust expert knowledge must be democratically validated. Indeed scientific statements are now treated by the public as contestable propositional truths and this is why expert systems have to become dialogical…Active trust implies a reflexive engagement of lay people with expert systems instead of the reliance on expert authority.[5]

Institutions now become constructed around the individual, opening them up to contestation and debate. Experts must answer the democratic demand and justify themselves while authority must make itself available to discursive justification. While Mouffe suggests that the slogan of the post-traditional society would be 'no authority without democracy'[6], we can perhaps add and 'no trust without justification'.

This is the context in which the MMR vaccine controversy arises.[7] The vaccine, which is administered to children in the UK at the ages of one and four, was originally given separately for each disease (a measles shot, mumps shot and a rubella shot) but in

[5] Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.45 I should note Mouffe if summarising the vision presented by Beck and Giddens – a position she goes on to question.
[6] Ibid., p.54.
[7] See Sorell, p.1

1988 the government switched to a triple vaccine (one shot for all three). Sorell explains that one of the reasons for switching to the triple vaccine was that single vaccines were considered to be less effective than the triple vaccine, and 'allowing parents the choice to have their children separately vaccinated would reduce the rate of immunization even further.'[8] However publicity surrounding the publication of a paper suggesting a link between the MMR vaccine and autism in young children had the effect of reducing uptake for the combined MMR vaccine and prompted parental demands for the reintroduction of the separate vaccines. Although subsequent scientific re-examinations have disagreed with the results of the original paper, and despite a motion to re-introduce the separate vaccines being overwhelmingly defeated at the annual conference of the British medical Association in 2001, doubt over the MMR and distrust of expert opinion remain.

This seems to be the kind of problem that becomes increasingly common in the reflexive modernity or post traditional society outlined by the likes of Beck and Giddens (as summarised by Mouffe above). Despite seemingly overwhelming scientific evidence, and despite the expert advice from UK public health bodies, individual parents remain unconvinced by expert opinion and continue to demand to have the choice of separate vaccines. Thus, coupled with doubt and distrust there is the demand for individual autonomy, for parents to have the right to choose the course of action that they think is best for their children regardless of the advice of expert systems.

This issue is highlighted by the position of Dr Ian Robbe, a senior lecturer in public health at the University of Wales, Cardiff, who entered the MMR debate arguing that separate vaccinations ought to be made available because 'not to respect the parent's position is not to give people the right to make a choice – it takes choice away from them.'[9] Robbe's position seems to be that of the expert in reflexive modernity, succumbing to a popular opinion that treats the statements of science as contestable propositions, not authoritative facts. The authority of expert systems in this particular situation is called upon to democratically justify itself in the eyes of a distrustful public whose demands of individual autonomy are seen to trump the prescriptions of expert

[8] Ibid., p.2
[9] Quoted by Sorell, p,2.

authority. Thus echoing the slogan of reflexive modernity, democratic accountable is here the condition of authority and public justification the only way to gain the individual's trust.

Defending Knowledge from Democracy

For Sorell this is 'one of a range of issues that arises when there is a conflict between popular opinion and expert opinion in a democracy.'[10] However unlike Robbe, Sorell insists that this issue should not be conceived as one in which expert systems have to reflexively reorient themselves as services providers for patients in order to appear more accountable. What this issue ought to be about is not democratic accountability but professional standards and knowledge; about enforcing professional standards laid down by other professionals and holding people to those standards. This holding cannot be done by an inexpert public; it requires the knowledge of experts.

However this in turn raises a number a questions regarding the issue of democracy and knowledge. The idea that a key component of democracy is the principle of freedom goes back to Plato and Aristotle. 'A fundamental principle of the democratic form of constitution' according to Aristotle 'is freedom'[11] and it is in the name of this principle that democracy maintains a space for the autonomous running of one's own life. As Plato puts it, 'Granted this freedom, won't everyone arrange his life as pleases him best?'[12] The answer of course is yes; *demo-cracy* is this power of self-determination, the freedom or autonomy of the people to arrange their lives as they see best. But this is precisely the problem for Plato and Sorell – some people simply cannot see what is best and this sets the autonomy of democracy on a collision course with the knowledge of what is 'True'.

