DIVERSITY AND ANCIENT DEMOCRACY
A Response to Schwartz

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W HAT CAN ONE LEARN about democracy from the fifth and fourth century practice of and theory about Athenian democratic institutions? Joel Schwartz's review of my book *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (1992) in the November 1994 *Political Theory* (vol. 22, pp. 685-8) implicitly raises this question. While the issue was at best subsidiary in a book that focused primarily on the ancient theorists' explorations of the political consequences of an epistemological search for an unseen, underlying unity, the question of how ancient democracy can help us understand the most common modern political regime is an important one and worthy of more consideration than I can offer in these brief comments on Schwartz's review of my book. Ours is a world in which democracies constantly have to address demands for unity, ethnic or otherwise, as well as demands for an openness to diverse populations. Our ability to accept "the other," to acknowledge difference at the same time that we recognize the need for a unity based on some set of similarities, is central to the preservation and successful functioning of democratic institutions.

Schwartz reads the argument of my book as turning the "demos" into the "totalizing modernist," unable to accept the differences that derive from the particular bodies of individual members of the community, and as suggesting that the "aristoi become the champion of diversity" (1994, 686). The former point deserves primary consideration; the latter is simply a misreading of the argument, but in itself indicates the difficulties we often have with acknowledging the tensions *within* democratic regimes between a need for a unity based on identity of members as opposed to a unity that can incorporate and build from differences. To approach this as a conflict between aristocracy and democracy with all the normative baggage that accompanies those words is to ignore that those tensions plague democracies and is to limit the possibility

of addressing them seriously. It is also to assume that the only important lessons to learn from Athenian democracy are about participatory politics. There is much more that can be gained from a consideration of Athenian democracy and from those who wrote while it flourished. As Aristotle teaches us over and over again in the *Politics*, all regimes, democratic or otherwise, must express in their foundational principles who is equal and who is unequal, who is to be included and who is be excluded; in so doing, all regimes must incorporate differences at the same time as identifying what it is that makes the members of those regimes equal participants in the political life of the city. Democracies cannot ignore this challenge. The ancients help us understand the consequences for democracies of attempts to build a "political structure through collective speech and abstraction from familial bonds . . . [that] overcomes the transitory mortal nature of human bodies" (Saxonhouse 1992, 233).

The democratic regime in Athens emerges from many forces, but among the most important and the one identified by Aristotle in *The Constitution of Athens* is Cleisthenes's restructuring of the traditional patriarchal tribes to re-situate the citizens as equals within the demes (21.1-4). Following Vernant (1982) and Loraux (1986), I would argue that the origins of democracy in the late sixth century entailed an interchangeability among equal citizens, or as Loraux observes from her study of the language of the funeral orations, "The Athenians, inter-changeable and anonymous, are so many replicas of a single implicit model, that of the hoplite . . . there are no oarsmen or archers, only Athenians. This lack of differentiation is no doubt democratic" (1986, 278). This articulation of democratic foundational principles in the speeches of its orators suggests the difficulty that democracy has with the incorporation of a diversity deriving from the physical nature of its citizens. In the search for a unifying principle in the equality of its members, democracy often abstracts from the body its particular characteristics, its particular strengths, its particular weaknesses, and its particular ties to others. To acknowledge the differences that the body, perceived by the senses, introduces disrupts the cohesive principle of identity and the unifying language, while undermining the interchangeability of citizens in the cycle of civic space and time (Vernant 1982, 101).

While Schwartz sees this as portraying the demos as "totalizing" and thus damaging the reputation of ancient democracy, I am more interested in how the theorists and the playwrights resist this "totalizing" tendency in democracy (or any regime), not as an attack on democracy itself, but as a challenge raising the question of how democracies can incorporate diversity while building on the principles of equality. The ancient playwrights and theorists critique democracy, but they critique it not because they fear or scorn the

masses and wish to reinstitute any sort of aristocratic model; they do so because they recognize that democracy as it is experienced and expressed in ancient Athens *can be* "totalizing." While epistemologically, the pursuit of an underlying unity is attractive (as seen in the power of the Parmenidean "What Is" and the Platonic Good or Forms and in the image of the net of Hephaestos as used by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*), the ancient theorists (including Plato, I argue) worry about the political implications of allowing such a principle to control the structure of any regime. Their analyses force us to address the ways that democratic regimes can avoid "totalizing," since, as they so vividly present it, such a political perspective can only lead to tragedy and sterility rather than to a necessary mutuality and creativity.

