**On the Nature of Plato’s Embodied City and the Making of Biopolitics**

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[Holmes\_fig\_1: Illustration attributed to a member of the Sangallo family (Florence, ca. 1530–1545) from The Fortification of City Walls (Vitruvius, Book 1, Chapter 5).]

Every city needs walls, or so Vitruvius assumes.[[1]](#endnote-2) If you are going to design a city from the ground up, deciding where to locate its walls is the first order of business. These walls form, first and foremost, a military defense. But Vitruvius is also alert to the threats posed by the city’s surroundings that walls cannot repel. You don’t want to build on a site that is too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry. You should also avoid marshland teeming with little creatures wafting pestilence over any fortifications you build.[[2]](#endnote-3) Vitruvius is drawing here on what was, by the first century BCE, a well-established tradition within medicine and natural philosophy for predicting and assessing the health of a community based on its locale. He starts, accordingly, from the assumption that the architect has to build salubrious conditions into the plan for the city if its citizens are to have a reasonable chance of flourishing.

In the *Republic*, written a few hundred years earlier than Vitruvius’s *On Architecture*, Plato approaches the question of public health differently: not only from the perspective of the citizens’ bodies but also, and more seriously, from the perspective of their souls. Here, perhaps for the first time in his writings, he develops a robust theory of the tripartite soul by way of his narrator Socrates. On this account, the soul is divided into the “appetitive” part, the seat of desire and appetite; the “spirited” part, which Socrates likens to a dog, vicious or loyal depending on who it obeys and how you look at it; and the part housing reason, which, Socrates argues, should rule over the appetitive and spirited parts. The psychic condition in which reason rules is what he calls “justice.” Yet keeping reason on top will require, in turn, policing the affects and desires that originate in the lower parts of the soul.

To see this argument about psychic justice clearly, Socrates proposes translating it into a domain where it can be scaled up.[[3]](#endnote-4) It is in this context that he introduces the city as the soul’s macroscopic double. Like the soul, Socrates argues, the city has different parts: not only citizens but also, more formally, three ranked classes of citizens (the producers, the guardians, and the rulers). The city’s health, too, depends on the unity of its unequal parts. But the city is not only an analogue to the soul. It is itself made up of citizens whose souls have to manage a continual influx of affects through the senses and pleasures and pains without endangering the rule of reason. Given the porosity of the embodied soul to external stimuli, the individual’s psychic health is entangled with the affective life of the city. It is for this reason that Plato understands public health in terms of the shaping and regulation of both individual souls and the relations between souls.

To call the entanglement of life and politics in the *Republic* “biopolitics” registers the ambitious scope, at once vast and intimate, of Plato’s “reason of the state” (as the early modern political theorist Giovanni Botero put it) in the *Republic*. At the same time, the language of biopolitics raises complicated questions about continuities and discontinuities between Greco-Roman antiquity and European modernity. The rise of biopolitics as a paradigm of analysis over the past few decades owes much to Foucault’s influential definition of the modern state against premodern sovereignty in terms of the state’s exercise of control over life—what Foucault called “biopower.”[[4]](#endnote-5) Yet the modern paradigm of biopolitics is itself shaped by the reception of the canonized texts of ancient Greek political theory, most notably Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics*, and therefore implicated, albeit in complicated ways, in the elaboration of a politics articulated around norms of health in fourth-century BCE Athens.[[5]](#endnote-6)

One of the persistent challenges of unpacking an ancient biopolitics in its relationship to modern biopolitics has been to navigate the concepts of life and health that govern the political theory of both Plato and Aristotle.[[6]](#endnote-7) Less attention has been paid to the early Greek concept of nature, about which new ideas were emerging that were integral to the theorization of the physical body in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.[[7]](#endnote-8) In the *Republic*, Plato uses the flourishing of a body animated by a specific kind of nature (*phusis*) as a model for both the soul and the city.[[8]](#endnote-9) The very persistence of nature as a norm in modernity makes it all too easy to naturalize nature (*phusis*) in the ancient Greek sources rather than understanding nature as a historically situated, politically complicated, and semantically rich concept taking form in the period when Plato is writing. By destabilizing the nature that Plato uses to stabilize the political order envisioned in the *Republic*, we are better positioned not only to interrogate its persistent legitimation of state power in modernity, but also to resist the naturalization of Greek antiquity itself as the classical origin of modern biopolitics.

