

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

One of the most serious and now most urgent questions facing liberal democracy is whether there is a place in it for virtue. We seem to founder for the lack of it and to risk losing the autonomy we cherish by taking direct steps to foster it. It is the contention of this book that the clearest account of virtue and of its place in political life is Plato's account of Socrates and that studying his account of Socrates may be our best opportunity to cultivate virtue while strengthening liberal democracy.

For many years, there was broad agreement that liberalism is a system of institutional checks and balances that functions smoothly without regard to the virtue or vice of its citizens. Perhaps the clearest statement of this view is Kant's suggestion in *Perpetual Peace* that liberal institutions could effectively govern a race of devils. But today a remarkably broad range of thinkers agrees that if liberal democracy is to survive it must undertake new efforts to cultivate its own civic virtues. There is an emerging consensus that we suffer a decline in "values," a crisis of "character," a lack of "higher purpose." In particular, we hear warnings about the absence of "personal responsibility" to family and to society, the slackening of self-discipline, the lack of tolerance, the debasement of culture, the coarsening of political debate, among other problems. It thus becomes far clearer than before that liberalism has always depended on particular qualities of character. Yet there does not appear to be complete agreement about which virtues are most important or about how we can promote particular virtues without threatening our freedom. Nor is there a solid consensus about what virtue is.

As we begin the difficult task of identifying, ranking, and fostering the virtues, we find that the models of virtue that inspired earlier generations of citizens seem to have lost much of their luster. Locke's model of the rational and industrious individual is widely considered to be petty and isolated, based on an exces-

sively materialistic and narrow understanding of human nature. Similarly, the Kantian model of the autonomous individual who acts in accordance with universal moral categories seems abstract and rooted in dogmatic, enlightenment conceptions of reason and natural right that are no longer tenable. Seeking a model of virtue that combines independence of mind with a sense of civic responsibility, some thinkers look back behind modernity to the figure of Socrates. Long a hero to liberals such as Hume, Mill, and Dewey, Socrates is once again recognized as a paragon of citizenship. Richard Rorty identifies liberalism's civic virtues as the "Socratic virtues" of talking, listening, and deliberating about common concerns (Rorty 1982, 172; 1991, 29, 191). J. Peter Euben and Arlene Saxonhouse claim that Socrates' eagerness to consider every opinion and to reason with everyone about virtue makes him the image of democratic man (Euben 1990, 207–11; Saxonhouse 1992, 144). William Bennett's *Book of Virtues* repeatedly cites Socrates' courage, self-discipline, and sense of civic responsibility as models for contemporary moral education (Bennett 1993, 97–101, 246–51, 512–514, 657–660). While Socrates may be so appealing an example of citizenship that some will emulate him without further reflection, in order to promote his virtues as widely and as effectively as possible, it would be useful to learn what convinced him that his practices are, in fact, virtues. For how do we know that the Socratic virtues are excellences of the soul and not merely a set of habits and practices with which we could dispense at little cost? How do we know that his virtues do not merely resemble our virtues but in fact differ from them fundamentally?

While agreeing that Socrates exemplifies virtues we hope to find in liberal democrats, Leo Strauss argues that Socrates is especially useful to us because of what he can teach us about virtue. According to Strauss, liberal democracy is intended to be "an aristocracy that has broadened into a universal aristocracy" but has, instead, devolved into a narrow and spiritless "mass culture" that emphasizes security and efficiency and pays scant attention to excellence or virtue (Strauss 1968, 4, 5, 8, 19, 64). In order for liberal democracy to accomplish its original goal, we must recover the "liberal education" that Socrates practiced as he led his friends to "perfect gentlemanship," that is, to excellence and

greatness. Plato indicates that in its “highest sense,” this education is philosophy (7). According to Plato, a philosopher such as Socrates possesses “all the virtues or excellences of which man’s mind is capable, to the highest degree” (8). As a philosopher, Socrates is a “perfect gentleman” in the highest sense (Strauss 1970, 175–176). Strauss says that since we are not philosophers and cannot acquire the highest form of education, we must strive to share in it by listening to the “great conversation” among the “greatest minds” (Strauss 1968, 8). In this sense, Socrates is not only an example of a virtuous human being, but also our best access to learning and caring about virtue. For Socrates is “that one among the greatest minds who because of his common sense is *the* mediator between us and the greatest minds” (6). Only by studying how Socrates examined and chose among the competing claims of the greatest minds can we share in the liberal education that completes the promise of liberal democracy.

