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2016

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Mortal Democracy

Confronting Death in Political Life

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Political Science

by

Elizabeth Brandon Barringer

2016

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2016

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Mortal Democracy

Confronting Death in Political Life

by

Elizabeth Brandon Barringer

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Joshua F. Dienstag, Chair

Within liberal political theory there is a general sense that death's meaning should be kept strictly private, 'quarantined' from political life; yet whether we are comfortable with the idea or not, attitudes about death powerfully shape how individuals engage in political relationships and practices. *Mortal Democracy* thus provides a way of acknowledging death directly as a part of contemporary political life, one amenable to democratic practices. I develop three distinct political accounts of death and its political meaning from Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, and Hannah Arendt; each read alongside an interlocutor from ancient Greek thought. The first chapter "The Wisdom of Silenus: Friedrich Nietzsche and The Politics of Death" develops a Nietzschean adaptation of Homeric "beautiful death," where persons are *capable* of transforming the contingent, painful experiences of death into moments of enacted personal or shared value. The second chapter, "A Vocation Unto Death: Max Weber, Modernity & Soldierly Politics" examines Weber's turn towards an absolutist soldierly model of meaningful death as a part of

modern political life. I argue this view of death artificially suppresses the grounds of democratic compromise and amplifies extremist political conviction; a point I demonstrate by juxtaposition with the Periklean Funeral Oration from Thucydides. Chapter 3, titled “Death on the Stage: Hannah Arendt and the Disappearances of Death,” develops an account of death alongside Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where death “appears” as an absence subject to plural interpretations and narratives, yet retains a fundamentally hidden, private aspect. In the final chapter, “Mortal Ignorance: Socrates’ Apology for Death,” I develop a political orientation towards death through a critical reading of Plato’s *Apology*. I argue that death’s plural and contested meanings need not be quarantined from public life, but rather the polity can inoculate against death’s excesses through a deliberately inclusive, open-ended, orientation towards death that takes its structure from the *aporia* at the heart of Socrates defense: mortal ignorance. I argue this perspective provides a critical vantage point from which we might acknowledge death’s plural, contested place as a part of democratic political life. Doing so, we stand to more fully recognize the variety of perspectives and capacities we have before death. We also gain powerful tools for resisting those extremist and violent politics which have traditionally leveraged death’s meaning for political ends, and which pose an increasing threat to democratic political practices in our contemporary world.

The dissertation of Elizabeth Brandon Barringer is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2016

For my mother, Mary Lee Hearne Barringer, in memoriam.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

To my committee, for their considerable good humor and unflagging support, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. Kirstie McClure, John McCumber, and Giulia Sissa have all shaped this work in ways too numerous to count, and I am deeply grateful for their thoughtful criticism, generosity, and advice. I owe a special word of thanks to my advisor and chair, Joshua Dienstag, who has been a tireless source of guidance and encouragement since I first arrived at UCLA. I have learned more from him than I can adequately convey, and I am grateful for our many conversations. I was first introduced to political theory as an undergraduate by Simon Stow, whose skill and humor in the classroom remains an inspiration. Finally, this project originated in a conversation with Victor Wolfenstein. He is greatly missed.

While completing this project, I have been grateful for the financial support of the Edwin W. Pauley Fellowship, the UCLA Department of Political Science, and the Dissertation Year Fellowship of the UCLA Graduate Division.

To my friends, fellow theorists, writers and co-conspirators: I cannot think of better company, or a group of people I admire more. For their willingness to share their time and talents as readers, critics, and commiserating souls, special thanks go to Liz Ballou, Arash Davari, Carol M. Dingman, Megan Gallagher, Stacey Greene, Emily Hallock, Aaron Hess, Jeff Jackson, Anita Kellog, Allison Lindell, Rob Schrode, Althea Sircar, and Lucy Williams.

To my family, who supported me *even though* it meant moving to Los Angeles, and most of all to Ben: your love and faith in me has carried me through.

VITA.

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Mortal Democracy: Confronting Death in Political Life

Introduction: The Denial of Death

“Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return.”

—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

How can democratic politics better accommodate death? The fact of human mortality has featured heavily in political thought since classical times, yet among liberal democratic theory and discourse there nonetheless seems to be a general sense that the practices, customs, and institutional responses to death should be kept ‘quarantined’ from political life and contestation—either from a desire to separate deeply felt convictions from the application of state power; or, alternatively, because of a belief that the rational, instrumental bargaining of politics should be kept clear of matters pertaining to individual conscience.¹ Instead, death is understood a medical, material, or ontological fact, one to be bracketed from political life. Death in this sense is an event to be secured against for the sake of “commodious living;” its meaning to be determined by individuals in private discourses, preserved within the neutral framework

¹ The language of “quarantine” is Stephen K. White’s, referring to liberal theorists’ desire to avoid depth experience, including near death experiences, and the ways these might be brought into liberal polities via a productive ethic. See, Stephen K. White, “Fullness and Dearth: Depth Experience and Democratic Life.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 4 (2010), 800-816. John Seery points to several factors that might contribute to this avoidance of death in public life, including the narrative of state neutrality on issues of substantive value for individual happiness and conscience; the historical need for a “deathless sovereign” state (in keeping with Kantorowicz’s argument about the “two bodies” of the king); and the cultural movement towards a commoditization of death rituals, as death and dying have become increasingly “privatized” in the 20th Century, even within domestic spaces. See, John Seery, *Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 26-7; Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A study in Medieval Political Theory* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957); on this avoidance in culture more broadly, see also Jessica Mitford, *the American Way of Death*, (Vintage Books, 1998); and Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

made possible by the security of the state, and the ongoing life of the polity as a whole.² As John Seery puts it, “death is politically out of bounds. Death is now construed as power’s limit; it is deemed a *private* matter, a secret aspect of an individual’s existence.”³

I argue here that avoiding political discussions of death bears the risk of encouraging other, less ethically suited framings of the meaning of life and death to enter into political discourse by default.⁴ Absolutist moral and religious codes, for instance, or a totalizing political identity and project may provide ways of framing and making death meaningful for individuals or groups—innocently or as a result of a deliberate political objective—yet these have historically provided the basis for a very dangerous sort of politics.⁵ If, as George Kateb suggests, we “crave” meaning out of our political institutions and our political identities, it bears asking in what ways the need to make death meaningful might not also seep into political life unannounced and unlooked for. Excluding political considerations of death’s meaning from public discourse therefore leaves us more vulnerable to the dangerous excesses of fascist or violent

² The language of “commodious living” is Hobbes, but similar arguments about securing physical safety and exercising *power* over death, but not its *meaning*, are present in ‘liberal’ formulations from Locke to Schmitt.

³ John Seery, *Political Theory for Mortals*, 19. The denial of death parallels a broader cultural shift in how death is understood and ritually treated. For instance, in the last fifty years there has been a trend away from visiting tombs or monuments to the dead, with more personalized responses taking the place of this old, communal practice. S.C. Humphries notes that “one of the probable reasons seems to me to be the reluctance to associate commemorative thought with anything as clearly linked to the *idea* of death as a tomb or cemetery. The attempt to avoid or deny the existence of death by no means implies a lack of concern with the memory of the dead.” See S. C. Humphries, *The Family, Women, and Death: Comparative Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 160-1.

⁴ My concern here parallels George Kateb’s concerns with aesthetic politics, in that making death meaningful (or finding means of avoiding this confrontation) can provoke a similar set of cravings for meaning or security—cravings which, according to Kateb, we cannot help but try to fill. I discuss this point in Chapter 2. See George Kateb, “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility.” *Political Theory*, Vol. 28, 5 (2000), 5-37.

⁵ The experience of fascist and totalitarian projects of the twentieth century in particular flavors cold war liberalism with deep undercurrent of distrust for politics that make claims to fulfill human destinies or provide ultimate meaning for life (or death) that carries out into liberal and libertarian thought today. See for instance Judith Shklar’s discussion of Romanticism in *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1969); or Jan-Werner Muller’s analysis of Berlin, Aron, and Popper in “Fear and Freedom: On ‘Cold War Liberalism’” *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol 7, No. 1 (2008), 45-64.

politics which have historically attempted to meet the challenge of meaningful death for their adherents.

In light of these concerns, *Mortal Democracy* argues for a more robust political vocabulary of death, one that can enable a more textured and nuanced grasp of death's significance as a part of political life, for good or evil. I am interested here in death's powerful political potential to draw lines of symbolic and enacted political commonality, but also the ways death generates distinction, domination, and division between individuals and groups. In this dissertation I therefore ask how we might better understand the competing political claims and significations attached to death, and what resources for democratic political practice and theorizing a deeper engagement with death might provide. By way of response, I look to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, and Hannah Arendt; each paired with a classical interlocutor. Within this dialogue between ancient and modern thinkers I argue we can find rich and productive ways of thinking through death's place as a part of contemporary political life, ways that might enable us to more fully enact democratic ends.

My ultimate concern is not merely to enrich modern conversations about death, however, but also to provide a means of accommodating these competing accounts within democratic politics. What is needed is an orientation towards death that does not attempt to close off death's meaning in any final or concrete sense, but rather leaves the question of death's meaning and place in political life undetermined. Thus in the final part of this dissertation I develop a political orientation towards death and its meaning through a reading of Plato's *Apology*. I argue that an orientation based in Socratic, mortal ignorance can provide a means for accommodating considerations of death into political life that is open but critical; one which directs our attention towards fundamental, contested questions of how we should live.

While my concerns in this project are theoretical, the stakes are practical. In recent years death has become an increasingly prominent part of the global political landscape. Massive international refugee crises, ongoing wars with extensive civilian and military casualties, and extensive political violence in the form of terror and political insurgence give shape to the modern, global world. In the United States, movements like *Black Lives Matter* call attention to the ways that the political appearances of death—or more accurately, the political invisibility of some deaths, or the official blindness to specific mortal disappearances— demand ways of theorizing the competing political narratives that ascribe meaning to death; narratives which can affirm or deny a person’s capacities as a political actor, their status as a subject, or more profoundly, their humanity. I argue here that a richer political vocabulary of death can provide important theoretical resources for understanding these contemporary movements and events. Further, by critically and openly accommodating death as a part of political life and discourse we stand to gain new ways of mobilizing political relationships, and to recover political capacities that might otherwise go overlooked.

As a central feature of human experience, it bears asking if by avoiding death we might not be condemning ourselves to a shallower notion of political life, one that does not offer any way to have a stance towards death that is recognized as politically productive or meaningful. After all, attempts to marginalize death from political life do not prevent it from playing an important, even foundational role shaping the horizons and patterns of contemporary political practice. A “denial of death” to borrow James Baldwin’s phrase, may underlie and structure our political relationships within the architecture of the state. But our understanding of death also shapes our relationships with others, driving distinctions and fissures in the political life of a polity, or underlying demands for conformity to unified vision of political life that suppresses

difference in the name of the mortal preservation of the political body as a whole.⁶ Foucault thus comments on the reluctance to speak of death under the modern liberal state, “that death is so carefully evaded is linked less to a new anxiety which makes death unbearable for our societies than to the fact that the procedures of power have not ceased to turn away from death.”⁷

I therefore turn to Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt, and ultimately, the figure of Socrates, *not* to try and supply a singular, coherent understanding of death—arguably impossible, and certainly morally suspect. Rather, these theorists offer distinctive ways for understanding how a richer vocabulary of death as part of politics is both relevant and important for thinking through the kinds of practical political problems confronting the modern (and post modern) era. It may seem strange to think of these three figures as theorists of death, as all are in some respect theorists of *life*. Nietzsche famously condemns western religion and philosophy for its corruption of the vitality of European culture; Weber offers several baleful meditations on the meaning of life in a modern, disenchanted age; and Arendt is, if anything, a theorist of natality and new beginnings. Part of the work in what follows will thus be to bring forward less-well known dimensions of their thought: their accounts of human mortality as it relates to politics.⁸

As a means of bringing this element to the fore, and of critically engaging with these diverse accounts of death as they relate to democratic politics, I read these three authors alongside a common historical counter example: Ancient Greece, and more specifically Athens.

⁶ As Baldwin notes in the passage I have chosen as an epitaph here, the price of preserving the illusion of deathless existence has historically been exacted through national projects, colonial violence, and racial conquest; violent death and corporeal violence is offset onto other populations, so the illusion of invulnerability and security may be preserved. See, James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Right of Death and Power Over Life” in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 138.

⁸ Arendt is the major exception here, as a quite a bit of attention has been given to her understanding of mortality, immortality and politics. See in particular George Kateb’s *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), and John McCumber, “Activity and Mortality: Hannah Arendt,” in *Time and Philosophy*. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2011), 201-224.

The Athenian notion of democratic citizenship is highly attuned to death as an active, productive part of political life, culture, and civic engagement. Athens also occupies an important theoretical place in the tradition of thought that Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt engage with (and against.) It is my intention that the distance between these classical accounts and those of my primary authors will generate a productive dissonance, and perhaps occasionally surprising (if also uncomfortable) similarities. As briefly mentioned above, in keeping with this ancients/moderns dialogue I anchor these classical investigations in a reading of Plato's *Apology*. My interest specifically rests in the ways that Socrates positions his defense within an aporetic statement of thoroughgoing *mortal ignorance*; an orientation which, I argue, provides an example of how death might be more openly, but critically, accommodated within democratic political life. I outline these conclusions, and provide a brief overview of these chapters, below.

I. Tragedy, Loss, and Theorizing Death

There is a vast literature on the subject of death, spanning philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology—to only name a few fields.⁹ While I cannot do justice here to this literature as a whole, several vibrant bodies of work in political theory have emerged in the past decade that deal with mortality and the human experience of death—including political theories of tragedy, political uncertainty, and politics of loss and mourning.¹⁰ *Mortal Democracy*

⁹ For a concise, erudite review of the treatment of death in the academy more broadly, see John Seery's *Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death*, 20-31. Seery's project shares with mine the observation that death remains broadly overlooked in liberal theory, as well as much of political theory more broadly. However, his interest is with a theory of "Plutonic justice" derived through literary excursions into death, rather than a more general interest in developing a richer political vocabulary of death as I undertake here. I also come to a different conclusion than Seery regarding Hannah Arendt, who he sees as wishing to exclude mortality from politics entirely (see pages 6-20 in his book) where I find her understanding of mortality to situate her politics in powerful ways. I argue this point in Chapter 3.

¹⁰ I do not consider in any depth the large body of work on bio-politics, one field that helps illustrate the difficulty of trying to keep death out of politics (although in different terms—primarily liberalism's treatment of "bare" death, while refusing to touch any qualified notion of death outside of military memorial, which is oddly naturalized, and neutralized, as a result. Theorists of politics and loss such as Judith Butler, (taken up below) help to bridge the divide between my concerns and those of this body of work. See, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and*

responds to these bodies of work in two major ways, which I have organized here into two broad “strands” of political thought.

The first strand turns on interrelated questions concerning human vulnerability, loss, and mortality, and the resources (or lack thereof) these might provide for politics. Within this strand of theory death and mortality have been recognized as deeply significant for political experience. At the same time, however, in this work death is frequently treated as pre-political or post-political phenomena. Alternatively, death is the *occasion* for grief and mourning, *events* that are more centrally given pride of place as matters of political concern, while death itself remains a non-political occurrence. While this project takes much from these calls to acknowledge death as productive for political life and ethics, by its very design this project resists efforts to define death in a pre-political, transcendental way. I therefore build on the insights of a robust critical literature that responds critically to these mortalist attempts. I do not have the same goals as many of these accounts—I do not attempt here to develop an alternative humanism or expansive democratic ethic, for instance, as many of these accounts are concerned to do—rather my concern is to articulate and develop a more variegated and textured understanding of death as a part of political life.

The second strand deals with political responses to ethical and political uncertainty, incommensurable conflict and loss. For many, these questions are animated by an increased attention to the limits of optimistic reason in politics, and the attendant call for some other means of navigating ‘the world as we find it.’ Death makes this set of concerns personal, urgent, and constant; yet is itself not often considered as a relevant subject of explicitly political contestation and meaning; instead it is understood as a more universal limit that calls optimism and the

Violence; and Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso Books 2010); also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998).

powers of reason into question. I therefore argue here that a more variegated understanding of death offers a valuable means for examining the kinds of pressures and risks that attend political “thinking without bannisters.”¹¹

I proceed here by considering these two broad strands of thought, and outlining the theoretical intervention this project makes in each, before turning to the specific contents of this dissertation and its chapters. I have presented these strands as distinct, however their concerns do intersect and overlap. Each, for instance, makes extensive use of tragedy or a tragic world-view. With respect to the first strand of concerns, tragedy—particularly ancient Greek tragedy—has gained increasing attention as a source of ethical and philosophical insight. The historical and cultural remoteness of classical tragedies and the world they engage are leveraged as valuable sources of illumination for modern dilemmas. Similarly, as a literary form, tragedy is thought to provide formal structures and framings that can be productively put to work for contemporary theorizing. In keeping with the second strand of questions I discuss, tragedy has also been taken up as representing a specific worldview (“the tragic”) where the constraints on human agency, our vulnerability to contingent and conditioned actions, and the limits of philosophical reason are laid bare. As we will see, these two different engagements with tragedy—directly or indirectly—serve as a useful means of understanding a larger, if at times divisive, conversation of death.¹²

II. Mourning, Loss, and Mortal Vulnerability.

¹¹ The phrase is Hannah Arendt’s, recently adopted by Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Bannister in the 20th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹² In making this distinction I follow J. G. Finlayson’s distinction, where tragedy is a condition (the tragic), or where tragedy is understood as a response to a condition (tragedy—as a form of literature that offers some resources for working through, reacting, or surviving what is produced by “the tragic”). The degree to which “a tragedy” fully acknowledges “the tragic” is also taken by some scholars as a way to evaluate a “true” tragedy from modern, weak imitations of its form. See on this point Simon Goldhill, “Generalizing about Tragedy” in Rita Felski (ed), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore, John’s Hopkin’s University Press 2008), 45-65; J. G. Finlayson, “Conflict and Reconciliation in Hegel’s Theory of the Tragic” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 37, No. 3, July (1999), 493-520.

In recent years political theorists of tragedy, mourning and loss, as critics and as supporters of liberal paradigms, have turned to mortality as a resource for political thought. These theorists of “the politics of mourning”¹³ investigate questions of what political role the experiences of grief and loss might play establishing a more democratic politics. Their positions may be organized as falling along a spectrum running between three basic positions. The first finds in the experience of loss and the example of tragedy the basis for some kind of universal, anti- or pre-political ethic that can overcome superficial differences of nation or creed; the second generally finds in loss and mourning a parallel potential for *political* division and disagreement. Other theorists mediate between these, finding in the practices of mourning a unique chance for a public working-through of common experiences of loss while remaining open to difference; or, alternatively, a space of criticism and resistance to dominant political traditions.¹⁴

Theorists such as Judith Butler, Simon Critchley, and Stephen K. White, for instance, turn towards mortality and finitude as the basis for an expansive “ethical turn,” one aimed at supplementing democratic politics for the sake of a more generous orientation towards others

¹³ The phrase “the politics of mourning” titles a book featuring an afterword by Judith Butler arguing for the political potential of grief; I use it here—as others have—to refer more generally to a recent interest in political theory of grief, loss, and memorial; though this is also sometimes referred to as “the politics of loss” or “the politics of lamentation.” Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?” (Afterword) in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (ed), *The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Distinct from traditional understandings of humanism that appealed to the faculty of reason as a universal standard for inclusion or political commonality, for “mortal humanists” it is vulnerability towards each other (emotional and physical) and ultimately to death, that unites us. Honig identifies Judith Butler, Victoria Whol, Nicole Loraux, Gloria Fisk, and David Scott as representative of this particular view. See Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism.” *New Literary History*, Vol. 41. No. 1. (2010), 4-5; critics of this view include Ella Meyers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham: Duke University Press 2013); George Shulman, “Acknowledgement and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics” *Theory and Event*, Vol. 14 Issue 1 (2011); and Simon Stow, “Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism and Public Mourning” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 101, No. 2 (May 2007), 195-208.

and their political worth; or, for fostering new understanding of “moralist humanism.”¹⁵ Often framed with reference to the works of Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt—authors used to theorize the extreme acts of sovereign exceptionalism that have so far defined the twenty-first century—these accounts respond to urgent questions of violent nationalism and political extremism.

Through a sustained focus on humanity’s essential vulnerability towards death, and the mutual interdependence this vulnerability signifies, these accounts seek to disrupt the inevitable, violent and reactive logic of “sovereignist” political thought, and foster democratic alternatives.¹⁶ As Butler puts it, the experience of mortal vulnerability need not provoke aggression, but might instead instigate a re-imagining of a global community founded in an awareness of our mutual interdependence and connection. She notes that “our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted in the recognition that radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part, that no final control can be secured, and that final control is not, cannot be, an ultimate value.”¹⁷

Many of these accounts, including Butler’s, find resources for theorizing mortality, contingency and vulnerability in Greek tragedy. Indeed, a vibrant literature in political theory has emerged in the last several years around the reception of classical political literature and theory and its use for rethinking contemporary democratic political problems. At the heart of these

¹⁵ For a preliminary survey of exemplary discussions, however, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, and, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*; Simon Critchley, *Very Little, Almost Nothing* (Routledge, London 1997); Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009).

¹⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiii.

efforts has been a robust literature in classics which over the last three decades has made remarkable gains in uncovering the daily practices and beliefs of ancient Greek and Athenian life.¹⁸ This project of recovery has been tied to a parallel effort on the part of contemporary political theorists interested in democratic politics in the modern era. Scholars such as J. Peter Euben, Josiah Ober, Sarah Monoson, Arlene Saxonhouse, and Giulia Sissa argue powerfully for the capacity of classical political thought to provide resources for contemporary political thinking that are unencumbered by the weight of modern assumptions, or which might unsettle modern conventions.

Greek tragedy and the conventions of the tragic theater have become a central site for this project of critical recovery—though not without controversy. Since the 1960s, the viability of utilizing Greek tragedy to make sense of contemporary politics has been the subject of an ongoing conversation.¹⁹ For critics, looking back to the ancients is nostalgic at best, dangerously misguided at worst. Reasons for this abound: the differences in social scale, the complexity and constitution of polities ancient and modern, and fundamentally distinct philosophical assumptions—all of which purportedly prohibit us from accessing the “meaning” of tragedy from a modern position. In opposition to this view, others find in classical tragedy an important resource for a range of contemporary ethical and political problems *because* of its distance from modern political and ethical ways of thinking. Yet even among those who turn to tragedy for modern purposes, there remains broad disagreement over its significance or legitimate use.

¹⁸ For an overview of this literature see Kurt. A. Raaflaub, Josiah Ober, and Robert Wallace (eds) *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008); for an example of this work in modern reception studies, see J. Peter Euben, John E. Wallach, and Josiah Ober, *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1994).

¹⁹ For an extended discussion on this point, and a well articulated counter-argument, see the collection edited by Josiah Ober and Charles Hendrick, *Demokratia: A Conversation Ancient and Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); For more general discussions of the relationship between ancients and moderns, see the introduction in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

One of the central points of contention in this debate has to do with the meaning and value of death. Critic George Steiner has argued, for instance, that the “absolute tragedy” of the Greeks is premised on the fundamental recognition of an ur-myth of original sin, an abandonment by god(s), or an ontological estrangement from the world. He finds this articulated in the Theogenic myth of Silenus. This story provides a maxim, situated at the heart of attic tragedy, that the ‘best thing for mankind is to have never been born, second best to die, soon.’²⁰ This *absolute* pessimism, for Steiner, makes “the tragic,” when properly understood, inaccessible to our modern sensibilities. As Rita Felksi points out, by Steiner’s view, many of the tragedies of Shakespeare do not qualify as “real,” as they are “too hopeful.”²¹ Steiner’s view rests on the contention that the historical distance—culturally, philosophically, and politically—between ancient Greece and modernity is too vast to cross. Any attempt to use tragedy to address modern problems must therefore either rest on a basic misunderstanding of tragedy, or of our modern condition.²²

Yet even if the gulf between ancients and moderns is too vast to cross, an engagement with the past can nonetheless be accomplished in a historically mediated, productive way. J. Peter Euben, and Bernard Williams, by way of Nietzsche, have done much to leverage a classical

²⁰ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1961). This formulation is classically known as the “Wisdom of Silenus” and it appears throughout major Greek texts of the fourth and fifth Century, BCE. See for instance Herodotus’s account of Cleobis and Biton [*The Landmark Herodotus*, trans. A. Purvis (New York: Anchor Books, 2009) 1.31.3, 20.] Alternatively, the choral ode from Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* (later quoted by Arendt in *On Revolution*): “Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best; but when a man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came.” Sophocles. *The Oedipus at Colonus of Sophocles*. Edited with introduction and notes by Sir Richard Jebb. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1889) ln.1225. The sentiment is also repeated in Pindar, Aristotle, and Euripides. For these references, see Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Penguin Books, London 1992), 281-7.

²¹ Rita Felksi (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 2008), 4; also, in the same volume, see Steiner, “Tragedy Reconsidered,” 31-2.

²² Steiner, “Tragedy Reconsidered,” 29-32. Contemporary theorists of uncertainty and pessimism, taken up in the second “strand” below, might be understood as actively turning to tragedy precisely *because* of this absolute pessimism and the worldview it entails.

past for contemporary questions.²³ What is valuable in an engagement with the world of Homer, Perikles, or Sophocles, these authors suggest, is precisely the strangeness of ancient life, and its distance from current ways of being. Equally valuable are the startling, unsettling similarities that force a reconsideration of modern, settled political assumptions about what is politically good, normal, or natural. Rather than seeing the distance between past and present as problematic, these theorists embrace the value of “untimely meditations” on the Greeks and ancient tragedy as not only viable, but particularly well suited to meet the specific demands of political thought in the modern and post-modern age; thinking which (as I will discuss in more detail below) no longer has recourse to comforting myths of historical progress, and given foundational values.

In the wake of the political and military horrors of the twentieth, and now twenty-first century, there has been an increased call for new ways to frame our political and ethical relations to other human beings, and the suffering these relations inevitably provoke. By presenting clear, powerful (sometimes, beautiful) illustrations of human suffering in the face of political loss, contingency, or finitude, tragedy provides an alternative framing for ethical relationships that does not rely on universal appeals to the human capacity to reason. Through tragedy, or the tragic confrontations with mortality and contingency found in Homer and classical thought, contemporary theorists seek a means of re-imagining our political community in radically democratic ways that have shaken loose contemporary assumptions about how we *must* act politically in response to terror, social or economic disruption, or existential threat.

²³ See Peter Euben’s discussion of “untimeliness” in his book, *Platonic Noise*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 9; or Bernard Williams’s discussion of the value of classical thought, specifically as a historically grounded and *not* as a ‘timeless’ or universal enterprise, for ethical thinking today. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 1-20.

Judith Butler's book *Precarious Life* is exemplary of this, where she argues for a reconsideration of our politics from the perspective of mutual vulnerability as mortals and dependency on "the other." Butler finds that dwelling in our vulnerability, and the disorienting ways that grief can cause us to 'lose ourselves' may provide the basis for a deeply democratic ethic of sympathy for others; something akin to Schopenhauer's claim that if we thought of ourselves as "fellow sufferers," we might at least start from a position of understanding towards strangers, rather than suspicious disdain or crudely nationalistic pride.²⁴ This argument not only critiques the aggressively patriotic quality of post 9-11 politics in the American context, but also indicates the impossibility of any political attempt at "final control" of physical, social, or emotional security.²⁵

Other theorists have sought similarly "humanist," democratic ethics in the fact of mortality, particularly as presented through tragedy and other classical works. Stephen White thus looks to the *Iliad* as a means of finding a 'weak ontological' ethos of community grounded in the common fact of mortality.²⁶ In the final, mortal confrontation between Priam and Achilles White finds an example of an epistemological vantage that might promote a more generous and "capacious" ethic, one where "connectedness comes to life [...] through a cultivation of the *experience* of common *subjection*" to death; an ethos that might be brought about through a deliberate, "vivified consciousness of mortality."²⁷ Similarly, in her later work Nicole Loraux

²⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969). Hobbes' famous take on the fear of death requiring an absolute sovereign and a deep skepticism of democratic politics provides a useful counter-position to this, as do the deep, ontological divisions related to death in politics, as articulated by Schmitt. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiii, 19-23. For a recent critical, but generally sympathetic engagement with Butler's argument, see also David W. McIvor "Bringing ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and the Politics of Mourning." *Political Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2012), 409-436.

²⁶ Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*, 2-4.

²⁷ *ibid*, 75-6.

finds in the grieving, wordless laments of tragedy, “an ‘anti-politics’ that points beyond [the divisions of the political world]” and to an “entirely a-political body known as the human race or, to give it a tragic name, ‘the race of mortals.’”²⁸

Finding in tragedy a deeply anti-political impulse that pushes us *beyond* politics to universal, yet individuated, cries of suffering, this position sets humanity’s common finitude as the basis for a fundamental, all encompassing *ethic*. The underlying assumption in these accounts is that unity born out of grief or suffering can move individuals to pre-political orientations or anti-political recognition of the common humanity of others.

These accounts powerfully articulate the ways death is capable of transforming and shaping the ethical and epistemological orientations of individuals towards each other, and towards the world. In this respect, *Mortal Democracy* shares with these theorists an interest in the transformative potential that an acknowledgment of death can have for structuring political communities and relationships. Yet while many of these accounts acknowledge that mortality can produce politically valuable conditions and experiences, they nonetheless keep death and its meaning marginal to actual political discourse. Instead, political attention is primarily directed at those moments which are *produced* by death—the rituals of mourning, or the performance and mutual experience of a shared, human loss; a deeper ontological sense of ethical contingency, vulnerability, and fragility which mortality indicates; or an interrogation of the expressions of sovereign power and national identity found in the political treatment of the dead.²⁹ Death itself,

²⁸ Nicole Loraux in Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws,” 6-7.

²⁹ There is a thriving literature on these subjects. Representative works include Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4:1 (2003), 9-37; Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002); Victoria Wohl, “Tragedy and Feminism” in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca W. Bushnell (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 158–59; and Simon Stow, “Agonistic Homecoming: Frederick Douglass, Joseph Lowery, and the Democratic Value of African American Public Mourning” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 144, No. 4 (Nov. 2010), 682-697.

as the root source of a pre-political, *ontological* experience of vulnerability, or a unifying, post-political moment of commonality, precedes or transcends politics.³⁰

It is worth asking about the costs of this gesture to an *ontological* experience of death, however. A deliberate acknowledgement of mortal vulnerability and death has enormous appeal for sustaining and generating communities defined by unity and commonality—as I will argue here, these appeals for unified meaning and purpose towards death are *overwhelmingly* seductive and powerful. Yet such appeals do not only serve democratic, or humanist ends. An overly strong conviction in the unity of the human experience in the face of death—or the *insistence* of a political equality grounded in death and loss—can have the unfortunate effect of masking deeply felt differences, or sanctioning the erasure of embedded, structural inequality in the name of mortal fellowship.

As I will argue in more detail in chapter one, below, such conviction denies those concrete distinctions and reactions to vulnerability and loss in favor of a romanticized and unified whole.³¹ The potential for death to generate a community of equals, in other words, may be put to work *sustaining* political conflict and power as easily as more disruptive ends. As a basis for an account of *political* belonging, then, mortalism presents a troubling problem. A more diverse and nuanced means of theorizing death's political aspects and appearances is thus not only worthwhile, but potentially urgent, for preventing these narratives from, themselves, becoming totalizing.

³⁰ On this point I follow Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism.” *New Literary History*, Vol. 41 (2010), 1-33.

³¹ This is a particularly concerning possibility in the context of state power and coercion, where a dominant “unified” response may drown out or suppress dissenting voices that are already marginalized by the state. This speaks to agonistic concerns about the dangerous tendencies for myths of political unity to drive dissenting voices to more extreme, violent positions instead of acknowledging difference, and thus welcoming more reasoned discussion. I expand on this point in chapter one, though a reading of Nietzsche’s critique of democratic (mortal) pity.

In this way, the themes of tragic loss and mortal humanism are brought into dialogue with the politics of pluralism and democratic agonism, in particular as expressed by Chantal Mouffe or William Connolly.³² These theories provide an important framework for acknowledging how even common features of human life such as death are subject to competing significations, claims, and meanings. Directly engaging with this ethical turn towards death, and building from (sometimes critically) a pluralist and agonist perspective, several contemporary theorists have raised concerns about the political consequences of a mortalist humanism, or a universal democratic ethic based in mortality. Bonnie Honig, George Shulman, and Ella Meyers, for instance, all provide important critiques of mortality as a pre- or post-political experience that bypasses the messy work of political conflict and compromise.³³ As Honig argues (and both Butler and White acknowledge) the “experience of lamentation and the so-called fact of mortality are always also wrapped up in—inseparable from—their meaning, which varies.”³⁴

Arguing in favor of an “agonistic humanism,” Honig contends that a universalism grounded in suffering bears with it a danger of glossing over the diversity of ways that the pain of mortality and loss might be balanced by a concomitant celebration of the pleasures of life as it is given.³⁵ George Shulman and Ella Meyers have similarly expressed concern over the

³² William E. Connolly, *Pluralism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005). While significantly influenced by agonistic politics, my own commitments and intentions in this project are not intended primarily as a theory of agonism per se, but as a means of supplementing and improving liberal democratic politics and practices as we find them in the world. See Seyla Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), for a range of ways that agonism is taken to supplement, even if by way of critique, liberal politics.

³³ George Shulman, “Acknowledgement and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics” *Theory and Event*, Vol. 14 Issue 1 (2011); Ella Meyers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham: Duke University Press 2013); Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism,” 1-33.

³⁴ Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws,” 8.

³⁵ Honig reads *Antigone* to show how these varied meanings may be expressed and contested as political claims (in the figure of Antigone) or by the sovereign authority by the state (in the figure of Creon.) She argues, by way of

movement towards an ethic grounded in mortal acknowledgement, and the kinds of political dynamics such a move may enable political actors to overlook. Meyers thus warns of a lurking hierarchical structure found in a turn (via Levinas) to mortal ethics that is “inclined to undermine, rather than enhance, citizens’ democratic activity.”³⁶ Shulman, similar to my concerns in chapter 1, below, asks what is enabled and precluded by a turn to an “ontology of finitude.”³⁷ His critique points to the gap between an *ethic* based in mortal acknowledgement, and the concrete political and material claims and conditions that are the stuff of political action.

The present study builds from these critiques. By asking how we are to accommodate death as a part of democratic politics, I take as a point of entry the idea that death is subject to many competing claims, and can be put to work in powerful political and ethical ways. I depart from these critiques, however, in that the specific focus of my project is not to develop a political ethic capable of sustaining democratic practices, or an alternative notion of humanism. While *Mortal Democracy* is informed by these concerns, my interest here is with *how* death appears in diverse, specifically political ways; how death might be productively theorized as a part of politics; and how these different political accounts of death suppress or enable democratic practices.

Once we acknowledge that the experience of vulnerability and loss lead to political divisions as much as political commonality, however, we are still left with the question of how

Rancière and Wittgenstein, that “...[A]n agonistic humanism [...] sees in mortality, suffering, sound, and vulnerability resources for some form of enacted universality, but also sees these as no less various in their significations than are the diverse languages that unite and divide us.” While Honig argues that an acknowledgement of human mortality requires a “wide justice,” one that recognizes the interval between life and death, pleasure and sorrow, she leaves what this might entail or how we might think through such a position undeveloped. Thus I argue there is still a need to theorize specific, diverse acknowledgements of mortality, and how these may shape and work through ordinary political practices, or enable democratic ones. Honig, *ibid*, 4; 13.

³⁶ Meyers, *Worldly Ethics*, 2; Meyers provides a more extended critique of Butler and Critchley in chapters 1 and 2 of the same volume.

³⁷ Shulman, “Acknowledgement and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics.”

best to admit these claims and experiences into contemporary political life (and, perhaps just as important, why we should want to). Beyond the political potentials found in the specific experience of mourning, loss, and grief, what can be said about how best to acknowledge death, or make human mortality meaningful within the boundaries of contemporary democratic politics?

III. Mortality, Pessimism and The Tragic

A second strand of political theory speaks to this more general concern by taking as its focus the *condition* of modern political action as contingent and uncertain, defined by many competing and irreconcilable values. Thus many have championed tragedy as a more general means of addressing a growing loss of faith in the promises of liberal rationalism, unified, democratic consensus, or broader narratives of historical progress and political certainty. In this sense, tragedy is not merely a literary form of response to human activity, loss, or trauma, but rather recognizes something fundamental about the political and ethical reality of the world. Tragedy—not as a response to a particular set of actions, but as a condition, “the tragic”—may be understood as forming the basic conditions of political life. Death makes many of the questions raised by the tragic deeply personal and urgent, such as the limits of our reason, our moral and ethical uncertainty, and our vulnerability to historical and political forces we do not control, but nonetheless must act within and against.

Nonetheless, death is often overlooked as an explicitly political concern in this literature, instead denoting a limit, or a manifestation of our tragic condition that is to be understood independent of the particular conditions of a specific life. By proposing a consideration of how claims about the meaning of death might actively shape the stakes, practices, and outcomes of political action, my project therefore contributes to the conversation that finds in “the tragic”

resources for practical political and ethical life. Here I proceed by considering several ways in which the tragic, and the problem it implies, have been taken up in recent political theory, and how a more robust vocabulary of death can contribute to this conversation.

Theorists of “the tragic” seek resources in tragedy for grappling with a contingent and uncertain political reality. These approaches take a variety of forms, ranging from a direct engagement with the interwoven relationships and ethical conflicts portrayed in literary tragedies, to a more general situating of political and ethical thought in the context of irresolvable uncertainty, political flux, and historical upheaval. In this vein, Gloria Fisk argues that the loss of confidence in historical progress requires a return to a worldview that embraces the contingency at its heart—which she finds within the context of Ancient Greece and the Athenian theater.³⁸ For theorists Bernard Williams, Olga Taxidou, and Rita Felski, tragedy is a means of ethically reasoning through the limits of rational action and sovereign autonomy, and also a way to curb excessive philosophical confidence in analytic models and concepts.³⁹

Building on this approach, others such as J. Peter Euben, have argued that tragedy is particularly suited to shape the task and form of political theory in the contemporary world.

Josiah Ober, writing of Euben’s book *The Tragedy of Political Theory* remarks,

[...] tragedy’s value lies in its refusal to allow its audience to indulge either in totalizing univocal explanations of human conduct, or in the fantasy of human freedom that would transcend the need for community. The position of intentional uncertainty adopted by tragedy *is* the middle term; tragedy’s embrace of community and rejection of final explanations demands the intervention of an active, participatory politics.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gloria Fisk, “Putting Tragedy to Work for the Polis,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2008), 895.

³⁹ See Rita Felski, introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy*; and Olga Taxidou, “Machines and Models for Modern Tragedy: Brecht/Berlout, Antigone-Model 1948,” from the same volume. Also, Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans & Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*.

⁴⁰ Josiah Ober, “Review: *The Tragedy of Political Theory*” *Political Theory*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Aug., 1991), 477-480. Ober rightly points out that Euben’s emphasis on tragedy as a kind of ur-narrative in political thought may go too far

Tragedy thus offers us a way politically to navigate the world “as we find it,” encouraging a kind of openness to contingent and uncertain events that nonetheless does not end in moral paralysis, but activity.⁴¹

As *Mortal Democracy* considers the ways that we might make similar acknowledgements of death, while leaving open any final pronouncements as to its meaning, I build off of the insights of this rich body of work in the chapters that follow. However, there remains an active tension within this discussion as to just how far the resources made available in tragedy and the classical past can actually go. In rejection of Steiner’s absolutism, some argue that tragedy may indicate a politics capable of *redeeming* human life in the context of the dehumanizing mass politics of modernity.⁴² Directly citing what he calls a “minor tradition of politics,” for instance, Steven Johnson argues that there is a healthy tradition of political thought in “tragic” authors such as Machiavelli, Weber, and Rousseau (to name a few) that can generate “ethico-political resources for an ethos of commitment and accountability suited to life in a democratic pluralist polity.”⁴³ Others such as Bonnie Honig and Bernard Williams resist this impulse to human redemption, seeking instead to find ways to make use of tragedy for a kind of moral “survival,”

at points. But the general argument that tragedy offers important resources for what theory might become in the wake of lost confidence in historical narratives of progress holds.

⁴¹ Other examples of accounts that also look to tragedy for resources responding to “the tragic” in contemporary politics include Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness; Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1986); Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*.

⁴² Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 26. The language of “redemption” is Euben’s.

⁴³ Steven Johnston, “American Dionysia” *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol 8, No. 3 (2009), 255-275.

that recognizes the possibility of moral dilemmas where there is no ‘right’ thing to do, but where action is nonetheless necessary, and an agent must somehow survive the process morally intact.⁴⁴

In this later respect, tragedy as a literary form speaks to a more general approach to politics that attempts to move beyond arguments of political certainty and progress, on the one hand, and which seeks resources for political life and judgment outside of absolute values, on the other. Joshua Foa Dienstag, for instance, finds a counter tradition of pessimist philosophy that begins with an acknowledgement of the inescapable burden of time, a burden which specifically is made evident through an awareness of mortality and death.⁴⁵ Rather than ending in nihilism, however, this tradition (with a few exceptions) tends strongly towards a justification of life and a more vital engagement with the world on its own terms. Following Nietzsche, the aim is not to “Die gloriously, but to live dangerously and die necessarily.”⁴⁶ A life lived in an awareness of death by this view may provoke an ethic that incites activity *for* life and politics. Recent works such as Tracy Strong’s *Politics Without Vision* are, in contrast, more directly concerned with how we might think politically through the moral conditions and ethical dilemmas of the political world “as we find it.” Strong’s book draws attention to several authors who “reject the need for, and the possibility of, a “vision.” As he claims, “if political theory is to attempt to be adequate to

⁴⁴ Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). Honig directly draws on Williams’ account, admiring his use of tragedy as an ethical framework where “the goal is to salvage from the wreckage of the situation enough narrative unity for the self to go on.” Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009), 4-7.

⁴⁵ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 40.

politics of the twentieth (and now twenty-first) century, it *must* think without a banister and without any nostalgia for one.”⁴⁷

It is in this kind of tragic, political context that I argue we should examine how death animates a range of political relationships and commitments. Death makes problems of “thinking without banisters” personal. It casts broader ethical conditions of uncertainty into stark terms that are both immediate and inescapable. To the extent we look for meaning in common symbols, shared horizons of meaning, or recognition from others, the common availability—or lack—of social and cultural norms referenced to situate death in any meaningful context bring the question of how to contextualize death into direct dialogue with this problem of political thinking outside of a tradition or culturally “given” set of values. That this uncertainty might then be addressed through political claims, or that these claims might be attached to institutional or moral foundations for political reasoning, gives the question of mortality particular urgency as a matter of political theory.

However, outside of a religious or cultural framework that attempts to frame, or give content to the ultimate *meaning* of one’s life and death (which the value-neutral framework of democratic liberalism explicitly professes to avoid⁴⁸) there seems to be a fear that such considerations will tend towards useless gloominess at best, and nihilistic destruction at worst. The fear is that bringing questions of the meaning of death into politics risks infecting political discourse with a kind of nihilistic disease, on the one hand, or a politics of extremist convictions, on the other. In this sense, the concerns about ethical and moral thinking in “tragic” conditions

⁴⁷ Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision*, 7. Strong also considers the common need to “think without banisters” addressed by each of my primary authors—Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt. My question concerning the acknowledgement and meaning of death engages many similar concerns, as death sharpens and makes immediate the range of issues falling from the “death of god” and the loss of a firm or certain absolute moral standard.

⁴⁸ Central among these concerns is what Stephen White terms a “politics of certainty” (which seems to have striking similarities to Weber’s understanding of a politics of conviction. I address this concern in Chapter 2).

are deeply relevant: how do we build a political life that acknowledges death, contingency, and uncertainty, but which can hold onto common boundaries, a concern for justice, and some form of shared life? How are we to do so in the absence of divine or universal values, without giving into the *absolute* tragic pessimism of Silenus? Given the absence of widespread social-cultural foundations, one might ask if the liberal attempts to “quarantine” death are linked to a broader anxiety that, outside of a posited *universal* and pre-political desire to avoid death, we may have no legitimate arguments for submitting to a common, governed life.⁴⁹

My project responds to this anxiety by arguing that we would be best served to consider head-on the ways that death—fear of death, or a desire to give death purposeful, meaningful framing—is *already* a part of political life. Theorizing the different ways that death appears within, grounds, and distorts political life, I argue, can provide important intellectual and practical resource for resisting the violence of nihilistic or aesthetic politics. A richer vocabulary of death can enable us to more clearly identify, and potentially disrupt, those kinds of dangerous political dynamics which we can no longer rely on unshakable traditions or over-arching moral meta-narratives to restrain. At the same time, such theorizing may prove to uncover democratic capacities and political dynamics we might otherwise have overlooked, capacities which we might specifically draw on in conditions of extreme mortal vulnerability, or existential risk, for democratic ends.

⁴⁹ Alan Bloom criticizes John Rawls on precisely this point, suggesting that the ‘social contract’ of his Original Position ignores that a common fear of death is the only foundation capable of transforming a diversity of values into an agreement to live under common government. Drawing on Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau he argues that “The state of nature demonstrates that the positive goals of men which vary are not to be taken seriously in comparison with the negative fact on which all sensible men must agree, that death is terrible and must be avoided. They join civil society for protection from one another, and government’s sole purpose is the establishment and maintenance of peace. [...] (in the Original Position) the fear of death disappears as the motive for joining civil society and accepting its rules... what Rawls gives us in place of fear is fairness.” See Alan Bloom, “Justice: John Rawls v. Political Philosophy,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (June, 1975), 653.

In light of these two different strands of political thought, then, *Mortal Democracy* contributes to recent scholarship by providing a developed account of how death and its meanings may act on, be an obstacle to, or be complicit in political action. *Mortal Democracy* aims to foster a more robust understanding of death's significance as a part of political life through the examination and development of several distinct accounts of death, each drawn from a dialogue between ancient and modern sources, and informed throughout by a tragic sensibility. To this end, in the chapters that follow I undertake a thematic study of death in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, and Hannah Arendt. Each of these thinkers considers death to powerfully shape political life. Each, also, provides distinct ways for theorizing death's productive and dangerous political potentials. My concern, ultimately, is to provide an orientation from which these plural accounts of death can be (critically) accommodated within democratic politics. This orientation is developed with the explicit framing of a tragic worldview—that political thinking and judgment must be made without appeal to a sacred foundation or transcendent values. I develop this orientation through an understanding of critical, aporetic *mortal ignorance*, drawn from Plato's *Apology*.

Central to this project, then, is the conviction that the vast distance between the present in the past, rather than an obstacle, can function as a productive source of conceptual dissonance. By recovering lost ways of being and thinking that might unsettle modern attitudes and expectations concerning death, *Mortal Democracy* seeks to generate an experience not unlike Socratic *aporia*—a deliberate sense of estrangement and homelessness, one which might clear the way for critical thought and political judgment freed from unexamined expectations towards death. In this sense, the tragic sensibility found in Silenus which Steiner argues has been lost to 'us moderns' operates as an important theoretical spur for this project. Where Steiner argues

Silenus represents a position of absolute and thoroughgoing abandonment, I suggest here that the pessimist orientation towards death his maxim entails—that it is best never to be born, second best to die soon—can also be generative. I bring this point forward through my analysis of Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt; all of whom confront some version of the pessimistic wisdom Silenus provides.

All three of the modern authors I take up in this project also engage the political thought of the Greeks and antiquity, and in some sense have projects that perform the sort of “untimely meditations” with which I am concerned. To adopt Peter Euben’s phrasing, while attentive to the dangers of false analogies and aware of the vast historical distance between “the Ancients” and “we Moderns,” the “Greeks [may be] used as a diagnostic aid to clarify the character and contours of modern theory and society.”⁵⁰ The aim in choosing classical Athens as a common reference, and in ultimately anchoring my account in Plato’s *Apology*, is *not* that we ought to “go back” to an ancient mode of politics, or that such a thing is possible (or desirable). Rather it is to draw out the ways these different accounts of politics acknowledge the meaning of death, and how these might provide alternative ways of thinking through death’s place in contemporary politics. I discuss my specific reasons for choosing these authors, and this approach, in the next section.

IV. Silenus, Disenchantment, and Politics in the Modern Age

How are we best to acknowledge mortality as a part of politics, while remaining open to the diversity of ways this highly personal, yet also deeply cultural fact of human life may work on and through politics? Is there a way to acknowledge, or make death meaningful that is consistent with the ends of liberal democratic politics? This project answers these questions by proceeding along two simultaneous fronts. The first is a project of illumination. How does the

⁵⁰ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 24.

need to contextualize, frame, or make death meaningful complicate, undermine, or dangerously affirm certain formulations of politics? The second is constructive. Given the ways that death operates on and through our politics, how can an acknowledgment of death be incorporated into democratic politics, and what potential resources for politics can such an acknowledgement provide?

Why Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt? Although these authors are increasingly studied in tandem, in many respects they are not comfortable companions.⁵¹ All, for instance, have radically different opinions on the relationship between legitimacy, power and violence. All, also, are by varying degrees supportive of (or hostile to) democratic politics. When Nietzsche is given recognition as a political thinker at all, he presents the basis for an aesthetic and profoundly agonistic politics that is by turns seen as elitist, volatile, and intensely suspicious of mass, liberal democracy.⁵² Weber is a (reluctant, pessimistic) liberal and champion of charismatic presidentialism. Finally, Arendt argues for a politics fundamentally concerned with persuasion, public deliberation and speech acts, as well as a controversial proposal for the formation of popular councils—though her work is claimed by neo-republicans, deliberative

⁵¹ See, among others, Strong's book *Politics without Vision*, and Dana Villa's *Socratic Citizenship*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) for a comparison of all three authors. For comparisons of Weber and Arendt, see Andreas Kalyvas *Democracy and Politics of the Extraordinary*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Other, binary comparisons include on Nietzsche and Arendt, such as Dana Villa's "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action" *Political Theory*, Vol. 20 (1992), 274-308; and Bonnie Honig, "The Politics of Agnoism: A Critical Response to "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action" *Political Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1993), 528-533. On Nietzsche and Weber, see David Owen, "Autonomy and 'Inner Distance': a Trace of Nietzsche in Weber." *History of the Human Sciences*, 74, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1991).