Plato’s understanding of nature as a norm governing human life is caught up in late fifth-century BCE debates. Above all, it is associated with the sophists, and their debates about the relationship between nature (*phusis*) as a cause of why specific kinds of beings—human and non-human—behave the way they do, and the law (*nomos*) that determines what is right and just in human communities.[[9]](#endnote-10) In the *Republic*, as in other later dialogues, Plato primarily aims to align law with nature. In so doing, he looks to what had become the culturally dominant science (*tekhnē*) for the control of human nature in Athens by the early fourth century BCE: medicine.

Yet the nature at stake for both the medical writers and Plato exhibits something of an internal contradiction with significant consequences for its relationship to law as well as to the techniques of control classed under the idea of *tekhnē*: namely, it is both self-legitimating and needy. On the one hand, in what will become a canonical passage from the Hippocratic text *Epidemics* VI, “untaught” nature is the model for the physician: it shows him what he ought to do in treating the patient.[[10]](#endnote-11) On the other hand, the physician exists precisely because nature often fails to self-regulate. As Socrates says early in the *Republic*, it’s not enough for a body to be a body: it needs the medical *tekhnē* because it is too unstable on its own.[[11]](#endnote-12) The city is the same way, Socrates suggests: it must be designed if it’s going to be healthy; it needs constant care. Recognizing the emergent status of nature in the fourth century bce as both the norm of health and the object of technological management holds a naturalized nature—and, with it, an uninterrogated *bio*- bridging Greek origins and modern biopolitics—at bay in our reading of Plato. In turn, we can see more closely how, in crafting human beings and a city for them to dwell in together in the *Republic*, Plato is experimenting with a concept of nature as an object of regulation by state reason while also deploying the language of nature to designate a norm that is, ostensibly, self-given and beyond contestation.

One of the ways that Plato experiments with the double-sided status of nature—and, with it, ideas about health, bodies, and souls—is through the phenomenon of shared affect—or *sym*-pathy—in the *Republic*. Affects, as we have seen, are shared both between the parts of the soul *and* between the members of the city. The idea of sharing affect in both cases is premised, first, on the claim that souls and cities have different parts. If there were no difference, there would be no need to share. But difference is only one side of the coin. Parts or bodies must also hold something in common if they are going to share affects. For this reason, the fact that affects *are* shared can bear witness to the community that makes such sharing possible. In Book 5 of the *Republic*, Plato uses shared affect to present the unified, living body as a model for the unity of the citizen body: that is, for a “naturally” normative biopolitics. Yet, this natural unity is heavily engineered by state reason through a far-reaching eugenics program. In other words, the (re-)production of “natural” order is seen to require the philosopher-kings acting, as Socrates says, like doctors. The need to regulate all affective exchange between the citizens to bring about psychic and civic health is especially clear in Book 10, in Socrates’s critique of tragedy, which is presented explicitly as a threat in terms of “sympathizing.”

Plato’s use of the verb “to sympathize” in the *Republic* is, in fact, one of the two earliest examples in Greek. The other example also comes from Plato and, more specifically, from a dialogue likely to be earlier than the *Republic*, *Charmides*. Socrates observes there that one of his interlocutors has “caught” his own aporia the way that one person yawns in response to seeing another person yawn; in other words, they “sympathize.”[[12]](#endnote-13) This early use of the language of sympathy to describe “contagious” yawning emphasizes the problems posed by the affective life of the ensouled body: that is, it is open to being easily influenced by the affects of others in ways that risk undermining reason’s control. That Plato later uses the language of sympathy to describe the risks of tragic spectatorship suggests he understands this risk in terms of what we can call “contagious affect.” Yet affects only circulate among people because they hold something in common. That what is held in common in the “sympathy” between living beings is *nature* is spelled out in the book devoted to problems “from sympathy” in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physical* *Problems*, probably written a century later than the *Republic* (where the “problems” of the title refers to phenomena that are somehow caused by nature but resist the physicists’ explanations). The author of the *Physical* *Problems*, who is interested in a range of problems related to “contagious affect” (such as contagious yawning as well as shared pain),glosses this nature held in common as a kind of “kinship” (*oikeiotēs*).[[13]](#endnote-14) He therefore brings us back to Plato’s use of shared affect to manifest the natural community of political kinship that the state eugenically engineers in Book 5 of the *Republic*.

These two sides of sympathy—as contagious affect and as a sign of natural community—in the *Republic* reveal the unstable nature at the heart of the dialogue’s biopolitics.[[14]](#endnote-15) In other words, these two different models of “shared affect” allow us to grasp the work performed in the dialogue by the ensouled physical body understood as both an internally divided object entangled in a mesh of chaotic affective relations—and thus requiring technical control—and as the paragon of complex unity. In short, sympathy presents a glimpse of how Plato imagines the body politic to be both an organic whole and a breeding ground for contagious affect, which together make up the natural life informing his biopolitics.