Sorell faces this challenge head on:

> Suppose that there were a majority for withdrawing the MMR vaccine…Would *that* be an argument for withdrawing the MMR vaccine or altering vaccination

[10] Ibid., p.1
[11] Aristotle, *Politics* 6.I.I.3I7*a-b*
[12] Plato, *Republic*, 9.8.6.557*b*

> policy is some other way? Although it may sound anti-democratic to say so, may answer is that would *not* by itself be an argument.[13]

Regardless of what a majority of people may believe, the only reason for changing the policy is if there are good enough reasons to do so and good reasons in this case just are those reasons provided by the authority of expert knowledge. Sorell here seems to be making the distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa* arguing that the fact that many people may believe x to be the case doesn't mean that x is the case. Parents in the MMR case may sincerely and firmly believe in the dangers of the vaccine and the harm it may potentially cause to their children, but as Sorell puts it 'believing doesn't make it so, whether it's one person believing or millions.' If we really want to know what *is so*, then Sorell maintains 'there has to be something that makes a thing true, *independently* of its being believed.'[14] And that thing is precisely the knowledge of the expert. While doxa is notoriously fallible, especially when it comes to complex issues such as medicine, *epistēmē* can get at the truth independently of our shifting beliefs.

If expert knowledge overrules the democratic majority's demand for the removal of the MMR vaccine, what about the trickier case of parents refusing to immunize their children with the vaccine? If expert knowledge can, as it were, ignore the demands of an inexpert majority, can it override the autonomy of democratic citizens or should autonomy have immunity from the power of expert authority?

Autonomy and Knowledge of the Good

In the case of a typical doctor-patient relationship treatment requires the consent of the patient and therefore the doctor should respect the autonomy of the individual. Imagine the case in which a specialist doctor offers her patient two possible treatments *a* and *b* for his very serious condition and strongly advises *a* as the best course of treatment, *b* being a less than satisfactory option. Now if the patient opts for *b* this is an acceptable move even though the specialist prefers *a*. The patient's autonomy trumps the specialist's knowledge. Now imagine the case where the patient refuses all treatment. This is an

[13] Sorell, p.9

increasingly foolish move from the perspective of the specialist, but still permitted in terms of the patient's autonomy – treatment requires consent and therefore expert knowledge must once again give way to autonomy.

Now in these two examples, the choices of the less than satisfactory *b* or the refusal of all treatment are no doubt bad moves from the perspective of the specialist, but they may be consistent with the patient's core beliefs (moral, religious etc). Thus regardless of the specialist's conviction that the patient is making a foolish or even dangerous decision, the autonomy of the patient ought to be respected. Autonomy cannot simply be the right to make the right decisions, but must also include the right to make the wrong decisions. The right to make only the right decisions is not really much of a right at all.

However suppose now that the doctor asks the patient why he refused the treatment or opted for *b* and the patient replies "because it's raining outside". Is the specialist to accept this as an expression of autonomy? The patient's response seems such a strange one that the doctor may question the rationality of her patient. At this point autonomy may seem to make no sense as the patient has seemingly lost his rational capacity. But one can perhaps imagine some kind of explanation being offered - the rain brings bad luck or is a sign from the gods not to go ahead with treatment - and while these may be poor reasons for the specialist they are not necessarily a sign of rational incompetence; the patient may be making an "irrational" decision as far as the specialist is concerned but it does not follow he is rationally incompetent. Therefore even in this limit case autonomy is in play and would therefore trump the specialist's knowledge[15].

This is usually the kind of defence of autonomy that one expects in a democracy; however the MMR case is not simply an issue regarding the autonomy of the individual deciding for him or herself. In the case of the parent refusing to vaccinate their child with the MMR vaccine the parent is not only deciding for another (their child) but is putting others at risk (other people's children). This takes the MMR case out of the private relation between doctor and patient and into the realm of public officials responsible for

[14] Ibid., p.8

[15] Of course in an actual situation as described here, depending on the seriousness of the condition, one would hope that the specialist would not be as easily convinced as the author and discussions would be more in-depth before she decided to send the untreated patient on his way.

public health. While the doctor has to go along with the patient, public officials do not have to go along with the public. The latter have the responsibility of deciding what's best *for* the public.