⁵² Some argue Nietzsche is not political but can be used for politics, while some say he is fundamentally anti-political, and others find him extremely politically oriented. For a discussion of the range of interpretations on this point, see Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

democrats, and agonists alike.⁵³ This is to say nothing of their methodological differences (philology, sociology, historical political theory), or even the specific historical transformations within which each lived and wrote.⁵⁴

Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt nonetheless have important traits in common which make them particularly rich interlocutors. Each responds to the social, political, and cultural changes of their lifetime from within (and at times, against) a common intellectual background: the German academy and a western philosophical tradition that, for each, has important foundational elements with ancient Greece.⁵⁵ Equally important, each argues that this tradition has faltered. Either the tradition has been undone by its own, latent centrifugal forces; been overturned and overturned again; or is now merely a matter of momentum, unhinged from formerly unshakable foundations. “God is Dead” for Nietzsche, Arendt, and Weber, in the sense that overarching, fundamental, or absolute values have been eroded. The idea of a “given” god—one not constructed in some sense by human needs, but essentially waiting to be discovered or made manifest—is lost.

⁵³ Treatments of Arendt’s work are highly diverse, with her arguments claimed by scholars such as Pettit, Habermas, or Honig for their distinct political ends. The range of essays present in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Dana Villa (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) further demonstrates this diversity.

⁵⁴ Each of these authors has had a biography written that focuses on the ways historical conditions influenced their thought. See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), and Walter Kaufman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

⁵⁵ While Arendt and Nietzsche are very obviously engaged with ancient Greek philosophy and make extensive use of the Greek experience in their thought, Weber’s engagement is less well known. Recent scholarship has shown that Greek thought, particularly Thucydides, was quite important to Weber, both in his early education but also in his later thought during and following World War I when he composed the major texts that I take up in Chapter 2. See Christopher Adair-Toteff, “Max Weber’s Pericles—the Political Demagogue” *Max Weber Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (July 2007), 147-162 and Wilhelm Hennis and Keith Tribe (trans.) “‘Hellenic Intellectual Culture’ and the Origins of Weber’s Political Thinking” *Max Weber Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July 2006). Weber was also a notable defender of the (philology and classics dominated) curriculum of the Gymnasium, increasingly criticized as outdated during his lifetime, arguing that such criticism was “‘hogwash’ peddled by ‘a load of people without talent.’” Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, 70-72.

For each, this loss directly relates to their particular accounts of death and politics. Each theorist takes up some version of the “Wisdom of Silenus,” the observation at the heart of Greek tragedy that it is best never to be born, second best to die, soon. Nietzsche and Arendt both directly cite this myth: Nietzsche in the context of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Arendt (via Sophocles) in *On Revolution*.⁵⁶ In Weber, this “wisdom” is expressed through a new interlocutor: Tolstói. In “Science as a Vocation,” Weber uses Tolstói’s meditations on death to present the idea that “[death has] no meaning for a civilized person,” a problem based on the dual processes of rationalization and the ever-expanding range of possible values which, independent of an individual’s active articulate selection of values himself, cannot provide meaning for life.⁵⁷ Yet for all three, this “wisdom” does not necessarily result in an absolute, hopeless pessimism such as George Steiner identifies with ancient tragedy—though Weber perhaps comes the closest to this view.⁵⁸ Rather the possibility of death as “the best thing for mankind” is a proposition to be met, overcome, or otherwise courageously faced; alone, or in concert with others.⁵⁹ Like the death of God, for Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt, the inherent meaning of life and death in modernity is no longer “given,” either—but this fact need not end in despair.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Hereafter, BT); Ed. Raymond Geuss, Trans., Ronald Speirs (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22-3. Also, Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 273.

⁵⁷ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁵⁸ We might think here of the “polar night of icy darkness and hardness” which Weber anticipates in “Politics as a Vocation.” in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁵⁹ Kateb, Strong, and Euben all remark on the presence of this myth (and some sort of productive reaction to it) in the thought of one or more of these authors; though Nietzsche, Weber and Arendt have not been thoroughly compared on this point. See Kateb “Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt” *Political Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May, 1977), 141-182; David Owen and Tracy Strong, “Max Weber’s Calling to Knowledge and Action,” in Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*.

⁶⁰ None of these authors thinks that life is inherently *worthless*. Rather, each in his or her way is quite concerned to rescue some basis for defending the value of life from the threat of nihilism or meaningless, “animal” behavior.

Through the works of these different authors I develop a series of counter-narratives about death meant to unsettle the assumption that death has no place in political life. To foster a sense of critical distance from contemporary patterns of thinking, I read Nietzsche with Homer; Weber with Thucydides; Arendt with Aristotle; and finally, I conclude this dissertation with Plato's *Apology*, and Socrates.⁶¹ Through the diverse ways these authors theorize mortality, and the ways their distinctive understandings of death shape political practice—either by positive, or negative example—I argue these different accounts can provide important intellectual resources for thinking through a democratic accommodation of death in the contemporary political world.

Chapter one, titled “The Wisdom of Silenus: Friedrich Nietzsche and The Politics of Death,” examines two deaths that Nietzsche finds exemplary—dying Socrates, and dead Achilles. I argue here that Nietzsche's genealogical account draws attention to the ways that these different understandings of mortal vulnerability can serve deeply divergent political ends, alternatively enabling or suppressing political action and agency. For Nietzsche, liberal democracy (and modernity more generally) inherits a dangerous understanding of death from the Socratic-Christian tradition: death as a *negation* of life, experienced as an ontological source of vulnerability. For Nietzsche, this understanding of death “democratizes” persons by making them equally vulnerable to death, and equally worthy of pity and preservation. I argue that Nietzsche's account usefully draws attention to the ways universalizing or totalizing narratives of death can erase substantive, politically significant differences in the ways that mortal vulnerability is experienced by different persons.

⁶¹ The politics of death in Athens were nuanced, multi-faceted, and hardly unified. It is, in fact, the diversity and conflict around the politics of death, and their private, hearth and family centric counterpart, which makes the Athenian treatment of death particularly useful as a point of comparison to the diversity of approaches to death today. See on this Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Zone Books, 2006); Numa Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Reading” *Greek Death: To the End of the Classical Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

Yet Nietzsche's genealogical project is not *only* critical. By reading Nietzsche alongside Homer's *Iliad*, I develop a Nietzschean account of death defined by individual capacities to actively choose one's ability to live, *and die*, as a particular person; a person defined by the distinct commitments to oneself and others upheld in uncontrollable circumstances. Read as an adaptation of Homeric "beautiful death," a way of death personified for Nietzsche by the shade of Achilles who longs for life, I argue Nietzsche offers an alternative account of death that views persons as *capable* of transforming the contingent, painful experiences of death into moments of enacted personal or shared value, capacities essential for democratic action in the face of totalizing political power.

While a Nietzschean account of death can help us to identify and mobilize important political capacities in conditions of vulnerability, it simultaneously places no limits on the form, or the moral valence of the values an individual may find constitutive. Further, while Nietzsche himself is deeply critical of state projects that promise to provide meaning for life and death for their constituents, history has shown how devastatingly seductive the promises of an aesthetic, existential politics can be. As a means of understanding the interior logic and orientations that such existential political appeals make use of, and for a better disrupting, resisting, and restraining the political consequences of existentially weighted politics, I turn in the second chapter to an account of political death that places at its heart political service that is oriented towards death in conditions of a disenchanted modernity: Max Weber's political vocation, read here as a soldierly calling unto death.

Chapter two, "A Vocation Unto Death: Max Weber, Modernity, and Soldierly Politics" examines how a soldierly view of death animates the core themes of responsibility and leadership in Max Weber's two famous vocation lectures. I argue that, for Weber, the solution to

meaningless, “accidental” nature of mortality in the modern age is a turn to an absolutist *soldierly* commitment to one’s (political) cause, an orientation towards one’s life commitments—including *political* commitments, that undermines the political grounds for compromise and responsible, ethical leadership. I read Weber’s diagnosis of soldierly politics alongside selections from Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*—a text Weber returned to in his later career—to illuminate what is troubling about Weber’s specific understanding of soldierly death in modernity, but also to provide some means of interrupting the bleak political logic his model entails.

The conceptual and contextual differences between the soldierly death praised in Perikles’ funeral oration, and the version of soldierly death praised by Weber, illustrate how a soldierly orientation towards political service distorts the political landscape in troubling ways. Divorced from the checks of recognition and group decision making found in the Athenian polity, a soldierly commitment understood as an *inner* orientation towards death promotes an artificial, conceptual realignment whereby competing political causes become *enemies* at war. This comparison helps to explain Weber’s bleak diagnosis of the political future Europe faced in his times (a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness.”) By highlighting the active political capacities of the Athenian democratic body listening to Thucydides speech, however, I argue we can find resources to think our way out of the bleak political fate Weber prophesies. Weber’s sophisticating understanding of political leadership, I argue, overlooks the active political capacities that the democratic polity has to exert a critical, mediating force on the existential political appeals of leaders and factions. I therefore suggest we can find democratic resources in Thucydides that supplement Weber’s account of mature political leadership in ways that restore

power, and *responsibility*, to the democratic polity as a body *capable* of critically assessing existential political appeals and the moral costs these entail.

Accepting the power of the democratic polity to exert a kind of mediating judgment on the appeals, claims, and political narratives about death's meaning, however, introduces a new question: how are we to theorize the dangers that attend these publicly formed narratives of death and its meaning? More specifically, how are we to accommodate and mediate *between* competing narratives of death, public and private, while preserving the dignity of the individual who has died, and respecting the ways that death may alter the shared political world for those who remain? In Chapter 3, titled "Death on the Stage: Hannah Arendt and the Disappearances of Death," I argue that Arendt's work, *The Human Condition*, provides a way of theorizing death's public appearances as an object of plural interpretations and political concern; an appearance that nonetheless retains a fundamental respect for the private, personal experience of death. I analyze Arendt alongside several of her favorite sources, focusing particularly on Aristotle's *Poetics* and his treatment of "death on the stage," where the moment of death is off-stage, but made meaningful within the ongoing action of the plot.

This Arendtian account of death, I argue, does not place a search for immortality at its heart but rather the condition of human togetherness. Death's appearance is not simply a matter of a memorable deed or a fixed space of appearances, but rests in the relationships and stories that form around an absence. This public absence is shaped and stabilized by its connection to a private darkness which affirms and deepens, rather than detracts from, the meaningfulness of death's public appearance. An Arendtian account sheds light on the complicated ways that death appears in public life, and simultaneously can reveal what is at stake when death *fails* to make a public appearance. I argue that an Arendtian account of death can therefore make us more

sensitive to the ways that death has *both* a public and a private existence that constitute each other in ways important for democratic politics: an account where my death is tantamount to the death of another, but not reducible to it.

In the final chapter I turn to the second major task of this dissertation: the development of a positive, orientation of political openness towards mortality that might directly acknowledge these competing understandings of death (and others) within democratic politics. For this task I turn to Plato's *Apology*. Given the emphasis I place on the tragic metaphysical assumptions of Silenus, and the problems these pose for politics, the choice of the *Apology* may seem perverse.⁶² There is also the question of why this particular dialogue, when many of Plato's works (if not all of them) take up the question of death, and many in far more detail than the *Apology*.

My choice of the *Apology* is based on several factors. First, while dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, *Menexenus* and the *Crito* deal explicitly with the relationship between death, the soul, and the polity, the *Apology* develops a position of thoroughgoing skepticism towards death that I argue is especially important for modern practices. Specifically, I argue that Socrates' profession of mortal ignorance throughout this defense is a deeply productive example for a critical yet open political analysis of death as a part of political life; a position figured in the aporetic statement that he "does not know" if death is a good or a bad thing for mankind.⁶³ In this respect, the orientation towards political life and death that Socrates presented in Plato's *Apology* does

⁶² Aside from Plato's metaphysical assumptions that treat the world of sensual, embodied experiences as less "real" than the true existence which can only be "known" after death (see the *Phaedo* for the strongest articulation of this view.) Plato was also a determined critic of democracy; however, he might be described as willing to teach it a thing or two. See J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), and "Reading Democracy: "Socratic" Dialogues and the Political Education of Democratic Citizens" in *Demokratia*. See also the rejoinder to this position by Benjamin R. Barber, "Misreading Democracy: Peter Euben and the *Gorgias*" in the same volume. For one interpretation of the complexity of Plato's relationship with democracy, see Sara Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶³ Plato, *Apology* in G.M.A. Grube (Trans.) *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2002), ln. 29a, 33. I have relied on the Grube translation throughout because it is well known and familiar, but indicate places where I rely on my own.

not primarily gesture to the existence of the soul *after* death, but remains immanent, located within and oriented towards the limits and experiences of mortal, democratic life and the embodied, human community.⁶⁴

Thus in the final chapter, “Mortal Ignorance: Socrates’ Apology for Death” I develop a critical, democratic orientation towards death drawn from Plato’s *Apology*. In contrast to approaches that seek to remove death from politics, either by ‘quarantining’ discussions of death from public life, or by keeping its meaning marginal, I argue instead for a model of democratic openness situated in the Socratic condition of mortal ignorance; a model motivated by a concern for the health of the diverse democratic community as a whole, but which leaves death’s ultimate meaning radically undetermined. While Plato is no democrat, he nonetheless develops his critique of Athenian political life and death through appeal to the rhetorical practices and values of the democratic city. In this way, the *Apology* does not explicitly close off the question of death’s meaning, or place it outside of political life and argumentation, but maintains an outlook of uncertain thoroughgoing mortal ignorance that is situated *within* the conventions of democratic political life.

As I will argue, Socrates’ pronouncement that nobody knows “whether death is a good or a bad thing for mankind”⁶⁵ transforms the trial of Socrates into a trial of Athenian democracy. This aporetic position of ignorance and openness towards death’s meaning, that rests at the center of the *Apology*, structures a critical orientation towards political life that illustrates how a polity might accommodate death while remaining critically oriented towards death’s power to

⁶⁴ I say a great deal more on this below. My read of Plato in this respect is indebted to several authors who find in Plato’s meditations on life and death a deeply political turn, one that may gesture beyond the experience of sensual, ‘shadowy’ existence and appearance, but which nonetheless remains within its limits. See Sarah Brill, *Plato On the Limits of Human Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013); Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶⁵ Plato, *Apology*, 29a.

shape and distort political practice. From his position of mortal ignorance, Socrates engages in a critique several distinct “regimes” of meaningful Athenian death in his defense—including a heroic regime, a soldierly regime, and the question of death’s proper appearances in family and public life; all of which I take up in relation to Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt’s accounts elsewhere in the dissertation. Socrates engages with these conventional understandings of death not simply to dismiss them, but rather to expose them to view for the Athenian polity who sits in judgment, that they might be reconsidered and reformed for the sake of the polity as a whole. In this respect, Socrates’ failure to convince the Athenians is an equally instructive part of this dialogue, as it reveals how it is not only the unexamined life which may yield a corrupted polity, but also unexamined *death*.

I therefore argue that the *Apology* can provide the basis for a productive accommodation of death as a part of political life. Through his critique and interrogation of these several regimes of death, a critique made possible by Socrates’ aporetic insistence that he does not know if death is a good or a bad thing, I suggest we can find a productive model for how a modern polity might also hold death’s meaning open for the sake of critical review and interrogation—including the interrogation of the distinct accounts of death presented by Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt. By admitting these diverse accounts into public life while remaining critically oriented towards death’s capacity to structure political life and relationships, I argue that death need not be quarantined from public life, but rather the polity may inoculate against its excesses through a deliberately inclusive, open-ended dialogue.

Chapter 1

The Wisdom of Silenus: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Death

“The linguistic economies within which we officially or unofficially give meaning to life and death have a paralyzing effect; we become stingy and afraid to spend—that is, to live. Our different discourses of death—juridical, medical, even statistical/chance—are all discursive economies within which death is a force to be held off by the exercise of a kind of parsimony. And this conceptual parsimony, along with the strictures of perception and conduct it implies, prevents a vision and a conduct of life as exuberant expenditure. It cedes authority and control to the agents who own and operate the various departments of constraint and restraint.”
—Michael J. Shapiro⁶⁶

Responding to urgent problems of political exclusion, violence, and seemingly irresistible sovereign power, in recent years political theorists have turned towards mortal vulnerability as a resource for democratic politics. As I mentioned in the introduction, these accounts comprise one part of a broader ethical turn in political theory, concerned to supplement political life and foster more open, “capacious” sympathy and compassion towards others.⁶⁷ A question many of these accounts take up is how we might better acknowledge the dignity and personhood of others in ways that resist, or unsettle, a political tendency towards acts of sovereign exceptionalism and exclusion: acts that dehumanize or deny the political significance of persons in the name of national security, or the preservation of a way of life. Starting from a vantage of mutual, *ontological* vulnerability before death and loss, these theorists seek to transform the experience of vulnerability into an experience of mortal solidarity, mutual sympathy, and gratitude rather than aggression or suspicious fear.

⁶⁶ Michael J. Shapiro, *Reading the Post-Modern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 194.

⁶⁷ Theorists have particularly turned to Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben for arguments about sovereignty on the one hand, and the later works of Michel Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas as a resource for democratic ethics on the other. While a full biography of this literature would be impossible in this context, see Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.), *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Psychology Press, 2000) for an overview.

Our ability to recognize the concrete political differences in how persons face death, as a result of personal choice or wider, historical circumstance, are crucial for contemporary political conversations concerning the fates of vulnerable populations; of refugees, victims of war, or those subject to systematic racial violence. Yet *how* we do so matters. A striking feature of these accounts is that they tend to represent death as an ontological experience of negation: “the primal scene of emptiness, absence, and disaster.”⁶⁸ Judith Butler, for instance, suggests “a non-violent ethics, one that is based upon an understanding of how easily human life is annulled.”⁶⁹ Stephen K. White echoes a similar formulation, arguing that we are ontologically “subjected before death,” our sovereignty “undone” by mortality.⁷⁰ In different ways, each is concerned to create the foundation for an expansive political community through the powerful *humane* experience of mortal vulnerability. As Alphonso Lingis remarks on this point, “One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one’s forces, but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice.”⁷¹ These accounts thereby appeal to an understanding of shared mortal vulnerability as a basis for political community, one that cuts across entrenched categories of persons and power.

By appealing to this view of death as a general human experience of ontological negation, one that produces feelings of vulnerability and fear, these theories make use of what Harry Silverstein calls the “common-sense view” of death, one with strong historical and

⁶⁸ Simon Critchley, *Very Little, Almost Nothing* (Routledge, London 1997), 75; 82.

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), xvii.

⁷⁰ White departs from Butler and Critchley in that he wishes to balance an understanding of death as negation against a concept of “capacious agency.” In doing so he engages with many of the same themes as Nietzsche. However White’s account separates the experience of death from the specific individual capacities of agency, elevating death to a pre-political or ontological experience. As I argue below, Nietzsche’s does not. See Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009), 68-76.

⁷¹ Alphonso Lingis in Critchley, *Very Little, Almost Nothing*, 75.

philosophical underpinnings.⁷² Yet at least since Hobbes, such appeals to ontological vulnerability before death have also served as central, *stabilizing* parts of political narratives that justify the formation and powers of the sovereign state. Mortal vulnerability and existential preservation have, in recent years, particularly been called upon to legitimate the exercise of sovereign power over civic populations and ‘enemies’ abroad.⁷³ Put differently, many recent attempts to think past the narratives of sovereign power and what Agamben has called “bare life” have in turn depended on a political understanding of death that is, itself, “bare.”⁷⁴ There is thus good reason to ask if, by engaging in similar appeals to ontological mortal vulnerability that *also* legitimate sovereign acts of exclusion and violence, these mortalist accounts might thereby unintentionally reinforce a foundational element of the political dynamics they aim to disrupt. In this chapter I therefore am concerned with developing an alternative way of understanding death, one that might critically engage the powerful, if often unquestioned, narrative of ontological mortal vulnerability. Doing so, I suggest, can provide a means of destabilizing totalizing political

⁷² Harry S. Silverstein, “The Evil of Death” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77:7 (1980), 401-424. As Phillippe Aries has argued, this understanding of death as *inherently* frightening is specifically modern in origin. Death has become “forbidden,” no longer simply a sad, yet “tame” event, but frightening and ‘unspeakable’ for modern persons, where once it was “tame” and familiar. Jessica Mitford similarly notes that in the United States much of the “commercialization of death” in contemporary times is about “making death friendly.” See Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

⁷³ A massive body of legal and political theory has grown in the years since 9-11 dealing with the emergency powers of the state, exercised in the name of sovereignty that is defined in existential, Schmittian terms—many of these mortalist works, particularly those of Butler, are interested in explicitly resisting these appeals. See, for instance, Michael Dillon, (ed) *Biopolitics of Security: A Political Analytic of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2015); and Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*.

⁷⁴ Butler, White, and Critchley (in various ways and degrees) all acknowledge that we experience death through our cultural attachments, yet nonetheless hold a version of mortality as an *ontological* experience that we are universally vulnerable towards or subjected by as the locus of a more universal, transcendent or pre-political appeal for community. My aim is not to engage in a thorough analysis of these arguments here, but to suggest that this general understanding of death-as-negation as the basis for political appeals can be put to work for very different ends (as a Nietzschean critique of mortal, ontological vulnerability will reveal) and can be productively rethought. For a direct critique of these theorists on this point, see Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws,” 1-33; Ella Meyers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Ethics and Care for the World*; and George Schulman, “Acknowledgement and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics.”

appeals to mortal vulnerability, and the elisions of status, agency and dignity such totalizing political appeals entail.

Few thinkers are more furiously concerned with challenging traditional, totalizing narratives than Friedrich Nietzsche. In what follows, I develop an account of death drawn from Nietzsche's works, informed by his 'untimely meditations' on a Homeric past. Such an account, I argue, can provide us with important resources for resisting political elisions of concrete status and vulnerability towards death, on the one hand, and might allow a greater awareness and mobilization of democratic political capacities, on the other.

While much interest has been given to Nietzsche's account of meaningful life, far less has been given to his understanding of what constitutes a meaningful death.⁷⁵ Such an investigation is worthwhile for several reasons. First, Nietzsche's notion of meaningful death is explicitly oriented towards an understanding of mortal life that places power, creativity and agency in conditions of fundamental vulnerability and contingency at its heart. Second, Nietzsche's genealogical account also provides a critical evaluation of the ways that a dominant cultural narrative about death's meaning—death as negation, a terrifying, pitiful transition from life to some other kind of existence (or non-existence)—underlies not only *sovereign*, top-down claims to authority and obedience; but can also structure *democratic* appeals in ways that can deny persons their agency and strength in conditions of vulnerability, and which can restrict the grounds for expressing concrete differences, or acknowledging distinctions of status and power.

⁷⁵ General accounts of Nietzsche's work that I have found helpful in the following include Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism*; Lawrence Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1995); George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Walter Kaufman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*; Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, trans. Duncan Large (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983); Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985); Leslie Thiel, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*; others I have cited as relevant.

I take Nietzsche's retelling of the "Wisdom of Silenus" from *The Birth of Tragedy* as a point of entry. This folk tale usefully frames the dimensions of Nietzsche's evolving account of death: death as a *part* of being—not merely its negation—an event or state to be transformed and affirmed.⁷⁶ Nietzsche believes that our relationship with death is deeply distorted by the assumptions of Socratic philosophy, inherited by Christian and democratic frameworks. Death *becomes* a negation, no longer affirmable on its own terms. For Nietzsche this change invites passive political relationships, legitimating the compassionate management and intervention of life by external powers. I take up this transformation in parts two and three of this chapter. Without trying to excuse or otherwise rescue Nietzsche from his extreme (and frequently distasteful) views, I suggest here that his genealogical critique illustrates how mortal vulnerability can generate multiple political narratives that legitimate binding hierarchical *and* democratic relationships, not all of these desirable.

Nietzsche's genealogical account is not only critical, however, and in the final parts of this chapter I return to the figure Nietzsche offers as a response to Silenus: dead Achilles. Understood as an adaptation of Homeric "beautiful death," I argue here for a positive Nietzschean account of death, one that begins with the acknowledgement of persons as *capable* of transforming the contingent, painful experiences of life into moments of enacted personal or shared value—in short, as capable political agents—even when those capabilities are not

⁷⁶ I have attempted to take the evolution of Nietzsche's thought seriously, while drawing forward how certain themes are present throughout Nietzsche's works regarding the meaning of death and its political importance. The first section of this paper focus on earlier texts—in particular *The Birth of Tragedy* and his short essay, *Homer's Contest*. The second and third sections dealing with Nietzsche's mature works pull most heavily from *The Genealogy of Morals*, the *Gay Science*, *Anti-Christ* and *Twilight of the Idols*. I do not offer a schematic outline of the evolution of Nietzsche's thought, however I generally follow the divisions as identified by Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), xiv. I have also used selections from the *Nachlass* and *Will to Power*. While the latter is a problematic text, I have used it when it is particularly clear on an important point that reflects Nietzsche's thought elsewhere. More generally, I follow Alexander Nehamas' reasoning on my inclusion of it here. See *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, 9-10. Whenever possible I have used English translations of Nietzsche's work by Walter Kaufman or R. J. Hollingdale; for Homer I have used the translation of Robert Fagels. I have noted places where I have relied on my own.

enabled, or denied by an external force. Starting from this positive Nietzschean understanding of death, I suggest, might more fully allow individuals to mobilize their capacities for action *through* vulnerability in ways that traditional narratives of ontological mortal vulnerability can elide, or actively suppress.

I. The Wisdom of Silenus

In keeping with his genealogical method, Nietzsche does not offer a systematic definition of death's meaning. As I will argue here, however, his account responds to a consistent problem that has a coherent, identifiable form. The central features of this problem may be found in his retelling of the parable of Silenus. Nietzsche puts it this way:

There is an ancient story that king Midas hunted in the forest for a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him. When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: 'Oh wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.'⁷⁷

The insight Silenus offers appears across classical Greek literature, often presented as a maxim that it is 'best never to be born, second best to die soon.'⁷⁸ In this simple form, Silenus has

⁷⁷ BT 22-3, emphasis original. Nietzsche's framework at this point in his career derives a great deal from Schopenhauer's pessimistic arguments, yet even from the early stages of his work Nietzsche argues that Hellenic pessimism was a sign of strength and "cheerfulness" in response to the wisdom of Silenus. The tension between Nietzsche's view of a "pessimism of strength" and Schopenhauer's pessimism is already apparent in *BT*, where the two positions are somewhat conflated; a criticism mentioned by Nietzsche himself. (See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Attempt at Self Criticism" #4, *BT*, 20-2.) Nietzsche's understanding of Silenus is illuminated by contrast with Nietzsche's contemporary and friend Jacob Burkhardt who held a view of Greek culture and tragedy more in keeping with Schopenhauer's understanding, one that particularly emphasized the benefits of non-existence and the *futile* nature of human activity. Nietzsche's departure from Burkhardt on this front reflects his growing distance from Schopenhauer. On the relationship between Nietzsche and Burkhardt, see the introduction by Oswyn Murray in Jacob Burkhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998) xi-xli; and on Burkhardt's understanding of Silenus, see 104-5 in the same volume. On Nietzsche and Schopenhauer's pessimism more generally, I am greatly indebted on this point to Joshua Foa Dienstag, and his understanding of Nietzsche's "Dionysian Pessimism." Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 166-173.

⁷⁸The sentiment is repeated in Pindar, Herodotus, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Euripides among others. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 281-7.

resonance beyond the Hellenic context for Nietzsche's work. As Lawrence Hatab notes, "Nietzsche's philosophy, in all its elements, is focused on the question of the meaning of life—not in the sense of finding a decisive answer to 'Why are we here?' but rather the *problem* of finding meaning in a world that ultimately blocks our natural interest in happiness, preservation, knowledge, and purpose."⁷⁹ Silenus sets the pessimistic grounds on which life's meaning must be cultivated if it is to have any value at all—but this task also applies to death.

When Nietzsche's Silenus defines humankind as a "wretched, ephemeral race" he frames the problem of death in terms of the passage of time. Nietzsche describes the primal experience of being as "an insatiable craving for existence and self-contradiction in terms of time, therefore as *becoming*. Every moment devours the preceding one, every birth is the death of innumerable beings; begetting, living, murdering, all is one."⁸⁰ All-consuming time leads to terror and despair for the individual, who is powerless against her own diminishment. Nietzsche finds this particularly true of the Greeks, who in his view did not fear dying so much as the oblivion that follows a mortal existence.⁸¹ Awareness of the contradictory impulses of creation and destruction embodied by time undermines the meaning of momentary action, or the worth of fleeting life.

Crucially, by this framing death and non-existence are not the same. Silenus defines death as *a part of being*. When Nietzsche's Silenus chastises Midas for pressing him to reveal his knowledge, the daemon sets a clear distinction between those options available to mankind as a creature of being—one who has been born—and the superior option of non-existence: "not to *be*,

⁷⁹ Lawrence J. Hatab, "Shocking Time: Reading Eternal Recurrence Literally" in Manuel Dries (ed), *Nietzsche on Time and History* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 150.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Greek State" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 167. Nietzsche's assumptions about time—understood as constant directionless becoming—are not wholly shared by Homeric Greeks or the pre-Socratics, who frequently viewed time as cyclical.

⁸¹ Giacomo Gambino, "Nietzsche and the Greeks" *Polity*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Summer 1996), 418-19.

to be *nothing*.” Death, then, has two major dimensions for Nietzsche. The biological fact of death is undeniable and inevitable; however death is not a simple negation, nor is it the *opposite* of existence. As Nietzsche writes, “only something that can live can be dead.”⁸² Death for Nietzsche is both an uncontrollable physiological ending, but also an event, state, or act that may be affirmed, transfigured and made meaningful as a part of being. Death *and* life are opportunities to resist the horrifying fact of meaningless temporal destruction; death *and* life require transformation from inevitable processes into expressions of value, a theme that preoccupies Nietzsche into his later works: “Death! To convert the stupid physiological fact to a moral necessity!”⁸³

As the idea of “conversion” implies, within Nietzsche’s account death does not have a secure ontological value. Rather, artificial limits in the form of norms or cultural values stabilize the experience death amidst unbound, infinite becoming. We see this when Nietzsche has Silenus tell Midas that it would be “much more fruitful” for him not to hear his wisdom. Productive life requires some shelter from the horrors of Dionysian reality—but shelter does not mean *denial*: “The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream birth of the Olympians.”⁸⁴ The illusory, “Apolline” middle world served as a bulwark inserted in-between the transitory experience of individual mortality and the unbound experience of all consuming time.

⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (Hereafter, WP), Ed., Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), #312, 484.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ BT, 42.

Surrounded by a community caught in the same “dream,” an individual could contextualize their pursuits through the shared belief in a meaningful world.⁸⁵

One such “dream” can be found in the functional religion of the Greek pantheon. Indeed, Nietzsche’s argument about the Apolline mythic structures defeating the ‘titanic’ forces of Dionysian existence parallels the foundational sequence from Olympian mythology, where all-devouring Kronos, “father time” is defeated by his child Zeus. The Olympians thus quite literally do battle with (and ultimately bind) all-devouring time.⁸⁶ For Nietzsche, the notoriously envious and competitive Olympian gods and demi-gods acted as intelligible boundaries for human action and achievement. Gods and demi-gods were not only paradigmatic personification of human passions and relationships, skills, and physical attributes. They were also the upper *limits* of these values, marking the most concentrated expressions of values that individuals might

⁸⁵ BT, 42-3; and Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest” [Hereafter HoC] in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 33-4.

⁸⁶ Zeus is aided in his battle against “father time” by his mother, *Rhea*, who is *also* representative of time. Rhea signifies time as it flows through generations of individuals through reproductive cycles, and is also associated with the flow of blood (as in bloodlines, but also menstruation.) Rhea, significantly for Nietzsche’s account, is also responsible for bringing the infant god Dionysus, torn into pieces, back to life. This form of genealogical “everlasting life” remains important to Nietzsche as a response to time as late as works such as *Twilight of the Idols*. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 39-44; 103-6; Friedrich Nietzsche, “What I Owe The Ancients,” #4-5 in *Twilight of the Idols* [Hereafter TI] in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 227-8.

struggle to approach within mortal bounds.⁸⁷ Thus Nietzsche comments, “the gods justify the life of men by living it themselves—the only satisfactory theodicy!”⁸⁸

Significantly, the Olympic myths (or any specific cultural belief) do not themselves solve the problems of meaning posed by time and death. Rather, for Nietzsche it is competitive activity that takes place *within* a cultural framework that gives life and death value. Homer supplies a useful illustration: by competing to be the best—as clever as Odysseus, as prudent as Penelope, or heroic like Achilles—the individual Greek meaningfully pursued their own ends while simultaneously validating the worth of Homer’s framework for the community as a whole, much as an athlete validates the rules of the game she chooses to play.⁸⁹ Moreover, the individual shapes and *re-creates* these cultural frameworks as she embodies, aiming to set herself as the new standard of greatness that others will attempt to match. This is “emulation that aims to exceed.”⁹⁰

There are a few important features of this model of meaningful death. Centrally, this Homeric understanding of meaningful death situates individuals within a project of simultaneous

⁸⁷ Unlike a Christian notion of the immortal soul which is bodiless, possibly formless, the Greek gods were conversely “super-bodied,” paradoxically understood *through* the human characteristics they had and those they lacked, such as the ability to age, to lose their strength and beauty, or the need to consume physical food (*ambrosia* is a kind of “anti-food.”) Thus the gods are *athanatoi*, undying and un-perishing, but otherwise they carried out “daily lives” and existences which, while timeless and out of reach for human beings outside of acts of hubris, took a form that was not *opposed* to human, worldly life. Instead the gods figuratively embodied life in its most concentrated, particular, and sometimes *contradictory* forms. In this sense, the gods embodied a kind of perfection that does not devalue mortal life or its complexity (as Nietzsche finds the unitary metaphysical Christian and Platonic notions of perfection to do.) On this aspect of Greek theology, see Giulia Sissa and Marcel Detienne, *The Daily Life of the Greek Gods*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁸⁸ BT, 24. That these myths depict horrifying rape, violence, and cruelty, for Nietzsche, indicates the fully horrifying nature of the reality they respond to. Nietzsche writes of the Dionysian reality: “What earthly existence is reflected in these repellently dreadful legends about the origins of the gods: a life ruled over by the *children of the night* alone, by strife, lust, deception age and death. [...] such a reality would then *extort* from us a world of myths in which Uranus, Kronos and Zeus and the struggles of the Titans would seem like a relief...” HoC, 175.

⁸⁹ BT, 44; also Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, 135-185.

⁹⁰ HoC, 35-6; The quoted phrase is from Christa Davis Acampora “Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates and Paul” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 24 (Fall 2002), 26.

relation and distinction: persons are related to each other through the common contest of values, but struggle to prove their specific excellence. The contest to be “the best” (which meant to become the new, supreme human *embodiment* of Homeric values) situates individual death in purposeful contexts, but also helps to keep the individual from falling away into oblivion. Nietzsche notes that “even a dead man can still spur a live one to consuming jealousy... Every great Hellene hands on the torch of the contest; every great virtue kindles new greatness.”⁹¹ Envy links the individual dead to the living, combating the “miserable, ephemeral” quality of one’s life by extending one’s “presence” into the unforeseen future as an example that might actively spur others to greatness.⁹² Political and cultural values therefore reinforce, and are reinforced by, individual creativity and action.

While Homeric life was deeply elitist, it is important to note that *distinction* in this context need not be understood in purely hierarchical terms: this view of meaningful contest requires the presence of peers. Indeed, for Nietzsche the vital, existence-affirming contest of values is always in danger of collapsing due to extraordinary, victorious *success*. An unmatchable victory destroys the grounds of meaningful mortal contest, creating a tyrannical, dominating figure against whom others become an undifferentiated mass. “That is the core of the Hellenic notion of the contest: it abominates the rule of one and fears its dangers; it desires as a *protection* against the genius, another genius.”⁹³ Thus Nietzsche can praise the accomplishments

⁹¹ HoC, 35-6.

⁹² This view of heroic striving is highly localized to “Homeric” Greece, and as such may appear fairly a-political; however, Nietzsche cites many different rivalries in his essay *Homer’s Contest*, including Pericles the statesman. We might see this sort of contest functioning in many different forums, and indeed the role of envy in politics is a subject of both Thucydides and Aristotle. I discuss the adaptation of Homeric heroism in the Athenian polis in chapters 2 and 3. For an overview of this process, however, see Janet Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity* (Blackwell Publishing, London 2000), 41.

⁹³ This is also the explanation that Nietzsche gives for the practice of ostracism; to prevent such dominating figures from emerging within the context of the city, any figure who was *too* excellent had to be sent away. The shelter of

of Homer while expressing concern that the sheer dominance of his vision threatened to enervate Greek culture. As Tracy Strong puts it, “The Homeric answer [fails], precisely because it [begins] to appear as an answer...”⁹⁴

What the example of Homeric death demonstrates for Nietzsche is that a meaningful response to Silenus cannot be guaranteed by the mere existence of the ‘correct’ set of shared values. Rather, death’s meaning is always understood in relation to *activity* that is apprehended within a cultural—and political—context.⁹⁵ Hence it matters a great deal for Nietzsche that no single response to Silenus can function universally for all time. These cultural frameworks are themselves constantly being recreated through the actions of their adherents—and also creatively supplanted. This element of creativity makes Nietzsche’s account of death’s meaning deeply contingent. The different works of the pre-Socratics and later (also more problematically for Nietzsche) the rational philosophy of Socrates as it is carried out into religious, scientific, and political institutions, offer competing frameworks for understanding the value of existence, each with distinct effects on the practical and ethical conduct of their adherents. For Nietzsche, some of these frameworks are superior to others.

the contest requires *ongoing competition*, or it reduces to straightforward domination and unconstrained violent, pointless conflict. “...if we take away the contest from Greek life, we gaze immediately into that pre-Homeric abyss of a gruesome savagery of hatred and pleasure in destruction [...] if we usually draw the conclusion from these effects that the Greek was unable to bear fame and fortune: we should perhaps, say more exactly that he was not able to bear fame without further competition or fortune at the end of the contest.” HoC, 37-38.

⁹⁴ Tracy Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, p. 152. This observation holds not only for Nietzsche’s sense of the cultural and political life Greeks, but also for modern politics. Nietzsche’s critiques of liberal democracy is in part that it is in danger of becoming a universally accepted, “totalizing” political project. See, for instance, his discussion of liberal democracy in TI (“Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” #37-8), 213.

⁹⁵ There is a debate concerning the extent of Nietzsche’s interest in political thought. As will be obvious here, I find Nietzsche very concerned with political life to the extent it reflects, and is a part of, a broader cultural life that enables or suppresses human creativity and value. For a thorough critique of Nietzsche as a political thinker, see Thomas Brobjer, “Nietzsche on Democracy and Grosse Politik,” in Herman W. Seimens and Vasti Roodt (eds), *Nietzsche, Power and Politics* (New York: W. de Gruyter, 2008), 205-229; For a counter-argument for Nietzsche’s democratic potential, see David Owen, “Nietzsche, Ethical Agency, and the Problem of Democracy” in the same volume, 143-168.

I began this section by suggesting that death operates as a conceptual pivot in Nietzsche's account, one that encourages a re-ordering of human relationships and political power. As we will see, for Nietzsche the understanding of death inherited by modernity is wildly transformed from the Homeric example. This change, for Nietzsche, produces a number of problematic shifts in the ways individuals understand their mortal lives. It also powerfully restricts how persons relate to each other. These problems are not necessary or natural problems, but rest in a transformation of death's meaning from a part of life, to *being's negation*. This new understanding of death conceptually restricts the grounds for transformative action Nietzsche associates with the Homeric Greeks, in part by giving rise to what Nietzsche identifies as a deeply passive understanding of personhood, one defined by mortal vulnerability.

To see how this understanding of death is activated within the democratic polity (for Nietzsche) it will be helpful first to consider what Nietzsche identifies as a transformative figure for the modern understanding of death: dying Socrates: "*Dying Socrates* as the human being whom knowledge and reasons have liberated from the fear of death, is the emblem that reminds all of [the] mission—namely to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified..."⁹⁶

II. Dying Socrates and the Cure for Life

Nietzsche's characterization of Socrates has justly received a lot of attention. It is antagonistic, varied, and complex, and across his works is consistently associated with a growing faith in rational, divine (or scientific) moral principles.⁹⁷ As I argue here, Socrates' death has its

⁹⁶ BT, 96.

⁹⁷ Most of this attention has looked at Nietzsche's treatment of Socrates' life, rather than his death. On Nietzsche's evolving understanding of Socrates, see Alexander Nehamas, "A Reason for Socrates' Face: Nietzsche on the Problem of Socrates" in *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998) 128-155; In this dissertation I later assert that we can find a productive model for understanding death in Socrates' performance in the *Apology*. Nietzsche's attacks on Socrates are, as mentioned, largely due to the influence of rationalism and Platonic metaphysics, where my interests are with the more skeptical, aporetic Socrates portrayed in the *Apology*. In spite of major moral disagreements, it is specifically the final

own paradigmatic importance for Nietzsche: “The *dying Socrates* became the new ideal, never seen before, of noble Greek youths.”⁹⁸ For Nietzsche, Socratic rationalism supplants the “healthier” framework of Homeric myth, transforming the meaning of death in crucial ways that are inherited by Christianity and the modern democratic project. The model of death provided by Socrates fundamentally departs from the Homeric response in two critical respects. First, rather than beginning from a direct acknowledgement of Silenus’ bleak wisdom, the Socratic view begins from a position of rational optimism. The central shift here is that the suffering prompted by death can be made intelligible: suffering must have a *reason*.⁹⁹ Related, the second major transformation found in Socratic death is the idea that being, including death, can be *corrected* through the proper application of rational knowledge. As both of these changes inform Nietzsche’s critique of death’s place within modern democratic politics, it will be helpful to consider each in some detail.

What I refer to here as Socratic-Christian death in Nietzsche’s account rests on a conceptual transformation of the meaning of the moment of death. Instead of an affirmable part of being, death is reduced to a transitory event that happens to the body, “curing” the individual of existence in favor of a higher reality. Nietzsche thus presents the moment of Socrates’ death as a parable of its own, with ominous implications:

moments of Socrates’ life that Nietzsche finds particularly troublesome about Socrates. As a model for how one might *live*, someone who questioned authority and lived by his own self-made principles, Nietzsche is more positive: “I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said—and did not say [...] I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (Hereafter, GS) trans. Walter Kaufman (Vintage Books, New York 1974), 272, #340.

⁹⁸ BT, 89.

⁹⁹ BT, 95-6.

—something loosened his tongue [...] and he said: “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster.” This ridiculous and terrible ‘last word’ means for those who have ears “O Crito, *life is a disease.*” [...] Socrates, Socrates *suffered life!*¹⁰⁰

Here Nietzsche references the Greek tradition of sacrificing a rooster to Asclepius, a deity of medicine, when cured of an affliction—in this case, *life*. By altering how the moment of death is evaluated—an escape to a higher, better existence—Socrates also alters how *life* is evaluated: he redefines existence as suffering that requires a cure.

The idea that existence requires or could even *have* a “cure” marks an important shift in the response to the pessimistic wisdom of Silenus. Silenus requires an acknowledgement of the radical contingency and uncontrollable nature of reality, yet leaves open the possibility (and burden) of affirming life and death as they are. In contrast, encapsulated in the Socratic belief that the facts of being can be deduced into universal causal patterns, that everything is intelligible, is the “unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being, but even of *correcting it.*”¹⁰¹ The Socratic-Christian view of death thereby shifts the locus of meaning from *enacted* values within a cultural framework (such as Olympian or Homeric values) that might be altered and overcome, to intellectual *understanding* of a moral framework, against which the variable experiences of life may be measured, judged, and corrected.

Simply put, then, the transformation Nietzsche outlines may be characterized as a shift from the Homeric view of death as an affirmable *part of being* into Socratic-Christian death, where death becomes a *generic transition from being*, one that can be explained—but also *justified*—through different types of rationalization. This last point is important. From the

¹⁰⁰ GS, 272; Socrates remains symbolic of the rejection of life for Nietzsche as late as TI (see I #67).

¹⁰¹ BT, 95-6; see also Nietzsche’s *Daybreak* [hereafter “DB”] trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) #92, 53.

perspective of Silenus, death may be explained: a person can understand the facts and circumstances of death and what caused it in a straightforward sense. However, the *meaning* of death is not given through these facts, but through the social and cultural connections and values they enact. That death might be rationally given *meaning as such* requires a more universal appeal, one which can give death a fixed, definable and inherent significance.¹⁰²

For Nietzsche, modern institutions that inherit this Socratic understanding of death attempt to do this in distinct ways. The Church, for instance, provides universal standards for goodness and salvation while simultaneously explaining the suffering of death as the price of sin; a wage that cannot be repaid by mortal action—“that stroke of genius on the part of Christianity: God himself sacrifices himself for the guilt of mankind [...] the creditor sacrificing himself for his debtor, out of *love* [...]”¹⁰³ The medical sciences, also, provide universal definitions of bodily health that explain “natural” death and provide “treatments” for the end of life, an experience that Nietzsche describes as “the practice of vegetating in cowardly dependence on doctors and practitioners after the meaning of life;”¹⁰⁴ and (as we will see below) the polity provides a legal and ethical framework that serves a similar function. Each offers comprehensible “reasons” for death, but at a cost.

By starting from the assumption that death and the basic experiences of reality are somehow in the wrong, attempts to correct for the “faults” of mortal existence that are merely its “features” not only devalues the actual experience of life and death, but must also inevitably end in disappointment. Counter-intuitively, this disappointment strengthens the justificatory power of

¹⁰² That Nietzsche rejects the need (or existence) of inherent value in the world can be seen in several of his works (for instance, WP, #585). The point here is not that Nietzsche thinks the world is meaningless, or that people ought to do without meaning, but that they must find a way to be satisfied with meaning they themselves create, as individuals or through cultural values (such as the Homeric project.) I elaborate on this point below.

¹⁰³ GM 2.21, 92.

¹⁰⁴ TI, #36, 210.

these rational explanations. Nietzsche is quick to point out that the need to justify death is not generated by the pain of death and loss as such, but by the apparent *meaninglessness* of death and the suffering meaningless pain causes. That the problem of death is largely felt as one of meaning and meaninglessness paradoxically requires that the standards of value put forward by Platonic forms, the ascetic priest, or, finally, the political ends of the state, be impossible to actually live up to. For Nietzsche, this impossible standard is actively willed: “The *will* of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to a degree that can never be atoned for [...] his will to infect and poison the fundamental ground [...] with guilt so as to cut off once and for all his own exit from this labyrinth of ‘fixed ideas’ [...]”¹⁰⁵ So long as suffering can be explained through the agency of human *failings* the hardships of life may be made intelligible. Understood as the fault of some sort of agent, death has a reason—the consequence of sinful, or irrational mortal activity that leads to the failure of the more perfect goals of salvation, perfect health, or communal preservation.¹⁰⁶

It is important here that the price of “fixing” meaning for death in this way is a transformation of how *life* is understood. Quite significant for Nietzsche are the ways that the Socratic faith in universal, “divine” truths, such as Plato’s forms and especially Christian doctrine, pervert the experience of death—also those experiences basic to life: sex, pleasure and pain—into symptoms of a prolonged, shameful illness. “Suffering, struggle, work, death are considered as objections and question marks against life, as something that ought not to last, for

¹⁰⁵ GM, II.22, 92-93.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* In GM Nietzsche connects the “sickness” of viewing life and death this way to the invention of God for the sake of the certainty—albeit the *certainty of guilt*—that it can provide; but he also associates this development with the state (GM 2.19, 88-9). For a longer discussion of the ways that the experience of suffering create the need for an impossible ideal, and its relationship to political responsibility, see Bonnie Honig *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 46-54.

which one requires a cure—and *has* a cure!”¹⁰⁷ More than a mere moment of transition, then, Socrates’ treatment of death transforms mortality into a *cause* of guilt, shame, and pity. Compared to the truer, more ideal standards of reason and the immortal soul, the mortal body, prone to failures, aging, desire and constant material needs, appears an embarrassing mistake—a mistake which, nonetheless, must be allowed to run its course.

Importantly, for Nietzsche the “cure” offered through death is limited to those sorts of deaths deemed ‘rational’ according to the inner logic of the Socratic-Christian moral order. And, crucially, this model of death enshrines bodily failure as the only rationally desirable death. Nietzsche wars against this idea. “Christianity should never be forgiven...for perverting even the manner of death into a value judgment on people and the past! [...] this establishes the proper (which is to say, physiological) appreciation of a so-called *natural* death: which at the end of the day, is itself just an ‘unnatural’ death, a suicide.”¹⁰⁸ The “unnatural” death that comes by merely allowing the body to fail is the “suicide” of the willing, freely acting individual. Instead of the freedom to commit oneself (or others) to a set of values unto death—as an Achilles might accept death to live by his code—death must come when the body fails, and no sooner. To purposefully accept death before the body fails is to choose transient worldly values over the more “perfect” standards of divine or scientific truths; a sinful ‘sacrifice’ of the self that runs counter to the logic of meaningful salvation, or the goals of medical (or political) preservation.¹⁰⁹

The outcome of this model of death, for Nietzsche, is a dangerous conflation of living and dying. In place of an existence (and a death) that might be affirmed on its own terms, the world-denying view of Socratic-Christian values “substitute[s] a slow suicide: gradually a petty,

¹⁰⁷ WP, 130.

¹⁰⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, (“Skirmishes” #38) TI, 210.

¹⁰⁹ GS, 282-3; WP, 142.

poor, but durable life; gradually a quite ordinary, bourgeois, mediocre life [...].”¹¹⁰ Death takes on a deeply ambivalent value: it is to be held off and lamented, but the state it ultimately *yields*, desired. The Christian martyr illustrates this dynamic most clearly for Nietzsche: “When Christianity came into being the craving for suicide was immense—and Christianity turned it into a lever of its power. It allowed only two kinds of suicide [...] only martyrdom and the ascetic’s slow destruction of his body were permitted.”¹¹¹ The martyr, in other words, accomplishes all at once what Christianity teaches its adherents to desire: to leave life.

If the revaluation of death under the Socratic-Christian model causes individuals to view their own existence differently, it also transforms social relationships. Unlike the Homeric contest, where individuals viewed themselves (and their deaths) as distinct, but related through creative, mutual activity, the Socratic-Christian understanding of death rests in common confirmation to an internalized principle or ideal; in other words, through *understanding*. It is not what someone does, in other words, but the *inherent* value of the individual, immortal soul, and the *inherent* weakness and vulnerability of the mortal body that gives a life and death its meaning. Crucially, this is a meaning defined *by* sameness—the consequences of persons learning to bear guilty *responsibility* for the suffering of life and death, making persons “to a

¹¹⁰ WP, 143; on Nietzsche’s complicated view of suicide, see Paul Loeb, “Suicide, Meaning, and Redemption,” *Nietzsche on Time and History*, 168-171.