**The Affective Life of the City and the Soul in Plato’s *Republic***

In Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, Socrates first launches his infamous critique of the poetry that dominated education at Athens, especially Homer and Hesiod. Storytelling is the state’s most powerful tool of social control in the *Republic*, capable of literally molding souls. It must therefore be used with considerable care. Socrates’s attack on the poets in Book 3 targets the long-term psychic risks to the future elite of habitually molding themselves into characters rocked by disease or love. But Socrates is wary, too, of the very lability of the mimetic self, the shape-shifting character of the poet and the performer.[[15]](#endnote-16)

In Book 10, Socrates turns his focus to the dangers posed to the unified soul not by acting itself but by tragic spectatorship. Socrates and his interlocutor Glaucon start off agreeing that the person whose soul is in order would never give in to excessive grief and lamentation, no matter how great the loss. But even the best of us, Socrates says, find that the rational soul relaxes its grip on the appetitive soul’s desire for lamentation when we watch the sufferings of others on stage. We readily surrender ourselves to the performative grief of tragic heroes, “suffering along with the characters as we follow.”[[16]](#endnote-17) Socrates pathologizes this “strong pity” as the stimulation of the “appetitive” part of the soul that takes pleasure in emotion and that, prone to excess, is always at risk of overwhelming the rule of reason. Being laid open to another’s suffering makes the tragic spectator more susceptible to losing control of himself in the face of his own powerful emotions (*pathē*). The exposure to the suffering of others in the theater, Socrates says, “infects” our affective life outside the theater and brings about a pathological state defined for Plato by femininity and enslavement.[[17]](#endnote-18) In Book 10, then, the audience’s compulsive “sympathizing” with tragic heroes is diagnosed as the problem at the root of the genre’s threat to psychic unity. Like the effluences of pain in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*, the affects of others on stage enter the soul or mind through the senses and compel a response. But the identification of the (once rational) spectator with the (othered) performer produced by sympathy comes at the cost of psychic disruption, thus seeding division in the city. The only option, Socrates says, is to exile tragedy.

Yet if tragedy produces a divisive sympathy, another kind of sympathy exemplifies unity for Plato. Midway through the dialogue in Book 5, Socrates is trying to wrap up his account of the ideal city and shift into a detailed description of the various pathologies to which it is eventually destined to succumb. Glaucon interrupts to point out that Socrates has failed to say anything about a critical part of any city: the family, sexual reproduction, women, and children. Glaucon’s request spurs Socrates to describe another famous part of his proposal for the ideal city: first, the admission of certain women to the ranks of the guardians by way of the same educational regimen assigned to the class of boys working towards the apex of the sociopolitical hierarchy, and second, the abolition of the family, to be replaced by political kinship. The two policies go hand in hand as outcomes of Socrates’s account of nature here, understood as both the nature of classes of citizens as well as individual natures.

Part of what is radical about this plan is that it posits some women have the kind of nature to qualify for the highest class in the city, the guardians. The hierarchical difference in natural capacity is thus reconfigured in terms of class rather than sex. But nature isn’t sufficiently trustworthy to ensure a consistent, trans-generational reproduction of social difference. Eros is messy.[[18]](#endnote-19) Sexual reproduction is messy. The city planner has to step in to stave off anarchy. Socrates, accordingly, proposes a eugenics program explicitly modeled on animal breeding.[[19]](#endnote-20) This entails grouping guardian men with women of similar natures through co-ed education and coercing them to mate according to city-sponsored marriage rituals.[[20]](#endnote-21) We know, too, from Socrates’s account of education in Book 3 that the rulers are constantly watching the young to determine which of those assigned to the guardian class are fit to become rulers, and also keeping an eye out for those whose births would predict a lower class but who turn out to demonstrate “natural” excellence.[[21]](#endnote-22) The state thus aims to regulate sexual reproduction to stabilize a fixed social order while building in techniques of surveillance to catch out those citizens who perform contrary to what their “natural” descent would predict—and reassign them accordingly.