Like Strauss, Thomas Pangle identifies the highest form of liberal education with a Socratic education. While Pangle agrees with Strauss that liberal democracy always needs Socratic education to help it lift its gaze above the merely practical and mundane, he places more emphasis on how we need to foster Socratic education to alleviate problems that threaten liberal democracy from within. According to Pangle, the most serious danger for liberal democracy is, not “unsettling skepticism, or revolutionary discord, or the excesses of passionate diversity,” but instead “the deadening conformism to a bloodless and philistine relativism that saps the will and capacity to defend or define any principled way of life” (Pangle 1992, 213). Pangle reminds us of Tocqueville’s observation that a perversion of the principle of equality often puts a powerful pressure to conform on citizens of democracies. Tocqueville argues that because we are not omniscient, we must take our bearings from some authoritative opinions about our rights and duties and goals. But as democrats, we believe that we are equal to others and should be independent of anyone else’s authority. Consequently, we take as our authority opinions that are held by everyone and by no one in particular, that is to say, opinions held by “the public” at large. Because of the overwhelming reliance on the public opinion, individuals who are tempted to dissent from it are quickly isolated and overcome

(Tocqueville 1969, 254–258, 434–435). Pangle argues that this pressure to conform in democracy has become all the more powerful and dangerous now that it has embraced an especially intolerant form of “relativism.” He claims that even though democratic tolerance and equality promise everyone the opportunity of attaining “a just rank in the natural hierarchy of talents and attainments, of virtue and wisdom,” liberal democracy is now “haunted by the dangerous tendency to degenerate from the ideal of fertile controversy between competing moral and religious ways of life into the easygoing belief that all ways of life and all points of view are equal.” Those who hold this view are prone to think that no particular ways of life or points of view are “really worthy” or “in need of profound examination and passionate defense.” Moreover, they suspect that anyone who offers a substantive, principled, reasoned argument for the superiority of any one way of life, including for the superiority of liberal democracy, are for this reason “elitist” and immoral and intolerant. At this point, says Pangle, toleration and democracy begin to self-destruct (Pangle 1992, 215–216). According to Pangle, only a genuinely Socratic education can liberate us from dogmatic beliefs about the subjectivity of all values, beliefs that prevent us from experiencing true independence of mind and from rekindling the serious and free-ranging moral, religious, and political debates from which liberalism derived its original strength and purpose. He charges professors with the responsibility of helping students reenact, and thereby accept or modify, the “great reasonings” that originally “ushered in our modern civilization” (217, 194). Pangle promises that a Socratic education will be the opposite of all dogmatism to the extent that it makes us deeply aware of “the limits of our knowledge” and of “the power of the arguments that can be mustered against our beliefs” (195, 216). Without at least a taste of this Socratic education, he argues, it will be very difficult for students to develop the moral seriousness and intellectual freedom needed to practice our civic virtues.

While we may be attracted to the promise of a Socratic education, we need to know more precisely how a Socratic education differs from other kinds of education. What is it in particular about the way Socrates led his friends through books and through conversations to knowledge of the best way of life? How does a

Socratic education differ from and ultimately surpass a standard “Great Books” program? Why is it the single best antidote to our dogmatism and relativism? What evidence is there that Socrates uses reason in a way that is not reductionist or abstract but deepens our understanding of excellence and greatness?

