

# The Atlantic

## Making Athens Great Again

How does a citizen respond when a democracy that prides itself on being exceptional betrays its highest principles? Plato despaired, but he also pointed the way to renewal.



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**W**HAT HAPPENS WHEN a society, once a model for enlightened progress, threatens to backslide into intolerance and irrationality—with the complicity of many of its own citizens? How should that society’s

stunned and disoriented members respond? Do they engage in kind, resist, withdraw, even depart? It's a dilemma as old as democracy itself.

Twenty-four centuries ago, Athens was upended by the outcome of a vote that is worth revisiting today. A war-weary citizenry, raised on democratic exceptionalism but disillusioned by its leaders, wanted to feel great again—a recipe for unease and raw vindictiveness, then as now. The populace had no strongman to turn to, ready with promises that the polis would soon be winning, winning like never before. But hanging around the agora, volubly engaging residents of every rank, was someone to turn on: Socrates, whose provocative questioning of the city-state's sense of moral superiority no longer seemed as entertaining as it had in more secure times. Athenians were in no mood to have their views shaken up. They had lost patience with the lively, discomfiting debates sparked by the old man. In 399 B.C., accused of impiety and corrupting the young, Socrates stood trial before a jury of his peers—one of the great pillars of Athenian democracy. That spring day, the 501 citizen-jurors did not do the institution proud. More of them voted that Socrates should die than voted him guilty in the first place.

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It's all too easy to imagine, at this moment in American history, the degree of revulsion and despair Plato must have felt at the verdict rendered by his fellow Athenians on his beloved mentor. How could Plato, grieving over the loss of the “best man of his time,” continue to live among the people who had betrayed reason, justice, open-mindedness, goodwill—indeed, every value he upheld? From his perspective, that was the enormity Athenians had committed when they let

themselves be swayed by the outrageous lies of Socrates's enemies. Did truth count for nothing?

A despondent Plato left the city-state of Athens, whose tradition of proud patriotism and morally confident leadership at home and abroad had been recently and severely shaken. Whether he was witnessing the end of Athenian exceptionalism or a prelude to the long, hard work of rebuilding it on firmer foundations, he could not have begun to predict.

**P**LATO WAS in his late 20s when he lost Socrates. Born an aristocrat, he boasted a lineage that went back, on his mother's side, all the way to Solon the Lawgiver, the seventh-century sage often credited with laying the cornerstone of Athenian democracy. As Plato confessed in the famous *Seventh Letter* (which, if it wasn't written by Plato himself, was composed by an intimate familiar with the details of his life), he had planned to take an active role in the leadership of his illustrious polis.

Enshrined in the city-state's mythology was the fiction that its inhabitants were autochthonous: They had literally "sprung from the earth," which gave them a special claim to the soil they occupied. The Athenian triumph in the Greco-Persian Wars in 479 B.C., after a dozen years of on-and-off fighting, had intensified the pride in autochthony. Eligibility for citizenship—already an exclusive privilege denied to women and slaves, of course, but also to most tax-paying alien residents (some of them very wealthy)—was tightened. In 451 B.C., the statesman Pericles proposed a law that only those with two Athenian-born parents, rather than just a father, qualified. Still, as Athens asserted dominance throughout the region, presiding as the standard for Hellenic greatness, the emerging imperial power drew in immigrants. The best and the brightest arrived, hoping to engage in the city-state's achievements, its art and its learning, even if they were excluded from its vaunted participatory democracy.

But Plato, born and bred to play a prominent role within "the Hellas of Hellas"—as Athens had lately been anointed—turned his face away. On a voyage that lasted about 12 years, he ventured well beyond the borders of the Greek-speaking lands.

He went south and studied geometry, geography, astronomy, and religion in Egypt. He went west to spend time with the Pythagoreans in southern Italy, learning about their otherworldly mixture of mathematics and mysticism, absorbing from them esoteric sources of *thaumazein*, or ontological wonder. Plato, already primed by Socrates not to take Athenian exceptionalism for granted, was on a path toward metaphysical speculations and ethical and political reflections beyond any entertained by his mentor.

**H**IGH ON THE LIST of presumptions that Socrates had aimed to unsettle was his fellow citizens' certainty that their city-state brooked no comparison when it came to outstanding virtue. To be an Athenian, ran a core credo of the polis, was to partake in its aura of moral superiority. Socrates dedicated his life to challenging a confidence that he felt had become overweening.