The aim here is the production and reproduction of the city as the citizens’ only natural community. To achieve it, Socrates also has to thwart the formation of kinship within the natal family. Babies are whisked away at birth to an institutional nursery to become wards of the state, cared for under the watchful eye of the rulers. This seeks to erase the paradigmatic “natural” bond between parent and child in order to naturalize civic kinship.[[22]](#endnote-23) Meanwhile, we have learned in Book 3 that everyone will be told that their memories of their childhood and education were only dreams. Experience is to be replaced with a “noble lie,” that is, the myth of metals that legitimates class assignments in terms of citizens’ inborn natures and casts the city as a family.[[23]](#endnote-24) All citizens, according to the myth, are earthborn kin with a natural mandate to defend their motherland and love their brothers and sisters. At the same time, their souls are divinely fabricated out of different metals (gold, silver, bronze, or iron) that, they are told, fix their position in the city’s hierarchy. Like a “brave doctor,” Socrates’s story masks the manufacture of an unequal social order qua family with the face of nature, understood to govern both sameness and difference.[[24]](#endnote-25)

Much more could be said about these proposals. Here I only want to point to the test used by Socrates in Book 5 to determine if the technical production of kinship has succeeded in making a healthy body politic. If the eugenic technologies are successful, he says, the whole city will be united in its experience of pleasure and pain. The model of such a community is the ensouled, unified living body. For, if the finger is wounded, “the entire community stretching through the body to the soul in one system of control senses it, and this entire community suffers in pain together with the affected finger, as a whole.”[[25]](#endnote-26) The sharing of pain and pleasure thus bears witness here to the city as a natural unity structured by hierarchy. Recall that in Book 10, pains and pleasures and desires are dangerous because they defy reason’s control. But here it is precisely because pain is unwilled that it is such a compelling sign of the unity of the citizen body, one that proves the success of *tekhnē* in stabilizing and manufacturing nature even as the “natural” living body supplies the paragon of the complex One. This sign of shared affect enables Plato to name its cause as the relationship between the parts of the whole—in this case, the relationships that make up the tissue of the city according to mythically naturalized hierarchies of power.

**Unsettling the Nature of the *Republic*’s Natural Order**

The city that Plato designs is decidedly not a democracy, but it is haunted by democratic politics. In Book 8, Socrates offers an anxious critique of democracy as a mess of promiscuous freedom where “those who have been bought as slaves—whether male or female—are no less free than those who bought them,” and the relationship of men and women is marked by excessive equality (*isonomia*).[[26]](#endnote-27) On Plato’s diagnosis of democracy’s ostensible pathologies, too much freedom collapses boundaries between different classes of human nature. In the *Laws*, as in the *Republic*, Plato implicates tragedy in these pathologies, offering the neologism “theatrocracy” (*theatrokratia*) as a synonym for democracy and its supposedly excessive liberties, which eventually leads to the rule of the tyrant, the embodiment of appetitive soul.[[27]](#endnote-28) Whether Plato’s critique of democracy is right or wrong—or whether it’s a critique at all—have all been much-debated questions in postwar Europe and the US. Plato’s aversion to democracy was famously seen as evidence of his totalitarian inclinations by Karl Popper. The reading of Plato’s *Republic* as the Ur-antidemocratic text has been elaborated more recently by, among others, Jacques Rancière, who reads the anti-Athenian perspective of the *Republic* through Socrates’s investment in “natural” hierarchy. Against the Socrates of the *Republic*, Rancière theorizes democracy as an order that refuses foundational order (*arkhē*) and, more specifically, *any* order founded in the “nature” of kinship.[[28]](#endnote-29)

But Plato’s faith in nature, we have seen, is not so straightforward. Demetra Kasimis has argued that, in using the text to theorize the democratic ideal by way of a foil, Rancière prematurely reduces the *Republic* to its investment in “natural” hierarchy and order. She instead advocates reading the dialogue as critically “revelatory of hierarchy’s various iterations, machinations, and indeterminate effects” as they operate in democracy, too.[[29]](#endnote-30) By extracting democracy as an ideal thrown into relief by Plato’s engineered regime of reason, Rancière, on her critique, neglects the material conditions underlying the making of democracy and the dialogue’s own frame: that is, the historical Athens of the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE on whose outskirts the *Republic* takes place, in the house of a wealthy immigrant or “metic” with no path to citizenship for himself or his children. Athens was, by this time, a birth-based democracy legitimated by the myth of autochthony.[[30]](#endnote-31) Most notably, in 458 BCE, Pericles had instituted a law that required both parents be citizens for citizenship to be granted to their children, thereby blocking inter-state elite alliances. Such measures unfolded in tandem with new ideologies of race shaped by theories of the body and human nature as objects of expert medical-scientific knowledge, technical control, and care, which were all moralized by anxieties around gender, class, and sovereignty in the late fifth century.[[31]](#endnote-32) According to Kasimis, Plato’s myth of metals carries a subversive critique of Athens’s own noble lie that its citizens were born from the earth into a natural brotherhood uniting them against non-citizens. She argues that when Plato critiques democracy, it is Athenian democracy’s very investment in naturalized difference qua kinship to secure political membership that he is targeting.[[32]](#endnote-33)