The need to answer these questions becomes all the more urgent when we recall that making Socrates the model of our virtue runs counter to the some of the strongest currents of modern and postmodern thought. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that one of the fundamental points of agreement among most modern and postmodern thinkers is that Socratic philosophy cannot educate us to virtue and happiness. In fact, many doubt that even Socrates hoped for such an education. Socrates is often said to have concluded that he is completely ignorant of how to be virtuous or of how to be a “perfect gentleman” (Rousseau *First Discourse* 26–30; Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*, 202, 208; *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates”). Many scholars now claim that it was not Socrates but Plato who established philosophy’s grandiose ambition to lead us to virtue and happiness. According to Nietzsche, Socrates was a hyper-rationalist whose deafness to the instincts once permitted him the vulgar hope that reason can comprehend and even correct “Being”; but Socrates eventually recognized reason’s limits, abandoned this hope, and accepted his ignorance (Nietzsche *Birth of Tragedy* 13–15, *Beyond Good and Evil* 190–191). His student Plato, however, seized on and never relinquished faith in the power of reason. He is said to have committed the “great dogmatic error” of believing that the soul is animated by a “pure” desire to know the one, permanent thing that is “good in itself” (Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Preface”). But in fact the soul is merely a bundle of shifting, unconscious instincts or drives that are themselves subject to historical forces. Our conscious notions of goodness and virtue are merely “values” projected on the world by our unconscious drives in order to maximize their own power (Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* 1–14). Thus, Plato celebrates as true and as good only the lasting universals that are known by reason and disdains as false all the particular, changing, ineffable things that reason does not grasp. By drawing all phenomena around a “single center, principle or meaning,” Plato’s

universal forms annihilate genuine differences and rob particulars of their identities “by forcing them to become epiphenomenal veils for a generative ontological realm” (Foucault 1984, 20). Platonic rationalism thus marginalizes alternative centers of power, silences competing voices and visions, and imposes a single, abstract notion of virtue on the world. It not only narrows the range of phenomena that we find noble or worthwhile but also prevents us from experiencing such phenomena in their fullness. According to Nietzsche and Heidegger, we experience what is truly moving or awesome only through our historically changing, sub-rational instincts or through unpredictable, historical encounters with unfathomable “Being.” By grasping only what is accessible to everyone in any time or place, Platonic rationalism is able to touch only the surface of the awesome beauty known to those who experience artistic creations, political judgments, and religious revelations in the context of their particular historical settings.¹ Through Plato’s universal and technological worldview, we have sunk into a “darkened world” that lacks genuine differences, creativity, and rank (Heidegger 1977 [1947] 194; 1959 [1953] 45–48; 1993 [1976] 104–105).

In particular, the Platonic teaching that politics should be guided by transcendent standards is said to vitiate civic spirit and civic virtue. According to Rorty, the belief in transcendent principles prevents us from recognizing that our particular, historically contingent communities are the actual sources of our virtues and from cherishing them as such. According to Rorty, “our identification with our community—society, political traditions, intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see that this community is *ours* rather than *nature’s*, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made” (Rorty 1982, 166). Similarly, Benjamin Barber argues that we feel the greatest civic spirit when we look only to political participation rather than to Platonic philosophy to give meaning to terms such as *freedom* and *justice* and *law* (Barber 1984). Thus, far from educating us to virtue or liberating us from intolerance, Plato appears to erect enormous barriers to experiencing authentic civic virtue.

Because Plato’s admirers and critics make powerful cases for their respective sides, we might be tempted to abandon hope of deciding between them. Except that Plato’s greatest critics allow

that the brunt of their assault is aimed less at Plato's authentic thinking than at the "Platonism" into which that thinking devolved in the hands of subsequent thinkers and scholars. Nietzsche allows that his Socrates is an exaggeration and his Plato, a caricature (*Will to Power* 374, 432). As Heidegger observes, Nietzsche "protects" Plato by identifying his chief target as "Platonism" (Heidegger 1979 [1961] 205; cf. Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* "Preface"; *Twilight of the Idols* "How the True World Became a Myth"). In his own name, Heidegger warns against interpreting Plato in light of the language and thought of subsequent interpreters (Heidegger 1979 [1961] 190–191). In fact, a growing number of contemporary scholars, ranging from Strauss and his students to thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, J. Peter Euben, and Martha Nussbaum, have raised long-neglected questions about Plato's thinking by paying serious attention to the drama of his dialogues. By reading Platonic dialogues non-dogmatically, by considering the context of Socrates' words and actions, and by observing what Plato teaches about the variety of human types in his portrayals of Socrates' interlocutors, we may be able to determine for ourselves whether a Socratic education expands or contracts our political, religious, and moral horizon.