¹¹¹ GS #131, 185; Nietzsche has a very specific understanding of suicide martyrdom (and of Christianity); while he is open to suicide in some circumstances, religious suicide that denies the world is always situated within his critique of nihilism. As I address later, even a person who decides that violent death is the best expression of their personal values, and who makes this choice at the expense of others, never forfeits responsibility for his choices in Nietzsche’s account. From a theoretical perspective, an advantage to taking on Nietzsche’s understanding of death is that it provides means of analyzing political and cultural suicide in terms more nuanced than a binary of rational or irrational, and therefore in ways that might be more conducive to comprehending and limiting the conditions that foster this sort of political violence. There is not space here for a full analysis of this point, however, on modern suicide violence, see Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and consequently calculable.”¹¹²

Death, understood as a generic negation, teaches persons to view their individual lives in a uniform way—but this also serves a social and *political* function.

All “willing” souls are housed and dependent on bodies that are *universally capable of being negated*. This means that mortal life, experienced through the inherently vulnerable mortal body that is *capable* of suffering and death, provides a constant that can be used to compare any human life to any other human life, or which might be acted on for the “exchange” of debts.¹¹³ Bodily death and the immortal soul, in this way, make the individual life “calculable.”¹¹⁴ Every life may be evaluated by universal principles of health, virtue, or salvation, on the one hand, but also *exchangeable* potential for misery, suffering, and (ultimately) death. In this way, the preservation and care of the mortal body for the sake of the immortal soul produces a radically egalitarian and atomistic view of society. All individual lives are granted equal status (and immortality) *de facto* by virtue of the soul—in spite of any distinctions in political or material conditions. In this way the Socratic transformation of death is *democratizing*: all lives matter in this type of formulation *in the same way*, regardless of circumstance or material welfare.

¹¹² The full passage places this development of responsibility for the suffering of life as a “preparatory” step: The task of breeding an animal with the right to make promises evidently embraces and presupposes as a preparatory task that one first *makes* men to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and consequently calculable.” As this passage suggests, for Nietzsche the development of a will for guilt, even with these negative qualities, is not a completely bad thing. Although Nietzsche is anxious about the social consequences of this development, the development of a will capable of situating death’s meaning in purposeful (if guilt-stricken) context is the first step for Nietzsche towards the kind of creative will that ultimately defines his sovereign individual: GM II.2, 59.

¹¹³ GM II.4, 63: “Throughout the greater part of human history [...] anger is held in check and modified by the idea that every injury has its *equivalent* and can actually be paid back, even if only through the pain of the culprit.”

¹¹⁴ GM II.2, 59; GM II.21-22, 92-93).

It is important to note up front that Nietzsche, rather infamously, does not think that all life is equally valuable or worth preserving.¹¹⁵ In opposition to the Christian dictum against suicide, Nietzsche actively encourages those who think “we are ripe for nonexistence; for us it is reasonable not to exist” to act freely on this philosophy.¹¹⁶ Such a seemingly heartless endorsement of suicide is less bleak if one thinks, as Nietzsche does, that the Christian and Socratic worldviews already conflate worldly life with dying, while nonetheless insisting somewhat cruelly that adherents must suffer sinful existence until their bodies fail.¹¹⁷ For Nietzsche, life threatens to become “poisoned” by this relationship with death.

Even if we reject Nietzsche’s rather extreme conclusions, the *reasons* he critiques this view of death are worth our attention. As we will see in the next section, for Nietzsche the modern (liberal) democratic movement inherits many of the troubling characteristics of Socratic-Christian death. Secular death generates a specific kind of political arrangement that Nietzsche situates within his general critique of democratic politics: fearful, painful death establishes citizens as subjects of pity, with lives in need of correction by the “healing” ministrations of the political movement or the state. In the context of the modern state the management of political subjects through rational, moral, or scientific principles is legitimated and reinforced by communal appeals to mortal compassion—a compassion that sustains not only democratic, but binding, hierarchical relationships. As he puts it, the “*democratic* movement is the heir of the

¹¹⁵ TI, (“... Ancients,” #2), 210; WP, 143.

¹¹⁶ WP, #247, p. 143 Rather than a quick purging of those individuals who do not believe that their lives have any value, what this view of death as *desirable but withheld* preserves for Nietzsche are vectors of an attitude against life that makes it harder for others to make meaning out of their hardships. Perversely, for those who do truly do suffer life the slim comfort offered by Silenus—that one might at least die soon—is withheld from the individual in the name of a truer, more divine, or more correct end.

¹¹⁷ WP, #246, 142.

Christian movement [...] they are at one in their faith in the morality of *shared* pity, as if that were morality in itself.”¹¹⁸

III. Democratic Pity, Democratic Death

Nietzsche’s critique of (democratic) pity is well known, though what is often overlooked is how mortal vulnerability, grounded in an understanding of death as negation, works as a powerful lever of the political project.¹¹⁹ For Nietzsche, the modern political movement inherits an understanding of death that adapts Socratic-Christian death to potentially disastrous ends, and his criticisms of democracy are scathing.¹²⁰ Without agreeing with his diagnosis of democracy, I argue here that Nietzsche’s critical account nonetheless helpfully demonstrates how the uncritical use narratives of mortal vulnerability can restrict creative, individual action in two distinct ways. First, mortal vulnerability situates hierarchical relationships of obligation and vulnerability between the individual and the state, legitimating the management and disposal of life. Second, and more subtly, mortal vulnerability and the pity it sustains assert an expansive equality *between* individuals, one which commits individuals to an ongoing, *common performance* of vulnerability that can obscure important distinctions in power and material status.

¹¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, [Hereafter BGE] in Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2000) #202, 305-6.

¹¹⁹ My intent here is not to make Nietzsche into a democrat, but to argue along with theorists like William Conolly, Lawrence J. Hatab, David Owen, and Joanne Faulkner that we might make use of Nietzsche’s work for democratic ends. While Nietzsche loathed the liberal democratic project, a Nietzschean treatment of death provides a conceptual approach to death that can enhance political discourse in important ways. For a concise overview of different positions representative of this literature see Herman W. Seimens and Vasti Roodt (eds), *Nietzsche, Power and Politics* (New York: W. de Gruyter 2008), 1-37.

¹²⁰ Here I mostly use “pity” to stand in for Nietzsche’s “*mitleid*,” (feeling with) as a way of emphasizing the power dynamics Nietzsche believes compassion generates. The literature on pity in Nietzsche is enormous, and I cannot do justice to it here. For a succinct overview see Michael Frazer, “The Compassion of Zarathustra” *The Review of Politics* 68 (2006), 51-2.

For Nietzsche, the modern secular world is oriented by the moral goal of “the preservation and advancement of mankind;” not salvation from sin—a shift that on the surface seems to endorse worldly life. Yet Nietzsche is critical: “Preservation of *what?* Is the question one immediately has to ask. Advancement *to what?*”¹²¹ The point, for Nietzsche, is that what is life *preserving* need not be life *affirming*. In one of Nietzsche’s later notebooks, he thus writes of the “political mania” that has seized his time as “before all else a *secularization*, belief in the *world* and denial of [...] ‘a world on the other side.’ Its goal is the well being of *fleeting* individuals.”¹²² Here Nietzsche connects the modern political project to Silenus’s description of humanity as a “wretched ephemeral race.” The transformation of divine values into secular causes does little to alter what Nietzsche sees as the world-denying dynamic found in the Socratic-Christian response to death.¹²³ Life is characterized under the modern political paradigm as a transitional state, something to be momentarily preserved until natural death—a view that opposes Nietzsche’s proposition to “live *in such a manner* that you will have to *desire* to live again.”¹²⁴

Setting Nietzsche’s positive “teaching” aside momentarily, it is important to see that this view of life as “fleeting” is not merely an inert background condition, but actively situates political relationships in a number of ways. While individual life may be defined as “fleeting” in

¹²¹ DB, #106, 61. He continues, “but this definition is an expression of the desire for a formula, nothing and nothing more[...]suppose one conceived the attainment of mankind's 'highest happiness' as being the *to what* and *of what* of morality: would one mean the highest degree of happiness that individual men could gradually attain to? Or a necessarily incalculable average-happiness which could finally be attained to by all? And why should the way to that have to be morality?” The “formula” of human happiness and progress thus functions as a justificatory principle much as Socratic truths and Christian sin functioned: they give structure to the belief that there is a *reason* for suffering.

¹²² From Nietzsche’s unpublished writings, available online through the KGWB (<http://www.nietzschesource.org>) 11[163]. The translation is from Thomas Brobjer, “Nietzsche on Democracy and Grosse Politik,” in *Nietzsche, Power, and Politics*, 212.

¹²³ DB, #106, 61.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

secular frameworks, this does little to displace natural death as a moral, and *political*, good.¹²⁵ Recalling that Nietzsche's broader project is the critique of Socratic-Christian morality assists our understanding of this account. Rather than death when God wills it, here death is justified and managed according to the limits of science and medicine, framed within a rational legal order that has at its heart the twin goals of preservation and the elimination of suffering.¹²⁶ Yet this view of death is now subject to sinister twist. No longer promising a higher and better existence after death, the secular shift away from transcendental values returns the individual to the same position as the primordial Greek facing the horrors of temporal oblivion. This means that the project of preserving life in the secular context is *for the sake of natural death*.

In this way death remains a "question mark against life" in secular contexts for Nietzsche. Similar to its place in Christian orders, death also structures social relationships by remaining a problem requiring correction. Instead of grace and salvation *through* death, the state offers rational, legal activity that seeks to preserve collective life *unto* natural death. But rather than promising a transition to a truer existence, secular death makes no promises concerning the 'other side.'¹²⁷ For this reason Nietzsche identifies a continuation of the same nihilistic, suicidal impulse found under Christianity within the liberal democratic state, one that must be channeled so as not to undermine the stated, compassionate mission of preservation.¹²⁸ The state modifies the dual enshrinement of natural death and vulnerable life as a "lever of [its] power" through its

¹²⁵ DB, #106, 61. Emphasis original.

¹²⁶ Nietzsche is deeply skeptical of the modern interest in the "pursuit of happiness" as a mutually compatible goal with preservation, particularly as it is framed as a moral end: "has morality not, broadly speaking, opened up such an abundance of sources of displeasure that one could say, rather, that with very refinement of morals mankind has hitherto become more discontented with himself, his neighbor, and the lot of his existence?" *ibid*.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*. See also GS, #124, 180.

¹²⁸ GS #337-8, 267-71.

use of war and criminal justice, where “unnatural” death is sanctioned for official ends. As Nietzsche comments, “war offers a detour to suicide, but a detour with good conscience.”¹²⁹ Unlike a death chosen or accepted for personal reasons, which must appear irrational and wasteful within the political paradigm of preservation, death in the service of war or death under the dictates of law have no such limitations: such deaths serve, and preserve, the community as a whole.

Nietzsche is specifically concerned with the ways that individual life and distinctions are subsumed into modern group memberships, by which individuals may then be managed and deployed, passively and uncritically:

One never tires of enumerating and indicting all that is evil and inimical, prodigal, costly, extravagant in the form individual existence has assumed hitherto, one hopes to manage more cheaply, more safely, more equitably, more uniformly if there exist only *large bodies and their members*. Everything that in any way corresponds to this body [...] is felt to be *good*.¹³⁰

What is particularly important about Nietzsche’s analysis of this understanding of death is not simply that the logic of the modern political project can so easily manage and dispose of individual life and individual values in the name of group well-being. Rather it is that this way of understanding the meaning of life and death is *seductive*. Speaking of war under the modern state he writes, “rapturously, they throw themselves into the new danger of death because the sacrifice for the fatherland seems to them to offer the long desired permission—to *dodge their goal*.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ *ibid*, #338, 269-71. For Nietzsche the cause of preservation—or any cause not of one’s own willing—removes the burden of self-definition from the individual; a seductive appeal of totalizing political projects and wars. He continues (in the same aphorism cited above) “For our “own way” is too hard and demanding and too remote from the love and gratitude of others, and we do not really mind escaping from it—and from our very own conscience—to flee into the conscience of the others and into the lovely temple of the religion of pity.”

¹³⁰ DB, #132, 83.

¹³¹ GS, #338, 269-71.

Specifically, the logic of the state makes use of (and reinforces) a way of relating to one's own life and death where meaning is defined by conforming to a purpose that have been supplied *for* the individual, along with the social relations of compassion and community these imply.¹³² Nietzsche comments, "This is the moral undercurrent of our age; individual empathy and social feeling here play into one another's hands."¹³³

This last point—on the collaboration of individual feelings of compassion and the desire to belong to a collective group project—is particularly important for understanding Nietzsche's critique of death's place in democratic politics. From his perspective, participation in the political project of democratic, mortal compassion has more to do with the existential and moral *comfort* of the individual than it does with an honest attempt to reckon with the actual suffering of others:

If you who adhere to this religion [of pity], have the same attitude towards yourselves that you have towards your fellow men; if you refuse to let your own suffering lie on you even for an hour and if you constantly try to prevent and forestall all possible distress [...] if you experience suffering as [...] a defect of existence, then it is clear that beside your religion of pity you also harbor another religion in your heart that is perhaps the mother of pity: the *religion of comfortableness*. How little you know of human happiness, you comfortable and benevolent people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or as in your case, *remain small* together.¹³⁴

Viewing mortal suffering as categorically opposed to human happiness, for Nietzsche, is fundamentally disempowering. Most centrally, it shores up the idea that the natural pains of mortal life are legitimate cause for the individual pursuits of life to be managed and corrected by others. But a narrative of preservation against *generic* mortal suffering caused by the *fact* of

¹³² Nietzsche is not against group goals or morality as such, but these *must* for him come from a position of individual responsibility and choice: "To *recommend* a goal to mankind is something quite different: the goal is then thought of as something that *lies in our own discretion*." DB, #108, 63.

¹³³ DB, #132, 83.

¹³⁴ GS, #338, 269-71.

death also relieves the individual—and the *polity*—of the messy interpersonal accounting that life in a world defined by contingency and brute luck demands. Lending support to a project of preservation against mortal vulnerability or suffering *as such* conceptually folds those struggles of life that are *not* natural, but which an individual or community might be historically or politically complicit, into a common undifferentiated project of *universal* preservation.

In keeping with this, similar to the democratizing role of the immortal soul and vulnerable body under Christianity, the citizen who is physically *capable of being negated by death* provides a powerful definition for subjects of political power and legal jurisprudence. Mortal vulnerability supplies a generic definition for subject-hood that can be applied universally, allowing the political project to relate to its members through their neutral, formal status as living, physical subjects with bodies to be preserved or set to die on its behalf.¹³⁵ As has been well commented on by scholars of bio-politics, this “generic” means of relating individuals under the law does little to limit the claims made by the state to, as Foucault has put it, a “right of death, and power over life.”¹³⁶ Nietzsche raises this point by suggesting that within the context of mortal vulnerability, the very life of the subject generates a political obligation in the eyes of the state.¹³⁷ “It is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe exists—and [...] one has to *pay them back* [...]”¹³⁸ In this formulation existence itself becomes indebted to the preserving power of the political community. The political project is thus easily

¹³⁵ TI, (“Skirmishes”) #38, 213.

¹³⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Right of Death and Power Over Life” in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*.

¹³⁷ GM, II. 9, 71; II. 22, 91-2. These laws that can exact mortal punishment are in part legitimated by the “debt” of physical security and survival that is “owed” to the state through the ways it shelters a person from harm. “One lives in a community, one enjoys the advantages of a community (Oh what advantages! We sometimes underrate them today), one dwells protected [...] since one has bound and pledged oneself to the community precisely with a view to injuries and hostile acts. What will happen *if this pledge is broken?*”

¹³⁸ GM II. 11; II. 19-20, 88-90.

characterized as physician to a perpetually sick patient, one *obligated* to obey the doctor's orders.

Yet for Nietzsche the need to manage and correct mortal vulnerability does not merely produce hierarchical relationships. Pity also builds powerful connections between equals, drawing forward those struggles that are by nature common to all: our vulnerable, aging bodies and the inevitable pain of loss—facts which are figured in death. Thus Nietzsche writes that there is something “mobbish” about pity. It erases distinctions.¹³⁹ This complaint seemingly serves Nietzsche's elitist tendencies, yet as Manuel Dries comments, Nietzschean distinction need not be in terms of domination, hierarchical power, or economic class.¹⁴⁰ With respect to mortal compassion, in fact, Nietzsche's argument is of particular importance for identifying the kinds of political dynamics that can disenfranchise the vulnerable, or restrict the political grounds of agency and recognition for those lacking formal political status.

This can be seen by considering how the move to treat death as the basis for a shared, universal experience effectively brackets the specific cause, context, or response to mortal vulnerability faced by a specific individual or group. As Nietzsche puts it, “When people try to benefit someone in distress, the intellectual frivolity with which those moved by pity assume the role of fate is for the most part outrageous; one simply knows nothing of the whole inner sequence and intricacies that are distress for me or for you.”¹⁴¹ Nietzsche's point here is that appeals to shared pity can impose a narrative of *comparable* or *exchangeable* suffering where

¹³⁹ See Manuel Dries, “Toward Adulism: Nihilism and Becoming in Nietzsche's Philosophy” in *Nietzsche on Time and History*, (ed) Manuel Dries (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 139.

¹⁴⁰ As Dries points out, for Nietzsche even the unity of two people in love requires distinction—a distinction without domination. If within a pair one becomes dominant, the distinctions of the loved other become erased and give into the “sameness,” the mark of tyranny. See Manuel Dries, “Toward Adulism: Nihilism and Becoming in Nietzsche's Philosophy,” 139.

¹⁴¹ GS 338, 269.

none exists.¹⁴² This particularly matters to the extent that the conditions that shape the experience of mortal vulnerability are not necessarily natural, but often social, political, or historical in origin. A person might feel deeply vulnerable before death at the loss of a loved one, for instance, but this cannot *equate* to the vulnerability of persons facing death as a result of formal political status (or its lack), systematic discrimination, or material insecurity. To suggest that death ought to be treated as comparable in these circumstances is an erasure of massive political significance. What Nietzsche's concern highlights is that attaching the democratic project of pity to a claim of mutual, ontological mortal vulnerability creates a community at the expense of death's actual *circumstances*.

The stakes of this erasure are not simply a matter of political recognition, but action. A subtle problem Nietzsche's account also draws forward is that denying the individual the uniqueness of their suffering also denies the particular strength or effort undertaken in responding to that hardship. The result is to cast the subject of suffering in mute, passive terms, rather than in terms that recognize the tremendous strengths or capacities for action persons and communities can enact in conditions of extreme hardship. Mortal vulnerability, especially, defines community belonging in terms of what one is or what one might suffer, not in terms of what one can, or desires to do.¹⁴³ This framing of communal belonging thus shifts from specific goals and values *responding* to ontological vulnerability, as it was for Nietzsche's Homeric Greeks, *to ontological vulnerability itself*. Particularly troubling for Nietzsche is the potential for relationships defined by mutual suffering to actively restrict divergent responses to suffering that take unique forms, including those of strength or celebration: inclusion in a community of pity

¹⁴² For Nietzsche the idea of "exchangeable" suffering sits at the very heart of political justice, as it grows out of the creditor-debtor relationship, where bodily suffering could be exchanged for a broken promise. GM. II

¹⁴³ GM II.12, 50-51.

depends on *remaining pitiable in the same way* that dominant attitudes deem appropriately sympathetic.¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche thus insists that democratic pity not only recognizes vulnerability, it binds us to it.

Viewed from a Nietzschean perspective, the danger of setting compassionate preservation as a political foundation thus lies in rendering unimportant the diversity of ways persons concretely must face death, but also the ways they might grow, or build meaningful connections with others *through* mutual understanding of specific experiences of vulnerability.¹⁴⁵ *Universal* pronouncements about death draw attention away from specific conditions that affect only a subset of persons in favor of a more inclusive narrative. This is why, for Nietzsche, political projects are particularly dangerous when animated by “totalizing” appeals, seeking to apply rigorous universal values to a whole population.¹⁴⁶ The universal mandate to preserve life against mortal vulnerability *as such* need not make room for distinct views about what constitutes a fulfilling and meaningful life or death to be expressed or enacted, and as Nietzsche argues, can in fact actively suppresses these.

¹⁴⁴ A very recent political example of this dynamic, and its practical stakes, might be found in the “Black Lives Matter” movement and the swift “All Lives Matter” response. Without disputing the idea that all lives *ought* to matter (as Nietzsche might), when viewed from the perspective of Nietzsche’s theory what comes forward in this exchange is how the appeal to a universal value of life in the face of death, even when sincerely expressed, can nonetheless undermine the conditions of political action. In this case, the statement “all lives matter” conceptually brackets the specific historical and political conditions that situate black death in the United States in favor of a universal principle. Because “all lives matter” focuses on the question of life and death as such, and *not* the specific blindness to black death in the United States, it is a statement that allows adherents to feel morally satisfied—comfortable, in Nietzsche’s language—without critically engaging any particular political conditions, and particular acts of strength or violence, or any particular responsibility. In this way, even a well intentioned universal appeal can both erase the concrete conditions of death, but also restrict the grounds for critical action by insisting on a specific form of sympathetic performance. On a similar point from a non Nietzschean perspective see Dora Apel’s discussion of the media portrayal of Ferguson protesters, “‘Hands Up, Don’t Shoot’ Surrendering to Liberal Illusions” in *Theory and Event*, Vol. 17, Issue 3, (Supplement, 2014).

¹⁴⁵ GS #388, *ibid*. There is room in Nietzsche’s account for common *understanding* and joint action. In this same passage from GS he notes, “you will wish to help—but only those whose distress you *understand* entirely because they share with you one suffering and one hope—your friends—and only in the manner in which you help yourself.”

¹⁴⁶ Maria Cominos, “The Question of Nietzsche’s Anti-Politics and Human Transfiguration” in *Nietzsche, Power, and Politics*, 85-103.

Certainly there is something repelling, even offensive, about objecting to the preservation of life, not to mention arguing (as Nietzsche does) that “sacrificing” some for the sake of one’s own goals is permissible. Without endorsing Nietzsche’s apparent callousness, his critique remains valuable for highlighting the ambivalence of mortal vulnerability as a foundation for politics, and the unintended consequences such a foundation can produce. It is worth emphasizing that Nietzsche does not think that natural death, or preservation for that matter, is inherently bad. Nor is he arguing we should overlook the suffering of others. In and of itself, compassion is a necessary fact of conscious life: we must feel, and we are inevitably drawn into feeling for others in our lives. The danger is getting “stuck” in the sort of sympathetic dynamic that punishes critical judgment and action in favor of “appropriate” communal belonging.¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche’s point is that preservation alone should not be the end we assign human existence: *living a life* should be. He writes, “I want to teach them that what is understood by so few today, least of all by these preachers of pity: *to share not suffering but joy.*”¹⁴⁸

Nietzsche’s genealogical project of trans-valuation aims to expose and disrupt these political narratives, and so far, my reconstruction of Nietzsche’s critique has not considered the question of what sort of political acknowledgment of mortality is possible without falling into the dangers identified with democratic death. Yet Nietzsche’s project is also one of transformation and cultural revaluation for his own time through a critical recovery of the past. For this reason the Homeric examples Nietzsche uses to illustrate an effective response to Silenus are worth our attention—specifically his idiosyncratic treatment of Achilles. But Nietzsche is not seeking to simply *recreate* Homeric, heroic values in modernity. Rather, as Christa Davis Acampora notes,

¹⁴⁷ Michael Frazer, “The Compassion of Zarathustra,” 51-2, 69.

¹⁴⁸ GS #338, 271.

“[Nietzsche] takes on the imposition of the constraint of “Homer”...and then he strives to conquer that ideal by producing something still more beautiful and more powerful.”¹⁴⁹ For this reason, Nietzsche’s specific choice of Homer’s Achilles as a response to Silenus is worth our attention. What does Nietzsche recover in the figure of Achilles, and what does he seek to surpass?

IV. Achilles, Dionysus & Beautiful Death

Nietzsche’s early characterization of Achilles reflects an approach to death he returns to at several points in his later works: a view where death affirms the desire to live as a particular person, understood through the capacity to make, enact and embody a set of values in fundamentally uncontrollable contexts. This view does not deny mortal vulnerability—in fact, it insists on it—but it also insists that vulnerability not be conceptually *opposed* to strength. One may in fact be strongest precisely when they are most vulnerable. Nietzsche’s account thus provides resources for a political understanding of death that explicitly rests on an expression of those parts of life essential to politics: our commitments and our differences, as they are felt and expressed in conditions not of our choosing.

Achilles is brought up in several places throughout Nietzsche’s works, more often in reference to the achievement of Homer’s poetic genius than as a subject of praise in his own right. When Nietzsche discusses Achilles directly, however, his account is unusual for focusing on the hero *who has already died*:

Existence under the bright sunshine of such gods is regarded as desirable in itself, and the real pain of Homeric men is caused by parting from it, especially by early parting: so that now, reversing the wisdom of Silenus, we might say of the Greeks that “to die soon is the worst of all for them, the next worst—to die at all.” Once heard, it will ring out again’ do not forget the lament of the short-lived Achilles, mourning the leaf-like change and vicissitudes of the race of men and the decline of the heroic age. It is not unworthy of the

¹⁴⁹ Acampora, “Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates and Paul,” 25.

greatest hero to long for a continuation of life, even though he live as a day laborer [...] that lamentation itself becomes a song of praise.¹⁵⁰

Here Nietzsche focuses on the ghost of Achilles from the *Odyssey*, rather than the living hero of the *Iliad* who accepts his youthful fate.¹⁵¹ This appears odd because living Achilles reflects an attitude towards death (his own and others) repeated by Nietzsche in his later works, namely a “[indifference] to hardship, cruelty, deprivation, even life. Being ready to sacrifice people for your cause, yourself included.”¹⁵² Nietzsche’s celebration of Homer may appear as an endorsement of an archaic heroism that seeks excellence without regard for death; yet Nietzsche’s celebration of the *shade* of Achilles grieving for life invites a closer look.

Of the many themes in Homer’s epics, death and heroic valor are among the most prominent. Yet Neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey*, texts Nietzsche engages throughout his lifetime, are simple endorsements of glorious death.¹⁵³ Jasper Griffin has described Homer’s works as a “poem of life and death” as it is “the contrast and transition between the two [that] the poet is concerned to emphasize, and on this he concentrates his energies and our gaze.”¹⁵⁴ Achilles is paradigmatic because he is the most extreme example: “It is part of the greatness of Achilles that he is able to contemplate and accept his own death more fully and more passionately than any other hero.”¹⁵⁵ By using *dead* Achilles to respond to Silenus, Nietzsche’s account draws our attention more fully to the tensions inherent in living a life that *accepts* death. What are these tensions?

¹⁵⁰ BT, 43.

¹⁵¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*; translated by Robert Fagels (Penguin Press, New York 1996) Book II, ln. 548-9, 265.

¹⁵² TI, (“Skirmishes,” #38), 213.

¹⁵³ See Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, (Clarendon Press, 1980), 94-102.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*, 95.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

Beyond the general response to Silenus figured in the Greek contest of values discussed above, by setting the figure of Achilles against Silenus, Nietzsche engages with a very specific understanding of death and its meaning. In classical accounts, versions of the wisdom of Silenus are frequently presented along with meditations on ephemeral youth, physical strength, and heroic glory.¹⁵⁶ These are combined in a general trope Vernant has popularly termed the “beautiful death” (*kalos thanatos*): death that comes at the pinnacle of (masculine) vitality, often resulting from heroic action, before the process of aging has diminished the body and mind.¹⁵⁷ Yet the idea of beautiful death is not merely used to lament (or praise) the youthful greatness of the dead, it also makes a greater statement about identity or character. In Vernant’s words, “*kalos thanatos* [...] is like a photographic developer that reveals in the person of the fallen warrior the eminent quality of the *aner agathos*, the man of virtue and valor.”¹⁵⁸

The idea of a beautiful death reflects a cultural fascination with masculine youth and valor, but it also rests on a deep anxiety about the movement of time. Classical mythological evidence illustrates this, as death has several forms in Greek mythology. *Kalos Thanatos*, often represented as a young warrior, is distinguished from his sister *Ker*, the goddess of death-as-oblivion who swallows the dead into obscurity. With the trappings of glory, death becomes more than a horrifying return to oblivion. The inevitable fact is instead transformed into an event that might be made beautiful; one that explicitly is differentiated, and *resists*, the transition into

¹⁵⁶ Herodotus’s account of Cleobis and Biton is perhaps the most striking example of this. see Herodotus, *Landmark Herodotus*. Ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Andrea Purvis. (New York: Anchor Books. 2009) 1.31.3; 20. In this story, two youths after accomplishing a great and glorious act of strength are praised for their beauty and excellence. Those in attendance pray that these youths, in recognition of their great accomplishment, might receive the greatest gift the gods could bestow on them. Both youths are blessed that night by death in their sleep. This story echoes numerous passages in Homer that describe the beauty of heroic youths and their corpses (and in contrast, lament the body ravaged by old age, or the heroic corpse mutilated in combat; this is the particular insult Achilles pays Hector, by dragging his corpse around Troy after killing him.) The idea that the gods might take the ones they favor most in their youth is similarly repeated in Greek poetry as a refrain.

¹⁵⁷ Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 50-74.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, 50-51.

formless oblivion. A beautiful death secures the continued place of an individual's story as a part of being through *kleos*, glory.¹⁵⁹

In this way the ideas presented in the wisdom of Silenus forms the acknowledged grounds for the classical understanding of beautiful death. By way of challenge, Silenus's wisdom invites a transformation of the inevitable into an expression of how one has chosen to live. There is never any *guarantee* that one will successfully meet Silenus in a final, glorious act, a fact repeatedly figured in the litany of "ugly" deaths that Homer describes in his works. A striking feature of the *Iliad* in particular is the sheer number of horrible deaths catalogued in gruesome detail. Even the great heroes who express the same exceptional commitment to the values of archaic heroism as Achilles are not guaranteed a *beautiful* death, and many die quite badly.¹⁶⁰ Silenus's terrifying observation about the Dionysian experience of temporal change, where everything fades away, is thus dangerously met by the figure of *kalos thanatos* who attempts *at great risk* to transform death into a final expression of an excellent life. Vernant writes, "Death is overcome when it is made welcome instead of merely experienced, and when it makes life a perpetual gamble and endows it with exemplary value so that men will praise it as a model of 'imperishable glory.'"¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ These are not merely genealogical listings of who died and how (as you might find in parts of the Old Testament, or in the songs of the Vikings, for instance.) Jasper Griffin identifies the literary function of these lists as a subtle emphasis on the tragic conditions of heroic life and values, but also as an ongoing reminder that the glorious actions celebrated in the epic poems of Homer are backed by a consistent awareness of mortal vulnerability and suffering. The overwhelming number of brutal, viscerally described killings sits in direct tension with the elevated songs of glory and idealized "beauty" of the heroic death and corpse. Thus with Homer (and with Nietzsche) this understanding of death is not a simple endorsement of glorious violence that ignores or overlooks the costs of war in favor of a glorious outcome. Rather this account of heroic character insists on a direct acknowledgement of mortal vulnerability; another fact repeatedly made through incessant comparisons between heroic figures—men, women, and even cities—and the immortal, undying gods. See Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, 91.

¹⁶¹ Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 57.

Nietzsche's presentation of Achilles does not emphasize beautiful youth or heroic glory so much as it situates death as part of the "fantastic exuberance of life" found in Greek culture and politics.¹⁶² As Leslie Thiel succinctly puts it, for Nietzsche "it is the *achieving* of fame, not its *achievement*, that constitutes [Homeric] heroism."¹⁶³ Yet the central dynamic of the beautiful death—temporal anxiety and the transfiguration of death through heroic commitments—remain central to Nietzsche's treatment of meaningful life and death. At various points in his more mature writing, Nietzsche echoes the idea that death must be made welcome instead of merely experienced; an idea that sits in direct opposition to the understanding of Socratic, or even 'natural' death, where the death that is merely experienced (when the body is allowed to fail) is held up as the highest accomplishment of a flawed and vulnerable existence. More subtly, the idea that one might welcome death as an expression of one's life, and that this might make life both beautiful and dangerous also keeps Nietzsche's understanding of meaningful death in close proximity to this classical understanding of *kalos thanatos*.¹⁶⁴

Nietzsche's account departs from this understanding in one major respect. Distinct from the classical focus on fame or the physical qualities of the heroic dead (in particular, the Greek

¹⁶² GS #283, 228; compare with HoC, 33-4.

¹⁶³ Leslie Thiel, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul*, p.13. While I agree with Thiel on many points, his account tends to emphasize the "self-justifying" individual action—which does not quite fit with my understanding of Nietzsche's view of Archaic heroism outlined here or more importantly with Nietzsche's emphasis on the manner of life lived or desired. By my understanding, both the Homeric view (which is very concerned with the *cultural reality* of their person and actions) and Nietzsche's understanding of meaningful life are not concerned with *justifying* life in a robust sense, but living it well).

¹⁶⁴ Even in this early work there are similarities here of Nietzsche's later exhortation about the meaning of life as including a view that life ought to be lived *dangerously*. Just as a commitment to a heroic code is demonstrated in a willingness to face death, for Nietzsche a commitment to a value that gives life its purpose must not shy away from death, or more figurative destruction. This is one way of understanding Nietzsche's exhortation for the men of science to "live dangerously:" a commitment to a life of philosophical honesty entails a willingness to risk the destruction of those beliefs that enable survival. GS #283, 228.

emphasis on physical, youthful beauty and the integrity of the corpse¹⁶⁵) Nietzsche's consistent emphasis is on the ways that meaningful death anchors a specific orientation towards the value of existence and living as a particular person. Rather than a desire for eternal fame, what animates Nietzsche's account is how even when death is frightening and produces suffering it may nonetheless be an expression of an emphatic affirmation and desire for the possibilities of becoming. This point is brought forward by the choice of Homer's grieving, dead Achilles as Nietzsche's paradigmatic, successful response to Silenus.¹⁶⁶

When Odysseus, still a living, breathing hero, greets Achilles' weeping shade in the land of the dead, his first impulse is to tell Achilles he has nothing to cry about. "There's not a man in the world more blest than you, there never has been, never will be one."¹⁶⁷ Honored as the greatest warrior of the Trojan War, struck down at the height of heroic *arête*, he will never be forgotten: Achilles has died the beautiful death. For this reason, Odysseus encourages him, "Grieve no more at dying, great Achilles."¹⁶⁸ Nietzsche makes no mention of Odysseus's praise, even though it emphasizes the rewards of glorious death and heroic excellence. Instead Nietzsche cites Achilles' assertion that *any* form of life is better than death. "No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus! By God, I'd rather slave on earth for another man [...] than rule down here over all the breathless dead."¹⁶⁹

This reveals that, for Nietzsche, just as the living Homeric Greek was "unable to endure fame without any further contest," the dead hero, if consulted, would necessarily "desire

¹⁶⁵ Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 62.

¹⁶⁶ BT, #3, 24.

¹⁶⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book II, ln. 548-9, 265.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, Book II, [ln. 551-3], 265.

¹⁶⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book II, ln. 554-559, 265; Book II, ln. 551-3, 265.

existence above all.”¹⁷⁰ By focusing on the restless shade yearning for life as a humble day laborer, Nietzsche’s account emphasizes the singular opportunity of becoming, valuable precisely because it is specific to a particular life. As the *living* Achilles comments, “A man’s life breath cannot come back again—no raiders in force, no trading brings it back, once it slips through a man’s clenched teeth.”¹⁷¹ The value of living as a particular person, heroic or otherwise, cannot be exchanged or replaced as material wealth or formal, titular status can. In more Nietzschean terms, however humble, the laborer’s life contains occasion for ‘becoming who one is.’

Achilles’ words reflect that Achilles’ death is an expression of the heroic values through which he understands meaningful life. As Bernard Williams notes, this is not merely the case of an individual failing to live up to an external social standard but rather plays on “his identity, his sense of himself as someone who can live in some social circumstances and not others [.]”¹⁷² Achilles’ despair here is not resignation over the value of existence in general, but shame at falling short of *the specific manner of living through which he values life*. Beautiful death thus

¹⁷⁰ It is possible to read this passage as a straightforward critique of the kind of heroic life that spurns death. Homer’s *Odyssey* in particular constantly returns to the themes of suffering and loss of life which the heroic pursuit of glory at the Trojan War has wrought. However calling this an outright repudiation would be too simple a read for Homer (and for Nietzsche) as these criticisms themselves validate the heroic struggle even as they lament the cost it entails. The specific scene Nietzsche cites here is case in point: Achilles (among other dead heroes) is impatient with Odysseus’ praise of his glorious accomplishments, but is eager to hear of the heroic *arête* of his living son. It is only the accounts of his son *living up to* his reputation that mollify his lamentations. The implication is that death is always final for the individual, and even great glory offers, at best, a cold reward for a great deal of struggle and hardship. Yet a kind of “overcoming” of death is possible through the generations and a continuation of one’s bloodline. Nietzsche embraces a version of this idea in his presentation of the “Dionysian” in *Twilight of the Idols*: “Eternal life, the eternal return of life; the future promised by the past and the past consecrated by the future; the triumphal yes to life over and above all death and change; the *true* life as the overall continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.” TI, (“What I Owe the Ancients,” #4), 228.

¹⁷¹ Homer, *Iliad*, Book 9, In 408-9, 265. The greater context of this quote is that Achilles is rejecting Agamemnon’s peace offering, choosing instead (momentarily) to return home and live a long life rather than face death for glory at Troy. The reason Achilles cannot accept Agamemnon’s *material* offerings to appease his anger have everything to do with the implication the offer contains: that his personal worth and reputation as someone who performs deeds at risk of death can be bought or exchanged for material and political wealth. I discuss this scene in more detail in chapter 4.

¹⁷² Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press, Berkeley 2008), 101.

embodies a complex negotiation. The lamentations of Achilles' shade, longing for life, reflect an affirmation of existence that is *consistent* with Achilles' choice to face death as a living hero: he accepts death will follow from his choices *to live as himself*.

The way this sense of self plays out through a set of chosen values can be seen in the passage from the *Illiad* where Achilles chooses his fate:

...But Thetis answered, warning through her tears,/ "You're doomed to a short life, my son, from all you say!/ For hard on the heels of Hector's death your death must come at once—."/ "Then let me die at once!"/—Achilles burst out, despairing—"since it was not my fate/ to save my dearest comrade from his death!"¹⁷³

Because his friend died in battle while Achilles stood, "A useless, dead weight on the good, green earth," the only action worthy of the manner of life he has chosen is to pursue revenge, even unto death. Achilles' despair, the thing that takes away his "strength to make a stand in the world of men," can only be diminished with Hector's death, even if that death means his own will follow shortly after. Through his commitment to live in a certain manner, Achilles accepts death as the necessary outcome of his values. But he does not *want* to die.

It is important to emphasize that the heroic understanding of "beautiful death" is not a straightforward, willful rejection of death's capacity to cause fear and pain. Many of the heroes of the *Iliad*, the living Achilles included, regularly lament the suffering caused by death and their own physical vulnerability. The commitment to beautiful death thus embodies a complex negotiation. When alive, Achilles would rather accept death than act in such a way to betray his sense of self—for his own sake but also in the eyes of others. Yet once dead, any sort of life is preferable to the static, unchanging existence of the shade. It is the *possibility* offered by becoming, not a specific set of values or concrete outcomes, that that gives life its greatest value.

¹⁷³ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 18; ln 110-120, 471. The importance of this choice of identity is further emphasized by the earlier episode in Homer's text when Achilles seems to choose the opposite: a life of peace and obscurity at home. It is his loyalty to Patroclus—dead or alive—that animates his decision to welcome death, as it is this failing that crosses the line of acceptable existence for Achilles.

As we will see, what is distinctive for Nietzsche about this framing of death is how the direct acknowledgement of death found in Achilles reflects at all points an emphatic affirmation of life, and a craving for existence “under the bright sun.”¹⁷⁴

V. “To live so as to necessarily desire to live again.”

In what remains, I argue that a Nietzschean account of death provides a way of thinking about death’s political significance that allows a greater recognition of the political capacities of ourselves and others. In contrast to narratives that treat death as a universal experience of negation, Nietzsche’s account centers on individual commitments and goals as they are made and upheld in unforeseeable circumstances. Such an account, I suggest, is sensitive to the many ways individuals form meaningful commitments through the different experiences of vulnerability death produces, and might thereby be put to use resisting the kinds of exclusions and political blindness towards others that are often legitimated by sovereign appeals to narratives of ontological mortal vulnerability.

Nietzsche’s use of Achilles first requires some qualification, however, as the foregoing account of beautiful death should raise several objections when considered in light of modern politics. First, Nietzsche does not think the mythic structures that stabilized the conditions of life and death for Nietzsche’s classical Greek exist for modern man.¹⁷⁵ Even if they did, the cultural values that Achilles ascribed to should appear excessively (and unapologetically) elitist, violent, and sexist to our eyes, not to mention dangerously romantic. What general orientation towards life and death is separable from these Archaic values?

¹⁷⁴ This phrase which Nietzsche quotes in his description of Achilles (BT, 43) “Under the bright sun,” is frequently used as a stand in for “to be alive” just as to “leave the light of the sun” and “go into the dark” are Homeric phrases that appear regularly around the many deaths of the epic. For a longer discussion of this point, see Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, 90-1.

¹⁷⁵ GS, #125, 181.

A particularly difficult element of beautiful death is its disturbing extremism. The Homeric hero evaluates himself (and others) with little regard for intentions, instead focusing on the actions themselves. Achilles is ashamed because his friend is dead and because the enemy killed him—he has failed to “do well to his friends and evil to his enemies.” That Patroclus voluntarily went into battle does not mollify Achilles in the slightest. What is striking about this framework is that even in circumstances where the actor could not have acted otherwise (due to the intervention of a god, for instance) he might still feel shame for failing to live up to the standards he has chosen for his life, particularly if he has acted badly before his peers.¹⁷⁶

It is important, then, that Nietzsche does not simply take up this ancient view but alters it in critical ways. Nietzsche believes modern man has developed the capacity for responsibility to a degree well beyond his Homeric predecessors. The internal development of a will, central for notions of sin and guilt Nietzsche associates with Christianity and the culture of pity, also allow for *self-legislation*.¹⁷⁷ As opposed to a morality of ethical imperatives (such as Christian or Platonic doctrines), or more subtly opposed to an uncritical definition of self through given cultural standards (such as the heroic “middle world” of Homer) the psychological capacity to make and keep promises means, for Nietzsche, that the individual determines, *and is responsible for*, those values that make life and death worthwhile.

What Nietzsche keeps from the Homeric account of death is the idea that what one does, and does not do, may be as important in ethical terms as whether an act is voluntary or not

¹⁷⁶ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, especially “Shame and Autonomy” and “Necessary Identities,” 75-102; and 103-129. The specific example Williams uses here is that of Ajax—a warrior driven mad by the gods to prevent him from murdering his companions, instead driving him to slaughter several sheep. Ajax is so humiliated by the foolish barbarism of this act, performed in the sight of other heroes, that he takes his own life. Significantly, the (socially confirmed) identity formed here is not a rigid set of commitments, but *for Nietzsche* an ongoing process of commitments and affirmations. The emphasis on responsibility thus plays out in the ways that the individual navigates the process of keeping commitments, and bearing the costs of those commitments which, no longer representative of himself, he does not fulfill.

¹⁷⁷ GS 337-8; GM II. 11-12.

voluntary. This is most clearly seen in Nietzsche's discussion of responsibility in uncontrollable circumstances. Nietzsche writes, "those who promise like a sovereigns [...] know themselves strong enough to maintain [their word] in the face of accidents, even 'in the face of fate'."¹⁷⁸ The point we should take from this is not that the strong individual somehow manages complete mastery over death and its conditions, but the opposite. As David Owen interprets this element of Nietzsche's understanding of life, "Upholding one's word 'against fate' does not mean fantastically committing oneself to the incoherent goal of doing what is causally or ethically impossible for one to do, it means willingly bearing responsibility for the damage incurred when one's commitment cannot or must not be kept."¹⁷⁹ This general approach to life is equally fundamental to Nietzsche's treatment of death.

Nietzsche's emphasis on responsibility plays out in the ways that the individual navigates the ongoing *process* of keeping commitments and honoring debts within a world where everything, including herself, is subject to change and, finally, death. In this regard it is helpful to recall that even Achilles—arguably the most prideful and *least* flexible person in the *Iliad*—reverses commitments twice in the course of the epic. First, when Achilles rejoins battle with the Greeks, suffering his anger and taking responsibility for losing his friend. Second, when he surrenders the body of Hector to Priam, lamenting to his dead friend that he would no longer carry out his sworn vengeance.¹⁸⁰ Similarly for Nietzsche, sovereign promises are not radical

¹⁷⁸ GM II.2, 58-60.

¹⁷⁹ Owens, "Nietzsche, Ethical Agency and the Problem of Democracy," 150. We might also think here of what Bernard Williams calls "moral survival," an idea used to express a moral code that does not trade in utilitarian consequentialism, but focuses on actions as they relate to the question: "will I survive as myself if I do, or do not do, this thing?" Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, ed. J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

¹⁸⁰ Compare in Homer, *Iliad*, Book IX, ln. 460- 522 and Book XIX, ln. 61-85, 490-491; and *Iliad* Book XXII, ln. 398-432, 552 and Book XXIV, ln 670-698. Both of these instances are notably necessary compromises that serve the needs of communal belonging, political accountability.

commitments that must weather all change, but those that are carried out responsibly within the process of becoming as it unfolds in unseen, and uncontrollable ways.

Centering a view of agency on the capacity for self-transformation links responsibility to an understanding of freedom tied to the formation of character. This is “the concept of the autonomous individual who is not bound by moral rules as customary constraints, but as the freely endorsed commitments through which he gives expression to his own character.”¹⁸¹ Similar to the Greek individual who seeks to embody social standards of excellence and re-shape them for others in his own image (as Achilles might strive to live and die equal to those he sings about in song, that others might sing of him¹⁸²), Nietzsche’s Sovereign Individual understands the value of life and death through the commitments she undertakes. Because the circumstances of one’s life and death cannot be known in advance (or, frequently, controlled) the crucial part of this formulation is not the *act* of making commitments or the *choice* of them as such, but *the manner in which those commitments are enacted and fulfilled in unpredictable circumstances.*¹⁸³ As a condition of “fate” death is understood and *transformed* as an act or an event when it is somehow made coherent with one’s commitments and values.

The task Nietzsche’s view of death introduces is to accommodate the facts of death and loss within a chosen manner of living. Whether that be the embrace of palliative care to manage pain, so one might functionally live (as Nietzsche did); or a decision to view the suffering the death of a friend causes as a way of honoring their constitutive values, but also a re-affirmation of the value of a particular, lost life for how one understands *themselves*; death is understood as a necessary end *but not an opposition* to life or life’s value. In this way, making death welcome

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 148.

¹⁸² Homer, *Iliad*, Book IX, ln. 218-230, 257.

¹⁸³ Owen, “Nietzsche, Ethical Agency and the Problem of Democracy,” 151.

can be understood as an extension of Nietzsche's famous notion of 'a love of fate.' He writes, "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*."'¹⁸⁴

By framing death within Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*, it is important to note that accepting death is not the same as seeking it. Achilles' shade shows how one can make death *welcome* even if it is not *wanted*: Achilles accepts that death will follow necessarily from his choices to carry out vengeance, but he does not kill himself. The lamentations of Achilles' shade, longing for life, reflect above all an affirmation of existence that is *consistent* with his choice to face death by living according to his sense of what makes life desirable. In Nietzsche's phrasing, the orientation towards life and death found in Achilles is to live 'so as to necessarily desire to live again.' Desiring life with all its limits and hardships "innumerable times more" is an idea repeated across Nietzsche's works, perhaps most concisely in the Intoxicated Song of Zarathustra: "'Was that—life'? I will say unto death. 'Well! Once more!'"¹⁸⁵

Nietzsche thus writes with approval of approaching death with openness, even cheerfulness, but in keeping with Achilles' choice to face death, this is not a simple endorsement of suicide.¹⁸⁶ As an example of this, consider Nietzsche's straightforward support of medical euthanasia:

¹⁸⁴ GS #276, 223.

¹⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Intoxicated Song" Part IV, 326. This reading of Nietzschean death is also consistent with eternal recurrence. To the extent the thought of eternal recurrence may be borne in response to Silenus' wisdom, the role of death shifts as a possible outcome that may result from a valued life (the "second best thing for man") or, alternatively death may become a willful "act" that one may use to leave an existence that is no longer affirmable (the "best thing to die—soon.") A compelling reason to think that Nietzsche might have seen a re-evaluation of death in these terms can be found in the placement of "the Greatest Weight" in the *Gay Science*, which immediately follows his description of dying Socrates, and his call to "overcome even the Greeks!" GS, # 340, #341, 273-274.

¹⁸⁶ On similar themes see Joanne Faulkner's discussion of a Nietzschean view of 'innocent' suicide in "The Innocence of Victimhood versus the Innocence of Becoming," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 35/36, (Spring/Autumn 2008), 67-85.

...Dying proudly when it is no longer feasible to live proudly. Death chosen freely, death at the right time, carried with lucidity and cheerfulness, surrounded by children and witnesses: this makes it possible to have a real leave-taking where the leave-taker is *still there*, and a real assessment of everything that has been achieved or willed, a summation of life—all in contrast to the pathetic and horrible comedy that Christianity stages around the hour of death.¹⁸⁷

Against the notion of Socratic-Christian death, developed above, the emphasis here *is on desiring life in a particular way, as a particular person*. In *some* circumstances, suicide or euthanasia might be a coherent expression of a person's sense of a valuable existence; but it is not the *only* meaningful Nietzschean death. Nor is death that comes unexpectedly—a car accident, or through a deliberate act of violence—somehow meaningless. A life ended too soon is worth grief for precisely the reason that a particular person has been denied the ability to enact their commitments and goals as they otherwise might, and in general to participate in the meaningful process of becoming.¹⁸⁸ Through this Nietzschean lens, euthanasia, or choosing to undergo hospice care, can be understood as an affirmation of life as easily as Achilles's choice. Accepting an unwanted death from illness is not resignation or a choice to die, so much as a choice of how one wishes to live within the uncontrollable limits of being.

Nietzsche's free individual thus understands death through the commitments she undertakes, particularly those commitments that structure her sense of self. Because the circumstances of one's life and death cannot be known in advance (and rarely controlled) the crucial part of this formulation is not making a commitment to die, but *the manner in which the*

¹⁸⁷ TI, ("Skirmishes" #38) 210. Emphasis mine. I do not think that too much stress should be placed on Nietzsche's wording here that death is a "summation" of life—a romantic idea that has some affinities with Nietzsche's view—but rather that death is a part of life, and is not *opposed* to its meaning, but can in fact reflect life's meaningful commitments.

¹⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "Intoxicated Song" IV, 326.