Athens was undeniably extraordinary, and the patriotic self-assurance and democratic energy that fueled its vast achievements did stand out. But the Greek quest for an overarching ethos to guide human endeavor hadn't happened in isolation. It was part of a normative explosion under way in many centers of civilization—wherever a class of people enjoyed enough of a respite from the daily grind of life to ponder the point of it all.

How to make one's brief time on Earth matter? That was the essential question at the heart of ambitious inquiries into human purpose and meaning. Every major religious framework that still operates, the philosopher Karl Jaspers pointed out, can be traced back to a specific period: from 800 to 200 B.C.—the Axial Age, he called it. The sixth century (roughly a century before Socrates's prime) was the most fertile interlude, when not only Pythagoras but the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, and several Hebrew prophets including Ezekiel lived and worked. From Greece emerged Western secular philosophy, which brought reasoned argument to bear on the human predicament and the reflections it inspired. Those reflections, no less urgent now than they were then, can be roughly summed up this way:

Untold multitudes have come before us who have brought all the same passions to living their lives as we do, and yet nothing of them remains to show that they'd ever

been. We know, each one of us, or at least we fear, that the same will happen to us. The oceans of time will cover us over, like waves closing over the head of a sailor, leaving not a ripple, to use an image that inspired abject terror in the seafaring Greeks. Really, why do any of us even bother to show up for our own existence (as if we have a choice), for all the difference we ultimately make? Driven to pursue our lives with single-minded passion, we are nevertheless, as the Greek poet Pindar put it in the fifth century B.C., merely “creatures of a day.”

The Athenians’ conviction that they mattered uniquely—the entitled spirit that prevailed by Plato’s time—had long been in the making. For several generations of ancient Greeks before him, a less assured proposition had served as a guide: We aren’t born into lives that matter but have to achieve them. Such an endeavor demands a great deal of individual striving, because what counts is nothing less than outstanding accomplishments. Theirs was an ethos of the extraordinary, and its pitiless corollary was that most lives don’t matter. The deeper, and humbler, sources of the ethos dated back even further, to a time of anomie and illiteracy—the Greek Dark Ages, scholars used to call the period that followed the mysterious destruction of the great palace kingdoms of the Bronze Age around 1100 B.C. The wondrous ruins left behind—the massive bridges and beehive tombs, the towering edifices inscribed with indecipherable lettering—spoke of daunting feats of engineering. “Cyclopean,” the awestruck successors called the remains, for how could mere humans have wrought such marvels without the collaboration of the one-eyed giants?

Clearly there had been a previous age when mortals had realized possibilities all but unthinkable to lesser specimens. Those people had mingled so closely with immortals as to assume an altogether new, heroic category of being, celebrated in tales sung by ordinary Greeks. The reverence is embedded in *The Iliad*, which extols Achilles as the greatest of all the legendary Greek heroes—the man who, given the choice, opted for a brief but exceptional life over a long and undistinguished one. “Two fates bear me on to the day of the death,” he proclaims. “If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies. If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory dies.” Being

song-worthy is the whole point of being extraordinary. It's in *kleos*, in glory and fame, that the existential task of attaining a life that matters is fulfilled. Living so that others will remember you is your solace in the face of the erasure you know awaits.

These pre-monotheists' way of thinking about how to make the most of our lives is one that we, steeped in social media and celebrity culture, are in a fine position to understand. What is most startling about their existential response is its clear-eyed rejection of transcendence. The cosmos is indifferent, and only human terms apply: Perform exceptional deeds so as to earn the praise of others whose existence is as brief as your own. That's the best we can do, Pindar said, in the quest for significance:

And two things only  
tend life's sweetest moment: when in the flower of wealth  
a man enjoys both triumph and good fame.  
Seek not to become Zeus.  
All is yours  
if the allotment of these two gifts  
has fallen to you.  
Mortal thoughts  
befit a mortal man.

**B**UT AN ETHOS of the extraordinary poses a practical problem. Most people are, by definition, perfectly ordinary, the ancient Greeks included. Ultimately, they found a solution to this problem in propounding a kind of participatory exceptionalism, encouraging a shared sense of identity that also made them highly competitive. Merely to be Greek was to be extraordinary. Their word for all those whose native language wasn't Greek was *barbarians*, because non-Greek languages sounded to them like so much *bar-bar*—Greek for “blah, blah, blah.”

No collective experience transformed the Greeks' perception of themselves more than their unlikely victory over the Persians. In vanquishing the vastly superior forces of this world empire, the Greeks had given their poets a contemporary feat to sing about. Herodotus initiated his *Histories*—which is to say, initiated the practice of history itself—with these words:

These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory.