SOCRATES' EDUCATION IN THE LOVE OF THE NOBLE

One of Plato's most revealing accounts of Socratic education to virtue is contained in the *Symposium*, for this dialogue recounts how Socrates himself became educated in "erotic matters," the only positive knowledge that he ever claims to possess (Plato *Symposium* 177d7–8, 212b5–6; *Charmides* 155d4–e2; *Lysis* 204b5–c2; *Phaedrus* 257; *Theages* 128b1–4; cf. Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.6.28). The importance of this knowledge emerges as one discovers that it includes knowledge of how to cultivate and gratify our erotic longing to be "noble and good" and to manifest "true virtue" (*Symposium* 212a). According to Socrates' teacher, Diotima, this eros animates not only love affairs but also politics and the arts. Yet it is most fully expressed and most fully gratified through philosophy (*Symposium* 203, 206, 210a, 210d ff.; *Phae-*

drus 243–57; *Republic* 474d–475a, 485b–c, 490b, 499c, 501d, 521b). The drama of *Symposium* indicates that upon reflecting on Diotima's teaching, Socrates recognizes that his own, youthful love of the beauty or nobility of wisdom is based on hitherto unrecognized assumptions about justice and nobility and piety. Using what he learns from Diotima to think through his own experiences and beliefs about these things, Socrates concludes that he can learn what is truly "noble and good." He finds evidence in his own soul that philosophy can comprehend the soul, gratify its needs, and perfect its virtues. But he also discovers important reasons to question what he thinks he knows about what is noble and good and just and sacred. He becomes convinced that in order for philosophy to confirm that it can know the soul and its virtue, it must become "dialectical" and must examine the widest range of political, moral, and religious beliefs on their own terms. On the whole, Socrates' education in "erotic matters" teaches him that he can complete his own education to virtue only by "turning away" from his youthful, exclusively apolitical, study of nature and by becoming the mature *political* philosopher we know from Plato's dialogues (*Cicero Tusculan Disputations* 5.10–11; *Academia* 1.15–6; *Brutus* 39).

The *Symposium* is also important for the questions it raises about Socratic education to virtue. The speech that recounts Socrates' education is preceded by five other speeches praising the god Eros. By far the most impressive and celebrated of these is made by Aristophanes, the comic poet who is Socrates' greatest and most influential critic. In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes depicts Socrates as an atheistic and amoral natural philosopher who readily teaches his students that neither Zeus nor justice exist. Plato's presentation of Aristophanes in the *Symposium* helps us understand Aristophanes' own thinking about human nature and the gods and thus helps us see more clearly the core of his critique of Socrates in the *Clouds*. After Socrates finishes his speech, Aristophanes tries to respond but is interrupted by the entrance of Alcibiades, a brilliant but corrupt statesman, who makes a famous speech in praise of Socrates. But Alcibiades' praise is ambiguous. His very presence in the *Symposium* raises decisive questions about Socrates' ability to educate others to virtue. According to Alcibiades, he was very eager to acquire a Socratic

education but found Socrates unwilling to teach him. Socrates stirred Alcibiades' need to know how to be noble and good but cruelly mocked him when he asked for guidance. On the whole, Alcibiades' words and actions dramatically represent Aristophanes' critique of Socrates. By surrounding Socrates' account of his education with profound challenges to his wisdom, justice, and piety, Plato invites us to raise a dialogue among Socrates and his greatest critics so that we might learn for ourselves whether Socrates is a suitable educator to virtue.