*commitments of life are upheld in the unpredictable circumstances of one's death.*¹⁸⁹ Nietzsche keeps Silenus' framing of death as a part of being—a painful signifier of life's fleeting nature—but he finds in it the grounds for an “opposite valuation of life” he calls “Dionysian:” a perspective that affirms even death as a part of the “fullness” of existence.¹⁹⁰ In this way, Nietzsche's account of death is neither a Homeric, rigorously socially constituted event, nor a universal ontological experience of negation. Death for Nietzsche is rather made meaningful through the capacities individuals have to freely enact their constitutive values. These might be social or individual values; in either case, what is important is that even mortal vulnerability does not *negate* or transcend these commitments, but situates them.

This view of death is obviously very easily romanticized. Taken on its own terms, Nietzsche is perhaps too quick to endorse a kind of radical self-sufficiency, one which can support a kind of internally heroic quietism. His account, also, places no inherent limits on the type of values an individual might embrace as constitutive. Further, Nietzsche famously isolates the ability to affirm life in this way as the “right” of only a few sovereign individuals, going so far as to endorse a kind of “practical nihilism” (suicide) for the resigned sufferers of the world who lack the will to affirm existence as it is.¹⁹¹ While Nietzsche's account should not be embraced without qualification, however, his argument may be useful to us in ways Nietzsche himself did not intend.

The way we understand death matters a great deal for the kinds of political life and relationships we can imagine and perform—between ourselves and the state, or ourselves and other individual actors. As we have seen, Nietzsche's critique of democratic pity warns that

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 151.

¹⁹⁰ BT, “Attempt at Self Criticism” #4-5, 22-23.

¹⁹¹ TI, (“... Ancients,” #2), 210; WP, 143.

framing death as an ontological experience that transcends political and cultural differences can elide the specific contexts where practical politics must actually take place. Nietzsche's critique illuminates the ways that a political community grounded in ontological vulnerability does not, on its own, require any specific activity from its members: it is enough to be mortal to claim membership (or *be* claimed.) Nor does ontological vulnerability *require* acknowledgment of the diverse ways vulnerability before death is felt, is made meaningful, or in what conditions that meaning is denied. As George Shulman similarly notes, "What is the politics of 'founding' a community on the acknowledgement, not of concrete others, of a constitution, or of a problematic history, but rather of a truth about human life as such?"¹⁹²

A Nietzschean account of death brings a slightly different emphasis into our evaluations of death's political meaning than a view that focuses on common mortal vulnerability. Nietzsche himself did not think that a majority of people were capable of this kind of agency. Nonetheless his *framing* of death's meaning can foster a greater attentiveness to the political capacities of ourselves and others. While in nearly all practical senses an individual may lack formal or material ability to live (and die) in a way coherent with their understanding of a fully meaningful politically engaged life, a Nietzschean view of meaningful death does not bracket away the *capacities or potential* of that person to be a political actor. Put differently, a community might politically define themselves in these conditions based on the *denied capacity* of its members to act as they would otherwise in the face of death. This account thus provides alternative grounds to articulate the political significance of death outside the boundaries of meaning recognized and legitimated by any particular group or institution. His account rests on the concrete and distinct circumstances of individual life and activity, and may therefore be used to draw attention to the

¹⁹² Shulman, "Acknowledgement and Disavowal as an Idiom for Theorizing Politics" *Theory and Event*, Vol. 14 Issue 1 (2011).

specific question of what commitments and capacities are *enacted*, and which are *denied*, and in what specific contexts.

The political problem Nietzsche's account helps us to apprehend is thus not, primarily, what conditions are necessary for these transformative capacities to be expressed, or even what limits ought to be placed on the range of acceptable commitments and values that inform death's meaning (though it certainly invites these important discussions). Rather, Nietzsche's account helps us to see the particular lives and circumstances of those who face death. As Nietzsche writes, "Only something that can live can be dead."¹⁹³ A Nietzschean account of meaningful death is incoherent without someone there: a person capable of making and embodying values and goals, and of bearing responsibility for them as part of a distinct life.¹⁹⁴ Viewing death through the possibilities for its transformation as a part of life insists these capacities are present—even when they are not officially sanctioned, practically substantiated, or undesirable in the form that they take.

For our purposes, then, what is valuable in Nietzsche's account of meaningful death is thus not romantic, square-jawed heroic action in the face of the inevitable, but that Nietzsche's account insists on the presence of a person capable of forming and affirming values, relationships, and commitments; even in those contexts that are impossible to control, where voluntary action is severely limited, actively suppressed, or flatly denied. Nietzsche's transformation of beautiful death contains an understanding of human action that is not directly *opposed to*, but functions *through* a lack of control over the conditions of life, including the actions—and loss—of others. By starting with Silenus's wisdom, the challenge set by Nietzsche's account is thus to determine how, and to what extent, we can live with and through

¹⁹³ WP, 312.

¹⁹⁴ GM. II. 24-25, 65-67.

the necessary experiences of mortal vulnerability in a meaningful way. A task that falls to each of us, but takes no universal form.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that Nietzsche's account of death allows us to mobilize our distinct powers and capacities for political belonging and transformation in ways that accounts grounded in universalized experiences of negation may overlook, or actively suppress. Nietzsche provides a view of death that does not bracket those differences in status and context that provide meaning and the grounds for political resistance, but affirms them. This view gives agency and dignity to our experiences of vulnerability and pain, while nonetheless leaving room to acknowledge that we rarely control the circumstances of our lives and deaths, or of those near to us.

By this I do not mean to propose that we set death as the central, or most important fact of political life, or that Nietzsche did so. As with much of Nietzsche's work, what is important about this conception of death is its effect on our lives, and what possibilities—and risks—it opens for us. Nietzsche's account challenges readers to accept the fact of vulnerability before death, but primarily encourages individuals to recognize their shared capacity to live meaningfully within those same mortal limits. As Nietzsche writes, "How strange it is that this sole certainty and common element makes almost no impression on people, that nothing is further from their minds than the feeling that they form a brotherhood of death. It makes me happy that men do not want at all to think the thought of death. I should like very much to do something that would make the thought of life even a hundred times more appealing to them."¹⁹⁵

The point is to argue, with Nietzsche, that we ought to restore death to its proper place as a part of being. In doing so, we can be more attentive to the ways that death is subject to competing political claims and needs. Yet also how death generates grounds for political

¹⁹⁵ GS, #278, 225.

engagement, resistance, and meaning. Nietzsche's call to be "cheerful" before death is in part a cry for activity and a rejection of mere reactivity—to power, cultural narratives, or even other people. But it is also an invitation to view death differently: not as proof of our common helplessness, but as an opportunity to affirm the value of particular, irreplaceable lives.

Chapter 2

A Vocation Unto Death: Max Weber, Modernity, and Soldierly Politics

“We must live in awareness of death. Living with this awareness makes life serious, significant, truly productive and joyful. Keeping death in mind, we cannot help but work harder, knowing that death could interrupt the work we are doing.”

-L. Tolstoi

In the last chapter I argued that Nietzsche’s understanding of death could enrich political life by mobilizing individual capacities for strength, responsibility, and creative agency in deeply vulnerable conditions; capacities which traditional understandings of death might lead us to overlook. I suggested that a Nietzschean account could make us more aware of the diverse, constitutive commitments persons hold before death, even when those attachments are suppressed or politically denied. Yet speaking of constitutive attachments before, or *unto*, death brings Nietzsche’s account into contact with another political problem. While personal or private commitments of this kind may not pose a threat to public life, how is a polity to respond to those sorts of mortal, existentially weighted commitments which directly attach to *mass* political causes, political movements, or charismatic individuals? How, in other words, is a polity to accommodate political claims towards death’s meaning, but resist the violence with which such claims are frequently enacted? To better understand these dynamics, and for the sake of developing intellectual resources for resisting their violent potential, I turn in this chapter to the work of Max Weber.

History, some of it quite recent, has shown how powerful existentially motivated politics are; also how prone to immoralism, tribal divisions, and violence. Many theorists have turned to Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben for insights into the ways existential framings of state sovereignty can lead to a compression of political horizons between states and “others,”

restructuring political relations into binaries of friends and enemies.¹⁹⁶ But existential fears and desires are not *only* important for understanding sovereign power. Of equal concern are the dangerous ways that existential underpinnings can also distort ethical and political judgment *within* and *across* political communities, lending legitimacy to acts of xenophobia, racial violence, and nationalist protectionism.¹⁹⁷ The manner in which people address the need for meaning and purpose may be “innocent” or unintentional, but nonetheless drive powerful political orientations and commitments. As George Kateb has noted, a desire for meaning, membership, or “beauty” from social and political orders need not be deliberate to be dangerous.¹⁹⁸ For the individual, these desires might be rationally understood—and articulated—in terms of security, or a longing for a specific shared vision of political life, or through more

¹⁹⁶ For Schmitt, this binary is an ontological fact of politics. As we will see below, Weber has a more troubling view, where such existential conflicts may exist more generally at the level of the vocation as such, and need not attach itself to any sort of common cause, or any particular level or size of organization. Without the mediation of responsible ethical leadership, for Weber, the “war” of political values easily turns actively violent. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*.

¹⁹⁷ Fascism is the most obvious example of this danger; but we can also see the effects of existential needs in way individuals ethically and politically engage with others through the array of causes that a liberal polity fosters—a major concern of Weber’s that I take up in some detail below. We might, initially, think about the kinds of ethical “with us or against us” paradigms that emerge in existentially framed conversations. Stephen K. White, in a similar vein, points to George Bush Jr’s “born again” politics of good and evil following September 11th, a dynamic which was evident in international, but also domestic politics. White thus argues for a democratic ethic based in a more nuanced understanding of “depth experiences,” so that “late-modern, affluent democracies might [...] at least have some hope of enhancing the ethical-political promise they carry and of minimizing the deleterious effects.” Stephen K. White, “Fullness and Dearth: Depth Experience and Democratic Life.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 4 (2010), 801.

¹⁹⁸ Kateb’s concerns are “aesthetic cravings” more generally. He notes that (among other places) the “satisfaction of aesthetic cravings are found in [...] the conviction that one’s *identity* or the identity of one’s group has a distinctive shape or form [...] and] in the conviction that society’s rituals and procedures, customs and practices, and institutions and arrangements are all shapely or well formed, and all help to comprise a way of life, and hence that confusion, disorder, or rapid un-patterned change or brute immediacy has been overcome. [...] Because they are craved, they provide intense gratification when they are imagined to exist, and often will be defended without mercy; and when they are thought possible, they often will be pursued without mercy.” George Kateb, “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility,” 16.

explicit calls for political renewal, yet nonetheless have roots in a deeper “craving” (to borrow Kateb’s word) for purpose or meaning that goes unexamined.¹⁹⁹

Examining these cravings, then, and finding some means of critically assessing their influence and effects, is a matter of ongoing relevance. This task is particularly important for contemporary politics, where the power of existentially framed appeals in conditions of mass politics can seem overwhelming and irresistible. The specific question I investigate in this chapter is thus how we might theorize an understanding of death and its meaning that situates these kinds of appeals and the desire for them, on the one hand, and the ways this orientation can work to structure political attachments, relationships, and motivations (for better or worse) on the other. But at the same time, I am interested to do so in a way that does not occlude political resources from *within* this understanding of death that could be put to work *resisting* the kinds of violence and moral blindness that existential framings of political causes can justify. In what follows, I therefore take up Weber’s (by now) familiar interpretation of disenchanting modernity and the problems it poses for meaningful life—in particular, Weber’s depiction of political life—from the less familiar perspective of his diagnosis of the meaning or meaninglessness of modern death.

For Weber, meaningful death is situated by an internally consistent “ultimate” account of values, typified in modern life by the vocational commitment to serve a calling.²⁰⁰ This service,

¹⁹⁹ On this point, it is perhaps worth noting that Donald Trump’s recent ascendancy with the promise of ‘Making America Great Again’ correlates with mortality rates. Trump has performed best in counties where white men are dying younger, and in higher rates. See Jeff Guo, “Death Predicts Whether People Vote for Donald Trump” *Washington Post* (accessed: 4/17/2016) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/03/04/death-predicts-whether-people-vote-for-donald-trump/>.

²⁰⁰ Few authors have such a broad and comprehensive body of works as Weber. I frame the following investigation with reference to three of his major works: his two well-known Vocation Lectures, and his essay from the sociology of religion: *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions*. Similarly, from Thucydides I choose to focus primarily on the famous Periclean Funeral Oration, as this provides a usefully concise and idealized account of meaningful death in the context of the Athenian polis. For these three works I have used the English translation from

I argue, is shaped in important ways by an understanding of soldierly death outlined in his essay *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*, where death is meaningfully situated by the “massiveness” of the context of war, and the internal conviction that in battle one’s death is indisputably “for” something.²⁰¹ This model of meaningful death is very old, and Weber’s turn to it reflects his engagement with classical and ancient sources.²⁰² Here I take this engagement as an invitation to read Weber alongside another account of soldierly, political death: Perikles’ Funeral Oration, as presented by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

Reading Weber alongside the example of Perikles shows what is both illuminating and troubling about Weber’s account of soldierly death.²⁰³ I argue that a comparison with Thucydides’ depiction of meaningful, soldierly death as a *part* of democratic politics, its practice subjected to democratic criticism and judgment, provides an alternative way of viewing the

Gerth and Mills, as it is widely available and familiar to a broad audience. See H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). I have used the Richard Crawley translation of Thucydides from Robert B. Strassler’s *The Landmark Thucydides: A Complete Guide to The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996) for similar reasons, and noted where translations are my own.

²⁰¹ Max Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions” [hereafter RRWD] in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.) *From Max Weber*, 323-359. The essay is included in Vol. 1 of Weber’s *Sociology of Religion*, and was first published in 1915; though as discussed below, Weber updates his description of soldierly death in 1920, following the disastrous final years of WWI and the treaty of Versailles, to extend meaningful death to those who die in the service of their calling.

²⁰² Recent scholarship has increasingly grown interested in Weber’s engagement with Hellenic sources and their influence on his thought. Greek thought, particularly Homer and Thucydides, was quite important to Weber, throughout his life. In his later years, concurrent with his increasing interest in value pluralism and his two famous vocational lectures I consider here, he demonstrated a renewed interest Greek philosophy—interest reflected in his many citations to Greek thought throughout the two addresses. Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, 70-72. On Weber and Hellenism more generally, see Christopher Adair-Toteff, “Max Weber’s Perikles—the Political Demagogue,” and Wilhelm Hennis and Keith Tribe (trans.) “‘Hellenic Intellectual Culture’ and the Origins of Weber’s Political Thinking.”

²⁰³ There are a range of interpretations for Weber’s politics, and the extent to which his own convictions were compatible with the more fascist reinterpretations of his arguments for a plebiscitary democracy. See for instance, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1990); David Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985); Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). More recently, political theorists have returned to Weber’s theory as the basis for diverse approaches to democratic politics. For instance, see Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*; and Jeffery Green, *Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

relationships between leader and mass as actively constituted, plural, and dynamic. Doing so provides a timely example for re-conceiving democratic capacities to resist the more violent, restrictive tendencies that appeal to existential needs, but also provides intellectual resources for understanding what is at stake in an *unexamined* soldierly politics of the sort Weber describes. My aim is to show how the formal assumptions of that govern Weber's bleak diagnosis of modern, mass democratic politics and their vulnerability to existential conflict might be rethought. By decentering the enormous weight of responsibility and ethical agency Weber places solely on the shoulders of political leaders, and restoring this burden more squarely on the capacities of an active, and *reactive* polity, we can reclaim valuable political resources for theorizing and contesting those sorts of seemingly irresistible political narratives that leverage existential needs for undesirable, or unethical purposes.

I proceed as follows: In part one I outline Weber's analysis of the general transformation of death's meaning in the disenchanted conditions of modernity, and part two develops what is at stake, ethically and politically, in this transforming understanding of death. Part three considers Weber's exception to this general rule: the soldier's death on the field of battle. To clarify the dimensions of this "type" of death for Weber, and to establish the grounds of my turn towards Thucydides at the end of this chapter, I develop Weber's account alongside the example of soldierly death found in Perikles' Funeral Oration. In part four I show how the soldierly view of death structures Weber's understanding of the modern political vocation, in particular the tendency he outlines in his thought for conflicts between causes to be cast as *war*.²⁰⁴ Part five

²⁰⁴ Harvey Goldman has made a similar argument concerning the war-like effects of Weber's turn to the soldierly model of devotion as a basis for Weber's understanding of the vocation, from which I take a great deal. I do depart from Goldman's read in a few respects. Most centrally, Goldman finds in Weber's soldier a lurking metaphysical structure of religious salvation; I read Weber more in keeping with a non-salvational absolute conflict of values and political visions such as Thucydides outlines in his *Peloponnesian War*, and do not think the soldierly death and religious salvation are so easily collapsed into each other, even if they share many features. Harvey Goldman,

returns to Thucydides' presentation of an active, if sometimes misguided demos, as an alternative vision of mass democratic capacities; a vision I argue can provide valuable resources for mediating and restraining the kinds of soldierly, existentially driven politics that Weber's account describes.

I. The Progressive Ideal

Max Weber's famous lectures *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation* are, among other things, meditations on the meaning of life in an age of increasing rationalization and indefinite technological progress. Yet in these lectures Weber strikingly introduces the question of the meaning of death as a criterion for assessing the meaning of life. Referring to one of Tolstoi's central thematic preoccupations, Weber states that "for civilized man death has no meaning."²⁰⁵ Rather than viewing this shift from life to death in purely rhetorical terms, this orientation towards death's meaning provides the basis for Weber's analysis of the heightened moral and ethical stakes of political life in modernity. Death makes the uncertainty and fragmentation of the world that Weber associates with the processes of rationalization into personal and immediate concerns, not only for modern scientists or modern political leaders, but for "civilized man" in general.

Death animates Weber's understanding of the meaning of life in modernity in two potentially contradictory ways. Weber lays out the problem of death (with reference to Tolstoi) in an extended passage from *Science as a Vocation*, which I have reproduced here at some length:

All [Tolstoi]'s broodings increasingly revolved around the problem of whether or not

Politics, Death, and the Devil: Self and Power in Max Weber and Thomas Mann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

²⁰⁵ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" [hereafter SV] in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 139.

death is a meaningful phenomenon. And his answer was: for civilized man death has no meaning. It has none because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite ‘progress,’ according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. And no man who comes to die stands upon the peak which lies in infinity. Abraham, or some peasant of the past, died ‘old and satiated with life’ because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had ‘enough’ of life. Whereas civilized man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge, and problems may become ‘tired of life’ but not ‘satiated with life.’ He catches only the most minute part of what the life of the spirit brings forth ever anew, and what he seizes is always something provisional and not definitive, and therefore death for him is a meaningless occurrence. *And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless;* by its very ‘progressiveness’ it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness.²⁰⁶

Here Weber’s immediate goal is to illustrate the fate of modern scientists (academics), whose never-ending work dooms them to a life lacking any persistent or universal meaning. Within the infinite scope of scientific progress, any individual contributions to knowledge lose their value and must be expected to be overcome with time. However, the effects of this “progressivity” point to a broader concern the changing meaning of death for modern man in general.

For Weber, death has been transformed in modernity from a natural point of meaningful completion into a troubling, even unreasonable, “...ending where only a beginning makes sense.”²⁰⁷ With an increasing number of potential accomplishments available to man in modern times, death becomes an uncontrollable, even arbitrary event. This change rests on a broader “gulf between past and present” brought about by the demystification of the modern western world; a process Weber associates with several factors, but particularly with the powerful effects

²⁰⁶ SV, 139-140. Emphasis mine. This is importantly *Weber’s* account of Tolstoi. Tolstoi’s own writings on death are varied and point to a different understanding of the *meaning* of human mortality than Weber represents here—namely one premised exclusively on religious salvation through the Christian faith or traditional worldviews (which, as we will see, Weber finds problematic.) For a collection of Tolstoi’s writing on the subject, see Maureen Cote, *Death and The Meaning of Life: Selected Spiritual Writings of Lev Tolstoy* (Troista Books, 2000).

²⁰⁷ Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” 335.

of intellectual rationalization and scientific progress.²⁰⁸

Rather than aiming at a particular end or historical stage, Weber presents scientific progress as an ongoing *process* with infinite potential.²⁰⁹ This explicitly denies the possibility of any teleological meaning being derived from science. The endless possibilities for expanding knowledge mean that the scientist's life work can never be fully completed: there will always be more to learn, to understand, or to improve. This creates a separation for the modern scientist between the material and political interests that require the individual to pursue employment on the one hand, and the *meaning* of this activity on the other. Accomplishment itself, in other words, can no longer serve as a meaningful standard for evaluating a given pursuit's value. In principle, no scientific achievement can, or *should be* final.

Yet scientific "progressivity" also transforms the landscape of human achievement in a more general way. We see this when Weber remarks that modern man can never be "satiated with life," as 'Abraham, or some peasant of the past' could be. Weber's choice of figure here is instructive, if convenient.²¹⁰ Abraham, a patriarch, typifies an understanding of death where it maybe experienced as a *fulfillment* of life's achievements. This is for a few reasons. First, for Weber the meaning of man's life was in the past framed by the organic lifecycle. Birth, maturity, reproduction, and death formed natural temporal horizons, within which one could look to

²⁰⁸ *SV*, 139.

²⁰⁹ There is a large debate over the proper way to understand Weber's treatment of the process of rationalization as single, historical process; or as a more fragmented process comprised of different, competing strands of rationalization or comparative stages; or, finally, if rationalization and disenchantment should be considered the central concern of Weber's works at all. Representative works of this debate include Wolfgang Schulter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism*, trans. Gunther Roth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Friedrich Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber" in *Reading Weber*, ed. Kieth Tribe (London: Routledge, 1989); and Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, trans. Kieth Tribe (London: Allen & Unwin 1988).

²¹⁰ According to the Old Testament, Abraham lived a comfortable 175 years, so had a little more time than the average "peasant of olden times" to feel "full from life."

measure a ‘successful’ life and, conversely, a life deprived of meaningful achievements.²¹¹ A premature death of a young person in ancient times, for instance, might be understood as tragic specifically because that person was denied the chance to experience those “natural” landmarks of human experience like coming to adulthood, and the mastery of one’s socially ordained place in life. Likewise, a patriarch such as Abraham could look back on his life and his progeny with a sense of mastery and completion, “full” from life.

Second, and related, Abraham’s accomplishments are framed within a concrete horizon of cultural, political, or religious values. Weber can compare the death of Abraham—an exceptional figure by most standards—with “some peasant of the past” because in both cases individual behavior and values are framed by reference to a broader social structure. As Reinhard Bendix notes about Weber’s understanding of social structures, “Weber thought of the most routine actions of men in society as comparable to the religious innovations of charismatic leaders.”²¹² Even when routine actions boil down to an un-reflexive ‘following’ of traditional guidelines, for Weber what is reflected in individual action is always some inner orientation toward the *meaning* of externally existing social norms (for or against) and likewise toward the structures of power that order these interactions.

²¹¹ “Satiety” is not the same thing as “happiness.” Under Weber’s analysis, for instance, a tragic character like Oedipus might be said to die fully satiated with life “because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve.” Oedipus was an accomplished ruler, a father, and more than that, managed to achieve the status and role laid out for him by his birth famously by solving all the puzzles life presented him. The point is that Weber’s analysis of death experienced as “satiety” is not contingent on the personal *happiness* of the individual.

²¹² This is not to say that beliefs about death’s meaning are *determined* for Weber by cultural contexts. Rather, a “constellation of interests” exists between ideal and material needs that shape human behavior. For Weber these pressures work in tandem: material forces drive the spread and development of intellectual frameworks; these then provide meaning and legitimacy to human action. Similarly, such ideas legitimate, and sometimes discredit, material and political structures. A study of the political significance of death, for Weber, thus requires more than a comparative look at the internal belief structures of individuals and groups; it also requires acknowledgment of the institutional and economic incentives that stabilize or undermine these. These structures, for Weber, might be understood through the ideal types of domination—charismatic, religious/traditional, or rational. I will say more on this below. Bendix, *Max Weber*, 273.

It is therefore of note that, in contrast to this death experienced as satiety, Weber thinks that modern man merely grows “tired” of life. The range of possible achievement no longer bears any connection to the natural, temporal limitations of life imposed by man’s mortality. Similarly, the cultural and social structures of modern life do not provide life and death with a “given” meaningful framing. Rather, the progressive ideal of scientific rationalization, coupled with the sheer volume of subjects and skills that are available to be mastered in the modern world, serve to devalue the limited range of what is possible to achieve in a single lifetime. The consequences are profound. If comprehensive achievement is the measure of a meaningful life, death “should never come.” For those (like the modern scientist) working towards an end that never comes and never *should* come, even the value of individual contributions becomes problematic. The infinite, progressive aim of many modern causes, for Weber, has the effect of diminishing individual contributions to little more than infinitesimal movements in an onwards march.

More profoundly, for Weber traditional sources of meaning are also undermined by modern scientific notions of the “self-sufficient intellect” and natural causality. By converting the workings of the world into calculable, understandable processes, intellectualization strips activities of their transcendent, overarching meaning and reduces them to their empirical components.

Scientific progress is a fraction, the most important fraction, of the process of intellectualization which we have been undergoing for thousands of years [...] It means [...] the knowledge or belief that if one wished one *could* learn it any time. Hence, it means the principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.²¹³

Weber dismisses the idea that scientific knowledge can replace transcendental values, or offer a path to human happiness. (“Who believes in this, aside from a few big children in university

²¹³ SV, 138-9.

chairs or offices? Let us resume our argument.”²¹⁴) For Weber scientific knowledge cannot assume the burdens of faith and salvation in the modern age, though it may *appear* to do so. As Tracy Strong and David Owen succinctly put it, “if one accepts that certain beliefs and or practices can ensure one’s salvation, this implies that the world can be—difficult though it may be in practice—controlled.”²¹⁵ Advances in knowledge and technical mastery provide ways of controlling the terms of our existence—yet death remains obstinately outside of our control.

Similar to Nietzsche’s critique of Socratic optimism covered in the previous chapter, for Weber this inconvenient fact throws the possibility of salvation through science into question, and harshly demarcates the limits of what the “self-sufficient intellect” can accomplish. No amount of internal, intellectual understanding of the world can alter the incontrovertible fact of death. Rationalization, further, creates a fragmented quality to life in which intellectualization, having undermined all overarching meta-narratives, cannot itself offer any guidance with regards to Tolstoi’s central questions, “how shall we act?” and “what shall we do?” Tellingly, the example Weber uses to make this point is euthanasia. As he puts it, “Whether life is worth living while living and when—this is not a question asked by medicine. Natural science gives us an answer to the question of what we must do if we wish to master life technically. It leaves quite aside, or assumes for its purposes, whether we should and do wish to master life technically, and whether it makes sense to do so.”²¹⁶ Thus, while Weber is happy to concede that scientific progress has undoubted *value for life*, this must be seen as distinct from *giving life value*.

From this we can see how Weber takes up Tolstoi’s assertion about the meaninglessness of life and death for “civilized man in *general*.” In modernity, the direction provided by unified

²¹⁴ SV, 143.

²¹⁵ David Owen and Tracy Strong, “Max Weber’s Calling to Knowledge and Action,” xlvi.

²¹⁶ SV, 144.

cultural worldviews is replaced with a multiplicity of unmoored values and activities. This leaves the individual of Weber's modern world in the precarious position of needing to *choose* cultural values. He notes, "The 'culture' of the individual certainly does not consist in the *quantity* of 'cultural values' which he amasses; it consists of an articulated *selection* of culture values. *But there is no guarantee that this selection has reached an end that would be meaningful to him precisely at the 'accidental' time of his death.*"²¹⁷

The position of modern man is precarious not because faith or politics (or any other venture) has become less meaningful, but because it is increasingly difficult for individuals to sort through the available sources of value and *meaningfully commit* before the unknown moment of death. This point should be emphasized: for Weber there are plenty of values to be found in the world—even in a modern, disenchanted one—yet judging these falls to the individual who has no guarantee that her decisions will 'pay off' in any meaningful sense before death. Gunter Abramowski writes of this choice, "As to which ultimate values we ought to subscribe, 'a prophet or a saint' might well be able to pronounce, but none exists...the 'fundamental reality' [is] that we are destined to live in a god-forsaken prophet-less age."²¹⁸ For Weber the pursuit of meaning in modernity is a thoroughly uncertain venture, and it is death that throws this uncertainty into stark relief.

II. Ideal Types and Political Judgment

I have just argued that the twin processes of disenchantment and intellectualization, for Weber, create a modern world where the meaning of death, and the meaning of the pursuits of

²¹⁷ RRWD, 356; Emphasis mine. This passage repeats Weber's reference to Abraham and his 'satiety' with life, found in SV.

²¹⁸ Gunter Abromowski, Larry W. Moore, William H. Swatos Jr., "Meaningful life in a Disenchanted World: Rational Science and Ethical Responsibility: (An Interpretation of Max Weber)" *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1982), 124.

modern *life*, are thrown into question for the individual who must experience death as an arbitrary interruption. Before turning to the exception that Weber finds to this general rule of meaningless death, it is important to see what is at stake for Weber in this modern condition of precarious value choice. The problem of modern death is not simply personal meaning, but the ways the fragmented values of a disenchanting modernity creates a *general* political condition that creates problems for the ethical practice of politics. The lack of secure meaning for death generates a political world defined by radical plurality and shifting values. For Weber, ‘innocent’ and more deliberate attempts to find concrete meaning for life and death in these contexts can create barriers to exercising sound political judgment, or more troublingly, can actively structure how one ethically evaluates the costs their actions will exact on others. Both, for Weber, present problems that can perpetuate conditions of political injustice and violence.

In spite of its inability to provide sound meaning *for life*, for Weber scientific rationality and the (proper) scientific method can, and do, play an important role responding to these problems. One critical consequence of the erosion of Platonic, universal evaluative frameworks is the need for political and ethical actors to generate their own standards of meaning, standards that do not rely on universal givens but which have relevance beyond a single, concrete event. Weber’s methodological solution to the problem of fragmented, infinite social values is the construction of ideal types—models of “pure” character types, their internal orientations and external motivations, that can be used to clarify the motivations of real, historically occurring persons and movements. It is important that these types are not, for Weber, naturally occurring in individuals or as universal “forms.” Rather, as Peter Breiner puts it, they “select out the characteristic features of a meaning-context of an action [...and] connect them to a logical

construct.”²¹⁹ By presenting “types” which might, to varying degrees, help a person to map out a set of concrete, material motivations, ideals, and affective ties to social structures, ideal types provide a means of sorting social and political phenomenon so a person might clarify their own motivations, but also assess the behavior of others.

Understanding this methodological approach helps to illuminate the kinds of political problems Weber associates with the account of modern death he develops from Tolstoi. While Weber finds that the state of disenchantment is pervasive in modernity, this does not mean that individuals cannot (or do not) seek secure meaning for death within traditional worldviews or in within the promises of salvational religion. Broadly speaking, death marks a point of shattered temporal continuity for the individual that must somehow be explained. Salvational religions transform death into a point of transition (from the world of man to the kingdom of heaven, for instance.) Traditional worldviews accomplish something similar by circumscribing the infinite range of modern values to a fixed set. A person who lives by Amish traditions in modern times, for instance, situates their death within a structure of demarcated social values that can be pursued within a given lifespan. Thus the problem of death as Weber outlines it for modern persons need not ever fully arise.

Yet in a modern context, these solutions have a price. For Weber the pervasive spread of faith in self-sufficient intellect directly conflicts with the inner requirements of faith demanded by *both* tradition and salvational religions. Unless one lives in utter isolation from the world, the

²¹⁹ Briener, *Max Weber & Democratic Politics*, 36. Quite a lot has been written, for and against the ideal type as a method of judgment, or of scientific analysis. For a generally sympathetic account of this method as it applies specifically to history, yet one that nonetheless shows how the assumptions of the ideal types Weber uses drives some of his distorted conclusions concerning politics generally, and Greek politics specifically, see M. I. Finley, *Ancient History, Evidence and Models* (Peregrine Books, 1985); for a few representative accounts of Weber’s methodology as intended (in part) as a means of informing practical judgment see Peter Briener, *Max Weber & Democratic Politics*; Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision*; Wolfgang Schulchter, “Value Neutrality and the Ethic of Responsibility,” in Guenther Ross and Wolfgang Schulchter (eds.) *Max Weber’s Vision of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

metaphysical, transcendental status of any values can no longer be taken as ‘given;’ these systems inevitably face the same disenchanting pressures as all other modern values. In order to supply an internally coherent framing of death, then, such worldviews *always* demand of their followers an “intellectual sacrifice:”

To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man, one must say: may he rather return silently, without any of the usual publicity buildup of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. [...] One way or another he has to bring his “intellectual sacrifice”—that is inevitable. If he can really do it, we shall not rebuke him. For such an intellectual sacrifice in favor of unconditional religious devotion is ethically quite a different matter than the evasion of the plain duty of intellectual integrity, which sets in if one lacks the courage to clarify one’s own ultimate standpoint and rather facilitates this duty by feeble relative judgments.²²⁰

As can be seen here, while Weber treats this return to the “old churches” with a kind of dignity, he is clearly troubled by the possible ethical consequences such a turn entails, specifically with respect to the kinds of “sacrifices” of reasoning that influence sound moral judgment. For Weber “mature” ethical reasoning—including political reasoning—requires that one openly take account of (and responsibility for) the unintended consequences of one’s actions.²²¹ To do this

²²⁰ SV, 155. There is a deeply gendered aspect to Weber’s account of life and meaningful death. The “heroic stand” portrayed in the vocation lectures and echoed in the soldierly model is an explicitly masculine account. While this is too vast a topic to explore here, some consideration of what this gendered model of meaning implies—particularly within the context of the vocational calling which is generally not thought of as a purely *masculine* phenomenon—would be worthwhile. In particular, it seems worth questioning whether due to this component of “manliness,” there is an alternative, idealized “feminine death” for modern woman. Or if women—still mostly relegated to the household and domestic roles at the time of Weber’s writing—largely avoid the problem of death experienced by modern man by leading lives circumscribed by traditional, demarcated gender roles. This latter option is difficult to reconcile, however, with the active role Weber, and particularly his wife Marianne Weber, played in the women’s movement in Germany. More likely, this relates to the culture of heroic honor and manliness which Weber, in spite of his fairly progressive views on gender (given the time) was fascinated by throughout his life, and which he mediates on increasingly in letters from his final years. Marianne’s personal views on death were also quite Nietzschean, and in multiple letters she writes of her belief that there is a “right time to die” that is not necessarily natural death. On this point (with a Freudian interpretation), see Radkau, *Max Weber*, 539-540.

²²¹ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” (hereafter PV) in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (ed.) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (Oxford University Press, new York 1958), 119-120, 128; and RRWD, 327-8, 333-6. The ethical dangers of the demands of the universal ethic of religions against the demands of responsible worldly politics are several, most notably that a universal end has the tendency to justify morally ambiguous worldly actions. For this reason, Weber identifies the religious ethic of brotherliness as existing in tension with other value spheres in the world—of which politics is distinctive for its use of violent means to achieve its ends.

requires that a person be able to make a full acknowledgment of the fragmented state of plural values in modernity. Since values and pursuits can provide meaning for others in many different combinations, many of these irreconcilable, the difficulty here is to both affirm one's own choices while acknowledging that one's actions devalue other pursuits which are *as valuable to others* as one's own commitments are for oneself.²²² Acting ethically in a pluralist environment of this kind thus involves an inward act of resolution—a kind of passionate commitment to a cause *in spite of* an acknowledgment that one's choices mark only one possible path of many legitimate options, and in spite of an awareness that choosing one path over another will exact real costs from others.

In contrast, subscribing to salvational faith or traditional meaning undercuts sound ethical judgment for Weber because the choice to return to these frameworks in *modern conditions* marks a deliberate decision to accept the artificially limited (and limiting) value-spheres these worldviews entail. To maintain the coherence of an inner commitment to tradition or faith requires that one overlook those inconvenient truths which conflict with that belief; or, to the extent one confronts them, to treat these facts as morally or culturally less significant than one's own convictions. This is particularly important for those involved in political enterprises, who must adjudicate between courses of action that make use of violent, coercive force. Weber thus warns the audience in *Politics as a Vocation* that, “No ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of ‘good’ ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones—and facing the

²²² Weber can be charged with value relativism on this point, a position he attempts to offset by the condition of internal *consistency* in individual value choice, on the one hand, but also his insistence on measuring the consequences of one's actions, on the other. This response can (and has been) criticized on several grounds, notably by pragmatists such as John Dewey, or critics such as Leo Strauss. As Reinhard Bendix notes, however, Weber himself might read such differing responses to the moral legitimacy of his position as further proof of irreconcilable value conflicts. Bendix, *Max Weber*, 270-271.

possibility or even probability of evil ramifications.”²²³ Weber’s “mature” man bears responsibility for the consequences of his actions, intended or not, and the costs they exact from others; he has only the heroic affirmation of his choices to situate him.²²⁴

Thus while Weber acknowledges that traditional paths of meaningful death remain open in modernity, there is a sense in Weber’s work that they are neither particularly ethical, nor particularly manly. In contrast, for Weber the soldier’s death is a specifically worldly (and manly) type of meaningful modern death. Crucially, the soldier’s death avoids the problematic retreat from modern reality demanded by tradition and religious worldviews. Death in war, even service *unto* death, is explicitly given context within a battle of existential causes. It thereby becomes a suitable model for Weber’s notion of meaningful service in a disenchanted age—not merely for those engaged in actual wars, but also those who die *in service to their vocational callings*—including and (as we will see below) *especially* the political vocation. As Weber puts it, the “location of death within a series of meaningful and consecrated events ultimately lies at the base of all endeavors to support the autonomous dignity of the polity resting on force.”²²⁵

While a soldierly model of meaningful death does not retreat from the modern conflict of values, it nonetheless generates several troubling political problems of its own. In the next section I therefore outline Weber’s understanding of soldierly death by contrasting it with another famous idealized articulation of soldierly (political) service drawn from the classical past: Perikles’ Funeral Oration. This preliminary comparison will help to clarify the ways that

²²³ PV, 121.

²²⁴ PV, 119-120. See also PV, 128 and RRWD, 327-8, 333-6. In this way Weber seems to take on a version of Nietzsche’s heroic *amor fati*. On the relationship between Nietzsche and Weber, see David Owen and Tracy Strong, “Max Weber’s Calling to Knowledge and Action.” And Ralph Schroeder, “Nietzsche and Weber: Two Prophets of the Modern Age” in Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (eds), *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity* (London: Unwin, 1987).

²²⁵ RRWD, 335.

Weber thinks soldierly service provides a secure route to meaningful death, on the one hand, and the powerful ways this soldierly model shapes Weber's understanding of the *modern* political vocation, on the other. My reasons for the juxtaposition, however, are also critical. By looking at the ancient counter example we can see what is distinctive about Weber's understanding of soldierly death, but also why Weber's formulation should give us pause.

III. A Brotherhood Unto Death

Weber refers to military culture and its peculiar ethic in a few places throughout his works. His most direct and extended treatment of the soldier's death is found in his essay, *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*, where Weber takes up the question of soldierly death in a more general discussion of the conflicts between religious ethics of brotherliness and those of the rationalized, modern state. Weber writes:

Death on the field of battle differs from death that is only man's common lot. Since death is a fate that comes to everyone, nobody can ever say why it comes precisely to him and why it comes just when it does. As the values of culture increasingly unfold and are sublimated to immeasurable heights, such ordinary death marks an end where only a beginning makes sense. Death on the field of battle differs from this merely unavoidable dying in that in war, and in this massiveness *only* in war, the individual can *believe* that he knows he is dying 'for' something. The why and the wherefore of his facing death can, as a rule, be so indubitable to him that the problem of the "meaning" of death does not even occur to him. At least there may be no presuppositions for the emergence of the problem in its universal significance, which is the form in which religions of salvation are impelled to be concerned with the "meaning of death." Only those who perish "in their callings" are in the same situation as the soldier who faces death on the battlefield.²²⁶

The soldier's death is distinctive for Weber in two respects. First, death is unquestionably situated within a meaningful, existential context from the perspective of the individual, thereby avoiding the problem of the "accidental" timing of death: the soldier knows he is dying "for" something. For Weber, the "location of death within a series of meaningful and consecrated

²²⁶ RRWD, 335.

events” is achieved through the “massiveness” of war.²²⁷ The possibility of utter destruction (of one’s self, or the “object” of one’s fight—the community, or cause) inwardly frames battlefield action as unquestioningly purposeful for the individual, critically alleviating the perilous uncertainty of modern, disenchanting death.²²⁸

Secondly, death on the battlefield—even the *possibility* of death—forms the basis for a powerful commitment between individuals. Weber writes,

War does something to the warrior which, in its concrete meaning, is unique: it makes him experience a consecrated meaning of death which is characteristic only of death in war. The community of the army standing in the field today feels itself—as in the times of the war lords ‘following’—to be a community unto death, and the greatest of its kind.²²⁹

The “community unto death,” is formed through the experience of war, which for Weber breaks down prior social divisions between individuals, rebuilding new ones through common existential purpose. Weber argues war “thereby makes for an unconditionally devoted and sacrificial community among the combatants and releases an active mass compassion and love for those who are in need.”²³⁰

The community generated by existential struggle may be broad and far-reaching, but importantly for Weber it will always conflict with universal, religious ethics. Even when motivated by universal claims, the aims of political wars are worldly and particular. For instance, a war defined by humanitarian ends might promote a significant amount of compassion across social, political, or economic lines—but it will be *particularly* (and violently) opposed to a group or state that holds an opposing position. The inverse also holds. A *soldierly* commitment to an

²²⁷ The German is “*Massenhaftigkeit*.” Given Weber’s application of this model to the vocational calling I take this to mean something like the existential “enormousness” of war rather than the actual size or number of persons on a field of battle; one faces annihilation in some sense.

²²⁸ RRWD, 335-6.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ RRWD, 335.

ethnic cause, or philosophically “correct” way of life, recasts other ethnicities, ideologies, or causes as potential *existential* “threats.” As such, from the perspective of universal religious ethics, any “compassion” unleashed by war “must be seen as a mere reflection of the technically sophisticated brutality of the struggle.”²³¹

By this model, then, death is made meaningful through the *inner* conviction of the individual at the time of death, or alternatively through the *external* bonds of a community bound to each other *unto* death. Yet this model has an ambiguous scope. It is not clear if any soldierly community could potentially grant death ‘consecrated’ meaning, or if it is the existential “massiveness” of war that is decisive. This question is important for our purposes (and becomes more difficult) due to Weber’s extension of the soldierly model to encompass “those who die in the service of the calling,” an extension that was not original to the first publication of this essay in 1915, but added by Weber in 1920 following WWI. This addition raises some questions, particularly concerning the broad scope of possible meaningful vocational causes, and the ways these different kinds of service might be understood in soldierly terms.²³² Divorced from a literal battlefield, it is unclear if the individual’s internal conviction in their choice of value commitments, or the public community of recognition of those commitments as a cause, or the *activity* of service itself situates death’s meaning.

What is at stake in identifying the precise locus of meaning in Weber’s model is made more clear when it is compared to the classical Greek understanding of heroic, military death. Soldierly death played an important role in the political life of the polis, and shares many features with Weber’s construction. Yet the striking *differences* between these—more specifically, those features of classical soldierly politics that Weber sheds in his modern

²³¹ RRWD, 336-7.

²³² On this addition, see Harvey Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 66-67.

application of the soldierly type of death to the modern calling (particularly, the political calling)—help to illuminate the inner workings of Weber’s bleak diagnosis of political modernity, and the tremendous ethical pressures he places on modern political leaders who are “called” to explicitly soldierly political service.

As discussed in the last chapter, in classical Greek thought the meaning or meaninglessness of death is tied to memory: one lived on in the minds and recollection of others. This understanding rests on a particular ideal exemplified in the Homeric epics. The Homeric hero was portrayed as “chafing at the restrictiveness of mortality itself, which he attempts to override by performing a monumental, immortal deed to win him undying renown.”²³³ Achilles, whose violent anger and heroic pride costs the Trojans and Greeks alike tremendous suffering and loss in the *Iliad*, is paradigmatic of this heroic ideal as a ‘doer of great deeds and speaker of great words.’ Through glory, one could overcome death.

Constant heroic competition is not politically expedient, however. Fame-seeking competitiveness between individuals frequently occurs at the price of political solidarity, not to mention the safety of those nominally under the protection of these would-be immortals. One of the consistent themes across the Homeric epics deals precisely with the great, frequently tragic, costs of the heroic lifestyle.²³⁴ The kinds of achievements that lead to heroic immortality have no necessary ethical or political valence; both “good and wicked” deeds can secure renown. Thus the very means of thwarting death through individual heroic action form a particular political problem for the community as a whole. “. . .[A] respect for law and justice will not be upheld in a

²³³ Janet Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From Ancient Greece to Early Christianity*, 41.

²³⁴ Achilles in particular represents both the highest exemplar and the greatest critical cautionary account of the heroic lifestyle. The costs of Achilles’ life is captured in his name, which translates loosely to “grief of the people,” a name which might alternatively be read as a commentary on his youthful death, or the pain his rage unleashed on the armies of the Greeks and Trojans at Troy.

world where there still exist admirers of the Homeric heroic ideals. Therefore, the heroic, aristocratic *arête* must be institutionally and legally restrained and then refocused.”²³⁵

In Athens, one institutional solution to this problem was the annual, public funeral for the war dead; a deeply political event. More than an alternative venue for glory, this occasion actively redirected the values of archaic heroism towards a communal end.²³⁶ As Nicole Loraux has argued, the funeral oration was a way of explicitly connecting the figure of the dead Athenian soldier to the heroic “beautiful dead” of the epic past—only here the beauty of the death is *always* understood in reference to the glorious “immortal” city.²³⁷ The plural, public aspect of the speech (not individuals, but “the dead” are honored) allowed praise of the dead to become a kind of counsel for the living.²³⁸

²³⁵ *Ibid*, 42. In this period Athens transforms into a society engaged in increasingly complicated and imperial wars, and a newly complex set of political institutions meant to manage and cement Athens’ identity as the dominant political and cultural power of the Hellenic world. The Athenians of the Periklean age—and Thucydides himself—inhabit a vastly more complex society than the Homeric heroes would have. As Josiah Ober notes, in this world “the Athenians willingly exchanged their traditional confidence, based on indicative knowledge of one another as individuals, with trust in the system itself and its capacity to control risk through mechanisms of accountability and transparency.” The institutional shift from a focus on individual death and glory to an explicitly public funeral for the military dead of the city as a collective body reflects this social transformation. Josiah Ober, “Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science” in Antonios Rengakos & Antonis Tsakmakis, eds, *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides*, Vol. I (Boston: Brill 2012), 136-8.

²³⁶ The translation of individual heroism into political service was not universally embraced, and in fact was cause for significant political tension and contested reform. See Simon Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia” in John Winkler and F. Zeitlin, (eds.), *Nothing to do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990), 111-113.

²³⁷ Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*.

²³⁸ I focus here exclusively on Perikles’ Funeral Oration, which follows many of the conventions of “published” examples of Funeral Orations probably never given before a live audience, such as those by Lysias, or the ironic “Menexenus” written by Plato—both of which demonstrate similar structure, concerns, and themes as the Periklean oration in Thucydides. Versions of these texts are all available through the *Perseus Project* of Tufts University: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/> This speech has been interpreted many ways, and some readings will contrast with what I present here. See Loraux for a brief survey. *The Invention of Athens*, 31-34.

Through an idealized account of the greatest achievements of the Athenian dead, the average citizen was encouraged to re-imagine their own behavior in light of Athens highest ideals.²³⁹ Consider Perikles' words from the beginning of his speech:

The friend who is familiar with every fact of the story may think that some point has not been set forth with that fullness which he wishes and knows it to deserve; [...] he who is a stranger to the matter may be led by envy to suspect exaggeration if he hears anything above his own nature. For men can endure to hear others praised only so long as they can severally persuade themselves of their own ability to equal the actions recounted: when this point is passed, envy comes in and with it incredulity.²⁴⁰

That the praise of the dead might inspire envy is conspicuous. It indicates that the individual citizen might feel obligated to actively compete with those no longer physically present *as if they were*. In essence, rather than being surpassed by subsequent generations, the dead act as ever-present members of the community. Honored as particularly praiseworthy, the deeds of the military dead form a standard of meaningful action for the living to emulate in an ongoing, reciprocal relationship. This directly contrasts the progressive ideal Weber outlines, in which individuals *expect* and even *hope* that their deeds will be outdone.

To be “worthy of the city” was to measure up against the deeds—in speech and in action—undertaken by the heroic, civic dead. This “standard” is actively formed through a dialogue between the dead and the living, and could be put to work by orators like Perikles to encourage the demos to adopt different courses of action and behavior. Perikles is explicit on this point:

²³⁹ The annual public Funeral Oration does not simply cover the deeds of those who had most recently died, but also rehearses an idealized history that ran through the polity's ‘greatest hits’ of military feats, as well as the best features of their democratic public life (Perikles not only praises the military bravery of the dead, but also takes time to praise Athens' open political culture, fair mindedness, and love of art without softness.) This was intended to educate the living and spur them to great and virtuous action, but as Plato is quick to point out in his ironic *Menexenus*, patriotism could get in the way of moral sense and sound political judgment. Much like patriotic speeches given today, it is not merely the content, but the *reception* of these speeches and the appeals to existential meaning they contain that forms their overall significance.

²⁴⁰ HPW, ln. 2.35, 111.

So died these men as became Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have as unfaltering a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it have a happier outcome. [...] For this offering of their lives, made in common by them all, they each of them individually received that renown which never grows old, and for a tomb [...] that noblest of shrines wherein their glory is laid up to be eternally remembered upon every occasion on which deed or story shall be commemorated. [...] These take as your model, and judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom of valor, never decline the dangers of war.²⁴¹

I discuss this active, and frequently critical dynamic between heroic dead and living citizens below; what is important initially is that in the polis heroic service unto death could be a mediating force used to restrain and re-order the competition for recognition between persons (it does not *abolish* competition) in a way that actively reinforces the city's sense of identity and common purpose.

We can see a significant resonance here with the soldierly type described by Weber. The soldier who dies in service of the modern state knows he is serving a greater cause than himself. And to the extent his death occurs in the line of duty, it cannot be described as purely “accidental.” Likewise, he has joined a community he can reasonably expect will honor and memorialize his sacrifice through time. Both instances, Athenian and modern, attach the meaning of soldierly death to an existentially significant community. One can go further and note that military sacrifice is still leveraged to legitimate the state as an entity worth dying for.²⁴² But there are important differences between these depictions of soldierly death.

Recalling the ‘gulf’ between past and present that Weber identifies, Weber’s articulation of a progressive ideal opposes the view of time that underlies the Periklean formulation. In the polis the ever-present dead exist in a kind of collapsed temporality, the deeds of the living co-

²⁴¹ *ibid.*, ln. 2.43, 115.