My discussion of three Greek plays, *Seven Against Thebes*, *Antigone*, and *Ion*, shows the playwrights questioning the attempts by their heroic characters to provide unity and uniformity in the city, that is, to imitate the "totalizing" (as Schwartz refers to it) impulses identified by Vernant and Loraux. The critiques illustrate the tragic consequences of attempts to exclude the particularized "other" (in the case of the plays discussed, this is primarily the female and the family) and to make citizens as interchangeable as the warriors in the phalanx, without particularities among themselves and without particular attachments to their mothers, brothers, sons, and so forth. In *Seven Against Thebes*, for example, Eteocles with his focus on autochthony tries to deny woman's role and becomes the victim who dies while slaying his brother. In *Antigone*, Creon, drawing on themes of interchangeability, crudely asserts that any field would do for Haemon's plow. Any particularity in the relationship between Antigone and Haemon is ignored, as all women are considered the same. In *Ion*, the characters barely escape the tragedy of a mother killing her son because of an obsessive fear of the outsider, as the Athenians attempt to keep their "race" pure.

These issues emerge as well in Plato's dialogues and in ways that, I believe, have not been adequately addressed before. I read the dialogues not as showing "aristocratic" scorn for hoi polloi, but as pointing to the dangers of a democracy that might encourage "totalizing." For example, Euthyphro is unwilling to assess why he might want to think about differences between his father and anyone else whom he intends to indict for murder. In the *Crito*, the Laws of Athens are hardly comforting when they reassure Socrates that they, not Socrates, will educate Socrates' young sons (i.e., Socrates, like the democratic citizen, can easily be replaced by anyone else in the city). In the Callipolis of the *Republic*, women become participants in the ruling of the city only by becoming indistinguishable from men (Saxonhouse 1976). Indeed, it is only in the democracy as portrayed in Book 8 of the *Republic* that we escape this totalizing; the love of the many-colored, the openness, the

unwillingness to set sharp boundaries there allows for a multiplicity of human types found in no other regime (561e). This democracy suffers not from mass rule, but from an incapacity to distinguish the condemned man from the innocent one or the animal from the human, but it is also the only regime where a Socrates could flourish. Insofar as Athens executed Socrates, it was not a democracy—at least, according to the schema of Book 8; in a democracy, as Socrates explains to Adeimantus, "the one sentenced to death or exile no less remains and dwells in the midst of all, and with no one noticing or caring, he wanders around as if a hero" (558a).

By making us aware of the dangers of a "totalizing" politics—democratic or tyrannical—the ancients also alert us to the wonders, as well as the fears, of multiplicity. The word *fear* in the title of my book is taken from the "wonders" ode of the *Antigone*. The chorus, while marveling at all the achievements (*ta deina*, that which is wonderful, that which is frightening) of human craft, learns also to fear the destructive force of those crafts. The issue is not whether the authors I discuss are for or against democracy, for or against diversity; the issue is, what are the consequences of a "totalizing" that emerges from a fear of the multiple and how can we address those consequences in the political regimes in which we live and in which we might want to live?

It is in this context that Aristotle remains the hero of my book. It is not, obviously, a defense of hierarchy that gives him this status (which, unfortunately, is the implication of Schwartz's review). Indeed, I argue that while Aristotle may accept the naturalness of hierarchy and see in it the basis of any order to the world we experience, he makes it abundantly clear that because of our incapacity to see the soul wherein lie the true qualities of an individual, we may often (in fact, we usually do) construct hierarchies that are opposed to nature, thus enslaving those who are not slaves and allowing men to rule over women to whom they are inferior (Saxonhouse, 1985, chap. 4). Aristotle, instead, by treating the political community as a "sharing" (*koinonia*) in which there could be many sharers (who may not be as interchangeable as the member of the phalanx), offers a new way of thinking about political unity. Diversity in his model need not lead to a rather stultifying (aristocratic, if we must, but oligarchic would be more appropriate) hierarchy that would, no doubt, be in opposition to nature and set the worse over the better.

Aristotle makes us aware that nature has left us on our own, unable to identify any natural hierarchies with our limited capacities of observation, but he also gives us through the concept of *koinonia* a basis for unity that does not require identity and the interchangeability that was part of the democracy of Cleisthenes and of the speakers of funeral orations. Aristotle,

as he tries to think about the diverse and the one in such images as the army arrayed for battle (1247b), the river (1267a), the chorus (1276b), the ship (1276b), and the potluck dinner (1281b), achieves this through a reaffirmation of what we observe with our senses, the recognition that the multiple is real, that the human being is particularized. This does not require any appeal to aristocratic principles or oligarchic values. By reading Aristotle in this way, I find, he helps us understand how the experiences of ancient Athenian democracy assist us in our own attempts to address the principles on which democratic regimes—struggling with demands for unity and demands for multiplicity—can be based.

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