This is where things get a little uncomfortable. Vaccinations only become effective if there is a large uptake. Now if a government, on the advice of experts, claims a vaccine to be safe, how is one to respond to parents who, scared by tabloid headlines and motivated by a sincere concern for the health of their children, decide not to get their children injected with the MMR vaccine? Should public officials, armed with a knowledge of the Truth independent of what is merely believed, intervene and force parents to have their children injected with the vaccine? This raises all sorts of moral puzzles, however what I am concerned with here is whether such expert knowledge should override, recalling Aristotle, the fundamental principle of democracy - the freedom or autonomy of citizens to arrange their lives how they see best. Sorell bites the bullet: 'Coercion' he writes 'is of course best avoided; but sometimes it is moral obligatory.'[16]

Sorell gives at least two arguments for this, what I will call the "lousy at maths" argument and the "public risk" argument. Regarding the first, Sorell notes that while parents are the natural spokespeople for their children - as they typically love them and so weigh the child's interests more than other's would – this does not mean that they are the best person to judge what's best for that child.[17] No matter how much I try and help my daughter with her maths homework if I am lousy at maths then I am not going to do her much mathematical good. In fact there's a good chance of me doing her a fair amount of mathematical harm. There are experts for this sort of thing and it would be wise of me to defer to their greater knowledge. Indeed, this is what parents always do, as Sorell points out

[16] Sorell., p.6

[17] This is not to say that one simply dismisses the parent's opinions. One must do all one can to explain the situation to parents in hope of obtaining their agreement and consent for treatment to take place. However the real test comes when this process has come to an end with the parent still determined not to have their child vaccinated and it is this situation that I am addressing here.

> Parents entrust the health of their children to doctors, and usually do not educate their children themselves. If their children travel, parents often put their children's lives in the hands of car drivers or bus drivers and airline pilots.[18]

Just as in the case of maths, so in other areas of life there is a division of labour in which different professionals take on different responsibilities depending on their area of knowledge and expertise. Sorell goes on to argue that 'it would be jeopardising the welfare of the children if everyone regularly decided to take over piloting, doctoring, or education of their offspring themselves.'[19]

This argument echoes Plato's Ship analogy in *The Republic*[20] not only for its emphasis on the professional knowledge required for particular roles, but also for the dangerous consequences such swapping of roles is seen as having on all and this brings us to the second "public risk" argument. Just as sailors who 'have never learned the art of navigation'[21] should not be given the helm of a ship, so parents with no medical training should not be deciding which vaccines are best. If the unskilled sailor takes over navigating the ship or if the inexpert parent takes over doctoring his/her child then the welfare of *all* is threatened; just as the ship and all her crew are put into peril by a lack of knowledge about the stars, the winds and the ocean, so the individual child and the rest of society are put into danger by a lack of knowledge about science, vaccines and immunization.

So if, as Plato maintains, 'The object of our legislation is not the special welfare of any particular class [or group] in our society, but of the society as a whole' then do not public officials have a responsibility to intervene *for* the benefit of society as a whole here? In the name of society's welfare, such legislation, according to Plato, 'uses persuasion or compulsion' to benefit the community as a whole and therefore it does not 'leave everyone to please himself.'[22] This latter phrase recalls Plato's characterisation of democracy, where 'every individual is free

[18] Sorell., p.4
[19] Sorell, p.4
[20] Plato, 7.6.3.488*b*
[21] Plato, 7.6.3.488*c*
[22] Plato, 7.7.7.520*e*

to do as he likes' or 'arrange his life as pleases him best.'[23] Thus for Plato if persuasion fails, then, in the interests of society as a whole, the democratic freedom to arrange one's life as one's sees best will have to be sacrificed for a knowledge of what is best *for all*. Plato would insist that parents *must* have their children vaccinated with the MMR shot.

Sorrel seems to follow this Platonic argument to the effect that in the case of the MMR scare, parents, on account of 'false or ill-founded core beliefs', are refusing to vaccinate their children and the risks this poses to public health are sufficient grounds for 'compelling parents'[24] to have their kids injected. While Sorell is not recommending booting down doors, tying up parents and plunging needles into the arms of crying children, he does think that once every effort has been made to explain the scientific case for the vaccine and thus obtain parental consent, 'outside interventions'[25] such as 'prohibiting school attendance and even of withdrawing the medical advice parents are ignoring' are 'defensible.'[26] Thus democratic autonomy must give way to expert knowledge of the good.

Sorell, Science and Harm to Others

However one may question the way in which the distinction between democratic autonomy and an authoritative knowledge has been set up here. The objection would be something like this: "You seem to present Sorell as some anti-democratic Platonist simply because he holds that people should be restrained from certain actions. But calling for certain actions to be restrained is not, in itself, anti-democratic. Therefore there is no necessary tension here between Sorell position and that of the democrat." Or to put this criticism in more colourful terms: what democrat in his/her right mind would argue that there should *not* be certain restraints on people's actions? Surely Sorell can call for constraints on parental autonomy and still being a good democrat?