²⁴² One has merely to visit the center of Washington D.C. to see how this is still the case, and the rhetorical force of “let their deaths not have been in vain” remains a frequently employed hortatory device. The question of how sacrifice is politically utilized—as an occasion of straightforward patriotism or critical self-reflection (as it could be for the Athenians) is less obvious. See Simon Stow, “Perikles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism and Public Mourning.”

existing with those of the past and projected into the future. If the deeds of the present render those of the past obsolete, and inevitably *will be rendered obsolete* by the deeds of the future, the political coherence of the polis as a continuity of norms is subverted. The progressive ideal underlying the modern, rationalized world only provides continuity in the sense of ongoing change. Thus the dead can no longer play a meaningful role as *active* bearers of common ends. They exist only in the passive voice, and only in the past.

From the perspective of the polis, the progressive ideal generates several problems. It was not devotion to the Athenian state that gave life and death meaning to the Athenian dead, so much as the guarantee of enacted, competitive memorial by the living polity. Memory and dynamic recognition are demoted in Weber's account, if given any showing at all, in favor of inner conviction. While it makes sense to think of an inner commitment unto death as meaningful (Socrates' famous stand in the *Apology* comes to mind, as does Weber's appeal to the example of Luther²⁴³) individual conviction alone cannot guarantee the *continuity* of a cause. This damages the core political dynamic between the *inward* belief of the soldier who dies and the *external* recognition of that sacrificial service—which, as I will discuss below, is also an opportunity to *critically acknowledge, evaluate, or reject* the meaning of a specific act of service—by the community located in historic time. Lacking this dynamic, Weber's description of the soldierly type as a *model* of meaningful vocational death in modernity presents the basis for a deeply fragmented and divided world; one which, when attached to the political vocation, is deeply prone to violence and existentially defined faction. As we will see, when applied to the political vocation this model of meaningful modern death, for Weber, rather than *restraining* the extremism of politically existential ends, meaningful death actively *amplifies* value competition into war.

²⁴³ PV, 127.

IV. The (Soldierly) Political Vocation

Weber is famous for announcing the birth of a new era of mass politics, where plebescitarian democracy provides the necessary balance between the increasingly rationalized spread of officialdom and mass politics on the one hand, and meaningful charismatic leadership on the other.²⁴⁴ As I will argue here, the soldierly model of meaningful death structures many elements of the political vocation for Weber: it is a *soldierly* inner commitment to a coherent set of values *for which one fights*. Further, the ethical problems of judgment and responsible decision making Weber raises in conjunction with this vision of politics are exacerbated by the requirements of meaningful, soldierly death, which forces a realignment of competing values into oppositional, enemy forces. The heroic difficulty of balancing the absolutist inward demands of a soldierly commitment unto death against the competing demands of responsible leadership—defined by compromise, level headed judgment, and above all, mature responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions—thus clarify Weber’s pessimistic forecast for the future of German democratic politics: a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness.”²⁴⁵

For Weber the political world can be divided into two groups of persons: those who live *off* politics (the political official) and those who live *for* politics, the charismatic leader and his devoted following. One who lives off politics relies on political activity for her economic security, while the person who lives for politics serves her cause with inward devotion. Both require conviction, but for the official who lives off politics the meaningful commitment is to administrative *procedures*. In this respect political “officialdom” has undergone the process of rationalization. The official’s political actions are willfully divorced from personal convictions, except for a devoted commitment to the process of administration itself. Weber writes,

²⁴⁴ PV, 96-97.

²⁴⁵ PV, 128.

“According to his proper vocation the genuine official [...] will not engage in politics. Rather he should engage in impartial ‘administration.’ [...] the *raison d’etat*, that is, the vital interests of the ruling order, are not in question. *Sine ira et studio*, ‘without scorn or bias,’ he shall administer his office.”²⁴⁶

Significantly, this orientation towards political life generates the same problems of meaning as the progressive ideal of science. The activity of the official remains “political” to the extent that it is concerned with coercive force, yet no individual act can be expected to have lasting importance—in fact the administrator must *passionately* strive to avoid personal impact. Indeed, Weber’s characterization of the political official reminds one precisely of Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilych: a brilliant public servant who could ‘turn off’ his personal, neighborly persona in service of his professional duties, yet knew very little about how to die.

In contrast, the one who lives *for* politics, the “politician, the leader as well as his following” occupies quite a different category. While living in the same disenchanting world as the political official and modern scientist, the life of the politician is defined by “taking a stand” and choosing between competing ends—or for political followers, choosing between competing leaders. This choice fundamentally requires devotion and conviction. Weber states, what “the cause, in the service of which the politician strives for power and uses power, looks like is a matter of faith. The politician may serve national, humanitarian, social, ethical, cultural, worldly or religious ends...however some kind of faith must always exist. Otherwise it is absolutely true that the curse of the creature’s worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest political successes.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ PV, 95.

²⁴⁷ PV, 117.

Weber goes further here, however, in ways that reveal how model of battlefield death works on his notion of politics: “the politician, the leader as well as his following, must always and necessarily [...] fight.”²⁴⁸ Indeed, “When speaking in a political meeting [...] to come out clearly and take a stand is one’s damned duty. The words one uses [...] are not plowshares to loosen the soil of contemplative thought; *they are swords against enemies.*”²⁴⁹ This necessary “fight” is tied to “an exclusive *personal* responsibility for what he does, a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer.”²⁵⁰ In this sense, for Weber the democratic polity is not primarily a way to increase the political enfranchisement of the people; it is the best way to produce *great leaders*, persons ‘trained’ and challenged through electoral “battles.”²⁵¹

The metaphor of the battlefield also extends to encompass political followers: “the demagogic effect of the leader’s personality during the election fight of the party will...extend opportunities to their followers to find the compensation for which they hope.”²⁵² Once a leader has been elected, the demos returns to its passive role as disciplined, soldierly followers. In a kind of ‘trickle-down charisma,’ the material and internal interests of those who live off politics are thus tied to the passionate cause of the politician: a heroic individual fighting on behalf of a disciplined mass—whether they agree with his actions or not. As Mommsen puts it, “Weber made no attempt to save even the ideal core of the classical democratic theory under the

²⁴⁸ PV, 95.

²⁴⁹ SV, 145, emphasis mine.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ PV, 111-112; Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890-1920*, 395-6.

²⁵² PV 103; see also Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1 [hereafter ES], ed. Gunther Roth and Claus Wittich (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 1119-1120.

conditions of modern mass democracy. He replaced the postulate of the free-self-determination of the people [...] with the principle of a *formally* free choice of leaders.”²⁵³

When coupled with the soldierly model of meaningful death, these formal political assumptions place enormous ethical pressures on democratic leaders. Crucially, political values are subject to the same precarity of other modern values: they must be chosen. Recalling Weber’s anxieties concerning the “sacrifice of the intellect” that attended many modern value choices, it is important to understand that the modern world for Weber retains the many “gods” of the old world—personifications of competing values such as war and love, freedom and equality, beauty and justice—but in a disenchanted world these are exposed as merely competing material and practical interests. As Weber states in *Science as a Vocation*,

Today the routines of everyday life challenge religion. Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another. What is hard for modern man, and especially for younger generations, is to measure up to *workaday* existence. The ubiquitous chase for ‘experience’ stems from this weakness; for it is weakness not to be able to countenance the stern seriousness of our fateful times.²⁵⁴

In the past, cultural structures such as the polis and the “functional religion” of the Greeks served the valuable mediating function. One could commit to different values on different occasions, and do so without any sense of internal contradiction.²⁵⁵ In contrast, for Weber the modern world no longer has access to these “given,” worldviews and the internal flexibility they allow; yet the general problem of meaningful death for “civilized man” still applies. A person must sort and *choose* between competing political causes and values on their own; an enormously difficult

²⁵³ Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics*, 395-396. As Mommsen notes, Weber sees the democratic polity not primarily as a way to increase as much as possible the political enfranchisement of the people, but rather as the best way to form a state capable of great *foreign* accomplishments, through its production of strong leaders who fight heroically, and the restraint of formal bureaucratic control.

²⁵⁴ SV,149; emphasis original.

²⁵⁵ SV,148.

task. For Weber, those who seek to replace the guidance these functional ethical frameworks provided with mere expert knowledge or the wisdom of personal “experience” are actually seeking out *leaders*—individuals willing and able to make impossible choices on the modern battlefield of values that they might follow with clear, devoted conscience. A mistaken kind of ethical “weakness.”²⁵⁶

A soldierly choice and stand for a political cause does not deny this modern reality of many causes, with many costs; in fact, it insists on it. In this sense it does not require a “sacrifice of the intellect” in the way religious or traditional worldviews might. But as a model for meaningful political service it lends structure to an equally troubling ethical problem: wars require enemies. If the “massiveness” of the battlefield is *the* decisive component of soldierly death, then violent, existential conflict between causes—or at the very least, a *belief* that one’s cause is existentially opposed to others—is as important for situating death’s meaning as the choice of a cause itself. The frame of war, in other words, compresses the field of potential political causes into the rubric of “for” and “against.”²⁵⁷ Weber is explicit on this point: when choosing a cause in the modern world “you serve this god *and you offend the other god.*”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ This is not Nietzschean elitism: “Please consider that a man’s value does not depend on whether or not he had leadership qualities.” SV, 150.

²⁵⁷ In this respect, the *metaphor* of war, which Weber employs freely in both vocation lectures and (as I have shown here) particularly with reference to political life, may lead Weber to fall victim to the kinds of ethical compressions he is anxious to avoid. It is not obvious why competing values must become *enemies* that offend others except to conform to the model of soldierly service. A willingness to *die* in passionate vocational service, after all, is not the same as a willingness to fight others or *kill*. The exception here remains the political vocation, where even if one does not wish to fight or kill others, by definition for Weber one is making a claim about the permissible use of violent coercion.

²⁵⁸ SV, 151; emphasis mine. Weber at times seems to conflate soldierly devotion with metaphysical salvation and uses the language of faith, sin, and grace—yet he also associates these with political charisma. I therefore read the soldierly type as a worldly orientation, without the comparable *metaphysical* functions of religious salvation. For an opposing view, see Goldman, *Politics, Death, and the Devil*, 78-79.

Weber of course recognized that most individuals do not in actual practice maintain absolute devotion to a single cause. Like the individual of ancient times, the individual chooses between commitments to suit her practical, everyday circumstances. Yet he is adamant that modern individuals do not like to be pressed on this fact, as it undermines the belief that life has a coherent, purposeful meaning. One can compare Weber's point here to modern theories of "cognitive dissonance," or the idea that even though persons *can* and *do* hold internally contradictory views, they desire internal consistency and will work, consciously or not, to achieve an internally coherent sense of their life's meaning. And they will do so even at the cost of avoiding, devaluing, or ignoring contradictory information—or, as Weber suggests, when approached through the soldierly model, persons will tend to acknowledge competing values as *enemy causes to be fought*.²⁵⁹ In its most essential form, for Weber meaningful death requires a fully coherent framing through an *absolute* commitment to a cause. A coherence which the individual, in turn, will be powerfully, existentially motivated to uphold.

The danger is thus not that persons have political commitments or values as such, but that these commitments will work through a political landscape of causes that is defined by conflict, and unmediated by any kind of ethical restraint. The burden of honorably restraining this war of causes, for Weber, falls squarely onto the shoulders of leaders "called" to politics. These are rare persons who can soberly and maturely assume responsibility for the violent costs of their commitments.²⁶⁰ "Only he" Weber notes, "who in the face of all this can say 'In spite of all!' has

²⁵⁹ SV, 151. Also in line with this research, it is tremendously difficult to confront this dissonance, as it causes real psychic anguish. Thus Weber thinks that one of the most important services a person called to an academic life can perform is to help their students become aware of the full, coherent sense of their commitments—including those facts that are "inconvenient."

²⁶⁰ In this respect, I understand Weber's concerns to parallel Kateb's comment about aesthetic cravings, that the "ideals unconsciously preferred to doing the right thing and avoiding wrong [...] may locate in politics or [...] may sanctify the aspiration of a rare individual to eminence and greatness [...]. In every case, something aesthetic is at

the calling for politics.”²⁶¹ The danger is that the uncertain, modern internal orientation towards death that *requires* some sort of value choice, coupled with the desire for a coherent sense of meaning, may lead persons to dismiss the importance of these ethical considerations. Just as dangerous, potential leaders may avoid any internal confrontation with the ethical costs their specific “god” and cause will exact from others, fleeing instead into the moral grounds of absolute conviction and ultimate ends.²⁶² In this way the choice and subsequent devotion to the “god” of a cause is capable of unleashing truly diabolical forces. Causes that existed in tension—but not at *war*—with each other, are repositioned as enemy combatants. A very bleak, very violent conclusion.

That Weber felt compelled to extend this model of soldierly death to include those who perish in the calling following the devastating events of WWI indicates the importance this ideal model of death grew to have in Weber’s thought, but it also suggests what he understood as the practical stakes of his argument. Weber delivered the two Vocation Lectures at a time when the kinds of factionalism, opportunistic leadership, and political extremism were vital and urgent matters of practical German politics.²⁶³ Viewing the political vocation from the perspective of

work, and passionately so, but is not recognized and hence often morally ruinous in an apparently innocent manner.” Kateb, “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility,” 19.

²⁶¹ PV, 128.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ As is evident from reading Weber’s letters and speeches from this period, Weber’s concern with ethical political leadership should not be confused with pacifism. Weber was a nationalist who supported “honorable” and “sober but ruthless” foreign policy—he was not aggressively hawkish, but did not avoid war, either. His concern with the violence and factionalism of the times seems more to do with the ability of Germany to enact its foreign policy decisions in an effective way. Indeed, war for Weber seems to be an ordinary and natural, if lamentable, part of the essential violence of politics that mature men deal with honorably (but do not oppose as such). To the extent that he resisted German military engagement in WWI, he generally did so by lamenting the stupidity and incompetence of the German leadership rather than objecting to the idea that war and conquest are inherently morally wrong—a point which coheres with the power of the metaphor of war within his diagnosis of the political vocation. On the wartime context of these speeches, and Weber’s public political commentary through the end of WWI and the formation of the Weimar Constitution, see Radkau, *Max Weber*, 481-491 and 515-518.

the soldier's death, indeed, lends a particular urgency to the core themes of *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*. In a political landscape of causes defined by soldierly devotion, the exercise of a strenuous ethic of responsibility is of paramount importance for leaders. If individuals will be motivated to commit to their party causes *as soldiers* in order to fill an existential need—where politics, it must always be remembered, is defined by the exercise of coercive force and violence—the clear acknowledgement of the costs one's actions will levy on others is essential.²⁶⁴ One can hear in the two lectures appeals for clear ethical accounting, and a warning about the political dangers of uncompromising moral conviction in political leadership; anxieties that are oriented towards very real wars, and very real extremism.

Weber's analysis provides a useful means of thinking through the kinds of appeals and political dynamics which existentially uncertain conditions can produce, particularly the frightening ways such conditions encourage a constriction of ethical considerations towards others, and the restructuring of political rivalries into existential oppositions—problems which remain pressing concerns in practical politics and political theory today.²⁶⁵ Weber's understanding of death in modernity thus remains timely as a way of understanding the responsibilities and stresses placed on political life in contexts defined by existential needs. Yet there is reason to ask if the fatalism of Weber's bleak prognosis of modern politics is not, in part, a product of his own formal political assumptions, and therefore capable of being productively re-thought.

V. "Not Walls and Ships but Men"

²⁶⁴ The Scientific Vocation, from this perspective, is also reinvigorated as the means by which future "soldiers" learn to critically evaluate the costs of those causes they might serve. Teaching, also, is elevated by the very real responsibility professors have to influence a captive student audience in decisions of life and death. Weber notes: "The primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize 'inconvenient facts'—I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions. And for every party opinion there are facts that are extremely inconvenient." SV, 147.

²⁶⁵ Addressing this problem, see for instance, Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*

In this final section I again return to the example of Perikles, this time for slightly different purposes, and in a slightly different way. As I will argue here, Weber's formal assumptions lead him to dismiss important, practical capacities that democratic bodies can mobilize to critically restrain and mediate the kinds of violent and immoral politics Weber warns against.²⁶⁶ That Weber misses these capacities is seen in the parallel ways that Weber's conceives of a modern politics of leaders and followers that elides the capacities of democratic bodies to enact political judgments, on the one hand; but also in the similar elision Weber applies to the *classical polis*, distorting the relationships between the *demos* and its demagogues, such as Perikles.²⁶⁷ Taking this movement between past and present as an invitation, and building from the parallel dismissal of democratic capacities in Weber's account, I return to Thucydides for the sake of recovering an alternative way of conceiving the polity as an active (and *reactive*) body, one that might work in tandem with Weber's understanding of responsible leadership in modern contexts. In the *dynamic* relationship between Perikles and the Athenian polis, I suggest, we can find an example of a polity that exercises ongoing, active political judgment; one capable of subjecting even existentially framed causes to *ongoing* critical, ethical evaluation without sacrificing its coherence as a common project.

²⁶⁶ Weber's dismissal of mass democratic *electoral* capacities is somewhat puzzling. Kalyvas provides an excellent examination of Weber's disavowal of mass charismatic politics, in spite of the very rich account of how a kind of democratic charisma nonetheless is apparent in his religious and sociological writings. The point here seems to be that for Weber charisma is always a revolutionary or extraordinary force—it is not a part of everyday political orders of domination and established legitimacy; thus Weber can praise the admission of the popular vote as part of the Weimar Constitution for the legitimacy it endows on the government as the legitimate voice of a *nation* which, once formed, is led by its chosen elite. But he cannot conceive of a *stable*, modern democratic politics that engages in ongoing, active symbolic and political struggle without doing violence to his central political categories and definitions; and as we will see, he struggles to recognize these persistent qualities of mass “charisma” in the classical polis as well. See Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 70-71.

²⁶⁷ While Weber offers one of the great analyses of the classical demagogue and the ancient city, he also gets quite a bit wrong about the classical polis, and Perikles in particular. For a full analysis, see M. I. Finley *Ancient History: Evidence and Models*; also Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989), 124-125.

As I have just outlined Weber's understanding of the modern political vocation above, it will be helpful here to start with Weber's treatment of Perikles. Thucydides, and the Periklean oration in particular, were the subject of renewed and intensive interest in the German academy in the 19th and early 20th Century.²⁶⁸ Readings of Perikles' funeral oration (introduced in the 1880s to the gymnasium curricula) often turned on the question of "Greek patriotism," a concern which mirrored growing questions of German nationalism and state identity in Weber's own time.²⁶⁹ As Loraux comments, "Considered one of the authorized mouthpieces of classical Athens, the funeral oration does not escape the play of these partisan and partial readings, in which two imaginary cities—that of the ancients and that of the moderns—reinforce each other."²⁷⁰ What *modern* assumptions does Weber's depiction of Perikles reinforce?

Several scholars have noted the resonances between Weber's general understanding of the heroic, charismatic 'type' of leadership and Thucydides' Perikles. Adair-Totef, for instance, singles out Perikles as an important model of responsible leadership for Weber, as a "consummate realist who is committed to political ideals."²⁷¹ The idea is compelling. In his

²⁶⁸ German academics of Weber's time found in Thucydides a classical model for modern historical method and 'objective' analysis. Jakob Burckhardt, for instance, or the 19th C. "Thucydidean Germans" such as Barthold Niehbur, Leopold von Ranke, and Eduard Meyer (whom Weber cites explicitly in relation to his understanding of the Greek demagogue and Perikles—see ES vol. II, 1127) helped to construct the modern understanding of Thucydides' method and historiography. For a brief overview of some of these interpretations of Thucydides and their reception, see Francisco Murari Pires "Thucydidean Modernities: History Between Science and Art" in *Brill Companion to Thucydides* Vol. II (Boston: Brill, 2012), 811-825.

²⁶⁹ Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, 30-32.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 30.

²⁷¹ Adair-Totef notes that while Perikles is cited by Weber in a few places, the scholarship is mostly silent on the relationship between the two, though he cites Hennis, Mommsen and Nippel as major exceptions. I am generally favorable to Adair-Totef's read of Weber's relationship to Perikles, though focusing on Perikles at the expense of Cleon—who Weber also cites—tends to distort the deeply ambivalent feelings Weber had towards demagogic politics, even those he himself endorsed. Weber is quick to remind his audiences that Perikles—widely portrayed as a heroic figure and positive example of political leadership—was a classic demagogue: "Not Cleon but Perikles was the first to bear the name of demagogue" (PV, 96). M. I. Finley comes closer to capturing Weber's more ambivalent analysis of the classical demagogue—its strengths and its weaknesses. See Adair-Totef, "Max Weber's Perikles," 148; and Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1973).

History, Thucydides presents us with an individual who is passionately committed to the ideal “cause” of the city, yet a consummate politician who maintains a kind of calculating, rational distance from his cause; all values that Weber identifies with ethical political leadership in his modern Caesarist model.²⁷² In keeping with Weber’s ideals, Thucydides presents Perikles as a leader capable of making compromises and—most importantly—acknowledging and bearing responsibility when his actions fall short of his promises.²⁷³

But there are puzzling elements of Weber’s description of Perikles. Weber describes Perikles’ authority as based “not upon law or office, but entirely upon personal influence and the trust of the *demos*. Thus his position was neither ‘legitimate’ or even ‘legal.’”²⁷⁴ In *Politics as a Vocation*, Weber comments that “In contrast to the offices of ancient democracy that were filled by lot, Perikles led the sovereign *Ecclesia* of the *demos* of Athens as a supreme strategist holding the only elective office or without holding any office at all.”²⁷⁵ Weber thereby paints the image of an Athenian polis dominated by the power of Perikles’ character and his charismatic authority as a military hero, without appeal to legal or formal institutions.²⁷⁶

There are several problems with this depiction of the classical demagogue, however, that substantively alter how the soldierly model of meaningful death operates through the political vocation. As discussed above, Weber finds in Athens an example of cultural unity capable of mediating value conflicts—but this depiction elides the ways that Athenian “unity” was a dynamic process of *ongoing* political self-definition that went on *between* formally equal

²⁷² PV, 115. Compare with ES, vol. II 1127, 1314.

²⁷³ HPW, 2.60-2.65, p. 124-8; compare with Weber: ES, Vol. II 1127, 1314; compare PV, 115

²⁷⁴ ES, Vol. II, 1314; compare PV, 96.

²⁷⁵ PV, 96.

²⁷⁶ ES vol. II, 1127, 1130.

citizens. The demagogue found in Thucydides' account is not a leader speaking to a disciplined group of party members or even "followers" in the way that Weber characterizes them:

"recognition freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a proof [...] devotion to the corresponding revelation, hero worship, or absolute trust in the leader." In fact, one of the complaints Thucydides levels at the Athenians is that they *do not trust Perikles enough*.²⁷⁷

Weber's depiction of Perikles' relationship with the polis instead conforms to Weber's ideal types of leaders and followers at the expense of the more complicated interplay of democratic and elite relations found in Thucydides' account. As Finley notes of Weber's depiction of the polis, it "was neither a traditional nor a rational (ie, bureaucratic) form of domination. That leaves only the charismatic type virtually by elimination, and it has to be said that classification is extremely thin and casual."²⁷⁸ Weber's description of the demagogue and his authority curiously overlooks the ways that even at the height of Perikles' power, he must actively convince the demos of his authority—*not* through charismatic appeals and soldierly heroism, but in terms of material benefits and as a *member* of the demos: *the collective bearers* of democratically chosen actions and values.

The Athenian Assembly, for instance, was a fluid composition of citizens with constantly changing allegiances. On any given day, the assembly might be divided by cleavages of class, material interest, or family allegiance; these would vary such that a demagogue had no guarantee of which "Athens" he might be addressing.²⁷⁹ While Weber correctly calls attention to the charisma and character of the demagogue as an important feature of Athenian democratic

²⁷⁷ HPW, 2.65, 127; 3.37-3.49, 176-183.

²⁷⁸ M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models*, 94-5.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 25-26 As Finley notes, this greatly limited the growth of official "parties" of any kind.

politics, as Finley puts it, “The test [of leadership...] was simply whether the Assembly did or did not vote as he wished, and therefore the test was repeated with each proposal.”²⁸⁰ This is not a passive, dominated polity as Weber describes: “psychologically [leadership] is matter of *complete personal devotion to the possessor of [charisma]*, arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope.”²⁸¹ The portrait that emerges in Thucydides, instead, is an active and reactive body that *constantly* exercises political judgment—for good or ill—and leaders who must constantly appeal to that political capacity from within the assembly itself. As Perikles says, “I call on those of you who are persuaded to give your support to these resolutions *which we are making together*.”²⁸²

This matters: the difference between Weber’s understanding of the demagogue as a purely charismatic authority, and the more complex interplay of democratic and elite authority in Thucydides, modifies how the soldierly ‘type’ of meaningful death shapes (and is shaped) by the polity. I have already mentioned the polis’ active, reciprocal relationship between living and dead as bearers of cultural values. We might extend this point in a more substantive way. The continuity of norms which situated meaningful Athenian death was not embodied in a charismatic devotion to heroic leadership, or a unified, salvational ideal. Soldierly life and death was instead situated within a *continually self-defining political community* of citizens that *understood themselves as such*.

The most powerful, if tragic, articulation of this idea in Thucydides comes during the account of the disastrous Athenian excursion to Syracuse. Here the Athenian general Nicias attempts to restore order to the defeated, retreating Athenian soldiers:

²⁸⁰ Finley in Ober, *Mass and Elite*, 122.

²⁸¹ ES, Vol. 1, 243. Emphasis mine.

²⁸² HPW;1.140.1. This translation is Finley’s.

Be convinced, soldiers, that you must be brave, as there is no place near for your cowardice to take refuge in, and that if you now escape from the enemy, you may all see again what your hearts desire, while those of you who are Athenians will raise up again the great power of the state, fallen though it may be. Men make the city and not walls or ships without men in them.²⁸³

Nicias' speech evokes another famous military episode in Athens' history: the battle of Salamis, in which the Athenians, fleeing the Persian army, evacuate Athens and hide behind the Athenian fleet. The city is razed, but the Athenian people survive behind a "wall" of wooden ships.²⁸⁴ The episode is often cited as a formative historical moment for Athens, establishing Athens' identity as a naval power and defining the city as a polity.²⁸⁵ This speech—given to a group of soldiers quite literally about to die—indicates that the object of devotion framing the meaning of their lives and deaths is the plurality of citizens who are the polity themselves.

Weber's distinction between leaders and followers, compounded by his modern categories of those who live *for* and *off* politics, lead him to artificially dismiss the ways this dynamic self-understanding could provide the conceptual room (or in his words, the genuine "inwards flexibility") for ongoing debate, disagreement, ethical compromise and political judgment. Crucially, this critical, active political dynamic is not at odds with the maintenance of a common, existential cause. Rather, the actively critical and judgmental interplay between political elites and the democratic body *is an enactment of the existential cause*. The constant activity of self-definition that took place *through* the reception and rejection of the different pursuits the polity might take on, in other words—an activity that (as we have seen) was

²⁸³ HPW 7.77-7.78, 472.

²⁸⁴ J. Peter Euben, "The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory" *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (August, 1968), 359-390.

²⁸⁵ Citing this episode is somewhat ironic, as the Sicilian expedition reflects the growing imperialism of the Athenian people. That *Nicias* speaks these words, a general who vehemently opposed the mission to Syracuse because of its excessive greed, and who is ultimately killed there following a devastating rout of the Athenian forces, makes this speech doubly tragic. HPW, 7.86.

restrained and refocused by active comparison with the ever-present example of the Athenian heroic dead—substantiates the existential promise of the polis as a *democratic* cause worthy of being upheld.

In the next chapter I will discuss some of the limits and potential dangers of this kind of existential political project. What is important here, however, is the way that this view of the polity recovers a perspective from which the democratic body need not be at the mercy of elite leaders in existentially fraught contexts. Nor do existentially framed *movements* need to be characterized in the thrall of some leader or existential ideal. In both cases, polity and movement are comprised of *actors*. What this view recovers is the awareness that, even in conditions where political elites dominate the public stage and play an outsized role determining the “meaning” of public and political causes as worthy or unworthy of the use of violent force, the demos remains critically and actively engaged—*responsible* and *powerful*. To the extent that there is any kind of critical interrogation of a leader’s ethical choices in Weber’s world, in contrast, it seems to lie between leaders—those who compete on the electoral “field of battle,” supported by their devoted, soldierly following.

The relationship between the individual leader and the polity as a whole is thus reduced to a formal mandate concerning the actions of leaders, whose roles are to “fight,” injecting (for Weber) much needed agency, responsibility, and charismatic energy into a rationally stultified order. Aside from the choice of which cause or which *leader* one is willing to die for, it is not apparent that a life lived with soldierly devotion promotes any responsible accounting for the political—therefore potentially violent—consequences of one’s actions. There is little room here

for the responsible, critical *demos* that engages politically as equal members of a community of life and death.²⁸⁶

In this way even the compassion unleashed by soldierly communities in a Weberian understanding of political life are transformed into the potential tools of violent rivalry. In fact, projecting his notion of communities unto death onto the disenchanting landscape of values, a fitting description can be found in Weber's representation of the followers of "tribal deities:" "[These] were only concerned with the interests of their respective associations. They had to fight other gods like themselves, just as their communities fought, and they had to prove their divine powers in this very struggle."²⁸⁷ If one considers the political landscape this implies—a polity populated chiefly by disciplined soldiers for their charismatic generals—one begins to understand Weber's baleful prediction of the coming political "polar night of icy darkness and hardness."²⁸⁸ *Soldierly* political service, for Weber, fosters an inner orientation that approaches political and ethical life in binary terms: others are with you, or against you.

Weber places his fears and (slim) hopes for responsible political activity on the shoulders of those called to political leadership—remarkable, rare individuals capable of both charismatic domination, moral conviction, and clear eyed, rational judgment in the face of a disenchanting war of causes:

Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective. [...] a [political] man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in the very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither heroes nor leaders must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁶ On Weber's disavowal of mass charismatic politics in spite of a rich account of mass charismatic religious movements, see Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 70-71.

²⁸⁷ RRWD, 333.

²⁸⁸ PV, 128.

²⁸⁹ PV, 129.

Weber's call for responsible, passionate leadership provides a powerful metric for evaluating the ethical judgment and political orientations of would be leaders. Yet by not granting the democratic body its own agency or mediating capacities, Weber's depiction of political life—even when populated by “mature” leaders—bears a troubling resemblance to the Homeric age of heroic politics. Here the great deed meant to win personal immortality is replaced by heroic *service* to the ‘impersonal god’ of the political cause. In as much as politics is characterized by violence (even if it is *legitimate* violence), the conflict between causes necessarily manifests forcefully.

Thus in both cases, the ancient and modern, an attempt to overcome the problem of death creates a problem of politics. Just as the Homeric ideal of heroes vying to overcome death was not politically expedient, a politics resting on Weber's ideal of soldierly service is not politically expedient for the modern state, either: compromise is not a part of *soldierly* devotion. Such absolute commitments unto death must be mediated, refocused, and restrained. Weber overlooks the potential for such capacities in the dynamic self-understanding of the demos when he restricts his focus to the charismatic powers of leaders. We need not do the same.

A leader like Perikles might offer himself as the first, best examples of Athens' immortal greatness, or alternatively he might chastise his fellow citizens for behaving in ways deemed unbecoming of their undying legacy. But these appeals are made to audiences as formally equal members of a common political project. It is not a single, heroic vision which defines the polity as the meaningful space that situates soldierly life and death, but *many* voices, appealing to *many* listeners, who speak of themselves as a community even when they critique and actively disagree over what that community ought to look like, and what factors make it a community worth living, or dying for.

Importantly, this capacity for a polity to recognize itself as common enterprise—a living community made up of many, active members capable of disagreement and critical judgment without sacrificing belonging—need not be eroded in modern conditions of rationalization and pluralism in the ways Weber thinks religion and tradition must be. Rather, this kind of democratic self-recognition, and the capacity for responsibility it entails, can work in tandem with the sort of ethical requirements that Weber thinks are necessary for mature political leadership. In this way, even the most thoroughly existentially oriented causes might be mediated and critically exposed to an active *democratic* judgment, and borne by *democratic* responsibility. Even in conditions of mass, disenchanting politics, and particularly in contexts of extreme ethical uncertainty.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued here that Weber's understanding of death in modernity, coupled with his depiction of the soldierly political vocation provides a valuable means of theorizing the ways that political causes may be distorted by existential desires. The soldierly model of meaning that Weber outlines exacerbates the tendency for political rivalry to become political war, simultaneously reducing the grounds for meaningful compromise and critical exchange on issues of existential importance—a point seen in a comparison with the critical, plural understanding of the existential community found in Thucydides. I have therefore argued that a version of democratic receptivity drawn from the Athenian polis can provide an important supplement to Weber's account, one that works in tandem with his appeal for mature, ethical deliberation and leadership, yet might allow us to resist the fatalism of his grim political prognosis.

Juxtaposing Thucydides' account with Weber's demonstrates how our attitudes about death can radically distort the kinds of political relationships we imagine and enact. The point is

not that Athenian democracy with all its existential underpinnings is a model we should seek to actively recreate in full. Rather, the point is that *even* in Athens—a violent, imperialist society engaged in *deeply* existentially bound politics—the demos expected ongoing acts of critical and ethical judgment, persuasion, and compromise from its members. As such, it was able to play an active, mediating role by curbing the destructive ambitions of individual leaders and providing a space for dissent and collective self-reflection. What is important to take from the example of Perikles' speeches to his fellow Athenians is that we need not be *enemies* to critically examine and profoundly disagree with each other, even when what is at stake is something we find worth living, or dying for: a vitally important idea to keep in sight.

Understanding the political community as a polity comprised of praising and dissenting voices capable of compromise and persuasion as a *part* of its enacted identity is all the more vital when political causes are framed as existential causes—fights for a way of life, or a 'war' of political ideas. When politics becomes soldierly, it is necessary to keep the capacities for active democratic judgment and mutual responsibility in the foreground. To lose sight of these capacities is to risk, as Weber does, the realignment of political competition into a diabolical contest with little recourse outside of heroic resolve. In contrast, by starting with an understanding of a demos capable of democratically mediating, resisting, and critically assessing even the most existentially fraught proposals we might foster a political life more attuned to the kinds of ethical demands that existential needs can exact, yet remain responsible enough to critically acknowledge these costs directly when they arise.

If reading Weber with Thucydides shows how a democratic polity can mediate narratives of existential meaning and political action, there nonetheless remains the important question of how we are to avoid reducing the meaning of any specific death to a singular, dominating or

“official” narrative—democratically approved or otherwise. Death, and the dead, are subject to many different kinds of political claims, and these can be put to work in ways that both promote *and* erode the conditions for democratic political life. How can we understand the public appearance of death in a way that recognizes these plural, competing accounts, while nonetheless remaining respectful of those intimate, private meanings and attachments that never make a public appearance, but give substance to the specific meaning of a persons’ life and death? I turn to this question, and the work of Hannah Arendt, in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Death on the Stage: Hannah Arendt and the Disappearances of Death

“Human life, because it is marked by a beginning and an end, becomes whole, an entity in itself that can be subjected to judgment, only when it has ended in death; death not merely ends life, it also bestows upon it a silent completeness snatched from the hazardous flux to which all things human are subject.”²⁹⁰

The question of which deaths and which lives meaningfully appear in political discourse has become an increasingly prominent issue in contemporary political life. Movements like Black Lives Matter, for instance, or the political attention surrounding the “invisible” deaths of stateless persons and refugees, demand ways of theorizing the competing political narratives that ascribe meaning to death, public and private; narratives which can affirm or deny a person’s humanity. What is at stake in these conversations is human dignity, also specific questions of political identity and political standing. These questions are reflected in the ways that specific deaths are claimed by competing political perspectives as symbolically meaningful, or as events to be excluded from consideration by those dominant political narratives that determine which deaths are unworthy of public memorial or comment. In this chapter I ask how might we theorize death’s political appearances in a way that more richly accounts for these public and private inclusions and exclusions of death, the vulnerability of the dead to political appropriation by plural narratives, and also the power of a death to profoundly shape the political world for those who remain.

Hannah Arendt is pre-eminently described a political theorist of beginnings, of birth, and the “miraculous” capacities that humans have to begin new, unexpected and unpredictable actions. It thus may seem strange to turn to Arendt’s thought for a political account of death.

²⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, (New York: Harcourt Press, 1978), 164.

Arendt places natality—the faculty of beginning new things—at the heart of her theory of political action, a move which attempts to shrug off the weight of a tradition burdened by a desire to escape the world of human affairs. The political tradition falling from Plato, for Arendt, is tainted by a metaphysical desire for Being over becoming, for death over worldly questions of human dignity and freedom. In contrast her concern with the *vita activa*, whose organizing principle is a desire to overcome mortal limits, is marked by “gratitude and wonder at being,” and a deep appreciation for the capacities of human friendship and togetherness.²⁹¹ Thus commenters often stress the creative, redemptive qualities of Arendt’s politics, finding in her account a “long needed balance to the philosophical tradition’s apparent prejudice [for death].”²⁹²

Yet death and mortality are situated right at the heart of Arendt’s political thought, grounding her famous distinctions between public and private, and underlying the boundaries between the *vita activa*’s major categories of labor, work, and action. In some respects death and mortality—or put more casually, her thoughts on endings and their political importance—are as significant for Arendt’s world as her more commonly celebrated exploration of birth, natality, and the power of beginnings.²⁹³ Mortality conditions and structures the miraculous, spontaneous, and unbound qualities of Arendtian action in important ways, ways both instructive and timely for our modern world.

²⁹¹ The phrase is Kateb’s; *Hannah Arendt: Politics Conscience, Evil*, 4.

²⁹² Patricia Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natality* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 5.

²⁹³ Quite a bit of Arendtian scholarship has looked at her treatment of *immortality* as it ties to her notions of natality and beginnings; fewer have placed mortality and death at the center of their analysis, though several have. A few representative examples are Kateb’s work, cited above; Mario Feit, *Democratic Anxieties: Same-Sex Marriage, Death, and Citizenship*, (Lexington Books, 2011), 77-124; and John McCumber “Activity and Mortality: Hannah Arendt.”

In what follows I undertake a reading of Arendt's work centered on her treatment of mortality as a part of public and private life in *The Human Condition*. I take as my guiding perspective that of human mortality and death, rather than natality and birth.²⁹⁴ With this conceptual shift of emphasis, I hope to show how rich Arendt's notions of mortality can be for more clearly theorizing death's place as a part of political life, and the stakes of death's public appearances. Unlike political treatments of death which strictly demarcate public and private, excising death from public life, I argue Arendt's thought can provide resources for theorizing how death is subject to many different claims, actions, and perspectives, *both* public and private; while simultaneously retaining focus on a specific person (or people) who appears, and disappears, from public sight. To this end, I argue here that Arendt's treatment of classical death may be productively read through the lens of ancient Greek tragedy.²⁹⁵

While Arendt has been claimed by many theorists for many different ends—republican theory, participatory, deliberative, and agonistic democratic thought—the parts of Arendt's writing that frequently provoke the most controversy are those that turn back to the classical polis, particularly its agonistic contest of heroic citizens fighting for immortality. Arendt's use of “the Greeks” as an example of a lost, alternative account of human freedom is made more frustrating by her spare comments on those aspects of polis life that are the most disturbing to

²⁹⁴ A full evaluation of Arendt's thought on the subject of death would be impossible in this space, and is not my intention. Several excellent comprehensive accounts of Arendt's life and work that I have found particularly helpful include Roger Berkowitz, Jeffery Katz, and Thomas Keenan (eds), *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics* (Fordham University Press 2010); Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1992); Mary Dietz, *Turning Operations* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Lewis P. Hinchman & Sandra K. Hinchman (eds) *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: University of New York Press 1994); Bonnie Honig (ed) *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (Penn State Press, 2010); George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*.

²⁹⁵ The connection between classical tragedy and Arendt's thought has proven the basis for several insightful studies. See for instance Peter Euben, “Oedipus at Collonus” in *Platonic Noise*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Patchen Markell “Tragic Recognition” in *Bound By Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009); Robert C. Pirro, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Tragedy* (Northern Illinois University Press 2001); Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996).

modern eyes: the pervasive slavery, the unapologetic misogyny, the smug imperialism, and the glorification in political life of good *and* wicked deeds.²⁹⁶ Bearing these important caveats in mind, in what follows I nonetheless suggest that Arendt's engagement with the classical polis proves rich grounds for thinking through death's appearance in public life, and the dangers or stakes of such appearances. I restrict my focus to the tragic, theatrical elements of Arendt's account, reading Arendt alongside one of her favorite sources: Aristotle's *Poetics*.²⁹⁷ I argue that Aristotle's account of "death revealed" on the tragic stage provides a productive lens for interpreting Arendt's treatment of death's "appearance" in public. Mortality in this sense is conditioned by both a public and a private existence, two "aspects" of death which structure and constitute each other in ways suitable for a democratic account of death's public appearances. Focusing on mortality as the *disappearance* of individuals from the public stage of ongoing action, I argue that a tragic reading of Arendt's theory provides a way of acknowledging death politically that is situated in a condition of togetherness: the absence of the distinct person who was there, meaningfully felt and articulated by those who remain.

I. Death and the Human Condition

²⁹⁶ It would be a mistake to view Arendt's turn to the polis as straightforward nostalgia, or an appeal that we might in some actual way "go back." Even if such a thing were desirable it is almost certainly not *possible* by Arendt's account. So successful was the reversal of the cultural standing of action and contemplation for Arendt that "not even the rise of the secular in the modern age [...] sufficed to save from oblivion the striving for immortality which originally *had been* the spring and center of the *vita activa*." HC 21, (emphasis mine.) For a more thorough analysis of Arendt's engagement with "The Greeks," see Peter Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism" in Dana Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Hannah Pitkin, "Justice: On relating Public and Private" in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, 261-288. For a critical account of Arendt's Hellenism, see Sheldon Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political" *Salmagundi*, No. 60; On Hannah Arendt (Spring-Summer 1983), 3-19; or Dana Villa "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action"; For a response to Villa, see Bonnie Honig, "The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," 528-533.

²⁹⁷ Here I have relied on the translation of Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* [hereafter "*Poetics*"] (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1987); other translations I have consulted include Seth Benardet and Michael Davis, *Aristotle's On Poetics*; I have indicated places where I have used my own.

Arendt lays out several specific modes of death and mortality right at the start of *The Human Condition*, and these run through the various levels of her analysis. The basic distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* which frames *The Human Condition* can be read as two responses to the problem of futility prompted by fleeting, mortal life; a problem she articulates in terms similar to Nietzsche's retelling of the Wisdom of Silenus discussed in Chapter 1.²⁹⁸ The *vita contemplativa*, the life of the mind and of philosophy, is oriented by the principle of eternity: the experience of escaping time into thought. This experience is only achieved through an inward retreat, turning away from the human world of life shared with other people. Politically speaking for Arendt, the experience of contemplation in its highest forms is thus itself "a kind of death."²⁹⁹ In contrast, Arendt places immortality, "deathless endurance in time" as the historic principle of the *vita activa*, the life of activity in the world.

While more typically read as corresponding to different aspects of human life, each of the major categories of the *vita activa*—labor, work, and action—also contains a distinct framing of death. Against the possibility of the physical destruction of the body, labor "assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species." Labor resists biological death by providing for the body's unending, cyclical demands for food, shelter, and sex, all necessary for life. Work, "and its product, the human artifact" such as the physical creations like art and use objects

²⁹⁸ In the final section of *On Revolution* Arendt cites Silenus' maxim as it appears in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. The passage is notable for its placement—it is the last word Arendt leaves her readers after meditating on the meaning of political action and its loss in the modern world. She translates the passage as "Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came." While she does not mention Silenus in *The Human Condition*, major Arendtian pairings—death and birth, appearance and disappearance, meaning and its intimate connection to speech and storytelling—are brought together in her translation of Silenus in OR, leading many to comment on the "foreign" and "shocking" nature of this moment in Arendt's thought. As George Kateb notes, this is "the most concentrated expression" of Arendt's existentialist politics, writing "we must see that she sincerely shares this judgment." Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, [hereafter OR], 273; Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, 1.

²⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [Hereafter, HC] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 17-18. On mortality as a founding preoccupation of the western philosophical tradition and Arendt's response to this, see John McCumber, "Activity and Mortality: Hannah Arendt."

“bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time.” Unlike the products of labor which must be consumed, leaving no trace, the works of human creation shape and preserve a common world where distinct people may appear and disappear, providing stability to counteract the constant “flux” of life. Finally, action “creates the conditions for remembrance, that is, for history.”³⁰⁰

Action is particularly central for Arendt’s view of mortality, as it provides content for the memorial of those unique persons who have died, and whose distinct stories make up the fragile ‘web of human relations’ that distinguishes specifically human existence from animal recurrence. It is through action in the company of others that “human beings appear to each other, not as physical objects but *qua* men.” Words and deeds are the means by which humans reveal themselves as distinct persons, as “through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct.”³⁰¹ Action’s uniquely human quality springs from the fact that unlike gods, we are “natal:” born into the material and historical world. And unlike animals, we have “natality,” the capacity to begin new, unexpected activities and to “insert ourselves into the human world [...] like a second birth.”³⁰²

Yet to assert one’s natality through this ‘second birth’ is to make an appearance which, at some point, will demand an exit. If one must be born in order to be a creature that can die, one

³⁰⁰ All quotes in this paragraph are from HC 8-9.

³⁰¹ HC 176; Like Nietzsche, Arendt’s approach is grounded in the observation that the continuity between generations serves the life *process*, a process which outruns any individual death—as Nietzsche puts it in the *Twilight of the Idols* “Eternal life, the eternal return of life; the future promised by the past and the past consecrated by the future; the triumphal yes to life over and above all death and change [...]” Like Nietzsche, for Arendt this ‘Dionysian’ view of life is opposed to, even obliterates, the individual life in favor of the “*true* life as the overall continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.” Biological existence alone is not sufficient to provide an answer to Silenus’ wisdom; some sort of additional human activity is required. Unlike Nietzsche’s turn to Silenus’ wisdom, Arendt’s use of these words is explicitly political. Where Nietzsche’s account ultimately culminates in a sovereign individual who must will his own meaningful commitments before the unknown moment of death —potentially political, but always originating with the individual—Arendt situates the meaning of mortal life within the web of human stories that is *only* made possible by the presence of others.

³⁰² For this paragraph all quotations are from HC 176-7.

must also appear before other human beings in order to disappear in a distinctly *mortal* way. From the perspective of the individual who knows she will die, mortality creates conditions of futility that can only be overcome by acting with others, and thus having some chance at achieving “undying” renown within a community of remembrance. Thus Arendt turns to the Romans, “perhaps the most political of people we have known,” to emphasize the ways that natality and mortality are features of human life that *depend on the company of other persons*. As she notes, for the Romans “to be alive” was defined as “to be among men;” to die, “to cease to be among men.”³⁰³ Mortality and natality, then, correspond roughly to the biological facts of birth and death, but are not reducible to them. Nor are natality and mortality opposed to each other, so much as they exist as countervailing forces, giving structure and substance to human plurality—the “*conditio sine qua non*” of action—or the idea that “men, not man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”³⁰⁴

Yet as these preliminary remarks reveal, understanding mortality as an *exit* from the company of others implies a spatial relationship between public, polis life and private, household existence. When viewed from the perspective of death and mortality, what comes forward is less a series of sharp distinctions between these spaces and more an analysis of movement and interrelation. Indeed, Arendt’s treatment of mortality and death is constantly informed by a vocabulary of journeys, most often the motion of “rising” from one space to another—life “rises” from oblivion and returns to it; the rectilinear line of human, mortal time “rises” from the biological life-cycle into a recognizable story; the free man must “transcend the narrow realm of

³⁰³ HC 7-8 “The Romans...used the words “to live” and to “be among men” (*Inter homines esse*) or “to die” and “to cease to be among men” (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonyms.”

³⁰⁴ HC 7. A more drawn out discussion of the experience of time in these terms can be found in Arendt’s interpretation of Kafka parable, reproduced at the start of her book, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin Books, 1954), 7.

the household and ‘rise’ into the realm of politics.”³⁰⁵ Similarly, death “withdraws” the individual, who “descends” or “retreats” into darkness and the earth.³⁰⁶ But all of these “rises” and “descents” traverse boundaries that serve their own structural purpose: they provide the necessary liminal spaces for our comings and goings.

Concerning the architecture of Arendt’s various distinctions in *The Human Condition*, Patchen Markell comments about the household walls within the polis that, “Crucially, the function of these walls is not only to enclose and separate the private and the public; it is also to connect the private to the public.”³⁰⁷ Expanding on this idea, we can say in a more general sense that the proper “location” of one’s own is not isolated or quarantined from the other parts of one’s life but, “also has an exterior, publicly visible face, and the citizen who has a location regularly departs from it; indeed, the function of the exterior face is to connect private *to* the public and so to make the citizen’s departure and return possible.”³⁰⁸ We find a strikingly similar pattern of motion with Arendt’s arguments about death.³⁰⁹

Consider Arendt’s understanding of privacy as a source of depth and content for public life. A striking feature of Arendt’s description of private property in contradistinction to the public realm of “light” and appearances is the emphasis on “darkness” and things “hidden from

³⁰⁵ HC 19, 33. That this language is defined in vertical terms—rises and falls—may reflect the specific instance of the Greek polis. As I will discuss further below, for Arendt the polis was *distinctive* for insisting on the superiority of the polity to the household, where for the Romans the two had a more balanced co-existence.

³⁰⁶ HC 187.

³⁰⁷ Patchen Markell, “Arendt’s Work: On the Architecture of *The Human Condition*” *College Literature* Vol. 3.81 (Winter 2011), 26; HC 63.

³⁰⁸ Markell, “Arendt’s Work,” 27.

³⁰⁹ The lack of a space to appear *and* disappear is one of the chief signs of those modern societies most vulnerable to totalitarian violence and ideology. “Totalitarian government does not just curtail liberties or abolish essential freedoms; nor does it, at least to our limited knowledge, succeed in eradicating the love for freedom from the hearts of man. It destroys the one essential pre-requisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.” Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, [hereafter OT] (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 466.

the public realm.”³¹⁰ Death constitutes one of the most explicit forms of this darkness, darker even than the household. “The sacredness of privacy” she comments “was like the sacredness of the hidden, namely, of birth and death, the beginning and end of mortals who, like all living creatures rise out of and return to the darkness of the underworld.”³¹¹ In this way the “darkness” around the experience of death is not hostile to human dignity, and may in fact be essential to it.³¹² For Arendt, private property in its original sense meant having a place one could be *private* within; a place from which one might emerge and to which one might return.