The demonstration of Socrates' knowledge of erotic matters, or of the soul and its virtue, lies in his conversations with those who love noble virtue, such as with Alcibiades in the *Alcibiades Major* and *Symposium* and with Glaucon in the *Republic*. Socrates tries to educate both these ambitious, noble-minded young men to virtue. In both cases, he fails in some important respects to lead them to philosophy. Yet in these conversations he is able to show that his interlocutors are moved by an erotic need to know how to be both "noble" and "good." Furthermore, he is able to show that neither of them remains satisfied with his alternative account of virtue and that both admire, explicitly and implicitly, the virtues that Socrates admires and exemplifies. In addition to vindicating Socrates' knowledge and virtue, these dialogues help us understand the obstacles that prevent non-philosophers from reaching these things as well. Plato's dramatic presentation of Alcibiades shows us what can prevent ambitious people from benefiting from philosophic guidance. Plato's dramatic presentation of Glaucon illustrates the impediments that can keep the "civic" virtue of a non-philosopher from becoming the "true" virtue of a Socrates. But it would be contrary to the spirit of the dialogues to say that they decisively demonstrate the superiority of Socratic virtue to other kinds of virtue. Socrates' conversations show how philosophy itself points to the limits of his knowledge and repeatedly compels him to examine how others experience and understand virtue. For one of the crucial lessons of Socrates' education in erotic matters is that he can vindicate his knowledge and his virtue only by remaining open to the possibility that non-Socratics and non-philosophers may have some intimation or divination or knowledge of virtue that he lacks.

SOCRATIC EDUCATION IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Even if we grant that Plato's dialogues demonstrate that Socrates is educated to virtue, we are still left wondering what bearing this has on non-philosophers like ourselves. Is a Socratic education an essentially private good for a few fortunate thinkers? Or can Socratic education set the tone for society as a whole? If so, how would the teaching of Socratic education in our universities benefit those who live and work outside the academy? To begin to answer these questions, it is important to recall how profoundly philosophy has shaped modernity and postmodernity. Liberalism's moral and political categories derive from Enlightenment philosophers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, and Kant. The most powerful criticisms of liberalism originated with thinkers such as Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Even those postmodernists who argue that philosophy should not play a role do so on the basis of philosophic arguments. The philosophical origin of our political and moral vocabularies may expose them to the influence of Socratic rationalism. In fact, Socratic education has flourished occasionally in what seem even more unlikely settings, such as in Medieval Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Yet there are great obstacles preventing Socratic education from decisively influencing our politics and culture. Because we lack a Plato or an Al-Farabi to present it to us afresh, because its themes run counter to democratic and liberal tastes, and because it requires years of painstaking study, it is not difficult to see why some of its most sympathetic supporters hesitate to claim that it can correct our politics and culture.² But leaving those obstacles aside for a moment, in the best case, were Socratic education to acquire the sort of currency achieved by existentialism or postmodernism, what difference would it make in society as a whole? Were it to help set the tone of liberal democracy, what tone would it set? How would it touch the lives of those who do not study philosophy and who do not read erudite political and legal journals? While I do not claim to have decisive answers to these questions, I am willing to offer possible benefits of Socratic education to society as a whole, if only to spark a more concrete discussion of its potential uses to liberal democracy. Yet I want to stress from the outset that I mean only

to suggest some possible consequences were Socratic education to gain discernible influence in our culture. I do not expect this book alone to bring about such results.

Socratic education might serve a useful function by helping to transform heated, but generally limited, “academic” disputes into subjects of a broader public debate about virtue. It might, for example, have an especially helpful influence on the study, writing, and reading of literature. There is nothing new in recommending classical education to complement our thinking. Tocqueville argues that the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans offer the single best corrective to democratic moral leanings and literary tastes. For classical literature counters the tendency of democratic thinkers to focus more on the useful than the noble; to pay attention to mass movements and the sweep of history rather than to the influence of individual actors; to prefer the sensational to the charming; and to invent exaggerated, artificial, abstract characters rather than to depict the full range of actual human types (Tocqueville 1969, 472–474, 487, 488–489, 525). Tocqueville argues that only by cultivating a taste for classical literature at some universities can an element of democratic society be reminded of the full range of beautiful and noble things. Perhaps studying the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, as well as the poems, dramas, histories, and treatises encountered in Socratic education, would promote the desired classical counter-culture.