[23] Plato, 9.8.6.557*b*
[24] Sorell., p.8
[25] Sorell, p.7
[26] Sorell, p.8.

Indeed, it doesn't take a John Stuart Mill to remind us that 'No one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions'[27] and with this is mind one could argue that Sorrel's position isn't really the hard Platonic position it's being presented as, but a version of Mill's "harm to others" principle. You will recall that Mill accepts that 'As soon as any part of a person's conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it and the question whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it, becomes open to discussion.'[28] The question of 'interfering' in the conduct of citizens out of concern for 'general welfare' seems to be Sorell's main point here. Presumably Mill's use of 'conduct' would be wide enough to include acts of omission as well as acts of commission – as he suggests 'A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction'[29] – and therefore the refusal of parents to get their children vaccinated, at a risk not only to their own children but to other people's children as well, could be subject to Mill's "harm to others" principle. Thus one could see Sorell's position in the MMR case as simply deploying a version of the "harm to others principle" by arguing for the need to constrain autonomy where the exercise of that autonomy harms the welfare of others.

Now while there seems little doubt that Sorell is deploying a version of the "harm to others" principle – the "public risk" argument I outlined above acknowledges as much – such an argument is not the only thing going on in his move against autonomy. Indeed, I would argue that Sorell's main argument is "the lousy at maths" argument and this is ultimately driven by a commitment to Science and the kind of truth it is seen as providing. And it is this commitment to scientific truth that sees Sorell siding with Plato against democratic autonomy.

For example, when experts say that the UK National Health Service would benefit from an internal market Sorell thinks that one does not have to go along with the expert advice in this case. Now the reason why we do not have to defer to the recommendations of the expert here - as we should in the case of the MMR

[27] John Stuart Mill, (ed) H.B Acton, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* (Oxford: John Dent & Sons, 1972), p,114
[28] Ibid., p.134
[29] Ibid, .p.74

vaccine - is not out of concern for the harm the implementation of an internal market may cause to society but due to 'supply-side economics not being on par as a science with molecular biology.'[30] The implication seems to be that the expert's advice gives way to democratic decision making simply because it is not a science. And the reverse of this would seem to suggest that if supply-economics were a science in the same way that medicine is, and if experts in the field advised the implementation of an internal market in public health care provision, then presumably it too would demand the kind of deference that medicine does. The problem of what harm this could potentially cause to society as a whole doesn't feature in Sorell's discussion.

While the potentially damaging consequences of following an ill-informed public opinion does feature in Sorell's discussion of the MMR controversy, his position ultimately rests on the bedrock of: 'medicine *is* a science'. Sorrel goes on to note that it is 'on account of this scientific status that medicine trumps ordinary public or parental opinion.'[31] If Sorell's position is motivated by a version of the "harm to others" principle then why didn't he write 'it's on account of the potential harm posed to the welfare of others that expert medical knowledge trumps parental opinion'? While the latter is somewhat implicit in the former, insofar as science understands the potentially disastrous consequences of not having children vaccinated, Sorrell's emphasis on the scientific status of medicine seems to highlight what is really at issues; it is not so much about deferring to experts where policies may potentially harm the welfare of others, but deferring to experts who are in possession of scientific knowledge relevant to public policy.[32] By insisting that

[30] Sorell p.8
[31] Ibid.
[32] One could suggest that 'relevant to public policy' just means 'policies that could potentially harm the welfare of others' and that therefore the role of Science in Sorell's argument is not as central as I am claiming or that 'harm to others' is at least of equal importance. But one would then have to explain why Sorell thinks we don't have to defer to experts advising the introduction of an internal market in public health care. But one is now faced with a problem; one either has to demonstrate how the introduction of an internal market into public health care provision is not relevant to public policy in this sense (i.e it poses no harm to the welfare of others) and therefore one need not defer to expert advice in this instance; or one has to explain why Sorell thinks that supply-economics not being a science is a sufficient reason to release us from the advice of experts with regard to a policy that is publicly relevant (i.e that poses harm to the welfare of others). The former option of demonstrating that a particular policy has 'no harm' is more than a little difficult and in the case of the policy of an internal market in public health care it would seem to

the truth provided by Science trumps public opinion in matters of public policy Sorell sides with Plato in seeing knowledge of what is true as sufficiently powerful to override the will of a democratic majority. What the MMR dispute illustrates from the Sorellian perspective is the irrational movement of democratic autonomy in its rejection of truth. As such Sorell's argument to limit autonomy proceeds not from the harm to others principle, but from a defence of scientific truth and expert knowledge. Insofar as autonomy is to be limited by the 'Truth' Sorrel is right when he notes that this position 'may sound anti-democratic.'[33]