A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of *rising into sight* from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense.³¹³

The political experience of mortality is not defined by darkness as such, but by the appearing and disappearing movement *between* public and private of a life, much like the movement between

³¹⁰ HC 62, ft. 56, 60.

³¹¹ HC 62.

³¹² Arendt cites Numa Fustel de Coulanges’ work, *The Ancient City*, on this point, noting that the funerary rites of the hearth were always carefully hidden from public view, privately guarded by each family, and attached to rites of ancestral worship where ancestors occupy, and *will* occupy, the same place in the earth for generations to come. Generally Arendt cites Coulanges favorably, referring to his “great book”(her words) several times in her discussion of the household—though she is critical of what she sees as a conflation of Roman and Greek practices in his work. Modern scholarship is far more critical, and places Coulanges’ work as part of the 19th C. fascination with the cult of the tomb, in which ancestor worship was taken for granted as *the* organizing principle of social and religious life in the ancient household. As S. C. Humphries notes, however, for very practical reasons of space and generational branching the burial of familial dead was not always confined to a single family plot. Rather, graves tended to be grouped in small clusters of familial dead. And, in fact, *visible* spaces were the most desirable for the tombs of beloved or renown individuals, as Greek attitudes about immortality were deeply tied to memory and the ‘existence’ one might have in the eyes and mouths of those who would stop and read grave epitaphs, or marvel at a monument to a person’s excellent achievements. Thus crowded roads and major intersections were deemed some of the best locations for graves, as they would receive the *most* public notice. In this sense, the grave monument itself functions as the outward face of the silent, privacy of death, and is not necessarily enclosed by the walls of the household as the ancient hearth was. Coulanges’ interpretation is wrong in ways that do not necessarily contradict Arendt’s more general treatment of mortality, however, as her account hinges on the “rising” into view and passing away from sight of the specific person and their deeds. But these advances in understanding concerning classical burial practices do muddy the hierarchical relationship Arendt posits between the utter darkness of death and the earth, and the relative dimness of the ancient household in the Greek polis. See S. C. Humphries, “Fustel De Coulanges: The Ancient City” in *The Family, Women, and Death: Comparative Studies* (London: Routledge 1983).

³¹³ HC 71.

the interior, privacy of a household into the light of the public space structures the unique appearance of individuals before their peers.³¹⁴ She notes that “Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one’s own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human.”³¹⁵

It is helpful here to dig deeper into Arendt’s understanding of household death as it centered around the family hearth.³¹⁶ Citing the classicist and historian Numa Fustel de Coulanges’ *The Ancient City*, Arendt notes that “[private] property is not seen as attached to the family; on the contrary, “the family is attached to the hearth, the hearth is attached to the soil.”³¹⁷ This “attachment” had to do with the physical location of the family tomb, which corresponded to the household hearth (according to Coulanges); both of which had to be tended by the living family. Indeed, in striking ways the sacred rites of the dead Coulanges outlines correspond to the demands of necessity Arendt describes for the living. For instance, the ancestral dead, like their living ancestors, are bound to the household by their *physical* needs, including regular food, wine, and proper shelter under the earth—without which the dead become “wandering shades prone to vengeance.”³¹⁸ Private property, then, was quite literally a place where one “belonged,” in the sense that one’s family was tied to the earth in that specific location, due to the very real

³¹⁴ HC 30.

³¹⁵ HC 64.

³¹⁶ Arendt introduces her discussion of public and private with a famous passage from Aristotle’s *Politics* where the importance of belonging to a polis *and having a hearth* define proper human life—the epicenter of private life. Aristotle writes, “Man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the ‘tribeless, lawless, hearthless one whom Homer denounces.’” Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens* ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 13; book 1; ln. 1253a.

³¹⁷ HC 61-2 ft. 56.

³¹⁸ Numa Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, 16.

obligations the living had towards generations of familial dead, and for the sake of the future care the living hoped to receive from their children and grandchildren. Referring to the ancient funeral rites of the hearth and home, Arendt therefore notes that “birth and death are but two different stages of the same biological life over which the subterranean gods hold sway.”³¹⁹

This points to a specific existential deficiency of household death. The memorial of the household dead is essentially self-referential. Arendt cites Coulanges again to note that the physical “place” of the household hearth and tomb can be understood as existing in trust to any individual generation, properly owned by those ancestors and descendants that stretch forwards and backwards in time. In this sense, the family can situate, but does not *confirm* in any historically significant way, the distinct existence of a specific life. For the household, individual lives are understood in relation to the contained, and inwardly focused chain of generational life.³²⁰ Some public acknowledgment of a person’s *specific disappearance* is necessary to give a person’s death its historical, *objective* reality. It is the ending of a life experienced and apprehended as the final piece of a unique story, not as a link in an ever-recurring process, which constitutes the specifically *human* experience of death. Arendt remarks, “This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.”³²¹

For this reason, Arendt insists (*contra* Coulanges) on the priority of the polis religion and public life over that of the household in the Greek polis—a hierarchical arrangement which

³¹⁹ HC 30 ft. 19. This is a point of disagreement between Arendt and Coulanges, who saw the worship of the dead as the central, original religion of the household. Arendt re-asserts the importance of birth, and life as a part of this process.

³²⁰ Coulanges makes a similar note to this effect: *The Ancient City*, 26.

³²¹ HC 19.

Arendt, nonetheless, also describes as imbalanced.³²² She writes that “the *full* development of the life of the hearth and family into an inner and private space we owe to the extraordinary political sense of the Roman people who, unlike the Greeks, never sacrificed the private to the public, but on the contrary understood that these two realms exist only in the form of a coexistence.”³²³ But what is the nature of this co-existence? Arendt’s language of rising and falling, appearance and disappearance, unsettle a too-rigid reading of the public and private spaces in the polis as hostile to one another. Yet it remains unclear how the public “appearance” of death should be understood. How is death supposed to appear in public without exposing to light what is private, and *ought* to remain hidden?

There is, of course, something paradoxical about speaking of death in the language of appearances. In Arendt’s formulation, death inevitably *recalls* individuals from the public realm in ways that correspond concentrically to the different parts of the active life. One is withdrawn from a life of productive labor, quite literally back into the darkness of the earth. One is withdrawn from the common world of artifacts, no longer producing or making use of the world. One disappears from the presence of others, marking an end to those appearances one might accompany with their own words. Unlike the “rising” action of an individual who “transcends” darkness and steps into the public space to be seen, death is always a retreat from sight. How is a disappearance supposed to meaningfully *appear*, particularly as an *action*, or a performance?

³²² HC 24-5 ft. 6; emphasis mine. As evidence for this hierarchical arrangement in the Greek context, Arendt cites the relatively low status of Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth. Hestia’s public reputation was so low compared to other Olympians gods, according to Arendt, that “in the official religion of the polis” she was obliged to give up her seat in the pantheon to Dionysos—the god of the Athenian theater and Greek tragedy. While the household shelters and secures the family identity in necessary ways, the polis and its public spaces is existentially superior to the Greek household—so much so that the chief goddess of the household had no place in the public hierarchy of gods. Arendt’s rhetoric concerning Hestia’s *forced* removal from the pantheon is noteworthy: she cites Robert Graves version of the myth, however in Graves’ telling Hestia is quite pleased to “escape the jealous wrangling of her family” on Mount Olympus thanks to her assurance that she might “receive a quiet welcome in whatever Greek city it might please her to visit.” See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 106, 27 k.

³²³ HC 59.

II. Achilles, Perikles, and Shining Glory

An obvious answer to the question above would seem to lie with the two chief examples of death and memorial Arendt provides in her discussion of the space of appearances and political action—Achilles and Perikles. Arendt relates both of these figures explicitly to death, memorial, and the existential payoff of appearing in public. Arendt recovers foundational elements for her theory of political action, disclosure, and plurality from these examples, and celebrates the works of Homer and the Athenian polity in many of her works as a dynamic, rich example for understanding what has been lost in modern political life. As I will argue here, however, when approached from the perspective of mortality, these specific treatments of death’s public “appearances” suffer from a deficit of inclusion and perspective similar to the sort of deficits that structure many tragic plots.³²⁴

It is telling in this respect that Arendt introduces her discussion of Achilles, Perikles, and political action by first turning to a discussion of Greek tragedy, and then a discussion of the boundaries that structured the ancient polity—the physical walls of the city and its households. Arendt connects these physical boundaries to the tragic language of *hubris*: the “old virtue of moderation, of keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues par excellence, just as the political temptation par- excellence is indeed *hubris*.”³²⁵ Viewed from the perspective of tragic hubris, then, how do Achilles and Perikles illuminate our understanding of death’s

³²⁴There are many excellent analyses of Arendt’s theory of action, and Arendt’s constructive, creative engagement from the figures of Achilles and the classical polis. By choosing to focus on the ways these examples reflect a tragic imbalance, I do not mean to imply here that these figurers were flawed past redemption for Arendt. Rather, much like tragic heroes as understood by Aristotle, these examples are powerful for Arendt precisely because they are “great” figures, displaying “character” that is worthy of admiration and emulation in many respects; yet due to some mistake of perspective or understanding, are nonetheless prone to tragedy. On Arendt as an educator in this mode of classical tragedians, see Peter Euben, “Arendt’s Hellenism” in *Hannah Arendt*, 159-163.

³²⁵ HC 191.

appearances or exclusions, and how these are best ‘kept within bounds’ of a healthy political life? And what political risks and dangers attend an appearance that exceeds these limits?

For Arendt the walls of the city and household provided physical limits meant to counter action’s overwhelming tendency to “force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.”³²⁶ The physical walls of households and city fortifications for Arendt “protect and make possible the physical identity of a people” just as laws attempt to limit the extremes of action as a part of politics. These physical and legal borders are necessary to restrain action’s radical binding and unbounded qualities. As we will see, lacking moderation in these relations and limits—where moderation is a healthy, dynamic relationship between public appearances and private *disappearances*—leads to tragic excess with political consequences.

Achilles is the most obvious example of this excess and its risks. For Arendt Achilles is the exceptional figure who proves a rule: it is nearly impossible to control or otherwise “make” the meaning of one’s life and death. For one’s story to last in a meaningful way a person *always* requires the presence of others. Achilles is the extreme, “paradigmatic” example of a hero because he “delivers into the narrators hands the full significance of his deed” and then dies, “withdrawing” into the passive, darkness of death. In keeping with the discussion of *kalos thanatos* in chapter one, death here is made meaningful as a final act that reflects to the observing world the most important things about the hero’s life, unsullied by later actions or achievements of lesser quality or fame. Arendt comments,

Only a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness, because he withdraws into death from the possible consequences and continuation of what he began. What gives the story of Achilles its paradigmatic significance is that it shows in a nutshell that *eudaimonia* can be bought only at the price of life and that one can make sure of it only by foregoing the continuity

³²⁶ *ibid.*

of living in which we disclose ourselves piecemeal, by summing up all of one's life in a single deed.³²⁷

Taken on its own, this treatment of Achilles may seem exactly like a confirmation of a kind of heroic, self-composed existence. Yet Arendt very quickly points out its limitations, calling this understanding of life and death “rather individualistic.”³²⁸

The problem here is twofold. First, (and as discussed in the last two chapters) this understanding of death is prone to great immoralism and destruction. As Arendt puts it, heroic action unto death “stresses the urge towards self disclosure at the expense of all other factors” up to and including the life of the actor.³²⁹ Second, and more important for our current purposes, the “appearance” of heroic death as Achilles represents it is extremely existentially risky, “for the chances that a deed deserving fame would [...] actually become ‘immortal’ were not very good.”³³⁰ The action of an Achilles is risky to the extent that it leaves no trace on its own, but requires some transfiguration. “Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian without whom everything he did remains futile.”³³¹ Heroic acts require some sort of witness to recognize and transform a fleeting action into a form that has shared, *and shareable* meaning: speech. As Michael Davis comments, “This is just the problem of Achilles. [...] *Andreia* is in principle invisible, for one cannot see it apart from a political context, which is

³²⁷ HC 193, emphasis mine.

³²⁸ *ibid.*

³²⁹ HC, 194. Here the point Arendt is making also connects to the problem of action's durability in time, and the difference between action and making. The full passage is “It stresses the urge toward self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors and therefore remains relatively untouched by the predicament of unpredictability” referring to the ways that the extreme, heroic act “delivered” into the poets hand avoids the unpredictable turns that might lead one's life less concrete “significance.”

³³⁰ HC 197.

³³¹ *ibid.*

to say apart from the ulterior motives for action that are attributed to the political man.”³³²

However great or ordinary an Achilles might be, his actions will have little meaning in mute isolation.

But there is a more subtle point here about the meaning of an isolated death as well, a point which Achilles’ ‘paradigmatic’ story reflects. As Arendt notes, the “hero the story discloses needs no heroic qualities.”³³³ It is not heroic status, but simply the act of appearing in public, by which one exposes oneself to sight, which discloses an individual and requires courage. On this point, it is notable that Achilles spends much of the *Iliad* in limbo, poised *between* public and private: he may either return to the “private” existence of his father’s household and the long, unremarkable life it contains, or go out to the “public” of the battlefield of Troy, where he will die young and gloriously before his peers. So long as he does not act, definitively choosing to enter *or leave* the field of war, “who” Achilles is—or who he will *be understood to be* through the choice he makes to meaningfully appear or disappear—remains equally undetermined in the eyes of the community.³³⁴ It is not merely being seen by others that gives Achilles’ deeds significance, but the specific, socially constituted space of peers that he appears within, or chooses to leave. Thus, as a solution to the problems of mortal futility,

³³² Michael Davis, “Introduction” in Seth Benardet and Michael Davis, *Aristotle’s On Poetics* (St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), xv; also HC 182.

³³³ HC 186.

³³⁴ HC 196; As mentioned earlier, for Arendt the Greek household life is existentially insufficient compared with public appearances in the polity for Arendt, a distinction reflected in Achilles choice between an anonymous long life and immortality. My point here is that the meaning of Achilles’ actions are understood *through* the connection he has to these different spaces and the meaningful contexts they signify. A person with no family or political connections was, in Aristotle’s language, a beast or a god, but never a man. Achilles is politically isolated in the *Iliad* to the extent he has rejected the community of action found with other Greek heroes. But without reconciliation to his paternal, mortal roots (as opposed to his divine, *maternal* ones) Achilles is also not obviously a part of any human community. For more on this interpretation and mortal reconciliation, see Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer’s Iliad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

heroism requires a “remedy” in the form of guaranteed human witnesses, but also a guaranteed *stage*.

For Arendt, this was the project of “organized remembrance” that was the Periklean polis.³³⁵ Focusing on the idealized self-understanding of the Athenians, Arendt presents her discussion of Perikles’ funeral oration and the polis as a project of memorial. In her words, this self-understanding was “what the Greeks themselves thought of [the polis] and its *raison d’etre*.”³³⁶ Concerning Perikles’ world Arendt says that,

One, if not the chief reason for the [...] genius in Athens, as well as for the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city-state, was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence in everyday life. This second function of the polis, again closely connected with the hazards of action as experienced before its coming into being, was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech.³³⁷

The polis attempted to solve the problem of the isolation and futility of heroic action, and specifically Achilles’ dependence on Homer, through the establishment of a standing space of disclosure, constituted by a community of formally equal witnesses. Thus, “[the polis] gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the sea of their daring would not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn to words to praise them.”³³⁸ The “organized remembrance” of the polis was to ensure, *without poets* or any “chorus” of its own, that its members would achieve a kind of immortality through the

³³⁵ HC 196-197.

³³⁶ HC 197.

³³⁷ HC 197.

³³⁸ HC 197.

shared glory and exploits of the living community.³³⁹ A beautiful solution, but as Arendt notes, also responsible for the polis' "hardly [...] surprising swift decline."

In the last chapter I argued that recovering a vision of democratic politics from the critical and plural activity of the polis could help resist the kinds of ethical and political exclusions that often attend existentially defined politics. Arendt's depiction of the Periklean polis adds some important texture to this argument, by pointing out the conditions necessary to *sustain* a polity that is defined by plurality, and which is capable of critically accommodating many different perspectives.³⁴⁰ As discussed, the vision of heroic citizenship Perikles presents in his Funeral Oration presents the achievements of the heroic dead as a kind of active standard which living Athenians might emulate and (competitively) uphold. I argued this feat is accomplished in Perikles' oration partly through an artificial bracketing of time, and Arendt describes the polis project in similar terms: "the past is not to be remembered through the continuity of time *as the past*, with the awareness of a temporal distance, but instead is *to be directly maintained in a perpetual present, in a temporarily unchanged form.*"³⁴¹

The danger here is reification: that a *fixed image* of the immortal city might become more important than the specific community of particular persons that constitute its membership.³⁴² To succeed in the venture of organized, immortal remembrance without the use of poets or written

³³⁹ As Tsao notes, the irony of this claim "runs deep" as Perikles' words only come down to us thanks to the efforts of Thucydides to write everything down. Arendt seems quite aware of this. See HC 205-206. Also, Roy Tsao, "Arendt against Athens: Re-reading the Human Condition." *Political Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Feb., 2002), 111.

³⁴⁰ One way that Arendt's argument can resist the soldierly implications of Weber's understanding of politics rests in a major distinction between their treatments of political violence: violence is *always* pre-political for Arendt, where for Weber, it is one of the defining characteristics of political practice. By rejecting violence's "natural" place in politics, Arendt's thought helpfully complicates Weber's soldierly paradigm, which by its own internal logic—as I have argued in Chapter 2, tends towards violent conflict and war.

³⁴¹ This line is drawn from the later, German edition of the *Human Condition*; the passage corresponds to HC 197. I have used Tsao's translation. See, "Arendt Against Athens," 114; emphasis mine.

³⁴² Thus Arendt finally turns to Nicias' speech, to assert the actual meaning of the polis: "Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*." HC 198.

word, the Athenians committed to reenacting a specific, unified vision of patriotic greatness; one untouched by time. Yet an appeal for innovation within cultural boundaries that *citizens define in ongoing dialogue with the past*, on the one hand, can easily transform into a requirement that citizens enact the same cultural values *as others have enacted them*, on the other. In this way preserving an identity sits in tension with the cultural pressures of heroic action, inherited from a Homeric past, that strive to do the impossible and *extraordinary* as a matter of “daily occurrence.”³⁴³ The tragic imbalance Arendt’s argument indicates within in the Funeral Oration was thus the “supreme confidence that men can *enact and save their greatness at the same time* and, as it were, *by one and the same gesture*.”³⁴⁴

The stakes of this “supreme confidence” are quite high. If the meaning of *every person’s* death becomes subsumed into the same glorious identity—an idealized, immortalized Athenian body—the different deaths of distinct Athenians easily become interchangeable.³⁴⁵ Further, if the specific person who dies, with their specific social connections and civic contributions, becomes

³⁴³ HC 239-247. Arendt may over-exaggerate the connection between the project of memorial and the “swift decline” of Athens, here, but she does so in ways consistent with the tragic story that Thucydides tells in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Read as a *tragedy*, Thucydides’ account hinges on a gap that emerges between the balanced, idealized vision of Athenian greatness, justice, and virtue presented in the Funeral Oration by Perikles, and the *actual* political behavior of the Athenians, which becomes increasingly motivated by greed, a longing for glorious empire regardless of the justice of such desires, and the exercise brute force. Thucydides understands this decline in part through the loss of the heroic leadership of Perikles, who was able to lead the demos from within through heroic, exemplary courage and political discipline. Thucydides contrasts Perikles with later leaders such as Nicias and Alcibiades, who were principled but lacking in heroic greatness, or heroic but lacking in principles, respectively. As Thucydides tells it, neither was able to effectively lead the demos in moderate ways that *reinforced* its dynamic, innovative and self-critical qualities as Perikles had, but instead fell back on conservative, virtuous patriotism (Nicias) or unscrupulous, charismatic glory-seeking (Alcibiades.) In this sense, we might add to Weber’s analysis of responsible leadership from the last chapter that a polity that is not capable of enacting judgment and critical thought is vulnerable to the flaws of its leaders in ways that an active, self-governing polity—where leaders are only one part of a dynamic whole *that can accommodate change and plurality*—is not. See Thucydides, HPW, 127; ln. 2.65 5-13. For a read of Thucydides, and political leadership in relation to this kind of dynamic polity, see Josiah Ober, “Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science”, 136-8.

³⁴⁴ HC 205; emphasis mine.

³⁴⁵ This was one of the complaints issued by Athenian aristocrats against the democratic reforms that instituted, among other things, mass graves for the military dead and common memorial monuments instead of the traditional monumental tombs and ritual displays of mourning of private families. For a reading of Antigone that explores these social and political dynamics of death, see Bonnie Honig “Antigone’s Lament, Creon’s Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception.” *Political Theory*, Vol. 37, 5, (2009), 5-43.

divorced from the fact of sacrifice itself, the problem of interchangeable death slides into a problem of interchangeable *life*. The value and meaning of death is determined only through its connection to the project of formal, political status, at the expense of an individual's specific social connections or private relationships. In this sense Perikles' exhortation to honor the memory of the dead sounds more ominous: "These take as your model, and judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom of valor, *never decline the dangers of war*."³⁴⁶

In this way the project of "organized remembrance" is in danger of becoming a fixed, self-referential identity in ways that parallel the existential insufficiency of the household. Both are threatened by a disconnect from objective, human reality.³⁴⁷ The household, without the public realm, is in danger of detachment from meaningful human history that has external, objective validity. A self-referential, excessively unified *public* narrative of death's meaning, one that becomes existentially detached from the stabilizing, plural perspectives of individuals with *distinguishing* private attachments and features, is likewise dangerously susceptible to its own reified, abstracted understanding of reality. The vital, reality-confirming conditions of plurality depend on the presence of unique persons *who remain distinct* from one another, even when they act in concert. The healthy, well functioning polis provides a space for persons to be capable of

³⁴⁶ Thucydides, HPW, 115; ln. 2.43; emphasis mine.

³⁴⁷ In reading Arendt's treatment of Perikles in this fashion I am relying in part on Arendt's analysis of ideology and terror from the *Origins of Totalitarianism*. When the experience of changing, dynamic reality, stabilized through plural points of view that engage and contest each other is replaced with an abstract ideal, even if that idea is an abstraction of an otherwise innocuous value, there is a danger for common sense to collapse into an "untrustworthy" experience of reality, susceptible to superstition and political fantasy; an analysis that could easily describe the story Thucydides tells of the decline of Athenian political life and discourse, and the polity's disastrous behavior in the later parts of the Peloponnesian War. See OT, "Ideology and Terror," 475-6.

disclosing their unique selves, and is able to receive how the world opens up to a particular person's point of view.³⁴⁸

If these distinct, disclosing *actions* become transformed into instrumental *performances* of a specific identity, or upheld for a specific instrumental end (such as empire, for instance), the political body becomes dangerously susceptible to tyrannical acts of force.³⁴⁹ Arendt comments that where human plurality is lost, “people are only for or against other people [...] In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech becomes indeed ‘mere talk,’ simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda.”³⁵⁰ Without the differentiating attachments that connect individual lives to private and familial existence—from which a person might meaningfully and *distinctly* appear, and into which they might *distinctly* disappear—public life risks becoming unmoored from the foundations that quite literally “ground” the polity and its deliberations.³⁵¹ Given Arendt's comments about the “extraordinary political sense” of the *Roman* acknowledgement that public and private must robustly co-exist, one might say of Athens, in contrast, that public death

³⁴⁸ Arendt thus comments on the dual form of “*doxa*,” or “*dokei moi*” which she translates as “opinion” or the “it-appears-to-me” but which meant both reputation/fame as well as “opinion,” and was a commonly used phrase to introduce arguments and speeches in Greek oratory. See Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics” *Social Research*, 57:1 (1990: Spring), 81.

³⁴⁹ On this point, consider Perikles' comments to the Athenians who are in disarray after the devastating plague has caused an erosion of their core values, discipline, and laws: “You must not fall below the standard of your fathers who [won] an empire [...] Your empire is now like a tyranny: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go.” Thucydides, HPW, 2.62-3 (This is the Warner translation.)

³⁵⁰ HC 180.

³⁵¹ Reference to Athens's history during this period lends weight to this interpretation of the polis' imbalanced treatment of public and private death in Arendt's account, as the Periklean military framing of death not only opposed, but actively *invaded* and *restricted* traditionally private and familial jurisdiction over the memorial of the dead. In this period there were significant political restrictions placed on the kinds of mourning that could be enacted publicly, the size and placement of aristocratic, or individual grave-markers and memorials to the dead, as well as the kinds of information (names, deme membership) that might be included in official mourning ceremonies. On this point see Simon Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia,” 111-113.

ultimately became too prominently the domain of the city, for which the private life of the household was, in Arendt's words, "sacrificed."³⁵²

Viewed from the perspective of tragic *hubris*, then, each of these types of public "appearances" of death rests in a specifically limited and self-referential perspective, and both produce tragic insight.³⁵³ The meaning of death can only be preserved by stories that exist in connection to a human community: no individual can make his own story. Neither can the meaning of death's appearances be controlled or restricted to a single, official public narrative without inviting disaster. Both political "appearances" of death thus require another 'remedy' in the form of a balanced relationship between public and private life.

III. Tragic Death

With these observations in mind, for the remainder of this chapter I develop an alternative account of Arendtian death, one understood through the condition of human togetherness. As I have just shown, Arendt incorporates a tragic sensibility into her analysis of political action and human mortality. Here I expand on this tragic sensibility, developing from Arendt's account a view of death understood through specific reference to tragic emplotment. In contrast to Achilles whose death "appears" as a summation of an individual life transfigured in a great work of song, or the collective dead eulogized in Perikles' Funeral Oration, I argue here for an Arendtian understanding of death as a meaningful disappearance, one that takes its meaning through reference to a coherent story that moves around and beyond the moment of death itself. By thinking through death's public appearances with this account I argue we might become more sensitive to the ways that death's meaning is revealed through the ongoing actions and political

³⁵² HC 59.

³⁵³ It is telling and important that in Arendt's larger discussion of action, she turns to the Roman "discovery" of the authority of tradition, and the Christian discovery of the power of promising and forgiveness, to stabilize action's transgressive nature. HC 239-247.

relationships of those who remain on the public “stage;” but also how death distorts and conditions these relationships. For developing this account, I turn to Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

Arendt frequently cites Aristotle’s larger body of works, and engages directly with Aristotle’s *Poetics* several times in *The Human Condition*. The most extended engagement takes place in her discussion of action in “The Web of Relationships and The Enacted Stories” where Arendt calls attention to the idea “as Aristotle rightly claims” that it is not the actors but “in the making or writing of the play” that the imitation of action is revealed. Actors are restricted from revealing the full significance of the plot, instead only giving life to “the ‘heroes’ who reveal themselves in it.”³⁵⁴ Here Arendt cites the famous definition given by Aristotle, that tragedy is “the representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude [...] which] through the arousal of pity and fear [effects] the *katharsis* of such emotions.”³⁵⁵

Later I will address the specific ways that death is staged in Greek tragedy, and how these conventions are useful for understanding Arendt’s account of mortality. Initially it will be helpful to focus on how the meaning of death is put to work within tragic plots more generally. As Aristotle’s definition indicates, tragedy has as its proper end the imitation of an event that occurs between people for the sake of producing an emotional response:

The most important is the structure of events, because tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of actions and life, and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action [...] while men do have certain qualities by virtue of their character, it is in their actions that they achieve, or fail to achieve, happiness. [...] So, the events and plot-structure are the goal of tragedy, and the goal is what matters most of all.³⁵⁶

The priority of plot as the *goal* of tragedy tells us a few things about how the meaning of death is represented on the stage. Crucially, it situates the emotional power of death within the coherence

³⁵⁴ HC 187.

³⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ln. 1449b, 37.

³⁵⁶ Aristotle; 1450a15 37; *Poetics*, 37.

of plot as a whole. This bears repeating: what makes death effective as a part of a tragic plot designed to produce pity and fear is *not* its own innately horrifying elements.³⁵⁷

We can see this by considering Aristotle's discussion of the different types of plot. Even tragedies with "happy" endings, where nobody dies, should produce "pity and fear" in their audience—in fact, plots where death almost happens, but is thwarted by a moment of recognition and reversal are in Aristotle's opinion "the best" sorts of complex plots.³⁵⁸ Examining why these plots are best reveals the importance of the structure of a play for giving death its powerful, tragic effect. Aristotle notes that "many [plots] while weaving well, unravel badly. Yet both should be set in unison."³⁵⁹ Pity and fear, to the extent they may be aroused in an audience, relate to the complicated network of actions and interactions which extend beyond any one person or event. The relationship between actions and events, including death's appearance, succeed in provoking these responses to the extent they form a coherent arrangement of events.

The proper object of fear and pity in a tragic plot is thus not the specific *content* that describes a horrific death, such as the sufferings of a person's final moments graphically recounted onstage, but the recognition by the audience of the horrifying causal thread of action which weaves the plot into motion, and unravels the fates of its actors. It is these threads that situate death's on-stage disappearance—an absence which, itself, generates and shapes new

³⁵⁷ Halliwell notes that "Pity and fear need to be comprehend within the framework of a coherent tragic action; the effect which they represent is the result of a particular configuration of events, not simply of a pervasive generic style or tone (for which a better Aristotelian candidate would be the moral goodness of a character designated as typical of tragedy). It is only after the broader principles of structure and unity have been laid down, that Aristotle focuses on the critical stages of the tragic plot; and it is in elucidating these that he once more has occasion to stipulate pity and fear." *Aristotle's Poetics*, 171.

³⁵⁸ Aristotle, 1454a1-15, *Poetics*, 47.

³⁵⁹ Aristotle, 1456a9-11; this is Seth Bernardete and Michael Davis' rendering of the Greek (*On Poetics*, 46).

outcomes, revelations, and actions.³⁶⁰ It is the action that goes on around a death, in other words, which necessitates the speeches and speculations of the actors and audience. Those who remain must struggle between themselves to assert the meaning of an absent person, and a concluded life.

What this suggests is that it is the successful *presentation* of death as a part of a plot which endows the specific moment of death with its meaningful tragic effect. It is in this sense that Aristotle can assert the “most perfect” complex plots, the ones most effective in creating pity and fear in their viewing audiences, do not need to end in death to be terrifying, but can even end in celebration over a peaceful resolution, or having thwarted an unnecessary killing through recognition.³⁶¹ This sort of ranking makes sense only if we place the effects of pity and fear more properly in the apprehension of tragic *structure* of plot. What is revealed is the frightening contingency of human affairs, the vulnerability of persons to misrecognition, and the terrible unforeseen results of one’s own actions. Indeed, death is not the ultimate evil for sufferers of tragedy. Living with the consequences of one’s actions, or sometimes just the actions of others, is often worse.³⁶²

A further point concerning tragic plot is worth notice. Many of the stories told in the Athenian theater were based on well known myths, including those Aristotle (and Arendt) cites as prime examples, such as the life of Oedipus. But foreknowledge of *the story*, for Aristotle,

³⁶⁰ For instance, the multiple deaths in the *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides* give structure to the whole plot of the cycle of plays, driving actions and responses which run past the individual moments of death. This point might be understood both structural, causal terms; but also deeply personal, phenomenological terms. The world, *through the people in it*, is literally changed for agents through the presence and absence of others. I am grateful on this point to Patches Markell.

³⁶¹ Aristotle, 1454a1-15, *Poetics*, 47.

³⁶² Creon, for instance, begs the gods for death at the end of *Antigone* to no avail. The tragic apprehension of contingency also explains how tragedies like the *Ion*, where the play ends with a family reunited and a death thwarted, could nonetheless evoke pity and fear in the audience due to the contingencies of political status and life. On this play see Demetra Kasimis, “The Tragedy of Blood-Based Membership: Secrecy and the Politics of Immigration in Euripides’ *Ion*,” *Political Theory* 41, no. 2 (April 2013), 231–256.

does not diminish the powerful effect which *plot* has to evoke pity and fear. What the audience that entered the Athenian theater often knew was what would happen in a play, but not *how* it would happen. On this point Alan Sommerstein comments, “whether in the construction of his plots and the events surrounding them [...] or in building connections between the heroic age or the present day, the tragic poet was the master of myth, not its servant.”³⁶³ This matters to the extent that the “how” of a plot could transform a well known story—such as the conclusion of the Trojan war, for instance—through a shift in perspective, a re-conception of a known character, or a re-alignment of events to emphasize their contingent, inter-dependent nature as they circle a specific death.³⁶⁴

Understanding death’s meaning through the apprehension of tragic plot, then, reveals how these shifts in perspective and focus can substantially alter the *meaning* of a given story, or the meaning of a given death, by changing *which* elements, and *which* relationships evoke pity and fear in the audience. In this sense, what is at stake in a tragic apprehension of death as it appears within a plot is the awareness that how a known story is told—and how it might be *re-told*—can substantively change the public or political meaning of an event. Plot has the power to transform the emotional sympathies and perspectives of those who bear witness.

This way of viewing death as a part of a matrix of actions, reactions, and shifting, plural meanings that can be retold illuminates how death’s public aspect is vulnerable to the actions and words of those who witness its appearance; but also how death, and the plots that encircle it, may

³⁶³ Alan Sommerstein, “Tragedy and Myth” in Rebecca Bushnell (ed.) *A Companion to Tragedy* (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 177.

³⁶⁴ Euripides’ play “The Trojan Women,” for instance, views the end of the Trojan war from the perspective of Hecuba, Andromache and Cassandra, who have seen their husbands and children killed, and are about to be taken as slaves and concubines into the houses of the Greek heroes, here depicted as cruel enslavers and murderous conquerors. Thus, this play not only “re-reads” the Trojan War from the perspective of the defeated Trojans, but it also views the lifestyle of glorified heroic masculinity and violence through the eyes of the women who are its victims and slaves—a powerful political shift in perspective away from the rhetoric of glorious conquest, particularly for a play that debuted before Athenian audiences in the middle of the Peloponnesian War.

powerfully and unpredictably alter a shared, common world. As Stephen Halliwell comments, speaking of Aristotle's theory, "the emotional experience of tragic poetry presupposes a strong sympathy which does not take the spectator or reader out of himself, but entails a deeper sense of the vulnerability of his own place in the world."³⁶⁵ Aristotle's focus on plot indicates that the overall effect of the tragedy, pity and fear, derive from a recognition that one's intentions—and sometimes, one's actions—have little to do with one's (moral) failures and successes, and the ways that one's actions will take on meaning. Yet lack of intention, or even a more robust innocence, does not diminish responsibility or the weight of the consequences that emerge as a result of one's choices. And these can rarely be controlled or apprehended in advance.³⁶⁶

Arendt, in a similar vein, represents political action as setting off chains of events which cannot be controlled and are not limited by the intentions, or even presence, of the person who sets events into motion. Arendt therefore observes in an extremely tragic mood that "because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a "doer" but always and at the same time a sufferer."³⁶⁷ It is in this spirit that Arendt describes the classical theater as the "political art *par excellence*." The tragic theater imitates the ways that meaning and action emerge through the intersecting choices and deeds of agents who cannot control the events they set into motion, and who must bear the consequences, nonetheless.³⁶⁸ This gap between the intentions and expectations of the actors on the one hand, and the horrifying consequences that

³⁶⁵ Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 183.

³⁶⁶ On this tragic view, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, "Tensions and Ambiguity in Greek Tragedy," in *Myth and Tragedy* (Zone Books, 1988), 29-48; and Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*; for a recent look at the political importance of this tragic apprehension of vulnerability, see Patchen Markell, "Tragic Recognition: Action and Identity in Antigone and Aristotle" in *Bound By Recognition*, 62-89.

³⁶⁷ HC 190.

³⁶⁸ For this reason Arendt stresses the crucial "discovery" of the power of forgiveness, without which "our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever." HC 237.

spill over from their actions, on the other, is what Aristotle expects audiences to recognize as frightening. The apprehension of tragic action gives death on the stage its power to evoke fear and pity, but this sensibility also informs Arendtian politics. I therefore suggest we return to a consideration of death's public "appearance" as it emerges beyond the darkness of the private household in light of these tragic dynamics.

IV: "A Death Revealed"

Here I argue we can understand death's political appearances for Arendt chiefly as a meaningful *disappearance* that takes place within a community of actors, as part of an ongoing, coherent plot. The proper object of a political appearance of death is thus not the moment of death itself, but the felt absence or disappearance of a person, made sense of and given meaning through a web of stories that relate that person, no longer present, to others who remain. Such an account draws attention to the ways individuals must act into a world that is shaped by relationships which form around and through many such absences, each of which provides a potential moment of critical ambiguity and silence that begs some response—an understanding of death which may again be helpfully enriched by reference to death on the tragic stage.

Why the tragic stage for an account of death's public and private appearances in the political world? In particular, how are we to theorize the "appearance" of a specific person's *absence*, while remaining sensitive to the ways that in the real world of contingency and history nobody is ever "the author or producer of his own life story"?³⁶⁹ While it makes sense to speak of a person's appearance as the object of plural perspectives on a stage, it is less obvious how to theorize a "disappearance" in this way. The question at hand is thus how to develop an account of death's *political* appearances as it is woven into the ongoing and unfolding chains of doing and suffering that give shape to Arendt's political world. How are we to theorize this appearance

³⁶⁹ HC 184.

in a way sensitive to the plural and competing claims that are ascribed to public appearances and disappearances, while keeping room for the private, hidden attachments which bind a person to a particular place in the world?

Again, it will be helpful here to turn to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Read from the perspective of tragic death on the stage, I suggest we think of the depth provided by the movement of rising and falling from private to public (and vice-versa) in similar terms to the kinds of critical space as the moment of tragic death on the stage, "revealed to sight." In a particularly famous passage from the *Poetics* Aristotle describes death as one of the principle kinds of tragic suffering. He writes,

Well then, reversal and recognition form two components of the plot-structure; the third is suffering. To the definition of reversal and the recognition already given we can add the category of suffering: a destructive or painful action, such as visible deaths, torments, woundings, and other things of the same kind.³⁷⁰

The Greek here—*thanatoi en toi phaneroi*—is sometimes rendered as "visible deaths" (as Halliwell puts it here) or "deaths on the stage;" though it might as easily be translated as a "killing open to sight."³⁷¹ Nicole Loraux translates this phrase "death agonies in public" and "a murder in front of everybody." In a more Arendtian sense, the word "*phaneroi*" also has the connotations of something "made manifest," or a "death revealed" in much the same way that political action is also 'made manifest' between a group of actors whose presence allows political meaning to come into being.

While it may seem like a straightforward point to claim that death is a chief category of on-stage suffering, what makes the meaning of this passage obscure is that in Greek tragedy the

³⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ln1452b10, 43.

³⁷¹ There is a large, vibrant body of work on attic tragedy and in particular Aristotle's relation to it. Here I have found Stephen Halliwell's commentary particularly helpful; see Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, (University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Amielee Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002). Other works on Tragedy and its context that I have found particularly useful are George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1961); Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy*; Rita Felski (ed), *Rethinking Tragedy*; John Winkler and F. Zeitlin, (eds.), *Nothing to do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990).

actual moment of death almost *never* appears on stage. Of the plays that come down to us, only two have deaths or killings that actually take place onstage—and one these is a tragi-comedy in which a personification of death is a character.³⁷² For the rest, the moment of death is hidden offstage and removed from view, leaving a silent, unseen act or event that must be explained, reported, and accounted for by other actors as the plot resolves.³⁷³

And yet, the threat of death or its actual occurrence is such a common feature of tragedies that it can be grouped into distinct types of disappearance.³⁷⁴ There is deferred death, when a person is taken away to die at a later ambiguous date, such as in *Antigone* (sentenced to a “living burial”). Death from afar, when a person goes to a remote location and dies, such as Aegisthus in *Electra* (stabbed in the country), or Penthus in the *Bacchae* (dismembered in the hills by women). Death in an offstage, ironic or meaningful location, such as the death of Clytemnestra in the *Libation Bearers* (killed where she killed her husband). Or, finally, mysterious death, where the details of the final moments of life remain secret, such as Oedipus’s final moments in

³⁷² Euripides’ *Acelestis* details the story of a woman who promises to save her husband from death by taking his place. Acelestis dies on stage after eliciting promises from her husband to marry again and care for their children; then, in a highly convenient turn of events, a boorish Hercules arrives and decides to ambush Death and bring Acelestis back from the underworld. The tragic/comic tone of this work make it very difficult to interpret, but several choral odes describe Acelestis as a liminal figure: she is described as dead/not dead, and throughout the play is alive, dead, and returned but, due to the rules of the underworld, silent in her final re-appearance on stage. The other on-stage death is in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, which *also* has an off-stage suicide (of Phaedra), and details how the words and desires of a person, even after death, wreak havoc on the lives of the living.

³⁷³ There are many practical reasons that explain the removal of death from the tragic stage, chief among them the technical difficulties of pulling off a convincing death for an audience of several thousand spectators with only 5th Century BCE stagecraft. Others have speculated on the religious or ritual dimensions of death’s appearance and disappearance from the public space of the theater, though Aristotle makes no mention of such restrictions. As Aristotle was interested in tragedy as a philosopher, not as a historian, it would be dangerous to read too much into his silence on the subject. Aristotle’s primary concern in the *Poetics* is to define tragedy and explain its workings, not to give a thorough account of Tragedy’s historic reception or even as a catalogue for normal Athenian ways of thinking about tragedy. For a review of the historic and intellectual context of Aristotle’s text, see Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, “introduction,” 3-9.

³⁷⁴ I take these ‘categories of death’ in the discussion that follows from R. Sri Pathmanathan, “Death in Greek Tragedy” *Greece & Rome*, Vol 12, no. 1 (April, 1965), 2-14.

Oedipus at Colonus (vanishes in a cloud).³⁷⁵ Some versions of these offstage deaths are coded in gendered ways, or in ways that reveal social status. Hangings and wounds to the throat are the particular choice of offstage death for women—such as Jocasta, Antigone, or Eurydice from the Oedipal cycle. Men are more likely to be stabbed or bodily maimed, the fatal weapon typically a sword.³⁷⁶

What all this offstage variety indicates is that, in tragedy, the impact of the death on the viewing audience primarily rests in words. A corpse may be brought on stage and displayed as an object of horrified reactions and grief, but the moment of death itself, and often the specific meaning given to it by the agent who dies, remains obscure. As Loraux writes of female tragic death, though it might apply to tragic death in general, “Everything happens in words, and this is particularly true of death. [...] nothing [is] seen in the first instance: everything starts by being spoken, by being heard, by being imagined. For seeing is born from words and is closely bound up with them.”³⁷⁷ The meaning of the final moment of death as it is given to the audience must be received from the speeches and reports of secondary viewers, offered to the audience (and the other characters on stage) as the subject of plural interpretation and recollection.³⁷⁸

If in a very practical sense the use of language as the medium of death on stage heightens the emotional impact of the plot for the audience, an important side effect is that it also adds a

³⁷⁵ Pathmanathan comments in his study that there are dramatic reasons given within the plot for nearly all of these deaths to be hidden from the view of the audience, though as he notes, many of the reasons seem rather contrived. Pathmanathan, “Death in Greek Tragedy,” 13-14.

³⁷⁶ Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* trans. Anthony Forester (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*, vii.

³⁷⁸ These speeches on stage are not eulogies. Frequently they are deeply graphic reports, often delivered by messenger or eye-witness. Drawing from a long tradition of heroic poetry which gloried in the description of death—Homer is particularly rife with gruesome descriptions of violent death—death on the stage draws on the ability for the audiences’ imagination to provide the horrifying detail in ways stagecraft might struggle to do. It also expressly appeals to the capacity for the audience to imaginatively recreate the conditions of vulnerability.

crucial, irreducible moment of ambiguity to the tragic plot. That the moment of death is removed from sight, bearing with it any opportunity for the actor in question to give words to their own final disappearance, injects uncertainty into tragic proceedings that generates a space for speculation and critical thought. The silence of the actor who dies, and the dependence of those who remain on the reports of witnesses and messengers, exposes for the audience the need for judgment towards death. It also exposes the susceptibility of these narratives of death to plural interpretations by the different actors on the stage, who may react to the news of death in wildly divergent ways. “Death by report lends itself to conjecture vastly more than does violence exposed to the public view.”³⁷⁹ Hiding the last moments of death thus has the dual effect of appealing to an audience’s capacities for judgment and empathy, while simultaneously exposing the vulnerability of the dead agent to the words and perceptions of the living.

By explicitly *disappearing* from the public eye the off-stage death thus creates an absence that, by way of contrast, exaggerates the role that storytelling and perspective play in disclosing the actor’s final moments. Yet this absence also draws attention to the power the dead have to alter, through their absence, the constellation of relationships and choices which form the ongoing action of the plot. The chain of events set off by the actions and inactions of those on stage continue to resonate in spite of their disappearance, and often because of them. As Arendt notes of action’s boundless power, “one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.”³⁸⁰ The meaning of death is therefore apprehended through the significance of the absence that is felt by others, around which the action of the plot continues to unravel. This way of thinking about death as a meaningful disappearance that appears in words and stories, I argue, provides a way of understanding the mutual relationship between the public and private aspects

³⁷⁹ Loraux, “Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman,” x.

³⁸⁰ HC 190.

of death in Arendt's account; an account that is productive for theorizing public death in a way sensitive to the plural and competing claims attached to public appearances, while nonetheless respecting the private existence and personhood of the one who has died.

V. Between Public and Private:

I have just argued that Aristotle's discussion of the placement of death as a larger part of tragic plot provides one way in which we might deepen Arendt's account of mortality, and develop an understanding of death's appearance which reaffirms the balance between public and private claims on death's meaning in ways useful for us today. Here I outline an Arendtian account of death's appearance as a part of tragic political action. This account does not place a search for immortality at its heart, but rather the condition of human togetherness. Here death's appearance is not simply a matter of a memorable deed or a fixed space of appearances but rests in the relationships and stories that form around an absence; an absence shaped and stabilized by its connection to a private world, and the irreducible darkness of death. *Both* connections affirm and deepen, rather than detract from, the meaningfulness of death's public appearance.

As I discussed above, Arendt develops her account of political action by first returning to a brief discussion of physical walls and household darkness as a way of introducing the idea of a "space" of appearances.³⁸¹ Yet as Arendt presents it, the space of human appearances is not *simply* a physical location. Rather it appears between a particular arrangement of persons as they relate to each other. The "revelatory quality of speech and action," she writes, come to the foreground "where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, sheer human

³⁸¹ HC 191.

togetherness.”³⁸² Thus the proper place Arendt assigns for action is not in the heroic battlefield or within the specific walls of the polis but,

the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. [...] It is the space of appearances in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others, as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but make their appearance explicitly.³⁸³

For this space to come into existence, the public realm needs to exist “in common” with other people, frequently bringing them together around some common, worldly interest, (and not a specific, technical end, like winning a war, or turning a profit).³⁸⁴ Through one’s actions and words in the company of others, “who” one is—one’s “character”—is revealed. Arendt writes, “Action and speech go on between men [...] and] retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively ‘objective,’ concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move [...] These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.”³⁸⁵

But what does it mean to think of death as an *inter-est*: a disappearance which relates and binds persons together? Above I argued that death on the tragic stage was chiefly represented in words, and through the reactions of those on stage who must confront the absence of a specific person. Death, further, was given its larger meaning in the context of a plot, one which draws the diverse actions and intentions of the characters on stage into a coherent whole. In a similar way, to the extent that death can be an *inter-est*, it must be recognized as something that can “appear”

³⁸² HC 180.

³⁸³ HC 199.

³⁸⁴ HC 180.

³⁸⁵ HC 182-3.

and which is capable of being apprehended and spoken about from plural points of view, in a coherent way. In short, mortality, understood as the specific *disappearance of a person*, unlike death as a biological, universal occurrence, does not shed its connection to the specific commitments and qualities that shape a distinct life story. Death as a disappearance leaves a *specific* absence and silence, one that alters the shared, common world and generates the need for speech and deeds from those who remain.

In this sense, Arendt comments that the “in-between” of human speech and action which “is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown” over these objects of interest constitutes a reality that Arendt terms the “web of human relationships.”³⁸⁶ This web of relationships and stories give human appearances their historic reality. Because the world opens up uniquely to every individual, and every individual brings something new into the world—the interrelated conditions of plurality and natality—it is by seeing, hearing and being seen and heard that the common world can be known in a *human* sense.³⁸⁷ As Arendt notes, the space of appearances situated within this web,

does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them—like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian of antiquity [...] the jobholder or businessman in our world, do not live in it. *No man, moreover, can live in it all the time.* To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all ...and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality.³⁸⁸

How is this space of appearances tied to a space of *disappearance*? By retaining a connection to the darkness of the household, or more permanently into the ‘absolute darkness’ of death itself, an understanding of mortality as a disappearance from the public realm draws attention to the

³⁸⁶ HC 183.

³⁸⁷ HC 56-7.

³⁸⁸ HC 199. Emphasis mine.

active tension between the universal biological fact of death—a “sameness” which for Arendt is “non-worldly, anti-political, and truly transcendental”—and the distinct person who lived and acted into the world.³⁸⁹

As the various, detailed accounts of dying off stage which tragedy preserves can attest, the ongoing speech and actions of others, structured by the events that produced an absence as well as the specific absence itself, provide connections between the active reality of public discourse and the private, hidden disappearance of a person into death. While self-referential, and therefore incapable of providing the kind of historical, fully *objective* reality and durability in time that is offered by appearing in public before others, the household nonetheless plays an important role anchoring a person's life in ways that simple solitary isolation from others cannot.³⁹⁰ By disappearing into household society a person is drawn back into a closed existence that nonetheless has its own substantial claims on human life and experience—as a member of a family, a faith, or a species.

From this tragic perspective of death as a meaningful disappearance within conditions of human togetherness, private meanings and appeals attached to the moment of death need not

³⁸⁹ HC 215.

³⁹⁰ Arendt seems to treat these spaces as existing on a spectrum of “exposure” to public “light” when talking about the classical polis. Death is the darkest and utterly hidden by its very nature. The household is also dark, and obscure from sight, with foundations grounded in the mysteries of life processes; yet the household has its own interior reality, claims, and society, and also connects to public spaces with walls and doors that can be seen from the outside and remarked upon, and which give some differentiation to the distinct appearances and disappearances of persons from public. While my focus here is on the classical polis, the clarity of this spectrum is disrupted when one considers the collapse of these spaces which Arendt associates with the modern era. Her anxiety concerning this collapse seems to rest in her belief that the space of appearances is too easily destroyed, either by external encroachment from “the social” which erode the channels of appearance and disappearance, leaving an undifferentiated mass; or the too domineering narratives of the state that call for unity at the expense of plurality on the one hand; or which leave only the inward retreat into the intimacy of one’s own mind for “privacy,” on the other. In both cases, the individual loses the “space” to differentiate themselves, either by return to a specific location, or by meaningfully appearing in a distinct way. On the relationship of public, private and social see especially Hannah Fenichel Pitkin’s book, *Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 198), and Kirstie McClure, “The Social Question, Again.” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, No. 28, Vol. 1 (2007), 85-113.

compete with public meanings, but may actually deepen them. To assign death a political meaning as part of a public appearance, subject to plural public narratives—the death of a citizen such as Michael Brown, for instance—is not to suggest that the private attachments and the meaning of his absence, as felt by family and friends, should be less important or subordinate to the public relationships generated and sustained around the meaning of death.³⁹¹ Rather, it is to suggest that what defines a political appearance of death are the ways a *distinct* absence, one informed by the narratives and relationships formed around a specific disappearance, are set off from, and given structure by, the specific claims of private life and the general conditions human, biological existence.