In situating the dialogue as a text written in fourth-century BCE Athens, Kasimis is not registering a historicist’s correction to the use of the text for the ends of political theory. Rather, she targets the “theoretical toll” exacted by the text’s decontextualization and the risk of getting swept along with Plato’s project of disciplining the messiness of “nature” into social stratification legitimated by nature restored as myth. [[33]](#endnote-34) There is a risk, too, of mistaking Plato’s work of abstracting order through the manipulation of bodies and souls for binaries that are set in stone at the origins of western political theory and metaphysics. After all, Socrates does not hide the technological production of naturalized kinship in the dialogue itself. Nor is Athens in its practices of exclusion absent from the scene. Not to mark these traces is to reinscribe the Greeks as icons of mythic origin—of philosophy, of politics, of biopolitics—and assume a classical foundation rather than seeing in these much-trafficked texts a “nourishing food,” as Andrés Henao Castro proposes to do in his recent rereading of *Antigone*, imagining Sophocles’s play as the corpse of Polyneices cast to the birds who both metabolize it and scatter it to noncanonical places.[[34]](#endnote-35)

At the same time, we should be careful about equating the work of demystification with the critique of naturalization, and thus, paradoxically, naturalizing a concept of nature itself. Here it is worth returning to the emergent formation of nature in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE as paradoxically both self-legitimating and needy. Plato has Socrates build an elaborate process of surveilling and correcting nature into the design of his city, thereby turning the natures of different human beings, as both individuals and as members of naturalized classes, into objects of state control. Nevertheless, he does not seem to give up on the promise that nature in the fifth century BCE offers—that is, the promise of a norm outside of convention and human institutions altogether that underwrites an account of what it means for human beings to flourish as individuals and within a political community. Plato takes the promise of nature as a norm outside human control from contemporary medical writers and debates in fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athens that coalesced into “the inquiry into nature,” as he has Socrates call it in his famous intellectual autobiography in the *Phaedo*.[[35]](#endnote-36) But nature in the *Phaedo* turns out to be no ally to Plato’s Socrates. For Socrates famously attacks the “physicists” for their radical materialism—their care only for bodies and mindless powers (hot, cold, wet, dry), their failure to encode value into the non-human world and put a god in charge. What Socrates wants is a cosmology that subordinates the natures of things, including human beings, to the Good as the primary cause or world order. In other words, he loops back here to the idea of “needy” nature, that is, nature as a cause that has to be disciplined by the agents of reason.

This desire of Socrates is addressed by Plato’s cosmological epic, the *Timaeus*, probably written years after the *Republic*, although its narrative frame positions it as a kind of sequel. This time, the failures of politics practiced by embodied mortals—which eventually undo the state in the *Republic*—are subsumed into a cosmos whose own life is miraculously inviolable (the dialogue’s narrator describes a cosmic animal that sustains itself in a perfect cycle of auto-stimulation). The account of world creation in the *Timaeus* aligns the natures of things with materialist causes that have been reassuringly subordinated to mind, reason, and divine providence. Nevertheless, nature repeatedly surfaces in the dialogue, as it does in the *Republic*, as a way of being in the world for specific kinds of things that are legitimated or not through being “according to nature” (*kata phusin*) or “against nature” (*para phusin*). Its force as a stable norm thus persists alongside its role as a cause requiring rational management.

The normative force of nature is as much a part of the cosmological-anthropological idiom that Plato inherits as the physicists’ rubric of bodies and powers. Despite Socrates’s critique of the materialists for failing to think about value in the *Phaedo*, ethics was never absent from physics. Where a cosmology of nature meets an account of human nature in the fifth century BCE under the pressures of an imperial, enslaving democracy’s fixation on masculinized self-control as the embodiment of freedom, health and disease become *both* objects of control within a *tekhnē* of medicine *and* the ostensibly given norms that guide the physician’s work. For Plato, the ethical imperative to the citizen to control the affective life of embodied soul defines the autarchy that is supposedly given to the Athenian male citizen as his birthright but in practice requires surveillance and continuous manipulation. In Book 3 of the *Republic*, Plato bears witness to the success of naturalizing medicine in this period as a regulatory (and self-regulatory) regime at Athens. Socrates frankly expresses his interest in taking over medicine’s vast market in the control of human nature for philosophy’s techniques of psychic care.[[36]](#endnote-37) At the same time, the very proliferation of these regulatory regimes bears witness to a conceptualization of nature as animated by an elusive, non-human, ludic motility, or what Emanuela Bianchi has called the queer performativity of ancient *phusis*.[[37]](#endnote-38)