II. Defending Democracy from Truth

The MMR vaccine case highlights an inherent problem of democratic societies: how does one negotiate between the authoritative claims of experts for their knowledge of the Truth and the democratic claims of citizens? Moving from the concrete example of the MMR case I now want to explore this tension between knowledge and democracy on the more theoretical level of the fraught relation between philosophy and democracy and, in particular, the relation between philosophical claims of universal Truth and the particular claims of democratic politics. After sketching out this tension I will then attempt to defend democratic politics from the desire for a context-transcending truth.

The standards of natural science, which so impressed Sorell, have the kind of "universalistic grandeur"[34] that philosophers have a taste for. Like the expert, the philosopher strives for the universal and unconditional which she sees as providing

require a very sophisticated argument, something with the kind of explanatory power , predicative ability and exact measurements of Science. Yet this would then admit into the realm of science the field of supply-economic that Sorell explicitly excludes. And once the door of science is opened to this field, where, and how, does one draw the boundaries that identify an authoritative science? On the other hand, if one goes for the second option then one concedes the point that it is the scientific status of an expert field, and not the possible harm of a policy to the welfare of others, that is crucial when it comes to overriding the will of a democratic majority. Harm to others then would be nothing more than an additional reason for deferring to expert advice; it wouldn't be *the* reason for doing so.

[33] Sorel, p.9

[34] Richard Rorty, 'Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude' in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Uiversity Press, 2007), p.75

knowledge of the Truth unstained by the messy complexities of history and particularity. The truth sought is transcultural and ahistorical. This is what Richard Rorty called 'the Platonist hope of speaking with an authority that is not merely that of a certain time and place.'[35] So long as the philosopher remains detached in her armchair or alone outside the cave staring at the sun, then this doesn't pose much of a problem for the political struggles of democratic politics that are going on in the world outside or back in the cave. However the moment the philosopher steps out into the streets or back into the cave with that dazzled Platonic look in her eyes then things get a little tricky for democracy. Why? Well as Michael Walzer writes, '…the truth he [i.e. the philosopher] knows or claims to know is singular in character, [therefore] he is likely to think that politics must be the same: a coherent conception, an uncompromising execution.'[36]

The great fear of the democrat is that this claim to have knowledge of a universally valid Truth sounds like the authoritarian imposition of a singular vision that seeks to put an end to the struggles, negotiations and compromises that are part of the very freedom of democracy. While the Platonist vision of a unified system finally revealing the way the world *really is* may be philosophically inspiring, the 'uncompromising *execution*' this would demand in the realm of politics 'gives off a whiff of cruelty' to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche.[37] The great fear of the philosopher, on the other hand, is that if one gives up the hope of discovering a singular Truth that transcends all particularity then one loses the authority of universal validity and is left abandoned to the turmoil of interminable disagreements, the clashing of unjustifiable opinions and the irrationality of private desires; what Habermas calls the 'others to reason.'[38]

Although there may no longer be many heroic philosophers around arguing 'that political power should be in the hands of one or more true philosophers'[39] there are lesser versions of Platonism that remain enthralled by the uncompromising idea of universal validity and thus the tension between philosophy and democracy is still very much with us.

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[35] Ibid., p.83
[36] Walzer, 'Philosophy and Democracy' in *Political Theory*, Vol. 9 No. 3, August 1981. p.381
[37] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 47
[38] Cited by Rorty 'Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude', p.83
[39] Plato, *The Republic* 8.7.4. 540*d*

Take John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. Rawls asks the question: if you had a clean canvas on which to start society all over again what principles and arrangement would you endorse? Rooted as we are in our particular historico-cultural contexts different people would endorse different things. So Rawls departs from reality and begins setting out the 'original position'[40] which, with its 'veil of ignorance', leaves pure reflective minds, removed from the 'contingencies of social circumstances'[41] that make them the particular individuals they are, to get on with the philosophical task of deciding 'once and for all'[42] the founding principles of society. If one is to arrive at 'principles [that] are to be universal in application'[43] then, for (the early) Rawls one's contingencies must be left at the door.[44] While Rawls is a committed democrat, one can still see the ghost of Plato moving through this meeting of pure undistorted thinkers, freed from the particularities that get in the way of arriving at context-transcending truths.