The private connections that draw an individual back into private life and death, much like tragic death on the stage, generate a critical, silent “darkness” that simultaneously appeals to the critical perceptions of others, and exposes the vulnerability of the absent life to political narratives not of their choosing. This darkness generates an uncertainty that invites those who remain to grapple with the question of *who* is gone, and what the meaning of their specific disappearance ought to be as it will appear in, and shape, public life. The tragic tension between public and private helps to frame death’s appearances in a way that cannot be reduced to any other death *as such*, either in the sense of a too-biological understanding of death as a transcendental, universal or species experience, or in the sense of a totalizing claim of political unity. Like the critical ambiguity of death on the stage, death understood as a meaningful

³⁹¹ On the specific problems of politically speaking about black male death, see Tommy J. Curry, “Michael Brown and the Need for A Genre Study of Black Male Death and Dying” *Theory & Event* Vol 17, Issue 3, Supplement 2014. An Arendtian account of death as I’ve outlined it here is useful to the extent it provides a way of thinking through how different narratives are put to work around a specific death, for democratic or racial, state ends, but in a way that rests in active, generative tension with the kinds of personal, private claims and relationships that constitute a private life. Unlike an understanding of death that is universal or generalizes on the basis of a given biological fact like gender, Arendt’s account looks to the more particularizing effects of history, context, and the lived experience of the shared political world.

disappearance generates space of differentiation and connection, one capable of sustaining meaningful discourse.

In this sense, just as the public words and deeds of a person disclose “who” that somebody is, the ways their disappearance is felt, and the public notice of the “where” they disappear into discloses something about their humanity as well, or what parts of a person’s humanity have been denied. Understood as a meaningful *disappearance* and absence, death is given shape in the tension between the words and deeds which situate a person’s life within the bright ‘light’ of historical reality, and the differentiating pull back into the hidden, private commitments and relationships which ground one’s private, specific place in the world. These tensions help to prevent a too-unified or “official” understanding of death’s meaning from dominating public discourse, or overwhelming what is distinct and particular about a given person. Arendt notes, “The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is [...] the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.”³⁹²

Within the context of the polis, then, one way to think about the boundaries between public and private spaces of death is as channels of separation and connection. These structurally support the public realm the way suspension cables support the deck of a bridge: the suspension cables are held taut by the weight of the bridge span itself, and grounded by hidden anchors on opposing banks that sink into the earth. The public realm requires a certain structural countervailing tension into private disappearances if it is going to have its “revelatory” capacity preserved—that is, the specific quality that allows human beings to disclose who they are to others through their words and deeds—an “offstage” location from which to appear and begin

³⁹² HC 53.

something new, or in leaving, provoke a new chain of events around an absence.³⁹³ For the disappearances of death to meaningfully appear thus means for death to have the power to relate, and separate.

The space between public and private, or more accurately the movement between these two realms and their demands, thus provides a kind of stabilizing tension. On the one hand, the public face of death prevents the individual from sinking too far back into the individual-obliterating cycles of birth and death within a familial bloodline. On the other, a private, hidden component to death checks the formal equality of death in the public sphere from becoming too equalizing; preventing the meaning of death from becoming too detached from the concrete circumstances of individual life or too overtly dominated by state narratives that can collapse the space of meaningful, plural appearances. This framing helps to view a specific, individual death in the public sphere in ways that may be tantamount to other deaths, but simultaneously is not *reducible* to any other death. In this way the presence of a specific individual, and the meaning of their life and death exists through the confirmations of plural actors who see the person that appears between them, but also who noticeably vanishes out of sight.

VI. Conclusion

In the above I have developed an Arendtian account of mortality and death informed by a tragic understanding of death on the stage: a disappearance from a space of togetherness, one

³⁹³ HC 180. Thus a striking feature of the modern age for Arendt is not merely the expansion of private rule and concerns—economic and administrative—into the public realm, but the invasion of the private, and the exposure of “all things connected with the life process itself” to public view. Exposed to public light, the private process of life and death loses its capacities to shelter and give “depth” to an individual’s concrete existence. The public understanding of death, also, becomes routinized through exposure; no longer ambiguous or marked by an *occasion* of appearance or disappearance that confirms the specific and meaningful presence of an individual, mortal person. As Mary Dietz has argued, this process of the over-exposure of the life process and elimination of privacy is one of the distinguishing features of the death camps for Arendt in the German Holocaust. The over-exposure of *death* in its biological sense destroyed the *mortal* experience of death, that is, dying as a human being, leaving on “death-yet-not-death; life yet not life.” See Mary Dietz, “A Transfiguring Evening Glow: Arendt and the Holocaust” *Turning Operations*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 183-200. For a collection of essays analyzing the modern condition of the public sphere in relation to the past, see Tracy Strong and Marcell Henaff, eds, *The Public Space and Democracy*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

which leaves an absence that sustains and relates a community of persons, and which provokes words and deeds. Like the public space of appearances, meaningful disappearances are bolstered and supported by the divisions between public and private spaces. A sound public realm provides a common space where multiple views might re-affirm the reality of death's public aspect, cementing the loss of a specific person. A robust space of privacy ensures that the life and death of the individual retains its depth and complexity, giving conceptual space for the (contested, open) question of who they are, or have been, to emerge. Such an account demonstrates how admitting death into our public spaces and allowing it to "appear" need not be at the expense of the sacred and deeply personal meanings given to death in our private lives.

An Arendtian account of tragic death also calls attention to the important ways death is a part of political life, and deeply subject to competing narratives and perspectives. Unlike a treatment of death that tries to isolate death from public life on the one hand, or which treats death as a universal pre-political object of fear to be resisted and secured against, on the other, Arendt's treatment provides resources for theorizing how death, and the specific absences which particular people leave behind them, may generate communities, connections, and shape the ongoing "plot" of political action. Read alongside the example of classical tragedy, what is heightened in Arendt's account are the ways that the dead are simultaneously powerful, but also vulnerable: the specific loss of a person, and the need to give an account of a meaningful absence can bind and relate persons together; but the dead are defenseless against the perspectives of others on which they rely.

If Arendt's account is valuable for allowing us to more clearly grasp what we stand to gain or lose by admitting death into our public discourse, it also helps to see what is denied when a specific death or absence is actively hidden from public sight. It is an obvious practical

injustice that the public stage amplifies the absence of some lives, and passes over the absence of others. When these spaces of appearances become fragmented and divided, the existential rewards of the public space are also called into question. It is important, then, that there is no inherent exclusive limit concerning which deaths appear and which ones do not. The lack of such boundaries provides an important critical perspective on the treatment of death as a part of politics, (or as an exclusive part of private life) as it provides resources identifying the political dynamics which suppress some deaths, and raise others into view. While Arendt's theory provides no inherent *guarantee* that the stories of those who disappear and are absent will be allowed to make their appearances, it does supply powerful resources for understanding what stands to be lost by denying death its public appearance.

Reading Arendt alongside Aristotle's *Poetics* helps to deepen our awareness of those places where we might politically engage around an absent life, and how the meaning of death is dependent on, and vulnerable to, the presence and actions of others. An account of death which retains a critical ambiguity at its center will always be subject to misrecognition. However, this ambiguity also provides the space for togetherness by keeping some separation between the private experience of death and the overwhelming, dominating narratives states and publics may ascribe to a specific death's meaning. Understood from the perspective of tragic plot, also, we might be encouraged to remember how even familiar stories, with well-worn emotional resonances and affinities, could be made strange and frightening on the tragic stage. Tragic death invites us to consider how the meaning of death is told, but also may be *re-told*, in ways that can reconfigure the emotional recognition of a political community of actors, and thereby start something new. Thinking about death as a disappearance meaningfully felt thus heightens our ability to see how death may be appropriated for many different political ends. But as Arendt's

account suggests, tragedy also reveals how powerful and politically meaningful the absence of distinct persons can be for provoking, and sustaining, a politics of human togetherness.

Chapter 4

Mortal Ignorance: Socrates' Apology for Death

"I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about [death and the soul] in life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. For he must do one of two things; either he must learn or discover the truth about these matters, or if that is impossible, he must take whatever human doctrine is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking up on it as a raft, sail upon it through life in the midst of dangers [...] And so now I am not ashamed to ask questions, since you encourage me to do so."

—Simmiias, Plato's Phaedo [85c-e]

In the preceding chapters I have argued for a more robust vocabulary of death as a part of politics. I have done so by developing several distinct accounts from the works of Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt in conversation with classical interlocutors. So far my concern has been with how these different ways of theorizing death can enable or suppress democratic politics, and how, by taking up these different narratives, we might recover and mobilize political capacities otherwise overlooked or actively suppressed. Yet there remains the question of how to accommodate these competing accounts of death within political life without closing off death's meaning in any final sense. How, in other words, can we better admit discussions of death and the kinds of diverse political relationships and meanings it produces into democratic political life, while retaining a critical perspective on the kinds of violence and exclusions a politics of death can foster?

All three of the authors examined thus far felt an urgent need to reflect critically on the tradition of Platonic thought; a tradition which, for each, has come to an end. The modern crumbling of moral or political "givens" yields a pressing need for new ways of thinking through political problems that do not rest in transcendental appeals to universal moral values. Each thus undertakes a kind of intellectual excavation. By generating a sense of distance, tension, or

dissonance with an ancient past, these accounts seek productive grounds for theorizing the political life of their own times. What is at stake in these movements between past and present is the creation of an alternative perspective from which some critical purchase might be developed for thinking, and re-thinking, modern problems.

In this final chapter I suggest a return to Plato's *Apology* in this spirit. I argue that Socrates' critical engagement with the Athenian conventions of death in the *Apology* provides an example of what a productive political orientation towards death might look like. The tensions between life and death, politics and philosophy, and Socrates' famous profession of ignorance as the basis for his unrelenting drive to question his fellow Athenians famously yields not clarity but *aporia*: a lack of resolution, with no clear way through the problem proposed for examination.³⁹⁴ Here I argue that one such *aporia*—Socrates' ongoing insistence within the *Apology* that we “do not know if death is a good or a bad thing”—can provide a healthy, democratic orientation towards death as a part of political life.

I argue here that mortal ignorance provides the foundational space for a potential community of critical inquiry in Socrates' speech; one from which we, also, might re-approach “settled” questions of death's appropriate place in political life with, if not clear eyes, clearer ones. I am most interested in Socrates' aporetic interrogation of what I call several distinct “regimes of death” that operated within Athenian political life, an interrogation Socrates performs by using and *transforming* conventional ideals of Athenian democracy. I argue that this critical, dynamic interrogation of mortal democracy demonstrates how a regime that

³⁹⁴ “Aporia” literally means “a difficulty, a puzzle,” or “a lack of passage, no way through.” The word is often used in conjunction with Socratic thought to describe the way that many Socratic dialogues leave his interlocutors stunned, with nothing to say. This destructive, negative aspect of Socratic thought has been intermittently praised and blamed by political theorists seeking resources for contemporary political thought. See for instance Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness; Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*; Joel Alden Schlosser, *What Would Socrates Do? Self Examination, Civic Engagement, and the Politics of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014).

acknowledges death requires a political stance that remains oriented towards the limits of mortal knowledge: a position which admits death is a part of political life and action, but also accepts the impossibility of closing off death's meaning in any final sense, inviting *ongoing* political transformation and critique.

In what follows, I develop this orientation through a close reading of the *Apology*, focusing specifically on the ways that Socrates' defense engages the conventional practices and ideals of his time. My primary interest is in the conceptual spaces that Socrates opens throughout his speech as he defends his life. I thus do not directly take up the question of Socrates' relationship to Plato in this chapter, as I am mostly interested in Socrates as a character who *presents* a specific engagement with death within (and against) Athenian democratic political life within the *Apology*.³⁹⁵ Turning to Plato for democratic resources in this way may seem perverse, and particularly so for democratic resources theorizing *death*. If Socrates can be read as ambivalent towards democracy, Plato's letters and major works can be read as a sustained critique of the moral and psychological dangers of democratic politics, and an argument to avoid public life unless one absolutely cannot help it.³⁹⁶

What is important for my purposes, however, are the ways that the *Apology* stays grounded in Socratic ignorance and *aporetic* questioning towards death—a point I elaborate below—rather than the more robust Platonic metaphysical arguments that appear in later

³⁹⁵ In treating the Socrates of the *Apology* as a figure of Plato's dramatic representation I am generally following the approach of Arthur Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1999). I have also taken much from Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995); and J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth*. For a general discussion of the "Socrates Problem" in Plato, see Richard Kraut, "Introduction to the Study of Plato" and Terry Penner, "Socrates and the Early Dialogues" in Kraut (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), 1-50; 121-169.

³⁹⁶ See for instance, *Republic*, Book 8, and the infamous *Letter 7*, both available through the Perseus Project: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>.

dialogues.³⁹⁷ While I restrict my focus here to the *Apology* and Socrates' performance of a specific orientation towards death and political life, I also build on recent efforts in Plato scholarship that illustrate Socrates' "entanglement" with democratic practices and rhetoric. I argue his deeply ambivalent treatment of death should be read as part of a "political turn," one oriented towards the potential transformation of mortal political life on the basis of a more thorough understanding of its limits, and a reconsideration of its central practices.³⁹⁸

I begin in the next section by setting the theoretical grounds of my reading of the *Apology*, specifically how the *Apology*, and Socrates' understanding of death, are tied into the political life of Athens. In part two I outline Socrates' position of mortal ignorance. Socrates uses this position to expose the limits and inner workings of what I call several "regimes" of death, understood as those dominant conventional beliefs and practices which rule the political life of Athens. In the *Apology*, Socrates specifically engages with a heroic regime, a patriotic, soldierly regime, and the more intimate regimes of behavior governing death's public and private appearances.³⁹⁹ I investigate these regimes, and Socrates' critique of them, in part three. All are presented through appeals to the democratic ideals of Athens, and all are transformed through

³⁹⁷ While I speak on the "Socrates problem" as relevant throughout, an initial comment is worthwhile. The *Apology* is often treated as one of the most "Socratic" dialogues of Plato, in that it is seen as portraying a "historical" Socrates, and generally aligns with other historical accounts of Socrates' trial (such as Xenophon's). Unlike later Socratic dialogues composed by Plato, the *Apology* also does not include a developed theory of metaphysical forms or mathematical method, though it does include references that are generally *coherent* with these features of Plato's later thought. Crucially, even in the later dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, where Socrates is the most enthusiastic about death's value, there remains a critical, provisional quality to Socrates' speech (See *Phaedo*, 90e, for instance.) On this point I follow Sarah Brill, *Plato On the Limits of Human Life*.

³⁹⁸ The word "entanglement" is Sarah Monson's, referring to Plato's engagement with democracy. Monson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*.

³⁹⁹ All of these regimes are coded in specifically masculine ways within Socrates' speech—a point which reflects that social and political categories in classical Greek thought tended to treat the adult male citizen as the norm, and all variations as deviations from this perspective. This is also true of death, which was coded in myth and social practices in masculine and feminine ways. On this point see Vernant, "Feminine Figures of Death in Greece" in *Mortals and Immortals*, 96-110. In this chapter, I tend to default to the masculine pronoun so as not to distort this fact, yet use male and female pronouns interchangeably when the point is more general.

Socrates' defense of his own life. All these critiques, also, fail to fully convince the Athenians to spare Socrates' life. I take up this partial failure—and partial *success*—alongside Socrates' final return to the themes of ignorance, death and immortality in the final portion of his speech in part four.

That Socrates fails to convince the polis underscores the political stakes which are attached to any conversation of death as a part of political life. I argue here that Socrates' defense, and the unspoken dialogue it provokes with witnesses and readers, illustrates an orientation towards death that is compatible with fundamentally democratic ideals and practices: openness, truthful speech to a critical audience, and a basic appeal to the capacities of political judgment and accountability of the democratic polity. Yet his defense also stands as a warning, illustrating how complacency towards a critical examination of death's inclusions and exclusions from public life generates injustices of its own. It is from within this framework of mortal ignorance, grounded in an irreducible lack of knowledge of death, that I argue we might more openly accommodate death as a part of healthy democratic practice; remaining open to death's capacity to distort political life and imagination, while retaining a critical vantage oriented towards the question of how we should live.

I. Politics and Philosophy

Much of the *Apology* is given over to the various ways that Socrates is or is not like his fellow Athenians, how he does or does not live up to the highest ideals of manly courage and conventional democratic political participation, and how he will or will not bend from his philosophical mission to appease the democratic anxieties of Athens. At the heart of these tensions and comparisons is a consistent interrogation of the Athenians (and Socrates') attitude towards life and death. While the Athenians praise a life which does not fear death, Socrates

alone will admit he does not *know* that death is inherently fearful. “I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have. I do know, however, that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong.”[29b-c]⁴⁰⁰

The question the *Apology* routinely circles is thus not simply about the nature of death, but how one is to live a mortal life. More specifically, Socrates asks his judges to consider how an awareness of mortality ought to shape political judgment and behavior, as individuals but also as members of a deliberating community. Since Socrates is actively defending his life in this dialogue, the question is also turned on his interlocutors: what sort of lives does democratic Athens value, and what understanding of death? And can either accommodate Socrates?

Socrates has, at best, a complicated relationship with Athenian democracy. The historical Socrates was characterized as a dangerous sophist by Athenian orators for generations after his death, a reputation which may have had as much to do with Socrates’ student Alcibiades as it did with Socrates’ habit of embarrassing his fellow Athenians in public.⁴⁰¹ His civic activity was also non-traditional. Instead of speaking in the Assembly, arguing with his peers concerning the best course of political action, he chose to spend his time speaking in the agora and in private among friends. Indeed, Socrates insists at several points in the *Apology* that had he chosen to participate in Athenian politics in more traditional ways, he would have been executed long ago.[28b, 33a]⁴⁰² More scandalously, perhaps, Socrates did not restrict his philosophical conversations to

⁴⁰⁰ All in text parenthetical citations refer to the *Apology*. I have defaulted to Grube’s translation throughout this chapter because it is widely available and familiar to many, but have indicated those places where I rely on my own. See John M. Cooper (ed.), G. M. A. Grube (trans.) “Apology” in *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 2002).

⁴⁰¹ Gregory Vlastos, “The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Nov., 1983), 495-516.

⁴⁰² Some modern commenters have reinforced this view of Socrates as a political dissident who *fails* to live up to the democratic principles of Athens, rather than existing as a martyr for free speech as he is often portrayed by liberal commenters (such as J.S. Mill.) In particular I. F. Stone has recently made this argument, arguing the really

other citizens but, in the Platonic dialogues, speaks with slaves, foreigners, and women; always interested to find out what they know.

There is thus an implicit critique of Athenian politics in Socrates' defense: *Socratic* philosophy, with its concern for moral improvement and virtuous living, cannot be contained within the artificial limits of democratic practice that Athens upholds. There is some question, indeed, if Socratic philosophic practice can be contained within *mortal* limits.⁴⁰³ While the *Apology* contains a committed, skeptical orientation towards death's meaning as a part of political life (more on this below), the other Socratic dialogues of Plato—particularly the *Phaedo*—draw a more difficult picture. In the *Phaedo* Socrates argues that philosophers ought to have “eagerness” (*prothumia*) for death, calling philosophy a “practice for dying.”⁴⁰⁴ In the *Crito*, Socrates calmly rehearses several arguments for accepting death as a part of civic and moral obligation. Piling on, the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*—also the *Apology*—end with myths or hypothetical scenarios where Socrates details the afterlife, emphasizing a view of virtue and vice oriented towards an immortal existence, potentially at the expense of a mortal one.⁴⁰⁵

remarkable thing was not that Athens put Socrates to death, but that they suffered him to live for as long as they did. I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

⁴⁰³ For some, the failed relationship between Socratic philosophy and democratic politics depicted in the *Apology* represents a pivotal moment in the history of western thought, a kind of fable with significance akin to a religious “fall” from grace. In this spirit Nietzsche establishes Socrates as a philosophical nemesis. Arendt similarly notes that “the gulf between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and condemnation of Socrates, which in the history of political thought plays the same role as a turning point that the trial and condemnation of Jesus plays in the history of religion. Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates' teachings.” Yet for Arendt, the figure of Socrates is tragic precisely because he represents a kind of hopeful, if ultimately misguided, union of philosophy and politics. Arendt thus presents a version of the *Apology* where Socrates operates *within* the “gulf” between politics and philosophy; a story about a lost way of being meant to illuminate the world as we have inherited it. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 272; and Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics”; and Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation.”

⁴⁰⁴ Plato, “*Phaedo*,” in *Loeb Classical Library: Plato I*. trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 66b-e, 229-31; On this point see Brill, “Socratic Prothumia” in *Plato on the Limits of Human Life*, 19-36.

⁴⁰⁵ See, for instance *Crito*, 46b-49b; and *Gorgias* 526e. There is not room here to do a proper analysis of Plato's use of myth and particularly myths of the afterlife, however I have taken much from Sarah Brill's discussion of the

In these myths, death is a transition from the ignorance of mortal life to what lies beyond; *aletheia*, a state of True Being and perfected knowledge (as opposed to *becoming*) that any true “lover of wisdom” must desire. As mortal experience must always be limited by its sensual, embodied nature and provisional hypotheses, “compelled to regard realities through the body as through prison bars,”⁴⁰⁶ the philosopher *ought* to be eager for death. The true statesman, similarly, should orient himself towards a practice of “soul craft” that rejects the provisional, shadowy reality of democratic politics.⁴⁰⁷ What use does such philosophy have for democratic politics? And what resources can it provide modern readers?

While Socrates is certainly critical of Athenian democracy, it would be a mistake to overstate the hostility between politics and philosophy presented in the *Apology*, just as it would be a mistake to simplify the apparent preference of Platonic philosophy for death over life. Focusing too sharply on a “gulf” between these leads one to overlook how Socratic philosophy is deeply indebted to the conventions of Athenian democracy, sharing parallel features and goals. As Peter Euben notes, both Socratic philosophy and Athenian democracy in the *Apology*,

[...] remind us of, and exist because of our mortality, partiality and insufficiency. Both emphasize our need for others to compensate for our one sidedness and incompleteness, which is what philosophical dialogue and political deliberation ideally accomplish. Both aid men in achieving a more inclusive understanding of who they are and what the true significance of their speech and action is. In each case the presence (in both senses) of others is essential for knowledge and virtue, for knowing about politics and the living of a public life.⁴⁰⁸

“prosthetic” function of myth in Plato’s thought, as well as Kathryn Morgan’s analysis of myth and pre-Socratic philosophy as a means of philosophically reasoning and challenging dominant cultural assumptions—points which, as I argue below, are crucial for understanding Socrates’ project in the *Apology*. See Kathryn Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Pre-Socratics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁰⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, 82e, 289.

⁴⁰⁷ For a concise review of Plato’s many detractors on this front, see Sarah Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 3-6.

⁴⁰⁸ J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 210.

What this view rightly acknowledges is that Socratic philosophy, even when it is focused on the question of death's meaning, the immortal soul, and the corruption of worldly affairs, is nonetheless oriented towards a community of *living* mortals. Socratic philosophy needs community if it is going to achieve the kind of knowledge that transcends the particular, narrow experience inherent to any specific mortal life.⁴⁰⁹ Crucially, this perspective remains bound to the community that produces it.⁴¹⁰ As Sarah Brill notes, Plato's criticisms of sensual, mortal life are "immanent to the account of the human life they appear to transcend, that is, [knowledge of mortal limits] is attained only by a careful analysis of the human soul, one which attends to those moments when human experience points beyond itself, a 'beyond' that includes the city as well as the cosmos."⁴¹¹

In other words, while Socrates may mercilessly explore and expose the limits of mortal politics in the *Apology*, the focus of Socrates' defense is *life*, and specifically the kind of life that the Athenians believe is worth killing, or worth dying, for. If Socrates spends much of the *Apology* arguing that democracy needs philosophy to achieve its highest ideals, he also enacts an appeal to his fellow citizens to examine their assumptions about death, and to critically transform those democratic values and practices they hold most dear in light of the philosophical example he provides. It is through an analysis of the *limits* of democratic practice and mortal knowledge

⁴⁰⁹ Consider, for instance, the argument in the *Phaedo* about the dangers of misology. When Socrates' friends begin to despair that *any* argument may be believed in the face of the unknown of death. Socrates suggests they remember that most arguments, like most people, are not extremely good or bad, but a mix of both. Sound mortal arguments, and sound mortal *arguers*, thus both require conversation with others and critical examination to approach Truth and "the Good." Socrates therefore encourages them "Let us not admit into our souls the notion that there is no soundness in arguments at all. Let us far rather assume that we ourselves are not yet in sound condition and that we must strive manfully and eagerly to become so, you and the others for the sake of all your future life, and I because of my impending death." Plato, "Phaedo," 89e-91a, 313.

⁴¹⁰ Euben makes this point more politically: "Deprived of place and purpose within the city, philosophy will develop non-political aims, non-dialogical forms and forums far from the agora. Without location, philosophy elaborates the "ontological" homelessness envisioned by the chorus in *Antigone*, lived by Oedipus, and dramatized in the last scene of the *Bacchae*." *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 215.

⁴¹¹ Brill, *Plato on the Limits of Human Life*, 5.

in this dialogue that Socrates engages in a deeply political turn, one focused on the capacities of his fellow citizens to make sound political judgments in conditions of mortal ignorance.⁴¹² Any understanding of Socrates—and, indeed, Plato—must therefore also take into account the political and historical context of the democratic polity.

Seeking to “interrupt” well-worn assumptions about Socrates’ relationship to democracy, in recent years classicists and contemporary political theorists alike have looked back to the context and immediate reception of Socrates’ works to develop the democratic and philosophic discourses the figure of Socrates engages.⁴¹³ These efforts have been bolstered by a robust literature in classics which has, for the last thirty years or so, made sustained efforts to unearth the daily political practices, institutions, and political imaginary of Athenian democracy.⁴¹⁴ In this spirit Sarah Monoson argues for a Plato whose Socrates mobilizes the practices and rhetoric of democracy for his own ends, someone who “finds the lived experience and ideology of

⁴¹² This remains the case in later dialogues where the political conditions of the city are essential for conditioning and limiting the immortal soul. I do not engage with the question of immortality here, since it is beyond the scope of the *Apology* and the concerns of this project. However, it should be noted that within the Platonic dialogues ‘knowledge’ of the immortal soul is developed through the contemplation and analysis of the *embodied, mortal* philosopher. I read the provisional way Socrates treats his knowledge of death (or its lack) in the *Apology*, and the doubling back this concern has on the *political* life of the Athenians as consistent (or at least, coherent) with the treatment of death found in later Socratic dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, which is explicit on these themes [Plato, *Phaedo*, 107c, 369-371]; or the *Republic*, where the training, both moral and physical, of the individual is crucial for shaping the soul that is *projected* to continue past the moment of death. In this sense, there is no True *knowledge* to be had of the immortal soul, only provisional claims based on carefully interrogated logical claims and “prosthetic” myths (to borrow Brill’s phrase) that reason beyond the bounded experiences of embodied life, a point reflected in much of the provisional, speculative tone of Socrates’ dialogues which are always presented to his fellows in a mood of questioning and truth seeking (Socrates’ arguments are also frequently given in the optative mood, which endows a provisional, uncertain quality in Attic Greek).

⁴¹³ The language of “interruption” I have taken from Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013); as she uses it, this word refers to an ‘interruption’ of standard receptions and appropriations of Antigone’s narrative for political ends. Other works that have approached Plato for the sake of interrupting familiar narratives for modern thinking include Arlene Saxenhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1996); Christopher Rocco *Tragedy and Enlightenment: Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴¹⁴ For an overview of this literature see Kurt. A. Raaflaub, Josiah Ober, and Robert Wallace (eds) *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece*; for an example of this work in modern reception studies, see J. Peter Euben, John E. Wallach, and Josiah Ober, *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*

Athenian democracy repulsive and fascinating, troubling and intriguing.”⁴¹⁵ Josiah Ober, in a slightly different vein, presents Socrates as an “immanent social critic” emphasizing his use of “the performative, speech-act method characteristic of the democracy: vigorous, open debate conducted according to accepted protocols among persons who regarded one another as equals; followed by resolution for action by the assembled company” while nonetheless suggesting that Plato is “engaged in an epic rejection of Athenian Political culture” based on the ‘betrayal’ of Socrates.⁴¹⁶

What these various depictions share is an insistence on the irreducibility of Socrates’ practices to a straightforward rejection of democratic life. Rather, even as a critic or an elite “dissident” who seeks to transform or disrupt its conventions, the figure of Socrates remains rooted within a political landscape of democratic values. If the tension between Socratic philosophy and democratic politics found in the *Apology* is irreconcilable, then, it is in part because these are two practices divided by a common language. As Ober comments, in forming this common world, Athenian democracy contained a drive towards a “rhetorical and even epistemological hegemony over all members of Athenian Society, [...] key terms (for citizen, justice, freedom, equality and so on) within Athenian political terminology became so strongly marked in their use in democratic contexts that it required great effort for dissidents to redefine them for use in non-democratic discourse.”⁴¹⁷ These conventions of democratic life and practices were not merely a collection of habits, but formed a more robust epistemological orientation;

⁴¹⁵ Monson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 3.

⁴¹⁶ Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998), 213. Here Ober aligns his understanding of Plato with Sheldon Wolin’s notion of an ‘epical’ philosophic project that attempts to reinvent philosophy as a distinctive social practice. (See *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, 159) and Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2004).

⁴¹⁷ Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, 40.

what Ober terms “regimes of truth.”⁴¹⁸ In the next two sections I will examine the ways that Socrates is engaged in an effort to transform these regimes in ways compatible with his own moral, philosophical project—specifically, my focus will be the conventions and practices which governed the “regimes” of Athenian death.

In order to bring this transformation about, however, Socrates must first disrupt the settled beliefs towards death that inform the political perspectives of Athens. As I will show in the next section, Socrates transforms the charges set against him—charges of impiety and sophistry—to accomplish exactly this disruptive task. At the heart of this transformation is an account of mortal ignorance. Socrates uses this perspective of mortal ignorance to generate a productive tension between the ideals of democratic politics and those of Socratic philosophy. Both must respond to the limits which mortality imposes on individual knowledge, though they do so by gesturing beyond individual experience in different ways: limited mortal awareness to the collective knowledge of the political community on the one hand, and the out of reach, enigmatic perspective of the immortal divine, on the other.⁴¹⁹ In this way, reexamining the limits mortality places on human experience allows Socrates to critically mobilize democratic conventions of frank speech and communal criticism for philosophic ends. By placing mortal ignorance at the center of his defense, Socrates attempts to transform his judges into a potential community of inquiry, one formed through an appeal made to the collected civic body of Athens through the language of democratic criticism and frank speech.

II. Mortal Ignorance

⁴¹⁸ These “regimes of truth” were comprised of “an integrated set of assumptions about what is regarded as right, proper, and true.” Ober, *ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ As I will argue below, both knowledge of the divine and knowledge of death are always provisional, never fulfilled. Andrea Nightingale notes on this point that the word Plato uses to describe the journey from the ‘light’ of divine insight back into the darkness of the cave within the famous analogy for philosophic thought in the *Republic* is *katabasis* (*Republic*, 516d-e) which is the same word typically used to describe the journey of the soul into Hades. See Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 102-105.

In the *Apology* Socrates must respond to the charge that he studies “things in the sky and under the earth.”[18b] This charge may seem obscure to modern readers, but its language places Socrates’ transgressions against Athens in terms of mortal behavior, mortal knowledge, and the boundaries that circumscribe each: the sky is the realm of the immortal divine, and the dead dwell under the earth. To study or claim knowledge of either would require an epistemological transgression, as the kinds of knowledge available to embodied, living humans do not extend beyond the limit of mortal existence. To have knowledge of the gods would require access to a kind of immortal, unchanging experience that transcends human life. To have secure knowledge of the underworld, one must already be dead.

The other charges leveled against Socrates, that he makes “worse the stronger argument, and he teaches these same things to others” attach this frame of mortal impiety to the specific political conventions and health of the democratic polity. These charges all depend on the close link Athenians saw between public argumentation and political wisdom. Socrates’ method of questioning his fellow Athenians, of exposing their poor *logos* for public critique and shame is described in terms usually applied to the corrosive and politically shameful activity of sophistry, that of “making the weaker argument stronger;” [19b-c] a serious charge in a polity that attached the justice of its decisions to the wisdom of collective decision making. Taken together, these charges have an explicitly democratic, and explicitly *mortal*, frame of reference. Socrates responds in kind.

The combination of mortal and democratic perspectives in Socrates’ defense allow him to transform the charges of impiety into a critique of Athenian political life and its core conventions, chief among them a belief in the collective wisdom of democratic bodies—a kind of

wisdom Josiah Ober has termed “democratic knowledge.”⁴²⁰ Indeed, the pivotal moment of the defense turns on a statement of aporetic, mortal ignorance:

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. It is perhaps on this point and in this respect, gentlemen, that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld, so I do not think I have.[29a-c]

The implication is that the democratic knowledge and collective wisdom of the Athenians has been compromised by an unexamined fear of death and dying *as such*, so that they now lack the critical perspective to justly evaluate the consequences of their actions. The Athenians are instead enslaved to unexamined fears and hopes that rest in democratic dogma, rather than critical, courageous truth telling.

It will be helpful on this point to examine the Athenian conventions of knowledge and democratic life that Socrates critiques. As we will see, Socrates uses the Athenian notions of mortal piety, along with the ideals of frank speech and democratic openness, to cast himself as the proper inheritor of democracy’s highest ideals. But there is a twist. Here the conventions of democratic practice are decentered from an over-confident reliance on democratic knowledge, and re-approached from the critical vantage of mortal ignorance. By examining the limits of mortal knowledge as the central feature of his defense, Socrates invites his judges to re-form a critical community, one that has as its mutual focus the proper way to live within the *political* conditions of the Athenian polis.

Athenian democratic knowledge rested on a commonly held conviction that “both consensus and freedom of public speech were desirable” a “belief in the superior wisdom of

⁴²⁰ Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, 33.

decisions made collectively by large bodies of citizens.”⁴²¹ This belief was grounded in several ancillary conventions and cultural attitudes, chief among them a deep respect for “frank speech,” or *parrhesia*.⁴²² Frank speech is consistently and closely associated with two things: criticism and truth-telling. Sarah Monson comments, “To speak with *parrhessia* was to confront, oppose or find fault with another individual or a popular view in a spirit of concern for illuminating what is right and best.”⁴²³ It was the privilege of every free-born, adult male citizen to speak before the Athenian assembly, but also a duty. Frank speech was considered both a matter of legal importance, but also a “necessary precondition for the smooth functioning of democratic deliberative and decision-making institutions.”⁴²⁴

Socrates repeatedly references the conventions of frank speech in his defense, but he does so in ways that position democratic knowledge as childishly vulnerable to overconfidence and self-serving rumors, while positioning himself as the true, patriotic practitioner of democratic truth telling. Socrates thus begins his remarks by (conventionally⁴²⁵) emphasizing the dignity of speaking directly and clearly to a critical audience of peers: “I put my trust in the justice of what I say [...] It would not be fitting at my age, as it might be for a young man, to toy with words

⁴²¹ *ibid*, 33.

⁴²² While frank speech was a prized part of democratic life and practice, it was also tied to a heroic, Homeric tradition that is deeply elitist. Arlene Saxenhouse points to the tension between the democratic belief that all might speak frankly in democratic life, and the deeply restrictive cultural conventions of shame and status that nonetheless acted to curb and regulate the practice of frank speech. Arlene Saxenhouse, *Free Speech an Democracy in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 16-37; see also Michel Foucault, “Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia.” Six Lectures given at Berkeley, October-November, 1983, available online: <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia>.

⁴²³ Monson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 53.

⁴²⁴ *ibid*, 52.

⁴²⁵ Socrates’ *Apology* closely follows the conventions of the Athenian court, beginning with a statement of being an outsider to the court, an emphasis on the intention to speak the truth to his audience, and the justice of their wisdom, and a lack of skill in fine speeches and rhetoric. See on this point J. Peter Euben, *Tragedy of Political Theory*, 212; and Thomas G. West, *Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 74-75.

when I appear before you.”[17d] Here Socrates aligns himself, and philosophic questioning, with the proper ideal of truth telling. Socrates’ reference to his age here is also important, as the practices of frank speech and public deliberation were considered (by the Athenians) as proof they were more courageous than other Greeks, also more intelligent, mature, and manly.

Attacking this point, Socrates implies that the Athenians remain attached to childish beliefs, as his nameless detractors “got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger.”[18a-b] These unquestioned beliefs will need to be purged and re-examined in order for his judges to accurately, critically, and truthfully hear Socrates’ defense, as the democratic conventions of *parrhesia* and manliness demand.⁴²⁶

This appeal lays the ground for a more general critique of democratic knowledge. While nominally open to new ideas and critical thought, democracy is extremely vulnerable to misology, to misunderstanding the facts by chasing the wrong criteria.⁴²⁷ The processes of democracy yields outcomes that depend, ultimately, on majoritarian consensus and persuasion, *not* necessarily arguments built on sound foundations. Taking up this criticism attacks a central point of pride in Athenian culture, as the cumulative, critical power of equal and frank speech was understood as a tonic against the slavish or self-serving beliefs that could fester within a

⁴²⁶ Euben also comments on this childish quality, suggesting that the effect is to make the Athenians back into children, able to be re-educated by Socrates’ new principles. See *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 213.

⁴²⁷ This is not simply an argument that democracy is vulnerable to the emotions of its citizens, but *the criteria of judgment as it is more generally permitted in the court* treats emotional perceptions of character as permissible parts of their judgment. “When he entered the Assembly place or courtroom, the Athenian was no doubt aware of his duty to the laws and customs of his state [...] As a juror he swore “I will listen impartially to both plaintiff and defendant, and I will cast my vote strictly on the basis of evidence that is relevant to the case.” But [...] he constructed relevance quite broadly and never thought of excluding general impressions of the speakers or litigants as citizens [...] his judgment involved weighing not only the laws and the state interest but also his ideological presuppositions.” Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 125.

tyrannical regime.⁴²⁸ As Sarah Monoson comments, “As long as the city rejects philosophy, it is a city full of freedom untempered by the critical power of *parrhesia*. [...] Plato defends the ideal of *parrhesia* rather than attacking it. He suggests that the very regime that professes to honor *parrhesia* actually lacks it.”⁴²⁹ Suggesting that the Athenians might be similarly seduced by self-serving rumors thus attaches Socratic philosophy to the democratic rhetorical struggle against tyranny: decisions tethered to public opinion will require some critical perspective from which they can be evaluated if they are not to succumb to these vulnerabilities. Socratic philosophy, grounded in mortal ignorance, provides such a position.

Socrates develops this position by unveiling the true origins of his bad reputation. He argues, “what has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom [do I have]? Human wisdom, perhaps. It may be that I really possess this, while those whom I [examine] are wise with a wisdom more than human.”[20d-e] Socrates’ insistence that his wisdom be understood as “human” here is important, as is the counter charge that his accusers are making use of “wisdom more than human.” Socrates knows he is ignorant *because* he is mortal. He elaborates on this point when he explains his activities in Athens:

When [Apollo’s oracle] says this man, Socrates [that none are wiser], he is using my name as an example, as if he said: ‘this man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.’ So even now I continue this investigation as the gods bade me—and I go around seeking out anyone, citizen or

⁴²⁸ On the practice of *parrhesia* as an anti-tyrannical discourse see Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 92. That Plato was interested in the ways that philosophy was aligned with these anti-tyrannical dimensions of democracy is evident in the ways he presents democracy in the *Republic* as a regime which transforms into a tyranny. The competing self interest of the different factions of the city are easily manipulated by the strong leaders who emerge through speech to dominate the people. For Socrates in the republic, the language of tyranny is redirected from the language of political regime to a more ethical concern with the regimes that rule the practices of Athenian life, and as I will argue later, death.

⁴²⁹ The greater context for this quote is Socrates’ use of *parrhesia* in the *Republic*, though it is equally applicable to the subtext of the *Apology*. Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 176.

stranger, whom I think is wise. Then if I do not think he is, I come to the assistance of the god and show him that he is not wise. [23b]⁴³⁰

To be human is to possess a specific epistemological vantage that is essentially limited, and opposed to the knowledge of the immortals. Far from corrupting democracy with his impiety, it is *because* of Socrates' unique awareness of mortal ignorance that he has a unique means of patriotically serving the city. He will remind his fellow citizens of their mortal limits.

Claiming the vantage of mortal ignorance allows Socrates to unsettle the conventional claims of democratic knowledge in two potentially contradictory ways. While democratic knowledge can exceed the limited historical and political perspective of any given individual, death presents an *absolute* limit which democratic knowledge, or any democratic citizen, cannot claim to cross without committing an act of *hubris*. When Socrates questions his fellow Athenians he reveals the limits of his interlocutors' knowledge by destroying those claims which over-extend their certainty.[21b-23a] There can be no settled, final, or absolute wisdom in a community of mortal beings, no matter how many voices and perspectives contribute to democratic knowledge, because no person can concretely know what takes place beyond the threshold of death.

An objection to this point is that Socrates immediately calls his own epistemic humility into question by connecting his statements of mortal ignorance to *divine* inspiration. Socrates will go on to argue that he has his own private and divine source of insight: his *daemon*, who

⁴³⁰ The word Grube translates as “mortals” here is “anthropoi” more commonly translated as “man” or “men.” Here it takes on the generic use of “humanity.” (Socrates also uses anthropoi to describe “human wisdom” and “wisdom more than human”) I have kept the Grube translation in this passage because, when spoken by the oracle of Apollo *specifically about human wisdom*, the defining characteristic of ‘humanity’ is mortality. Within the Platonic/Pythagorean framework, mortality is the condition of *unknowing* or forgetfulness. In contrast, death is the condition of *aletheia*—“un-forgetting.” Platonic (and Pythagorean) beliefs that associate death with full knowledge—the *a-Lethe*—a reference to (and reversal of) mythic tradition where the soul “forgets” itself by drinking from the waters of Lethe in the underworld. Socrates' defense, then, is figuratively saturated with the language of death and truth, mortality and knowledge, and the tension between these. Grube's translation captures this tension by asserting the immortal wisdom is distinct from the mortal one. On the conflict between these Archaic and Pythagorean notions of death, see S. C. Humphries, *The Family, Women, and Death*, 163-165.

keeps him from acting unjustly.[40a] In other words, Socrates' ongoing quest to interrogate the ways and beliefs of his fellow citizens is not just a mortal, political task, but a *sacred* matter he has been set to by the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. [22a, 29b, 30d-e] Yet while the Delphic oracle represents alternative source of "higher" knowledge, this, also, remains outside of human grasp. Notably, when the oracle at Delphi announces that Socrates is the wisest man of all, Socrates receives these words as a puzzle to be solved. "Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? [...] For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." [21b] Human understanding of divine *knowledge*, like human knowledge of death, is *also* speculative, as any person who seeks divine aid must nonetheless make use of human faculties of interpretation and judgment.

But what is the effect of generating all this ambivalence? Crucially, Socrates' habit of questioning his fellows does not deny that his interlocutors are constitutionally *incapable* of making sound judgments. Nor does Socratic philosophy deny that frank speech and the critical, communal construction of knowledge is illegitimate as such. Rather, mortal ignorance exposes the need for sound *criteria* of political judgment by providing an alternative foundation for thought, one not based in overconfidence, or hubristically promising power over life (and death) where none exists.

Mortality provides a limit against which the plural experiences and the foundations of the public deliberations of the polity may be examined and considered.⁴³¹ Instead of a stable point of

⁴³¹ This negative, restrictive feature of Socratic questioning is what many political theorists find productive in the example of Socrates. For instance, this is what Dana Villa proposes as a healthy model of democratic citizenship, specifically as it may be used to foster intellectual and moral sobriety towards political engagement, slowing down thoughtless engagement. Also George Kateb finds the critical individualism of Socrates productive and important for modern life. See *Socratic Citizenship*, 20; and George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006). Like Villa I find the negative, critical quality of Socrates' speech productive for its ability to shake loose settled ways of thinking by rigorously examining the foundations and consequences of a political stance. However, as Joel Schlosser has noted, at times Villa opposes Socratic sobriety and intellectual critique *against* mass democratic movements in terms similar to JS Mill's concern with the tyranny of the majority. Yet Socrates argues from *within* the democratic polity. Rather than seeing Socratic interrogation as external to mass democratic practices, I read them as an attempt to transform democracy from within. See Joel Schlosser, *What*

shared knowledge from which one might build a firmer understanding of their life and action, mortal knowledge gives structure to a concrete, critical space of *lack*. From this position, one might be displaced from their typical assumptions and conventions, as there is no *mortal* way to reason through the limit which death presents. At best, one can speculate through myth or poetry, or with logical trains of thought that extend past mortal experience.⁴³² This aporetic limit, however, need not orient the individual away from the political world.

Death generates an impassible limit to human knowledge and power, but both philosophy and democratic politics address this limit in distinctive ways. Democratic politics supplement the limits placed on individual experience, judgment, and power by subjecting these to common examination and collective action. Socratic philosophy, likewise, requires a community of inquiry in order to address the fundamental limits, and limitedness, of embodied life.⁴³³ So long as the individual in question is mortal, democratic knowledge *and* the knowledge of the philosopher remain provisional, tied to a distinctly embodied self. But these embodied experiences include those of political life and identity, with the full range of emotional and erotic attachments to city these identities entailed.⁴³⁴ As Socrates comments, “I shall [question] in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens *because you are more kindred to me.*”[30a] So long as the individual in question is mortal,

Would Socrates Do?, 29-30; For an alternative critique of Villa, see Susan Bickford, “This way of life, this contest”: Rethinking Socratic Citizenship” in Stephen G. Salkever (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³² On this point I am indebted to Brill’s discussion, *Plato on the Limits of Human Life*, 6-8.

⁴³³ As Socrates comments in the *Phaedo* concerning philosophic practice, “[many] do not know in what way the real philosophers desire death [...] Let us then [...] *speak with one another.*” Plato, *Phaedo*, 64b, 223.

⁴³⁴ This is why the Socratic philosopher must care about the laws and conventions of his or her city, as these “train” the soul—the philosopher’s, but *also* those of her potential interlocutors. These themes are present in many of Plato’s dialogues, most notably the *Republic* [Books 3-7 especially], and the *Phaedo* [107c, 369]. They are also consistently present in the *Apology*: “I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul.” [30a]

democratic knowledge *and* the knowledge of the philosopher remain provisional, tied to a distinctly embodied, and distinctly *political* community.

Knowledge can never be *perfected* by a mortal, or even a mortal community since they are bound to a world of constant change, figured in the transformation of the body and the movement of time.⁴³⁵ Both political communities and philosophic discussions can thus *approach* a more comprehensive understanding of human life through a critical process of interrogation and critical dialogue, one that has as its object a common question to be defined and delimited—but these definitions are offered as a matter of analysis and critical thought.⁴³⁶ Socratic philosophy thereby shares with democracy a commitment to a community founded on open-ended deliberation, one that seeks the best argument for the sake of determining a course of action. Yet without the purging, reforming effects of philosophy, grounded in a firm acknowledgement of mortal ignorance, democratic knowledge is prone to intellectual confusion and moral relativity.⁴³⁷ As Monoson notes, “Democracy, it seems, has generated a need for a practice it cannot in fact provide.”⁴³⁸

By reasserting the limit of mortal knowledge, Socrates provides a position from which the collective, plural claims of democratic knowledge might be critically re-evaluated, and democracy made aware of its (potentially violent, in the case of his own impending death)

⁴³⁵ For a longer discussion on this point, see S. C. Humphries, *The Family, Women, and Death*, 163-165.

⁴³⁶ In the *Republic*, for instance, it is the unchecked openness of the regime and its excessive “choice” which leads it to moral disaster. Sarah Monoson comments, “There is no settled, single, determined way of life sanctioned or promoted by [democracy]. [...] instead individuals are confronted with many decisions and options and rely on their individual judgment for guidance.” Monoson notes that this description of democracy, taken from the *Republic*, has Socrates referring to the “license” of the Athenians several times, a word which does not quite capture the Greek *exousia* which more accurately refers to the absence of an overarching and stable norm, but instead employs “the practice of individuals generating their own personal standards, or rejecting any standards whatsoever.” This is a portrait of democratic openness to excess. Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 168.

⁴³⁷ On the adaptation of democratic openness by Plato, see Arlene Saxonhouse, “Plato and the Problematical Gentleness of Democracy” in *Athenian Democracy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

⁴³⁸ Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 176.

hubristic excesses. Presenting these arguments *in the course of his defense* requires that his judges react and evaluate his claims. That he defends mortal ignorance through the very democratic practices and values he is critiquing gives the Athenians the opportunity to re-examine their own practices anew from the perspective that Socrates offers. This perspective, set against and between the limit of mortality on the one hand, and divine insight on the other, form the conceptual space within which a new, critical community might form. This new, potential community has as its basis not the conventional practices of democratic knowledge (which have been infected by bias and envy) but rather an awareness of mortal limits, and a commitment to interrogate their own practices of life and death. It is a community, in other words, which might fulfill the ideals of frank speech and intellectual criticism that democracy promises, but cannot, on its own, fulfill.

In this way the specific claim of mortal ignorance which Socrates maintains throughout the *Apology* appeals to the intellectual and judgmental faculties of the community. Simultaneously, decentering his defense from democratic knowledge and onto the grounds of mortal ignorance demands that the Athenians critique their settled assumptions about what sort of civic practice of death is truly best for the city. The philosophical activity of delineating conceptual boundaries between what is known and what is unknown, similarly, is an activity which simultaneously *defines* and *exposes* the limits of mortal, democratic knowledge and action for interrogation; much as the deliberations of the courts and assembly of Athens define and expose the boundaries of what the community upholds as excellent, just, or wise for public approval.⁴³⁹ Mortal political philosophy, as presented by Socrates in the *Apology*, thus

⁴³⁹ In the *Phaedo*, for instance, the question of what is truly known about death, and what *can* logically be asserted, causes Socrates to draw, then re-draw, his definition of the immortal soul and its relationship to the body for his companions, modifying his definition in response to their critiques and dissatisfaction. By asserting a limit (in this case, the limit of death for the body but not the soul; elsewhere, the “limit” of proper justice or excellence; and in the

establishes the grounds for a thorough examination of democratic knowledge by destroying the foundational assumptions of his judges' conventional beliefs about death, and seeking their critical engagement as he defines an alternative way.