Part of the work of situating the *Republic* for political theory and, above all, for biopolitical theory, needs to be understanding “naturalization” itself as a polymorphous, culturally embedded, politically consequential process that persistently entangles Socrates in his efforts to imagine otherwise. We may read these entanglements as symptomatic of the limits of Plato’s own grasp on human flourishing and political community, or the sophistication of Plato’s use of the dialogue to read contemporary Athens critically, or theory’s historical conditions. But regardless, nature cannot be taken for granted. The two sides of sympathy drive this home by helping us map the complex topology of a historically medicalized body adapted by Socrates to model the tripartite soul and then blown up to the size of a city: on the one hand, health as complex unity sustained through the regulation of affects by an immanent, dynamic, normative force of order (i.e., “nature”); on the other hand, embodiment in the physical world as a condition of precarity and porosity requiring the technical control of bodies and communities, at least until the city, like all mortal things, inevitably degenerates to the point of total collapse.[[38]](#endnote-39)

The work of reading the *Republic* is imbricated in the many different histories of reading Plato, ancient and modern, that for all their differences cannot *not* mythologize him—and the Greeks more generally—as moments of origin. But what it can also do is show the seams and lay bare the decisions that go into reading Plato biopolitically, as well as the fact that decisions always get made when you craft something. That’s arguably what Plato has Socrates doing in the *Republic*: showing the seams of that made object called the city. Still, this doesn’t mean that Plato gives up on nature, for better or for worse, as one name of something in embodied humans that shapes their capacities to live or die, thrive or suffer. Rather, the question of imagining “natural” community is how to bridge a gap between nature as the non-human materiality of the self that is untransparent to embodied human beings, and nature as norm that governs a usually consequential evaluation of whether a life is being lived “well” or not—and of whether a political community, or an aesthetics of collective life, or a planet, is thriving.

This question transmutes but also recurs over thousands of years across communities that have made sense of their shared world in terms of a concept of nature imbricated in Greek natural philosophy. In trying to make sense of this tenacious seriality across millennia, it is important to resist, as a model for a classicized tradition, the living being whose parts are integrated into a whole according to a master trope of health (and pathology, decline, rebirth). The risks are most obvious in the modern regimes of biopolitics that have taken a Greek origin and norm as foundational to their own claims on health and racialized practices of exclusion, expulsion, and extermination. But reifications like “the classical tradition” and “the West” also risk a less evident trust in vitalist unity. Such trust can be understood in the ways in which Plato’s *Republic* has continued to condition the imagination of political community, its relationship to life, and its failures into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To show the seams is not simply to work through nature as made in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. It’s to show the Greeks as made over and again, entangled in the making of the ethics and aesthetics and politics of health that still inform diagnoses of crises of public health, democratic politics, racial capitalism, and ecological collapse, neither inside nor outside biopolitics.[[39]](#endnote-40)

The two sides of sympathy in the *Republic* challenge how we imagine together the difficult, provisional, and social practice of care in the face of suffering. Over the last decade, it has become easier to see how right-wing nativism in democratic politics goes hand in hand with a logic of roots. But Plato’s recourse to the model of a body integrated in its parts in his work of figuring political kinship in the *Republic* also invites scrutiny of what we think is at stake when we say a community or a nation or a world is broken, divided, infected, or sick, and what we think is necessary for us to become whole or to heal.

The Socrates of the *Republic* places tragedy’s contagious sympathy at the heart of his diagnosis of the ills of democratic Athens. He aligns its effects with the insurgent power of what he sees as the feminized and enslaved parts within every human being, even the most rational citizen. The extant Greek tragedies are themselves caught in this cultural logic of power and abjection mapped onto gendered and raced bodies. But they are also provocative in the ways they stage the gap between suffering and the capacity to make sense of it. In that gap, characters often fail to come together. As a historical form, Attic tragedy is cultivated under conditions of hyper-investment in law and medicine as domains for regulating collective life according to the logic of blame and cure. The plays repeatedly mark the limits of that logic. In so doing they function like aesthetic technologies for experimenting in public, by means of a highly formalized but repeatedly decentered perspectival fluidity, with the utopian possibilities, the provisionality, and the limits of the stories that people generate to sustain political life in the face of human suffering. They hold onto a space between acknowledging harm and the need for care without settling on a regime of health, disease, and cure.