One may object that Rawls' deliberative approach to the principles of justice seems to drop the idea of Truth as correspondence to an independent reality and instead waits for the 'fair agreement or bargain'[45] that emerges between those participants in the original position. Surely the agreement or bargaining here is far removed from the isolated Platonic philosopher staring into the sun and is instead the very stuff of democratic politics. However the original position is not really the kind of democratic forum it may seem to be. The veil of ignorance imposes a 'symmetry'[46] that strips participants of the very features that make them the particular individuals they are thereby reducing any potential participants to identical philosophical intelligences and consequently dispensing with the need for any actual participants.[47] At work in the original position is a singular, undistorted philosophical intelligence - that of the philosopher herself. Talk of bargaining and agreement is merely a metaphor for the processes of the philosopher's own thinking.

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[40] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 11
[41] Ibid
[42] Ibid., p 12
[43] Ibid, p.114
[44] Here I am focusing on Rawls initial position in *A Theory of Justice* and not his subsequent reinterpretation of his position in later work.
[45] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p.11.
[46] Ibid.
[47] This argument is indebted to Walzer who presents a version of it in his paper 'Philosophy and Democracy', p. 389.

The problem for democracy is that the philosopher returns from the original position convinced she has the one true answer to the question of 'what is to be done?' 'The claim of the philosopher' writes Walzer 'is that he knows "the pattern set up in the heavens." He knows what ought to be done'.[48] This kind of knowledge is singularly uncompromising and would seem to have little time for the endless negotiations and pragmatic compromises of a democratic politics. Moreover it would translate itself into a politics based not on the consent of the majority, but on the authority of those whose undistorted vision of the Truth gives them the knowledge of what is right – as the main character of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* puts it: 'The Party can never be mistaken.'[49]

And this brings us back to the question of autonomy. In the earlier discussion of the foolish patient refusing treatment I claimed that the right to make the wrong decision is a key aspect of democratic autonomy. Just as the patient has the right to opt for a foolish course of action regarding his health, so the demos has the right to decide on a wrong course of action regarding the laws and institutions it chooses to live under. The response of the Platonist emerging from the original position knowing what 'ought to be done' would seem to be that the sovereignty of the people is all well and good as long as they make the right decisions. But the right to make only the right decisions doesn't seem to be much of a right at all. For the democrat what counts is not so much the rightness of laws, but the consent of the people in making that law. The moment rightness overrides consent democracy is in danger.

As a democrat one should be suspicious of those coming back into the cave claiming to have the right blue prints for the laws of society based on their unique vision of "the pattern set up in the heavens." Such a vision attempts to eliminate doubt and arrive at the point when all conversation comes to an end, where history itself comes to end. And as the twentieth century has only all too well demonstrated the execution of such plans all too often ends up in plans of execution. Or in less dramatic terms, such a knowledge quickly sets about excluding those voices who disagree or simply cannot see what is best.

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[48] Walzer, *Philosophy and Democracy*, p.383
[49] Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (Middlesex: penguin, 1985) p.40.

But democracy is precisely that regime in which doubt is never eliminated, where we never decide "once and for all" and arrive at a universal truth that acts as a conversation-stopping full stop. Rewriting Isaiah Berlin on Romanticism, we can say that when it comes to democracy 'No matter what I say I always have to leave three dots at the end.'[50] Those three dots encourage the kind of fallibilism that maintains the possibility that I may be mistaken, that there are people who may disagree with my position and who should be listened to. Even in the absence of such a present disagreement the ellipses that necessarily accompany claims made in any democracy worthy of the name leave those claims open to the vulnerability of future objections not yet imaginable. If a universal truth leaves little room for negotiation, democratic fallibilism opens itself up to endless negotiations.

It is this fallibilistic attitude of democracy that needs to be defended from the Platonist dream of universal validity. By encouraging this fallibilism democracy acknowledges the context-bound nature of our claims and in doing so keeps open the spaces of pluralism that a universal validity attempts to close off. If one takes seriously the fact of pluralism, that people have irreconcilable notions of what constitutes the Good, then one has to accept that different communities will come up with very different answers to questions such as what is a just society? What laws should we adopt? Certainty of a truth that has universal validity leaves little room for the kind of democratic negotiations that such pluralism requires.