But in the eyes of many contemporary students of literature, to promote Socratic education would be less a complement to our limits than a concession to our biases. Some would object that philosophy is by its nature incapable of appreciating what is beautiful and true in dramas and novels and poetry. By introducing grand theories and “metanarratives” to our literature, philosophy is blinded to the unique, historical truths contained in a particular, “local” work of art (Elshtain 1995, 196–197; Havel 1991, 328–350). Others would grant Tocqueville’s point that literary taste and sensibility is always shaped by the dominant political class. But, unlike Tocqueville, they would identify that class not as the majority of ordinary citizens but as the predominantly European, male, propertied class that steers our society. According to this view, our literature’s sensationalism, its depictions of an abstract “everyman,” and its claims about the order or pur-

pose of history do not merely deprive us of examples of aristocratic art and noble individuals but, more importantly, conceal the existing marginalization of non-Europeans, women, the poor, and various minorities. In this context, Tocqueville's proposed remedy would not fully expose the political character of our literature. To contrast liberal and classical literature would only obscure the extent to which both are shaped by Eurocentrism, patriarchy, and oligarchy. Plato, of course, would be particularly inappropriate in that he is the father of the metanarrative that deprives particulars of the attention they are due. Rather than turn back to thinkers such as Plato, many writers and critics call for exposing the essentially political character of all literature and encourage those who have suffered exclusion to speak out in their own, distinct vocabularies. Thus, our "literary scene" seems divisible into at least two camps. On the one hand, we find a seemingly apolitical, often frivolous, sometimes coarse mass literature that is believed by many critics to exclude a host of political voices from expressing themselves. On the other, we find a less widely popular "multicultural" literature that professes to speak in many distinct and intensely political vocabularies.

Socratic education might help bridge the gap between these literatures and even raise the level of political culture. Far from contesting the claim that literature is deeply political, Socratics would begin by inquiring about what makes it political. Do we recognize it as political because it always reflects entrenched and therefore conflicting cultural and sexual and economic class interests? Or is it political to the extent that it says something about the fundamental issues that arise most vividly in heated political debates, such as, What is justice? What is sacred? What is admirable? What is good? Socratics would argue that we find "multicultural" literature political in this latter sense because it offers us moving insights—or because it makes provocative claims—about what merits our sympathy, our respect, and our blame. Socratics would ask what authors can see from their particular cultural or sexual or economic vantage points that eludes the "mainstream" of democratic society. They would ask what light they can shed on our history, on our failings as well as on our successes. But Socratics would also be alert to the possibility that what is most significant in "multicultural" literature are

insights that defy translation into other, more universal vocabularies. Perhaps what is most important can only be hinted at or glimpsed in particular, ineffable, historical things and thus can be captured, to the extent it can be captured, only by literature rather than by philosophy. A careful, dramatic reading of dialogues such as the *Symposium* and *Republic* shows that Plato does not, as is often assumed, simply dismiss poetry as rhetoric or as a tertiary imitation of reality. Even in criticizing how poets give their readers a moral education, Plato's Socrates concedes that "sensible men" can learn about virtue and vice from reading their poems (*Republic* 396c–e, 606b, 607b–e). Socrates calls poetry the rival of philosophy because, among other things, he is open to the possibility that only poetry captures important particular, changing, mysterious things that reason fails to apprehend. Modern Socratics would look to "multicultural" literature for signs that it sees just things, sacred things, noble and good things to which philosophy is blind.

