PLATO'S PRACTICAL POLITICAL-RHETORICAL PROJECT;  
THE EXAMPLE OF THE REPUBLIC

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Was Plato involved in practical politics? Responses to this question differ widely, but commentators seem united in ignoring Plato’s own conception of practical politics; they judge Plato by a standard which is not his own. In this paper I examine Plato’s conception of politics as it is found in early dialogues, and argue that in light of this conception we can attribute to Plato a well-conceived practical political project which he actually carried out. Thus, Plato was involved in practical politics.

In the first section, I argue that we can understand Plato’s peculiar conception of politics from the evidence of the early dialogues. In the second section, I discuss how Plato formulated a project to fill the political void he saw in Greek society. In the third section, I examine two major obstacles that this project faces. In the fourth section, I demonstrate how the drama and dialectic of the Republic are, in part, designed to overcome these two obstacles. I end with a brief summary and conclusion.

I

The best way to understand Plato’s conception of practical politics is to consider the conception of politics attributed to Socrates in the early dialogues, primarily in the Apology and the Gorgias.

During his trial, Socrates claims a number of times that he is on a mission from god (22a, 23b, 28e ff.). He describes his mission this way: "I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul" (30a-b, cf. 29c-e).
Socrates in the *Apology* does not explicitly characterize his activity as political. In fact, he states that he "did not venture to go to the assembly and advise the city" (31c) and that his divine sign prohibited him from taking part in politics [*ta politika prattein*, 31d5]. But these remarks simply mean that he did not take part in the public affairs which the ordinary Athenians identify with politics. Nonetheless, he claims that he has a divine mission to the city (30e1-3), and that he is the greatest benefactor of the city (30a, cf., 36b-37a). Thus, he implicitly characterizes his work as political, rather than as a private matter between himself and his interlocutors.

Socratic philosophy aims at the "best possible state of the soul." The health of the soul is identified with justice in the *Crito* (47e-48a), the *Gorgias*, and of course, the *Republic*. This seems odd: justice is the quintessential social virtue, but in these dialogues justice is characterized as a psychological state. Plato purposely presents this paradoxical definition to emphasize the intrinsic connection between one's own good and the good of others. A great deal of the psychic sickness of the Athenians is due to their mistaken notion that there is no such intrinsic connection; by correcting this mistake through philosophical discourse, Socrates will help heal the Athenian soul.

Socrates in the *Apology* says that he would agree that he is an orator (*rhetor*, 17b6) and someone who can speak powerfully (*deinos legein*, 17b7), if this means someone who speaks the truth (17b5). In fact, his philosophizing is essentially *rhetoric*: it is an act of persuasion (e.g., *peithein*, 30a8), exhortation (*parakeleuein*, 29d5), and demonstration (*endeiknunai*, 29d6).

In summary, the *Apology* implicitly characterizes Socratic philosophy as a rhetorical-political practice which aims at justice, the health of the soul. This implicit characterization is made much more explicit in the *Gorgias*.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates attacks sophists and rhetors (463a-465d, 503a-b) and famous