Of course the philosopher could respond to this and say, "well so much the worse for pluralism and democratic negotiations. Even though there may be many communities within a democracy with all sorts of different opinions about the good, the universal validity of my claim is community-transcending and therefore has a certain authority their claims lack". But what exactly does the philosopher mean when she says that her claims are "community-transcending"? What kind of claim is being made? It seems to me that what the philosopher means here is that the claims she is making are not simply compelling to those who are part of her particular historical or cultural community but are compelling to members of *any* community. That is to say, she supposes that the claims

[50] Cited by Rorty in 'Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude' in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Uiversity Press, 2007), p.84.

she is making can be successfully defended and justified to all comers. But how does the philosopher *know* this? Of course she can try and maybe she can, but how is she able to claim this in advance? As Richard Rorty notes, this would be like the village champion claiming he can beat the world champion.[51] The only way that the philosopher's claim could be made is to suppose that there is some neutral sphere containing the correct standards of argumentation and a shared criterion of evaluation that would reveal the objective truth to all concerned.

But rooted as we are inside the values, opinions and conventions of our own communities - communities which not only constitute our sense of self, but are constituted precisely through the exclusion of those who do not share such values and conventions - the neutral standpoint existing outside the practices of a particular community required by the philosopher is simply impossible. As Wittgenstein pointed out agreements in matters of what is true and false presuppose a number of agreements in forms of life.[52] The mistake of the philosopher is to believe she can leave the cave and return with context-transcending truths that would be accorded universal validity from within a particular context.

The lesson the philosopher should draw from this is, as Rorty says, to 'lower our standards from the unconditional above to the community around us'.[53] In doing so philosophy has to give up its inflated sense of authority and enter the struggles and negotiations of democratic politics. While the philosopher may still attempt to convince all of the rightness of her vision, the price of entry is the acceptance of the outcome of those struggles. That is to say, whatever knowledge the philosopher claims to have, it must remain vulnerable to defeat at the hands of the democratic will. For in the absence of a context-transcending truth, it is only the latter that can confirm legitimacy of a particular policy, law or set of arrangements. While the Platonist approaches the demos with the attitude that at the end of persuasion comes the imposition of Reason, following

[51] Rorty, 'Universality and Truth' in (ed) Robert B Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics* (oxford: Blackwell, 200), p.6
[52] Ludwig Wittgenstein,. *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) I.241.
[53] Ibid., p.77

Wittgenstein we can say that in a democratic politics 'At the end of reasons comes persuasion'[54]

III. Democratic Autoimmunization.

But is the price of entry too high to pay even for the democrat? If lowering our aspirations from the unconditional to the conditional, from universally validity to persuasive particularity avoids the kind of authoritarian over-ruling of democratic will that Sorell insisted upon, doesn't this contingency of democracy, the necessary ellipses that accompany all my claims, not only lead to a relativism in which democratic politics is no more justifiable than totalitarian politics, but an openness in which democracy becomes vulnerable to a totalitarian politics?

This openness is something Plato draws attention to. In a democracy, observes Plato, individuals are granted the freedom to arrange their lives as they choose and therefore one finds a greater variety of people there than anywhere else. With the freedom and 'diversity of its characters' democracy, 'like the different colours in a patterned dress',[55] weaves itself into a infinite variety of models and multicoloured patterns, such that 'it contains every possible type [of constitution]'[56]. Thus democracy according to Plato does not refer to the substantial content of a particular paradigm that closes itself off around some essence, but to the opening of a freedom and diversity. This is not simply the freedom *of* democracy but a freedom *in the concept* of democracy – a concept without a decidable essence and therefore irreducibly open. As Derrida says, this freedom presupposes

[54] Cited in Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 98
[55] Plato, *The Republic*, 9.8.6 – 557*c*
[56] Ibid, 557*d*

> An opening of indetermination and undecidability *in the very concept* of democracy…in the interpretation of the democratic…[that] takes into account, the empty opening of a *future of the very concept*.[57]

Defined by this indetermination and undecidability, by the empting out of any essence and the lack of any proper ideal or eidos, democracy can never be grounded; one must always leave three dots at the end. This is indeed 'the theatre of an uncontrollable adventure' referred to by Lefort.[58] But while this uncontrollability makes possible the kind of pluralism the democrat welcomes, it also opens it up to the kind of politics that would put an end to it. This has always been the question for democracy – it always risks handing power to those who are not friends of democracy. 'The *alternative to* democracy', writes Derrida, 'can always be represented as a democratic *alternation*'.[59]The democratic rise of totalitarian regimes in the past, the recent rise of the far right across Europe and the gains for the BNP here in England, are not a going wrong of democracy; this is constitutive of the very openness and freedom of democracy.