By reading "multicultural" authors with an eye to what they imply about justice and the rest of virtue, the Socratics would try to articulate their political claims. In the course of elucidating these claims, they would hope to provoke the writers of this literature not merely to "express" their insights but to engage directly in the political activity of persuading and educating their fellow citizens about virtue and vice. In the best case, this would induce writers to compete with one another to guide the reading public. In order to present their obscure or difficult insights in the fullest and most compelling way possible, writers might inquire more deeply into the experiences and thinking that shaped their own cultures. They might examine the sacred texts and writings of great minds that have enriched traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Taoism. In order to defend liberal democracy, some might reflect on its moral foundations and vindicate it through dramas or novels or poetry, following the example of a Shelly or a Whitman. Still others might seek out forgotten insights from the West's pre-liberal poets, philosophers, and theologians. As these various authors respond to one another, they might reconstitute something of the great debates among civilizations and among thinkers that have arisen from time to time. If the writing is skillful and raises the most fun-

damental political issues, it may engage a wide range of readers. By making a significant part of the nation more literate about the controversies surrounding virtue, it could serve as a springboard for a more informed and passionate public deliberation about civic virtue.

Socratic education might elevate public discussion not only about the arts but also about the sciences. Science now seems as problematic as at any time since the beginning of modernity. The technology that was thought to harness energy to cure disease and save labor is now widely seen to have unleashed terrible powers that destroy whole species and ravage the earth. The discoveries that seemed to dispel onerous superstitions and cruel prejudices now seems to have led us to regard the earth as an object for exploitation rather than of wonder. Having lost its reverence for nature, humanity seems bereft of a home. The modern natural science on which technology depends has fallen under such suspicion that some wonder whether it, like literature, is a useful myth perpetrated by the dominant groups in liberal society. Some even propose developing non-Western and female forms of science to counter those that prevail in the modern West.

Accustomed to the reproaches of many religious fundamentalists, the scientific community has reacted to this new criticism with bewilderment and indignation. After reminding us of the undeniable evils alleviated by technology, scientists emphasize the distinction between technology and science itself. They note how scientists devote themselves to impractical subjects such as number theory out of a desire to know for its own sake. They point with pride to how theories such as quantum mechanics and the special theory of relativity account for an impressive array of phenomena. Reminding us of atrocities committed in the name of "Aryan" and "Marxist" science, proponents of science warn of accepting the subordination of science to ideology.

In addressing these disputes, Socratics might acknowledge the impressive evidence of modern science's ability to measure and account for phenomena. But Socratics would note how modern natural science declines to consider whether nature has ends or purposes and relies on an abstract, mathematical account of phe-

nomena without pausing to wonder if this is an adequate way of measuring and accounting for them. Most importantly, they would note that science takes for granted the legitimacy of its own enterprise. According to Plato's Socrates, when he was a young man he was deeply attracted to the natural philosophy of thinkers such as Anaxagoras (*Phaedo* 96 ff.). But Plato's *Phaedo* and *Symposium* recount how Socrates came to question the decisiveness of scientific explanations and to recognize that his own, youthful devotion to philosophy rests on assumptions about justice, nobility, and piety that need to be examined on their own pre-philosophic or non-philosophic terms. According to the Socratic view, the most massive problem of modern science is not that it is insufficiently theoretical but that it fails to pay enough attention to the questionable needs, beliefs, and expectations that animate it. Thus, a Socratic would ask modern scientists to vindicate their pursuits by learning to listen to and address those who question its validity on non-scientific, even pre-scientific, grounds. Were scientists led to examine themselves on non-scientific grounds, perhaps they would see the wonder of their own souls and the wonder of the nature of which they are a part. Perhaps they would find a way to accommodate technology to our deeper spiritual or moral concerns. Simply by acknowledging the religious, environmental, and existentialist concerns of those who fear that science degrades rather than ennobles humankind, scientists may turn a heated and mutual animosity among opponents and supporters of science into a serious inquiry into the place of reason in our lives. By at once focusing and broadening debate about the legitimacy of the arts and literature, Socratic education might help citizens outside the academy reflect on several concrete, alternative accounts of virtue.