III. Three Regimes of Death

In order to generate the kind of critical perspective from which the Athenians can reevaluate their own practices, however, they must first be disturbed and dislocated from their typical assumptions about what sort of behavior is just and wise. As I will argue here, mortal ignorance, and specifically, *mortal ignorance about death* forms the conceptual center for this space. It is through a dislocating re-examination of the Athenian's assumptions about death—and by extension, their assumptions about mortal, democratic life—which Socrates makes explicit as he transitions into the second half of his statement of defense. As I argue below, the friction between the competing understandings of death as they are viewed by the individual, city, and the divine within the *Apology* give structure to a critical space of inquiry, one in which the boundaries on conventional behavior and political beliefs may be examined and called into question. Yet what is now at stake is not merely Socrates' life, but the very definition of shameful or worthy *mortal* behavior.

Socrates turns in the second half of his statement of defense to a targeted examination of how one should live as a mortal being, and what kind of life should be valued, and on what criteria.[28b] This discussion leads him to engage with several conventional figures and attitudes about death, though in keeping with the pattern of the speech as a whole, Socrates' engagement

Apology—as I argue below—the proper limits of behavior towards death in mortal conditions.) Socrates also exposes that definition to the examination of his companions, who are quick to ask questions and press Socrates to modify his position further. Or, as one of Socrates' companions describes philosophical inquiry towards death in the *Phaedo*, “I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters in life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. [...] And so now I am not ashamed to ask questions, since you encourage me to do so [...] *Phaedo*, 85c-e, 297.

is both celebratory and subversive. As the preceding chapters of this project have discussed, death was governed in democratic Athens by several coherent “regimes.”⁴⁴⁰ In this section I examine how the *Apology* interrogates these different regimes of death, and specifically how these interrogations disrupt their core assumptions, opening conceptual space for critical political inquiry in their place; inquiry that has as its focus the examined political life.

Socrates introduces his interrogation of these regimes by responding to the hypothetical charge of Athens that, “a man who is any good at all” should never “take into account the risk of life or death; he should look into this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or bad man.” [28b] Socrates goes on to conclude with a much stronger aporetic position, which I quoted above in more length: “No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. [29a-c]

The language of blame here is important. This passage serves as a pivotal moment in Socrates’ argument, shifting from his direct response to the charges made against him by his accusers to a more general question about shame and the proper behavior of an Athenian citizen towards death. Socrates turns this language back on his accusers by holding himself up as a reformed example of praiseworthy *mortal* behavior. He does so by cycling through three understandings of death, each attached to common conventions about what courageous, praiseworthy behavior looked like. Socrates undermines these models of meaningful death, simultaneously proposing himself as an alternative model of courage before death *to the city that sits in judgment*. He does this while, nonetheless, insisting that death cannot be known or

⁴⁴⁰ This phrase is a modification of Ober’s concept of an Athenian “regime of truth:” what he defines as an “integrated set of assumptions about what is regarded as right, proper, and true” Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, 40.

controlled by mortal efforts. In this way, Socrates opens a conceptual space by disrupting the Athenian's typical beliefs, one where death's public and personal meanings can be examined and critiqued, yet never fully resolved.

In Socrates' time the conventions of the democratic city were deeply coded and inflected with the practices of death. I have explored three of these in the preceding chapters. These included, first, an archaic, heroic understanding of death, exemplified by Achilles; second, the civic understanding of soldierly death, such as in Perikles' *Funeral Oration*; and third, and the family rituals of death and private memorial, and the distinctions these supported between family and polity. These different regimes of death existed in common, but also in tension with each other, often demanding different sorts of behaviors and competing attachments from their adherents. What these views share, however, is a deep anxiety about the destruction of the specific person through the process of death—a destruction which the various rituals of family, public and heroic mourning can compensate for, by extending the memory of a person into the future, but never fully *prevent*.

I will examine each of these in turn, below, but in order to understand the force of Socrates engagement with these different regimes it is first important to see how these functioned as part of political and ethical life. In the heroic, but also family and civic contexts, death marks an important transformation: the individual ceases to be an active personality, capable of making choices and commitments, and becomes the public property, so to speak, of those who will remember her. Conceptually, this might be understood as a kind of dismemberment: the new existence of the person is fundamentally divided, fragmented, and 'held' in the collective minds and words of those who feel her absence, or who confront monuments to her life. In its most extreme forms, this existence took on what Arendt calls "shining glory," but could also be found

in the more humble monuments to beloved family dead: men, women, and children. This kind of existence is distinct from a *continuation* of a person. It is instead the start of a new kind of being.⁴⁴¹

The transitional moment of death thus may destroy a person's bodily existence, but it potentially generates another: a collectively held and maintained impression, one that could be put to use in public speech to praise or blame a kind of life, or a kind of political outlook. Indeed, as we have seen, death acts as an important moment for public reflection on life. As a "dead character," a life could be viewed in its completeness in ways that a living person—still becoming, still capable of reinvention or of suffering disaster—could not. This is part of the meaning of the famous maxim given by Solon, who said he could not judge any man happy in life who was still alive.⁴⁴² For Socrates to turn to an understanding of death as a means of criticizing the most fundamental values of political life and moral excellence, in other words, is within the boundaries of conventional political discourse, and deeply attuned to the different fissures and textures of political life.

Regardless of the fame of the individual, for the Athenians whom Socrates confronts death always marks the loss of specific persons, to the extent that the individual is removed from participation in the matrix of the particular social connections and statuses they embodied. It is worth emphasizing that it is these *specific* social connections which are severed and disrupted by death—the status, exploits, and specific relationships a person has chosen—not the *fact of death itself*, which form the basis for grief in the Homeric epics, and give death on the stage in Athenian tragedy its specific force. These are also important for the civic realm. Jean-Pierre

⁴⁴¹ On this secondary existence and its relationship to the social status and self-conception of the living as a part of a community, see Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*; S.C. Humphries, "Family Tombs and Tomb Cults in Classical Athens: Tradition, or Traditionalism?" in *The Family, Women, and Death*, 79-134.

⁴⁴² This adage is presented in Herodotus 1.30.

Vernant comments, “One of the original features of Greek cities—this “political humanity”—is that [...] they used a dead character as a symbol and communal model, one who is defined no longer by his family or his position in the group but his career in life, which is his very own, and by the particular form of existence he himself has chosen and which remains always linked to his name.”⁴⁴³

One way to understand the normative force of the exemplary dead—of Achilles, or the military dead eulogized by Perikles, or even the private tombs and inscriptions of the household dead—is that the image of the dead which is recreated in words or images (sculptures or monuments) could encourage ethical or political reflection on one’s own choices *as they would appear from the eventual perspective of how others would view one’s death*. By looking at the examples of the heroic dead of song or the city, but also the humble appeals of ordinary gravestones, one learns to view their own lives from the perspective of this social, disembodied view. In this way, as a moment of completion and transformation, the horrifying loss of the acting individual person at death also provides a powerful spur to reflect on life, and to live well. An individual might deeply long for glory or the rewards of a life lived excellently in the eyes of his peers—a view which might spur him to acts of violence and mortal peril—yet nonetheless deeply fear death, and long above all for life.

As we will see, Socrates’ claim that “nobody knows if death is a good or a bad thing” makes use of these ethical dimensions of death, but does so in a way that allows a radical re-valuation of the conventional regimes of death in Athens. It is the open-ended *aporia* that emerges between these different regimes that I argue can provide the kind of critical accommodation of death as a part of political life. Here I consider three of these in the order that

⁴⁴³ Mortals and Immortals 82-83. On the social destruction of the individual and the “horror” of death see Humphries, *The Family, Women, and Death*, 170.

Socrates presents them: Achilles and heroic death, military service unto death, and the ways that familial life conditions political death. I have discussed different elements of these regimes of death in the previous three chapters of this dissertation, but here I view these from the perspective of Socratic mortal ignorance.

Regime 1. Achilles and Beautiful Death

By comparing himself to Achilles, Socrates engages with one of the most powerful cultural narratives of death within the classical polis: heroic, beautiful death—*kalos thanatos*. This trope, as discussed in Chapter 1, refers to a death which comes at the height of youthful excellence, and beauty. The man who dies at the peak of his physical prowess and accomplishments, like Achilles, leaves an image that was uncorrupted by old age. That Socrates makes the comparison is brash for a number of reasons, but it is not simple.⁴⁴⁴ By presenting his comparison to Achilles within the framework of mortal ignorance, Socrates undermines the central dynamic of *kalos thanatos*: youthful, beautiful life for undying glory, and an escape from the horrifying destruction of death. Fear of the faceless, formless destruction of the self acts as a goad for beautiful death, an urgent desire for the secondary existence in fame that overcomes oblivion.⁴⁴⁵ If death ceases to be viewed as a terror, but rather is approached from the vantage of Socratic uncertainty, the interior logic of the beautiful death is disrupted from within.

⁴⁴⁴ Since not every heroic warrior died young, (and most of them did not die beautifully) the tradeoff for losing one's youthful vigor was wisdom. That Socrates chooses to align himself with *Achilles*, not Nestor, or any of the "wise men" of the *Iliad*, warns the reader that this comparison is subversive. Achilles is young and beautiful. Socrates is old, and by all accounts quite ugly. Achilles' death is *the* model for heroic death prized by Athenian aristocrats who sought to distinguish themselves from 'the many' in the Athenian polis. Socrates was no aristocrat and by his own admission was quite poor; the result of his incessant habit of questioning others in the agora and private spaces of the city which left him "no time" (*ascholia*) for the "glorious" political life of words and deed pursued by Athenian aristocrats.

⁴⁴⁵ Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 79.

We can see how by looking more closely at the specific Homeric episode Socrates cites in his defense. Responding to the hypothetical charge that he ought to be ashamed for risking death at the hands of the city Socrates responds:

According to your view, all the heroes who died at Troy were inferior people, especially the son of Thetis who was so contemptuous of danger compared with disgrace. When he was eager to kill Hector, his goddess mother warned him, as I believe, in some such words as these: “My child if you avenge the death of your comrade, Patroclus, and you kill Hector, you will die yourself, for your death is to follow immediately after Hector’s.” Hearing this, he despised death and danger and was much more afraid to live a coward who did not avenge his friends. “Let me die at once,” he said, “when once I have given the wrongdoer his deserts, rather than remain here, a laughingstock by the curved ships, a burden upon the earth.” Do you think he gave thought to death and danger? [28b-d]

That Socrates cites this specific episode in the *Iliad* is revealing. As discussed in Chapter 1, Achilles’ choice at this moment is not a simple desire for non-existence, but a complicated affirmation of a life lived *as a specific person*, one who understands their own life through reference to a specific set of values held by a broader community. When Socrates compares himself to Achilles at the moment he chooses to remain at Troy, then, he is not merely choosing death over life. He is asserting that it is the *sort* of life one lives that matters, not that one lives or dies as such.

It is worth lingering on this point, however, because it sits at the center of an important tension between the choice of Achilles and Socrates. The kind of existence Achilles affirms is fundamentally concerned with his individual reputation, one he will maintain even at great expense to those he calls his allies. However the heroic sense of identity is deeply tied to how one is seen by others, and the dynamics of shame.⁴⁴⁶ Bernard Williams comments “shame need not be a just a matter of being seen [doing something shameful] but of being seen by an observer with a certain view [...] people can be ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience in the

⁴⁴⁶ On the social “necessity” of appearing before others in Homeric epic, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 75-129.

wrong way. Equally, they need not be ashamed of being poorly viewed, if the view is that of an observer for whom they feel contempt.”⁴⁴⁷ Socrates references this dynamic when he speaks of Achilles’ disgust at the idea of remaining as “a laughingstock” to the other Greeks. It is *shame* that motivates Achilles to seek revenge, and it is shame that motivates Socrates to practice philosophy at risk of death.

It is important to look more closely at this comparison, however, as Achilles was not merely the greatest hero at Troy; he was also one of its most vocal critics. Just prior to the scene Socrates quotes, Achilles had just decided he would abandon the war and Troy because “I say no wealth is worth my life! Not all they claim was stored in the depths of Troy, that city built on riches.”⁴⁴⁸ In this passage, Achilles rejects Agamemnon’s attempts to appease his anger through an offer of wealth and political power.⁴⁴⁹ Achilles’ rejection of Agamemnon indicates a deeper conflict between two kinds of glory and heroic status. Agamemnon demands respect because he is the most politically powerful and wealthy; Achilles, because he leads a life of excellence in action, and constantly has risked death to prove it. When Achilles refuses Agamemnon with the words above, he is saying that no material goods can be equated to heroic life lived bravely and well, precisely because it is *a unique life* on the line; not fungible, material wealth or formal status. Achilles adds: “A man’s life breath cannot come back again.”⁴⁵⁰

This understanding of the value of his life informs Achilles’ shame, and his choice to face death in Troy. It is shame for failing the specific social obligations he feels to the *specific*

⁴⁴⁷ *ibid*, 82.

⁴⁴⁸ Homer, *Iliad*, ln. 9.489, 265.

⁴⁴⁹ Homer, *Iliad*, ln. 9.134-193, 255. Agamemnon here offers wealth, in the form of gold but also women slaves, as well as political status through a marriage to one of his daughters. All Achilles has to do is accept his leadership and release his anger.

⁴⁵⁰ Homer, *Iliad*, Book ln 9.408-9, 265.

person of Patroclus who has been killed, and the social expectations this places on him within the heroic community who live by those values through which he understands his own particular life. As this indicates, living a good life, and dying a good death, are tied to the acknowledgement of those whom Achilles sees as the members of his community. *Who* this community is—the Greeks at Troy, the immortal, heroic community of song and legend, or the mortal community Achilles is ultimately reconciled with through the company of Priam—is one of the central questions of the *Iliad*.⁴⁵¹

But who is this community of shame for Socrates? The Athens which has brought Socrates to trial has succumbed to false rumors about Socrates' identity, and believes Socrates should feel shame for *risking death at the city's displeasure*, rather than feeling shame for failing *to live a kind of life*. Socrates' comparison with Achilles thus places tremendous pressure on the question of what appropriate behaviors towards death a community ought to enact and praise. Just as Achilles would not be swayed by the kind of community that places pride in material wealth and political status, Socrates will not be swayed by these values, either. "I say to you: Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively." [30b]

It is in this respect that Socrates' use of Achilles also invites a transformation—one which is only partially carried out through his trial. It is the *potential* community who Socrates addresses, one that might come to be reformed by Socrates' example. The comparison with Achilles from the perspective of mortal ignorance emphatically questions what kind of life is worthy of heroic praise—as both Achilles and Socrates would rather face death than live shamefully. By hearing this question, and truthfully seeking an answer, Athens has the

⁴⁵¹ The question of who Achilles' community is animates many of Achilles' actions throughout the epic, and underscores his final reconciliation with Priam. See Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*.

opportunity to become the kind of community that a man like Socrates *would* feel shame in disappointing.⁴⁵²

Regime 2. City of the Dead

If the comparison with Achilles opens up the question of what sort of mortal life is worth living, an immediate answer in the Athenian polis is a life of patriotic sacrifice. Indeed, Socrates turns directly from his comparison with Achilles to address soldierly, patriotic death. Just as the language of heroic death and prowess informed the political conventions of the city, so too did military service and risk inform the language of virtue and political practice. Socrates turns from in his comparison with Achilles to suggest that just as Socrates served as a soldier for Athens, he has also been placed, like a soldier, into his current philosophical mission by the Oracle.

This is the truth of the matter, men of Athens: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a dreadful (shameful) way to behave, men of Athens, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium, I had, at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else. [29b-c]

On the surface, this list of military service reinforces Socrates as a member of the Athenian polity, and a good democratic citizen. The battles Socrates references—Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium—all took place in the Peloponnesian War, where Socrates served as a hoplite (heavy infantry) within a phalanx of Athenian soldiers.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² It would be easy to say that it is a life of philosophy as Socrates' suggests for himself. However, Socrates describes himself as unique at several points in the *Apology*—he is famously the “gadfly” to the sluggish Athenian horse. At no point does he suggest that Athens ought to be a city of gadflies, and he explicitly argues that he has gone out of his way to avoid the public assemblies [31d].

⁴⁵³ In the *Symposium* Alcibiades recalls how Socrates saved his life in the battle, and his military courage is also praised in the *Laches* by Plato (a dialogue about courage.) Referencing these military battles in the context of his trial would also call attention to Alcibiades, who went on to become one of the most famous military strategists of Athens, also a traitor of the highest order.

Referencing his military service associates Socrates with one of the core elements of democratic rhetoric in Athens: to be a citizen was to be a soldier. Across classical Athenian oratory, political service is frequently equated with soldierly life, and used to legitimate the democratic participation of the many in matters of political justice and rule. This is most clearly articulated by one of Athens' chief critics, the so called "Old Oligarch." He comments that "There the poor and the people generally are right to have more than the highborn and wealthy for the reason that it is the people who man the ships and impart strength to the city" [...] This being the case it seems right for everyone to have a share in the magistracies, both allotted and elective, for anyone to be able to speak his mind if he wants to."⁴⁵⁴

Turning to his military service thus engages a distinct understanding of meaningful death within the city. But this view also sits in tension with the aristocratic, reputation-oriented understanding of death found in the example of Achilles, where only equals in deed and status were given political standing. As discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, this is one of the major transformations the democratic polis undertakes, transforming heroic death into a shared project of glorious death that any might have access to, should they serve their city well. Such is the nature of the sacrifice praised by Perikles in the *Funeral Oration*: "For this offering of their lives, made in common by them all, they each of them individually received that renown which never grows old."⁴⁵⁵ Here the political relationship established between citizen and city is not merely an exchange—death for glory—but a dynamic, reciprocal relationship of *ongoing* service for *ongoing* membership in a glorious, timeless community; one that can defeat the horror of death as oblivion.

⁴⁵⁴ "The Old Oligarch," ln3. This full dialogue is available online through The Perseus Project: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

⁴⁵⁵ Thucydides, HPW, ln. 2.43, 115.

Again, however, this comparison is not simple. Socrates establishes himself as someone who has risked patriotic death in war, yet also immediately subverts the central mechanism which soldierly death entails: it is not simply *obedient service* that defines patriotism. We see this when Socrates equates his military service with his philosophical activities. By equating these, Socrates offers an alternative form of service. His directs attention past the act of *physical sacrifice* in service to the city, and towards the *content* of patriotic service itself. It is not the offering of life unto death that defines patriotism by Socrates' account, but *the kind of life one lives for the city*, and the kind of *cause* it upholds, that ought to define patriotism.⁴⁵⁶

Here Socrates asks his judges to confront how patriotic death provides a model of civic sacrifice that is easily corrupted into what Bonnie Honig calls the logic of “replaceability.”⁴⁵⁷ Unlike the unique death of a particular life praised in the Homeric ethic, the democratic citizen-soldier is easily subsumed within the interchangeable mass of democratic dead, divorced of the specific personal convictions and commitments to friends, family, or deme.⁴⁵⁸ Severed from these ties, the *sacrifice* of life for the city easily becomes reified as inherently noble: “living up to” the example of the glorious dead, in other words, conceptually slides into the willingness to expend life for the sake of making *the same kind of sacrifice* made by those already dead, independent of questions of right and wrong which may have motivated their sacrifice in the first

⁴⁵⁶ Many of these themes are more fully expressed in the *Menexenus*, an ironic funeral oration written by Plato that centers on the moral distortions and twisted notions of service which a conflation of patriotic service with *just* action can bring about. Plato was *deeply* critical of Perikles and his politics. On the relationship between Plato and Perikles in this speech, see Sara Monoson, “Remembering Pericles: the Political and Theoretical Import of Plato’s *Menexenus*.” *Political Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Aug. 1998), 489-513.

⁴⁵⁷ Bonnie Honig “Antigone’s Lament, Creon’s Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception,” 22. I discuss this dynamic in light of Arendt’s argument in chapter 3.

⁴⁵⁸ This was one of the complaints against the democratic city in Socrates’ time, for it buried its soldiers in mass graves rather than the individuated graves sites that families (particularly aristocratic families) traditionally erected. On these rituals see Loraux, *The Invention of Athens*, 50-51; and Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, 88-93.

place.⁴⁵⁹ Such sacrifice thus becomes an empty performance of honor rather than a meaningful commitment to an honorable way of living, and living well.⁴⁶⁰

In this respect it is telling that Socrates connects his military service not only to his philosophic practice, but also to concrete political actions—both times he *disobeyed* the Athenian polis. The first was under the rule of the Oligarchs (a regime imposed on Athens by Sparta during the Peloponnesian War); but the second act of disobedience took place under the rule of the democratic polity, where Socrates alone argued against the execution of six Athenian generals at risk of his life.⁴⁶¹ “The orators were ready to prosecute me and take me away, and your shouts were egging them on, but I thought I should run any risk on the side of law and justice rather than join you, for fear of prison or death, when you were engaged in an unjust course. *This happened when the city was still a democracy.*”[32b-c; emphasis mine.]

The fact that a polity is collectively ruled by those who also defend it unto death does not prevent the logic of military service and sacrifice from becoming murderous. Nor does patriotic service to the correct regime—or even the correct ideal—guarantee that one will only ever do good. Socrates’ comparison of military, civic, and philosophic service critically exposes the ways the dynamic relationship between soldierly service and patriotic death can be easily corrupted into a self-referential cycle of death and sacrifice, one that requires interruption.

⁴⁵⁹ Socrates repeats this idea in several dialogues. Most notably in the *Menexenus*, where Socrates has the dead speak to the living directly to tell them that excessive mourning is not the best way to do honor to their memory, but to live moderately and well. (I have selected a section of this passage for the epitaph of this chapter, above).

⁴⁶⁰ The modern equivalent of this sort of logic are exhortations to a public to continue a course of action, however ill advised ‘lest those who have been killed have died in vain.’ This kind of internal, self-justifying cycle of sacrifice, as we have seen, is also one of the dangerous qualities of a political cause unto death that Weber identifies, and an excessively self-referential polity, as discussed in chapter 3. Democratic criticism and debate offers a tonic to this kind of inward-focused orientation to the extent it remains grounded in the concrete interests and costs its actions will levy from its distinct members as they form a *plurality*, rather than abstracted service to a unified cause. Socratic criticism, as a means of re-centering *democratic debate* and orienting it critically towards its own conventions, offers a new locus for grounding this sort of deliberation.

⁴⁶¹ A storm prevented the generals from rescuing the Athenian survivors at the end of a battle (which the Athenians had won); for this six generals in Athens were tried as a body and put to death. Socrates alone resisted the charge.

One means of interrupting this cycle is by attacking the meaning of death itself. If nobody knows if death is a good or a bad thing, “living up to” the example set by the noble dead cannot simply be a matter of dying at an opportune moment for a share of glory. By framing his military service in terms of death’s unknowability, Socrates places the focus of soldierly death back onto the *content* of civic life that leads to sacrifice, rather than the *fact* of service unto death itself. This move shines a critical, moralizing light onto the worthiness of the “great and wicked deeds” Perikles praises in the Funeral Oration by insisting that it is the *manner* of life that determines the worthiness of sacrifice and service unto death, not the deaths of one’s compatriots as such.

Mortal ignorance enables this kind of moralizing reflection by again destabilizing the appeal of glory: if death is not necessarily an evil, the glorious payoff given for patriotic courageous sacrifice loses some of its luster. Socrates knows he is ignorant about death, so will not be seduced into acts of injustice by promises of glory. Therefore Socrates is willing to face death and politically oppose his peers in order to live well, just as he is willing to insist his philosophical service is a *political* obligation worth dying for. Should Socrates abandon his philosophic post, it would be equivalent to deserting his fellows on the field of war, *true* cause for a trial of impiety and civic corruption: “That would have been a dreadful thing, and then I might truly have been brought here for not believing there are gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking I was wise when I was not.” [29c]

In contrast to Socrates, the Athenians are in danger of becoming trapped by their impious fear of death into a destructive cycle of mortal sacrifice and hollow glory. By holding up the Athenians’ baser weaknesses for examination, and insisting the polity might be better, *Socrates* has truly answered the call in Perikles’ speech to “fall in love with” Athens, to desire that her citizens not only die in a certain way, but that they might *live* well, too. What manner of life that

might be is presented as an open question to the Athenians, a point driven home by Socrates' final meditation on his family, and the limits of mortal power over death.

Regime 3: Death in the Family

Having explored two of the most prominent regimes of public death—heroic and military—Socrates returns his focus in the final parts of his defense to the more intimate relationships between family and city, parents and children. “I too have a household and, in Homer’s phrase, I am not born ‘from oak or rock’ but from men.”[34d] He makes this turn somewhat counter intuitively, by calling attention to the *absence* of his children from his trial. Unlike other men who have been brought before the city on “less serious charges” Socrates will not violate the proceedings of justice by appealing to pity or fear of death by displaying his children in front of the jury. At the heart of Socrates’ discussion of his absent family is a critical examination of the way that fear of death has corrupted the boundaries appropriate to moral and political deliberation within democratic Athens, yielding a false sense of political control over matters of life and death that manifest in perversions of justice. Socrates argues,

I have often seen [...] men who are thought to be somebody, doing amazing things as if they thought it a terrible thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you [Athens] did not execute them. I think these men bring shame upon the city so that a stranger, too, would assume that those who are outstanding in virtue among the Athenians, who they select from themselves to fill offices of state and receive other honors, are in no way better than women. [...] You should make it very clear that you will more readily convict a man who performs these pitiful dramatics in court and so makes the city a laughingstock, than a man who keeps quiet...I do not think it is right to supplicate the jury and be acquitted because of this, but to teach and persuade them. [35a-b]

This speech, which comes at the end of Socrates’s defense, just before his jurors depart to make their decision, restates many of the themes of his argument, particularly the role of envy and anger; now, also, pity [34e]. These emotions, again, conflict with the ‘manly’ democratic ideals the Athenians purport to hold. Socrates will not parade his sons before Athens, because “It is not

the purpose of a juryman's office to give justice as a favor to whoever seems good to him, but to judge according to law, and this he has sworn to do.”[35b]

Socrates' critique rests on the different appearances and disappearances in public life. Socrates's sons will not appear before the civic trial, because that would be beneath Socrates' reputation as a person “superior to the majority of men.” [35a] To fall back on such emotional tricks would be to betray the principles he upholds as the true patriotic citizen of Athens, and would be a betrayal of his divine mission from the Oracle.[31d] The emphasis on the *absence* of his sons from public sight also parallels the way that Socrates has also chosen to be absent from public life. He is explicit that “if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago [...] A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time.”[31d-32a]

Yet Socrates does not live a fully private existence, but one that occupies the space *between* public and private. Socrates spends his time in the public places that are *not* set aside for politics, the markets and the public streets, “equally ready to question the rich and the poor if anyone is willing to answer my questions and listen to what I say.”[33b] Socrates' service, similarly, is neither public nor private, but transgresses the spaces between them. His activity of questioning any person he meets—citizen, foreigner, slave, or free—draws attention to the divisions within the daily life of the political community itself, and the kinds of political overconfidence Athens might foster by artificially insulating their political deliberations from an honest accounting of the polity's dependencies and limits. In this sense, Socrates somewhat paradoxically combats the hubris of Athens by *collapsing* the boundaries between the polity and the family: “I was always concerned with you, approaching each one of you like a father or an elder brother to persuade you to care for your virtue.”[31b] Socrates establishes a reciprocal

relationship here between public and private, emphasizing the role that the moral interrogation of philosophy, like the honest advice of a trusted family member, is necessary for grounding the moral deliberations of the city that will exist through time, and between mortal members.

The focus here remains on death. Unlike the shameful performance of dragging children into the public courts of justice, intended to distort justice through fear and pity before death, Socrates will reassert the relationship between the private, and non-political spaces of the city as crucial spaces where mortal limits might be re-affirmed. The familial community of death and birth that undergirds Athenian political life can act as an important tonic to the kinds of inflated and false perceptions of power and control to which an excessively isolated political sphere, one enamored with its own “undying glory,” might fall victim. If the city promises its members a kind of immortality, Socrates suggests that this can only come at the cost of a gap between Athens’ ideals and its mortal practices. Those who expose this gap will be its victims—they must stay out of public life or risk death themselves. When Socrates connects the behavior of Athenians to those who act “as if they thought it a terrible thing to die, and as if they were to be immortal if you [Athens] did not execute them” to the same persons who will “fill offices of state and receive other honors,” he draws attention to the ways that a political denial of death is a dangerous act of intellectual and moral hubris of the highest order.

It is thus the Athenians who will set a bad example by expecting Socrates to avoid death at any cost, just as they act as though their political power can offset death. Fear of death cannot be resolved by any act of sovereign control. At best, political attempts to offset or marginalize mortal acknowledgement by restricting any account of mortal life to choices of who lives and who dies yields illusory control over the conditions of mortal existence, an illusion that demands the sacrifice of others, like Socrates, to support its own internal fantasy of immortality.

Displacing death onto others rather than confronting one's mortal limits and the kind of life one lives is thus a matter of the deepest impiety and delusion. The unexamined life, but also the unexamined *death*, distorts the ideals of democratic justice and mortal piety.

IV. An Apology for Death

We have just seen how, by accepting a position of mortal skepticism and ignorance, Socrates' defense presents a position from which the conventional beliefs and practices of Athenian politics towards death, and their dangerous excesses, might be interrupted and reconsidered. Through three interrogations of the conventional practices of death Socrates encourages his audiences to confront the conditions of mortality as a part of Athenian political life, and to weigh the unexamined costs these conventions may exact. I argue here that the outcome of the trial—a partial reformation of the city of Athens, but one unable to prevent Socrates' condemnation—reveals what the democratic polity might gain through a more direct, healthy examination of death's place in political life. But this outcome also reveals the costs of death's *exclusion* and denial. Importantly, while Socrates uses the example of his own life as a way of interpreting these different regimes of death, the question of death's meaning remains open at the end of his trial: ignorance of death cannot be *overcome* by any mortal community, but it must be confronted. The call to reconsider death's political place and meaning, on the one hand, balanced by the impossibility of any final answer, on the other, invites the formation of a community willing to engage in *ongoing* inquiry towards death and its meaning for political life.

That Socrates views the stakes of his trial in terms of a potential reformation of democratic life is apparent in the way he responds to the court's verdict. Having been voted guilty, Socrates is asked what penalty he believes is appropriate. His accusers suggest death; Socrates argues that "I assess it as this: free meals in the Prytaneum."^[37a] Meals in the

Prytaneum were common rewards for Olympic victors, but this privilege was also awarded to the decedents of the tyrannicides who, in Athenian political lore, enabled the founding of Greek democracy. In suggesting this penalty Socrates asserts himself with enemies of tyrannical forces, and as a re-founding servant of the polity. Socrates' suggestion on this front grows out of his aporetic view of death: "Since I am convinced that I wrong no one, I am not likely to wrong myself to say that I deserve some evil and to make some such assessment against myself. What should I fear? That I should suffer the penalty [of death...] of which I say I do not know whether it is good or bad?"[37c]⁴⁶²

Athens does not accept Socrates' proposal, and the reformed community of mortal ignorance that Socrates proposes in his defense is only *partially* born. Yet the closeness of the outcome of Socrates' trial indicates that whatever failures might emerge between the practice of philosophy and the Athenian polis, these failures were not inevitable, but contingent. As Socrates comments, "if Anytus and Lycon had not joined [Meletus] in accusing me, he would have been fined a thousand drachmas for not receiving a fifth of the votes." [36b] Athens, as a polity, was not moved by Socrates' urgent appeal to mortal ignorance—but some individuals have been persuaded.

Upon hearing the final verdict, Socrates divides his audience into two groups: those who have failed to hear his warning and have voted with anger, and those who have been persuaded by his arguments. The first group he speaks to with a voice of prophecy and warning. The second, he addresses as his "true judges" and as friends. [39c; 39e-40a] Those who have condemned him, he argues, have acted out of envy. They place an unexamined fear of death at

⁴⁶² On Aristogen and Harmodius, the tyrannicides in Athenian lore, see Sara Monson, "The Allure of Harmodius and Aristogen: Public/Private relations in the Athenian Democratic Imaginary" in *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* 21-50.

the heart of their deliberations: “Neither I, nor any other man should, on trial or in war, contrive to avoid death at any cost. [...] It is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death.”[39b] To these men Socrates speaks in the language of vengeance:

You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. [...] You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good [...] [39c-d]

The agents of vengeance Socrates refers to are those who have taken upon themselves to interrogate the conventions of the city, but unlike Socrates these persons do not have the best interests of Athens in mind, but their own destructive entertainment, or self interested pride.⁴⁶³ Socrates repeats the idea here that the Athenians are in danger of living in a world that is tyrannically divorced from reality: no amount of power over life and death can insulate a polity against the limits mortality places on its members.

Taken within the larger frame of mortal ignorance, this moment in Socrates’ address draws the reader’s attention to the ways that attempts to control mortal vulnerability by displacing critical reflection actually expose the polity to a greater danger. Death is not only generative of Socratic aporia. As Socrates’ defense illustrates, the unconsidered, conventional responses to the unknown of death also generates the conditions for the glorious, violent anger of Achilles, a heroic pride that nearly destroyed the alliance of the Greeks, and cost Achilles his life. Death also structures the reciprocal relationship between soldiers and city, as eulogized by Perikles, yet easily devolves into a self-referential cycle of mortal sacrifice that dominates

⁴⁶³ These youths are those who copy the destructive method of Socratic philosophy without its generative, productive intentions. In their hands, philosophy is purely destructive. That Socrates chooses this moment to speak of the doom of Athens reflects a literary trope in which heroic figures at the moment of doom pronounce the doom of others. Thus Patroclus prophesizes Hektor’s death at Achilles’ hand, and Hektor prophesizes Achilles death at the hands of Paris. See on this point, Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, 20.

political and ethical life in the name of the glorious past, and the heroic dead. Finally, death disrupts and stresses those relationships which shape the boundaries of public and private life. Without critical thought oriented towards the mortal community and its boundaries, and without a community willing to admit death's importance frankly into their public deliberations as a matter of ongoing, provisional investigation, the polity is vulnerable to these excesses.

It is thus a matter of divine luck that Athens has Socrates to criticize these narratives ("I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf [...] but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god's gift to you." [30d]) Unlike those who will come after him, Socrates cares about the fate of Athens. His philosophy, which places at its heart the unsettling question of death's meaning, will allow Athens to admit death into the city as a part of its democratic and ethical discourse: a controlled inoculation, rather than a virulent outbreak.

As we have seen in the *Apology*, but also across the different accounts of death considered in this dissertation, death is subject to any number of political claims and narratives, each capable of forging political relationships and enabling (or suppressing) political relationships and capacities. By avoiding a confrontation with death as a part of political life, and instead trying to suppress or exile death to the margins, Athens makes itself vulnerable to the sorts of violent disruptions which can emerge in the distortions that denial of death in public life are apt to produce.⁴⁶⁴ Put differently, Socrates was valuable to Athens precisely because he provided a kind of critical perspective from which Athens might have been reformed by its own volition. Socrates' warning is clear: A polity which does not take seriously the ways that mortal ignorance exposes its members to false promises of security and power over mortal life is

⁴⁶⁴ In this sense, the *Apology* parallels Perikles' funeral oration, in that it finishes with praise of the dead and advice for the living. Here Socrates praises *himself*, but in keeping with the parallel judgment of the whole speech, he also praises Athens as it might have been, while giving advice to the living in the form of praise and blame. For another comparison of Perikles' Oration and the *Apology*, see J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 202-210.

doomed to suffer from its own ranks the very kinds of mortal violence it has exacted on others, a warning which remains both timely and important.

Yet there is another Athens that Socrates addresses. To those who “being my friends” voted for Socrates’ acquittal, Socrates speaks kindly and with comfort, reassuring them that “What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death is an evil are certainly mistaken.”[40c] He goes on to suggest that against the conventional view of death as a terror, “there is good hope that death is a blessing.”[40c-d] Either death is like dreamless sleep, a refreshing nothingness where “all eternity would then seem to be no more than a single night” or death is “a relocation for the soul from here to another place.”[40c]

This final portion of the Apology is troubling to some commenters, as it seems to contradict earlier elements of the defense. As Euben notes, Socrates “for one” counts a dreamless state of sleep as a blessing, yet philosophy has just been described as intended to rouse the Athenians from sleep: death, then, would seem to negate the purpose of philosophy.⁴⁶⁵ There is also the seemingly strange addition of a myth of an afterlife. Socrates gleefully anticipates questioning the great poets Orpheus and Homer, as well as the heroes of Troy. “It would be extraordinary happiness to talk with them, to keep company with them and examine them. In any case, they would certainly not put one to death for doing so.”[41c] In death, perhaps, Socrates will finally find his community of inquiry: one of immortal heroes and poets.

These two possible “blessings” do not displace the framework of mortal ignorance Socrates has developed. Rather, I suggest, they reinforce the boundaries of mortality by calling attention to the parameters of natural, embodied life on the one hand, and the out of reach,

⁴⁶⁵ Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 228.

immortal timelessness on the other.⁴⁶⁶ These arguments reinforce the central dynamic of Socrates' defense, that the most important question to confront as a mortal being is not how one should die, but how one should live within mortal limits. That the quality of mortal life remains Socrates' concern, while the status of his immortal soul (or its lack) belongs to the divine, inhuman beings outside of the mortal *kosmos*, is evident in the final lines of the *Apology*, where Socrates turns from describing the pleasures of a ceaseless dialogue of the dead to express concerns with his sons: the young men who will become citizens of Athens, and subject to her laws and public life.

When my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief I caused you, if you think they care for money or anything else more than they care for virtue [...] reproach them as I reproach you [...] if you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also.[42a]

Importantly, Socrates here is still only addressing that portion of the polity which has been willing to hear his critical transformation of the political narratives of death. It is this *mortal* political community, and the natural continuity of his family who will live and die within it, that he takes as his penultimate concern.

This is contrasted with the final line of the *Apology*, where Socrates reiterates his mortal status of ignorance: "Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god." [42a] The distance between these final thoughts is significant. The concern for the future of his sons, who will be raised in his absence as part of a mortal democracy on the one hand, and his ignorance compared with the knowledge

⁴⁶⁶ It is important that Socrates also refers to the immortal existence in the underworld in terms of hearsay, reinforcing the provisional quality of mortal knowledge of the afterlife: "They are happier there than we are here in other respects, and for the rest of time they are deathless, *if indeed what we are told is true.*" [41c]

of immortals (who will literally get the last word concerning death⁴⁶⁷) on the other, reaffirms that the proper mortal orientation towards death is a clear-eyed awareness of one's limits, but one coupled with a desire to live well.

What is most important here are the ways that the limit death places on mortal knowledge, while an absolute limit for all human beings, does not imply that the fact of death will somehow negate the different relationships and choices which a person makes, and the kinds of commitments by which one lives their life. Unlike death as a universal object of fear, or as an established source of joy, the uncertain, and unresolvable orientation towards death which Socrates leaves the nascent, reformed community of judges is one that directs attention towards the specific choices and future relationships which fears or hopes concerning death may activate. Socratic, mortal ignorance exposes these for critical evaluation, and openly invites our response.

V. Conclusion

I have argued here that the *Apology* provides readers with a productive framework through which death might be admitted more openly, but critically, into democratic political life. Socrates' defense shows how mortal ignorance, where death is understood as an absolute limit on human power and knowledge, enables a series of critical transformations and comparisons concerning the different regimes of death in Athenian democratic life. These Socratic transformations draw critical attention to the limits of mortal experience and democratic knowledge, but yield an important lack of resolution. This lack of resolution, finally, invites the formation of a community of critical inquiry, one oriented towards the unresolvable but urgent question of death.

⁴⁶⁷ "God" is the last word of the *Apology*, a point which can be seen as reinforcing the falsity of the charges of impiety against Socrates, and, as I have argued here, emphasizing the aporetic limit of human knowledge.

What is at stake for Socrates in this examination of death is his life—but also the life of Athens. By re-examining the conventional orientations towards death that are active in city life, and recognizing the way these beliefs structure a set of behaviors and relationships towards others, the *aporetic*, unresolvable threshold that death presents exposes for view how political life is shaped by mortal narratives and expectations. Such exposure also reveals these political narratives of death for critical examination and, potentially, refashioning. In this way, I argue, Socratic, mortal ignorance provides an orientation towards death that supplements democratic practices of frank speech and openness, providing a critical vantage from which the familiar narratives of death, those that are leveraged and comfortably avoided, might be made strange and reexamined in light of their place in public life.

It is through this kind of critical dialogue that takes as its heart a radical *aporetic* understanding of death that I suggest provides a model for how we might acknowledge death as a part of politics. Adopting a deliberate position of *aporetic* uncertainty towards death, a position given structure by a deliberate orientation of mortal ignorance that forms around a specific *lack* of knowledge, I believe, can provide a perspective from which we might define the kinds of necessary political boundaries required to restrain the potential violence and exclusions which a politics of death can produce. Yet this perspective simultaneously exposes these limits as products of provisional, mortal knowledge, leaving them open to ongoing interrogation. In such a way, I suggest, death need not be quarantined from public life, but the polity may inoculate against its excesses through a deliberately inclusive, open-ended dialogue defined by mortal ignorance.

Crucially, Socrates' specific concern is with the concrete claims and ways of life that they produce. Thus his mission is to interrogate all Athenians as individuals, finding out what

they know, and purging them of what they do not. An *aporetic* orientation towards death, then, need not generate totalizing narratives of mortal behavior, but may instead take as its more modest, but equally urgent, aim of drawing our attention to the quality of specific lives, lived within specific communities of other mortals. The focus is how one should live, or how a specific community should live, as mortal beings. Beginning from a perspective of mortal ignorance places emphasis on the examination of life and death; what costs our ways of being before death exact on our communities and others, and what core values and commitments are worth upholding unto death. A democratic community may always be subject to the limited perspectives of mortal knowledge, but it nonetheless remains capable of holding that limit open to sight.

Conclusion

Mortal Democracy

In the last chapter, I focused on the *Apology* and the specifically aporetic orientation toward death it conveys. But this is not the only means of generating an aporetic orientation towards our practices and conventions of death. The historical distance between Athens and contemporary political life is its own sort of impassible distance, one with no obvious ‘way through.’ While turning to the example of Socrates may not provide a blueprint for drawing modern boundaries for death’s admittance into political life, Socratic mortal ignorance, with its specific ties to the language of the Athenian polity, nonetheless provides an alternative vantage from which we might *evaluate* death’s admittance, one helpful precisely because of its distance to modern ways of understanding death and its political appearances.

In this way my return to Socrates coincides with my reasons for returning to the example of Athenian life throughout this dissertation as a whole: to add depth and texture to a deliberate sense of estrangement with contemporary political accounts of death, understood as a universal experience to be avoided or defended against on the one hand, or restricted to private life, on the other. Through a re-examination of how divergent vocabularies of death may intersect and complicate political narratives, I suggest we can enrich an orientation towards death as a part of political life that reproduces and deepens a kind of Socratic *aporetic* experience. An experience capable of dislodging contemporary political beliefs about death, productively and sometimes frustratingly; both those expectations we form with reference to the past, and those we form with reference to an uncertain present. This dislocation can productively open us to the kinds of alternative narratives of death we find in authors such as Nietzsche, Weber and Arendt, while

simultaneously supplying a critical perspective from which we might evaluate our own mortal politics.

The point of this study, then, has not been to generate specific, concrete limits which ought to be drawn around death's political appearances—though these are vital conversations which this study aims to enrich. What is at stake in these pages is the development of alternative ways of thinking and speaking about death for the sake of working through contemporary political problems. It has been my contention that a richer vocabulary of death, one freed from the assumption that death ought to be quarantined from public life, or restricted to specific political narratives that transcend death's plural, contested meanings, can enrich political life. I have argued here that admitting death more openly into political life can allow us better resources for identifying and resisting political violence, exclusion, and the kinds of immoralist political reasoning that is often tied to existential ends. Yet viewing death as part of political life could also foster a richer experience of political life, one informed by a deeper appreciation for the political capacities persons have in mortal conditions, on the other.

Thus I have argued that Nietzsche's genealogical account of death illustrates how defaulting to a conventional understanding of death as a horrifying, ontological negation can be put to work restricting the grounds for democratic action, and shoring up binding relationships of hierarchical power in the name of compassionate preservation. In contrast, Nietzsche's recovery of an account of death as a *part* of being—read as a transformation of Homeric “beautiful death”—provides a way of understanding death politically as one part of a *specific* life, fully lived. Here death is understood through those values and commitments that a person finds constitutive. I argued this understanding of death can make us more attentive to the capacities

which even the most vulnerable persons have for agency and action, even in contexts of extreme uncertainty and powerlessness where such capacities are actively suppressed or denied.

I have similarly argued that Weber's understanding of soldierly service unto death can illuminate how the need to give life and death purposeful framing can artificially restrict political and ethical imagination in ways that undercut responsible compromise and accountability, yielding conditions of political tribalism and violence. Weber's account is useful for the insight it provides into these kinds of divisive politics, particularly for those who might wish to *resist* the violent excesses of soldierly politics—a point brought forward by reference to Thucydides, who shows one way that the soldierly “type” of meaningful political death may be alternatively theorized as subjected not only to the responsible, mature evaluation of political leaders, but also conditioned by the active exercise of democratic judgment; even in conditions of mass politics, motivated by existential needs.

Arendt, finally, when read alongside Aristotle, provides an account of death situated in a condition of human togetherness. This account of death as a tragic disappearance, informed by Aristotle's notion of death revealed on the stage, I have argued, provides a way of theorizing death's public and private meanings, and the appearances these make in political life. An Arendtian account can make us more attentive to the ways that the absences of distinct persons and peoples are meaningfully felt, and might “appear” in political life; mediated through many competing stories and attachments. Arendt draws our attention to the ways that the dead are vulnerable to the narratives told in their absence. But, also, how the dead can alter a shared world in disruptive, also sustaining ways.

Alongside these narratives, I have outlined three inter-connected understandings of death that dominated Greek cultural and political practices: an archaic concept of “beautiful death,” a

military, civic death as the domain of the democratic city, and finally a tragic notion of death that is informed by public and private existence. As discussed in previous chapters, these different regimes were not always compatible, just as the accounts provided by Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt begin and end with very different understandings of mortality and its political meaning. Yet in spite of a diversity of approaches and conclusions across these different conversations of death between Nietzsche and Homer, Weber and Thucydides, Arendt and Aristotle, and finally, the Athenian polity and Socrates, there is a common commitment to understanding how the unavoidable fact of death can be put to work in deeply conflicting ways in political life—productive and destructive. One theme of this dissertation has thus been the *risk* that attends death's reduction to a single mortal experience, or of attempting to capture death's meaning within a single, all encompassing narrative.

There is thus something extremely valuable, possibly urgent, in developing a richer, more variegated narrative of death as a part of political life. Interrogating the many subtle and sophisticated ways that mortality has been understood, embodied, and enacted in classical Greece and in more modern times helps to destabilize political and historiographical narratives that place the values of Greece as a straightforward antecedents of a progressive, more humane modernity. One essential function of seeking a more exacting vocabulary of death in classical and modern contexts is to unsettle well worn and comforting political narratives that make dubious use of a traditional past. Narratives which, for instance, seek to establish modern liberal democracies and their practices towards death as the necessary or natural realization of an inevitably progressing tradition that has the elimination of mortal vulnerability as its central justification.

Insisting on the sophistication and irreducible complexity of death as a part of political life, and struggling to approach these ways of living and dying across different authors and historical contexts (even if we are, justly, critical of what we ultimately find) is thus a dislocating project, one that exposes contemporary complacencies by forcing a more engaged evaluation of how contemporary practices inherit or oppose classical practices and values. What is at stake in attending to the depth and complexity of death as it distorts and plays on our political assumptions is a kind of critical purchase; an alienation from comfortable narratives about our ability to control or exclude what is frightening about death from political life. Through these different accounts of death as it emerges within classical life on the one hand, and for those authors who stood at the very end of a tradition whose patterns we continue to live with and struggle against, on the other, I have therefore argued that we can find resources and critical perspectives from which to interrogate the languages, practices, and assumptions of an equally complex political present.

But what sort of critical purchase can this dialogue between past and present provide? To frame this point in the language of the final chapter of this dissertation, we should once again consider Socrates' trial, and Socratic *aporia*: what is the critical, or political, value of fostering a sense of intellectual displacement—including the displacement of clear political narratives about death, its exclusions and political meanings? It is helpful at this point to return briefly to the wisdom of Silenus discussed at the start of this project. Silenus' maxim—that “it is best never to be born, second best to die soon” frames existence as a mistake and death as a blessing. By suggesting that there might actually be reason to “be of good cheer” before death, Socrates may seem to be simply affirming Silenus—Nietzsche certainly thought so. Yet by looking at the ways that Socrates' defends his philosophical practice unto death as not only dignified, but patriotic

through an engagement with several of these dominant ‘regimes of death’ governing Athenian life, a more complicated picture emerges.

Engaging the limits of mortal knowledge disrupts and unsettles conventions that might otherwise seem natural or inevitable. By challenging the fundamental assumption that “death is a *bad* thing,” it is important to note that Socrates does not *yet* go so far as to affirm Silenus. Rather he challenges his judges to consider the ways that their fears and unquestioned, collective beliefs about death may passively govern their political judgment and relationships with others. At the same time, since Socrates’ life remains on trial, his own life and philosophical activities are presented for the city as a new, alternative orientation towards death and political action: Socrates is defining the limits of mortal, democratic knowledge through his own political activities. In doing so he proposes an alternative orientation towards death *through* an interrogation of the established conventions of his fellow citizens. Socrates’ presents his own trial to Athens as an ethical challenge which—like Silenus—requires a response.

This leads me back, by way of conclusion, to the question where I started: how are we to accommodate death’s plural and contested meanings, while leaving open the ways that death distorts and works on and through our political relationships and institutions? The different authors I have examined here—Nietzsche, Weber, and Arendt, and finally Socrates—provide compelling arguments for allowing our understanding of death as a part of political life to remain open ended, defined more in terms of a complex web of intersecting relationships, dangers, and powerful political potentials, rather than fixed definitions that close off political evaluation or debate. Yet quite a lot of the work I have done here has been precisely to define, identify and classify distinct accounts of death and their political significance. This tension between holding open death’s meaning, while nonetheless seeking to define, interrogate, and articulate the limits

of the relationships and narratives through which death is active in political life presents a difficult balance; but one with very high stakes. Such tensions draw our attention to the ways political discourse often depends on deeply rooted conventions and practices, but also the tenuous nature of these constructions, their contingency and complexity, and their potential to be retold.

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