The refusal in tragedy to settle on diagnoses and cures, along with tragedy’s rejection of the phantasy that embodied life and community can be technologically controlled, haunts the *Republic* in its quest to secure psychic and political flourishing through the regulation of state reason. Plato reads tragedy as another form of materialism, and rightly so, although his paranoid anti-materialism produces powerful distortions. But like the tragedies themselves, the *Republic* shows the seams of Socrates’s creation of an aesthetics of political life. It, too, then, can help us see the seams of what we call philosophy, and art, and politics, and history, and architecture as always situated, porous, transitioning practices of collective survival that cannot and should not try to cage what they want to sustain and, in that failure, remain necessary to its persistence.[[40]](#endnote-41)

1. Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 1.4.1–1.4.6, in Vitruvius, *On Architecture.* Vol. I: Books 1-5, trans. Frank Granger. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Vitruvius represents a minor tradition for explaining plague transmission (most ancient authors blamed “bad” air): see also Varro, *On Agriculture* 1.12.2–1.12.4 (in Varro, *On Agriculture*, trans. W. D. Hooper and Harrison Boyd Ash. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), who imagines tiny *animalia* being actually inhaled, with Vivian Nutton, “The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance,” *Medical History* 27 (1983): 1–34, esp. 11, on Varro. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Plato, *Republic* 1, 368c–369a, in *Plato, Republic*. Vol. 1: Books 1-5, ed. and trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See esp. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 135–45. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. For the reception of ancient Greek political theory in the early modern period and in twentieth-century biopolitics, see Chiara Bottici, “Rethinking the Biopolitical Turn: From the Thanatological to the Geneapolitical Paradigm,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 56 (2015): 175–97, 178 with nn. 17–18 on Botero. The ancient Greco-Roman dimension of modern biopolitics has been most influentially—and problematically—asserted by Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). See also Mika Ojakangas, *On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics: A Reinterpretation of the History of Biopower* (New York: Routledge, 2016). For a critique of Agamben’s ancient genealogy and the complicated relationship between ancient Greek *bios* and modern biopolitics, with additional bibliography, see Brooke Holmes, “Bios,” *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 5 (2019), http://www.politicalconcepts.org/bios-brooke-holmes/. For a range of recent perspectives on the ancient dimension of biopolitics, see the papers in Jussi Backman and Antonio Cimino, eds., *Biopolitics and Ancient Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. The debate over the two primary Greek words for life, *bios* and *zōē*, has been central to critiques of Agamben’s account of Aristotle’s biopolitics: see esp. James Gordon Finlayson, “‘Bare Life’ and Politics in Agamben’s Reading of Aristotle,” *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 1 (2010): 97–126; Holmes, “Bios”; Sara Brill, *Aristotle on the Concept of Shared Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. But see the important correction to Agamben’s claims about Plato and “natural law” in Mika Ojakangas, “Plato and the Biopolitical Purge of the City-State,” in *Biopolitics and Ancient Thought*, ed. Jussi Backman and Antonio Cimino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 39–41. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. For a detailed argument about how a concept of the physical body takes shape in this period, see Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 121–91. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For a general overview of these debates, see now Richard Bett, “Nature and Norms,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sophists*, ed. Joshua Billings and Christopher Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 157–78. On the semantic zone of nature in this period, see also Gottfried Heinemann, “*Peri Phuseôs*: Physics, Physicists, and *Phusis* in Aristotle,” in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Presocratic Natural Philosophy in Later Classical Thought*, ed. Chelsea C. Harry and Justin Habash (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 13–31. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Hippocrates, *Epidemics* VI 5.1, in *Hippocrates, Epidemics 2, 4-7*, ed. and trans. W. D. Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Plato, *Republic* 1, 341e. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Pl. *Charm*. 169c., in *Plato ,Charmides; Alcibiades I and II; Hipparchus; The Lovers; Theages; Minos; Epinomis*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Aristotle, *Phys. Probl*. 7.7, in *Aristotle, Problems*. Vol. 1: Books 1-19, ed. and trans. Robert Mayhew (Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). On the concept of kinship proposed in the text, see further Brooke Holmes, “Pain, Power, and Human Community: Empathy as a ‘Physical Problem’ in Pseudo-Aristotle and Beyond,” in *The Body Unbound: Literary Approaches to the Classical Corpus*, ed. Katherine Lu Hsu, David Schur, and Brian P. Sowers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 13–56. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. I analyze these two facets of sympathy—what I call “magnified vulnerability” and “reparative unity”—at greater length in my forthcoming book *Sympathy and the Tissue of the World: Life, Community, and Nature in the Ancient Mediterranean*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Plato, *Rep*. 