Having helped to spark such reflections, Socratic education might shed additional light on the roots, the uses, and limits of civic virtue in particular. The great difficulty with this suggestion, of course, is that Plato's Socrates is famous for recommending one of the most illiberal civic educations ever imagined in the *Republic*. He argues in that dialogue that such an education is the best means of cultivating an erotic love of virtue among the citizenry (*Republic* 403a; cf. *Laws* 643d–e, 650b). Through the drama of dialogue, we see with our own eyes how Glaucon's erotic longing

for noble virtue leads him to love justice, the city, and law. But in this dialogue Socrates also argues that civic virtue is distinct from, less noble than, and in some respects even less genuine than the virtue of the philosopher. In fact, Plato's dramatic presentation of Glaucon shows us how and why his particularly "civic" virtue falls short of Socrates' true independence of mind and virtue of soul. Thus, the *Republic* is not simply an endorsement of an illiberal civic education but also a profound reflection on the inevitable limits of civic education, even in the best case. By studying works such as the *Republic*, keeping before our eyes both its praise of and reservations about civic virtue, we might better judge the potential uses and limits of our civic virtues. More generally, by helping to stir the most important debates about liberalism itself, Socratic education might help us see anew its strengths and uses. It might show us that liberal democracy is not an obstacle to moral and intellectual seriousness but a solid and valuable setting for thinking about, arguing about, and pursuing virtue.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The first chapter examines Richard Rorty's claim that liberalism will flourish without relying on any traditional philosophic foundations. After recounting Nietzsche's withering attack on Socratism and Platonism as progenitors of modern democratic resentment and nihilism, I discuss Rorty's claim that we can practice our liberal "Socratic virtues" without relying on "Platonic" philosophic support. I argue that Rorty wants to jettison philosophy from our conversation because he fears that philosophy—especially in the form of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's insights into the self and truth—poses a grave danger to liberal morality and politics. But I argue that these philosophic challenges are so serious and tangible that it behooves us to muster a philosophic defense of the Socratic virtues. The second chapter examines the objection that Platonic political philosophy ultimately fails to support the Socratic virtues and celebrates in their stead non-Socratic, "Platonic" virtues. I argue, however, that this may exaggerate the differences and tensions between Socratic and Platonic political philosophy. I argue that there are sufficient signs even in

what are called “Platonic” rather than “Socratic” dialogues that Plato continues to vindicate the dialectical political philosophy of Socrates.

The next chapters explicate Socrates’ claim to know the eros for noble virtue. Following Plato’s indication that Socratic philosophy emerged as a response to powerful criticisms of philosophic knowledge and virtue, the third chapter examines the poet Aristophanes’ powerful criticism of Socratic philosophy in Plato’s *Symposium* and in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. Following this is Socrates’ own dramatic and dialectical account of his education in erotic matters in the *Symposium*. The key discovery is that his own love of philosophy may not be as noble as he believed; that it rests on previously unexamined opinions about nobility, justice, and piety; and that he must examine these matters to confirm his belief that philosophy is genuinely noble and good.

The next two chapters examine the challenges to Socratic wisdom that are represented by Alcibiades. Based on Plato’s presentation of Alcibiades and Socrates in the *Alcibiades Major* and *Symposium*, the fifth and sixth chapters argue that Socrates ultimately shows that the soul is moved by an erotic desire to know that we are “noble and good” or “perfect gentlemen” and that only philosophy gratifies that desire. The seventh chapter explains how Socrates demonstrates that his way of life is most virtuous by examining the distinction between philosophic and civic virtue. Based on Plato’s presentation in the *Republic*, it explores the origins, uses, and limits of civic virtue. In particular, it explains how Socrates affirms through conversing with Glaucon that the virtue of the philosopher is more genuine and nobler than that of the non-philosopher. The conclusion discusses how Plato’s account of Socrates’ education to virtue constitutes a response to great critics of Socratic philosophy such as Aristophanes and Nietzsche and how the modern study of Socratic education could elevate the political culture of liberal democracy.