In the absence of any authority that could impose wisdom and constraint from without, the adventure and freedom of democracy, its 'anarchic form'[60] and 'excessive desire for liberty'[61] remains vulnerable to the uncontrollable licence of tyrannical bloodletting, executions and the murdering of one's enemies so vividly described by Plato.[62] In less colourful language we could say that confined to the contingency of persuasion, when faced with the possibility of the democratic rise of an anti-democratic party the democrat remains impotently context-bound and democracy therefore constitutively vulnerable to this death at its own hands. As Derrida succinctly puts it, 'Democracy has always been suicidal'.[63] Thus while democracy may well begin as Lefort's uncontrollable adventure, what's to stop the uncontrollable will of the people descending into Plato's all too familiar nightmare?

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[57] Derrida, *Rogues*, p.25
[58] Cited by Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, p. 51
[59] Derrida, *Rogues*, p.30.
[60] Plato, *The Republic*, 9.8.6 – 558*b*
[61] Ibid., 9.8.8 – 562*c*
[62] Ibid., 9.8.8 – 566*a*
[63] Derrida,.*Rogues* p.34

This is a familiar problem for democracy. In addressing this problem Chantal Mouffe offers the following response:

> I do not believe that a democratic pluralist politics should consider as legitimate all the demands formulated in a given society. The pluralism that I advocate requires discriminating between demands which are to be accepted as part of the [democratic] debate and those which are to be excluded…The approach doesn't not pretend to encompass all differences and to overcome all forms of exclusions. But exclusions are envisaged in political…terms.[64]

Mouffe's response seems to me the kind of move most democrats would make. What Mouffe is insisting upon here is a process of immunisation that would protect democracy from being undermined by outside threats. Democracy can only be protected by this non-democratic move of political exclusion thereby injuring itself in the process of trying to protect itself – a process Derrida analyses in *Rogues* under the term autoimmunisation.

This opens up huge questions. If candidates are elected by the will of the people in free and fair elections, then by what authority can one intervene in such a democratic process? This is not a mere academic exercise. If one is a committed democrat then shouldn't one accept whatever the people decide, whether they choose to elect a Pinochet government or a Le Pen government? How are we to respond to the democratic victories of Sinn Fein or Hamas? In the latter case the sanctions placed on the democratically elected Hamas government by other democratic states would seem to be indirect intervention aimed at reversing popular decision-making. In *Rogues* Derrida describes the more explicit example of how in 1992 the Algerian government interrupted a democratic electoral process, without the consent of the majority of its people, because as he explains

> they feared it would lead democratically to the end of democracy. Thus they preferred to end it themselves. They decided in a sovereign fashion to suspend, at least provisionally, democracy *for its own good*…so as to immunize it against a much worse and very likely result.[65]

[64] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 120.
[65] Derrida, *Rogues*, p,33.

This democratic autoimmunity seems to open up the way for constraining the will of the people, of going against the *demos*. Indeed not only does it open up this possibility but it seems that there may be occasions when democracy itself demands it. But what authority sanctions this sovereign fixing of the democratic debate? To appeal to the idea of democracy seems to beg the question because that is precisely what the democratic debate is engaging in establishing. Democracy is never a concept with a decidable essence that one can authoritatively invoke – one always has to add three dots at the end of whatever interpretation one gives of the concept of democracy. The temptation of course is to invoke the philosophical certainty of rightness in order to validate such a move. The people must will what is right and they simply got wrong. But having outlined the kind of commitments to context-transcending truths this would seem to imply, and the problems these involve, such a move is one I am reluctant to make. I am in agreement with Rorty when he says 'we philosophers who are concerned with democratic politics should leave truth alone'[66]

While I want to resist the Sorellian move of constraining popular will based on notions of Truth, this autoimmunisation of democracy makes political sense for if the popular will of democratic decision-making is to remain an open possibility then certain institutions must remain, in the words of Walzer, 'indestructible'[67]. Therefore limitations and exclusions are required. That is to say one must prevent certain decisions being made and therefore democratic autoimmunity is impossible to avoid. However by insisting on the need to rule certain possibilities and decisions out, and conceiving of such a move against popular decision-making in political not epistemic terms, one hopefully avoids the charges of relativistic impotence on one hand, and the dangers of an uncompromising absolutism on the other.

[66] Rorty Universality and Truth' in (ed) Robert B Brandom, *Rorty and His Critics* (oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.9

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[67] Walzer, *Philosophy and Democracy*, p.384.