3, 395c–395e, 396c–396e, 397a–398a. For the reading of *Republic* 10 above, see Holmes, “Pain, Power, and Human Community,” 32–33. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Plato, *Rep*. 10, 605d4, in *Plato, Republic*. Vol. II: Books 6–10, ed. and trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).. On the mixed pleasure and pain of watching tragedy, cf. Plato, *Phlb*. 48a, in *Plato, Statesman; Philebus; Ion*, trans. Harold North Fowler and W. R. M. Lamb. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. On the dangers of mimesis for Plato, see *Rep*. 3, 394e–396e; *Laws* 7, 814e–817a, in *Plato, Laws.* Vol. II: Books 7-12, trans. R. G. Bury. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), with Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), esp. 72–97. In the *Laws*, Plato delegates the mimesis of base characters to the enslaved or metics: no free person is allowed to train in such forms of representation (*Laws* 7, 816e). The entanglement of mimesis and enslavement continues through the Roman period. On forced performance as a site for the exercise of domination over the enslaved in the American context, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 17–78. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. See esp. Plato, *Republic* 5, 458d–458e. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Plato, *Republic* 5, 459a–459b, 460d on infanticide. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Plato, *Republic* 5, 459d–459e–460b. The men who display the best natures are rewarded with sexual access to many women in the interest of increasing their offspring (see also 468c). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Plato, *Republic* 3, 412e–414c. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. See Plato, *Republic* 5, 461d–461e, on precautions against incest that reconfigure the parent-child bond. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Plato, *Republic* 3, 414b–415c, 416e–417a. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Plato, *Republic* 5, 459d reintroduces the idea of the lie as medicine used by a brave (literally: masculine) doctor. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Plato, *Republic* 5, 462d; cf. 464a–464b. The idea that the whole body feels the pain of the smallest part appears in a medical text from the early fourth century: (Hippocrates) *On Places in a Human Being* 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Plato, *Republic* 8, 562e–563b. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Plato, *Laws* 3, 701a. See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum* *of the Other Woman*, trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) for a classic critique of Plato’s own use of scenography in the myth of the cave. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Jacques Rancière, *The Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 40–41. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Demetra Kasimis, *The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 116. Kasimis is also critically engaging Arlene Saxonhouse’s rich and provocative reading of Book 8, which singles out the fluidity of identity categories in democracy as the primary target of Socrates’s attack: Arlene Saxonhouse, “Democracy, Equality, and *Eidē*: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato’s *Republic*,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998), 273–83. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Nicole Loraux, *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes*, trans. C. Levine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. See esp. Susan Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in the Classical Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject* (n. 9) on these theories of the body and its control. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Kasimis, *Perpetual Immigrant*, 95–96, 129–131. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Kasimis, *Perpetual Immigrant*, 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Andrés Henao Castro, *Antigone in the Americas: Democracy, Sexuality, and Death in the Settler Colonial Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Plato, *Phaedo* 96a–99c, in *Plato, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*, ed. and trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Plato, *Republic* 3, 407a–408a. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Emanuela Bianchi, “Nature Trouble: Ancient *Physis* and Queer Performativity,” in Emanuela Bianchi, Sara Brill, and Brooke Holmes eds., *Antiquities beyond Humanism*, 211–238 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 228–236. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. There are also important disanalogies between soul and body that mark the limits of the health/disease model for an account of justice, virtue, and vice that I cannot discuss here. See further Sara Brill, *Plato on the Limits of Human Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 111–114, on the *Republic*, and on the shifting terms of the medical analogy in Plato, Brooke Holmes, “Body, Soul and the Medical Analogy in Plato,” in J. Peter Euben and Karen Bassi (eds.), *When Worlds Elide: Classics, Politics, Culture*, 345-85. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. See Brooke Holmes, “Bios.” [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. For superb feedback, editing, and encouragement on this essay, I am very grateful to Nick Axel, Beatriz Colomina, Demetra Kasimis, Karan Mahajan, Tony Vidler, and Mark Wigley. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)