The Greco-Persian Wars helped convert the ethos of the extraordinary from ancestor reverence into a motivational agenda. Aristotle, writing his *Politics* a century after the end of the wars, observed the spillover into the life of the mind: “Proud of their achievements, men pushed farther afield after the Persian wars; they took all knowledge for their province, and sought ever wider studies.”

And nowhere were this pride and this pushing more assertively on display than in fifth-century Athens, where business was conducted within sight of the Acropolis. There the monuments emblematic of Athens's newly gained imperialist glory were on display, including the exquisitely proportioned Parthenon, which, despite its immensity, seems to float—an idealized form of materiality. The architectural splendors, proof of undaunted genius and vitality, had arisen out of the ruins to which the older shrines of the Acropolis had been reduced in 480 B.C. by the invading Persians.

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**A democratic society with an exceptionalist heritage may prove unprepared to respond wisely when arrogance takes over.**

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The democracy that had gradually developed in Athens added considerably to the ethos of supreme distinction. The contrast to the oligarchic, tyrannical, and monarchical systems elsewhere couldn't have been starker: Every citizen was expected to partake in decision making directly, not through representatives. And just in case there were any Athenian citizens who didn't fully appreciate the uniqueness of Athens and what it conferred on them, Pericles—whose very name means “surrounded by glory”—articulated it for them.

“In sum, I say that our city as a whole is a lesson for Greece,” he declared in his famous Funeral Oration in 431 B.C., “and that each of us presents himself as a self-sufficient individual, disposed to the widest possible diversity of actions, with every grace and great versatility.” One of the first battles of the Peloponnesian War had just taken place, the start of what turned into a 27-year struggle, and Pericles called upon Athenian exceptionalism for inspiration. Elevation in the minds of others, now and in the future, went hand and hand with demonstrations of power:

This is not merely a boast in words for the occasion, but the truth in fact, as the power of this city, which we have obtained by having this character, makes evident. For Athens is the only power now that is greater than its fame when it comes to the test ... We are proving our power with strong evidence, and we are not without witnesses: we shall be the admiration of people now and in the future.

But navigating the line between patriotic pride and arrogance wasn't easy. In extolling the greater glory of Athens, its leaders didn't just aim to pump up ordinary citizens. They also hoped to tamp down individual hubris—to keep the city-state's ambitious upstarts committed to the collective cause, rather than to the lawless pursuit of their own personal glory. If that meant stoking political hubris, Pericles was more than ready. He went on to say, “We do not need Homer, or anyone else, to praise our power with words that delight for a moment,” but he was not advising

modesty. Quite the contrary, he celebrated the real-life deeds of imperial Athens as indelible proof of superiority:

For we have compelled all seas and all lands to be open to us by our daring; and we have set up eternal monuments on all sides, of our setbacks as well as of our accomplishments.

Cataloging Athenian achievements, from the uniqueness of the city-state's democracy to its magnanimity, Pericles suggested that its vanquished enemies should take pride in having been bettered by such unparalleled specimens of humanity. "Only in the case of Athens can enemies never be upset over the quality of those who defeat them when they invade; only in our empire can subject states never complain that their rulers are unworthy."

**H**ERE, IN THE ATTITUDE underlying Pericles's Funeral Oration, lies the meaning of Socrates's life, as well as the meaning of his death—and of Plato's response, which was not, in the end, a retreat. Even, or especially, a democratic society with an exceptionalist heritage—as Plato and his fellow Athenians were hardly the last to discover—may prove unprepared to respond wisely when arrogance takes over and expectations go awry.

Neither Socrates nor Plato ever challenged the Greek conviction that achieving a life that matters requires extraordinary effort and results in an extraordinary state. But Socrates was determined to interrogate what being exceptional means. Personal fame, he contended, counts for nothing if your life isn't, in itself, a life of virtue. Only that kind of extraordinary accomplishment matters—and the same could be said for city-states. Power and the glory it brings are no measure of their stature. The virtuous citizen, indeed, is inseparable from the virtuous polis, his claim to significance rooted in his commitment to the common good. What counts, Socrates taught, is the quest for a better understanding of what virtue is, what justice and wisdom are. The goal is a moral vision so compelling that every citizen,

no matter his position, will feel its force and be guided by it. A democratic state that fosters the continuous self-scrutiny demanded by such a vision can hope for greatness. Mere *kleos* is for losers.

Only an exceptional man would have dared to challenge such a fundamental presumption of his society. But if Socrates was so extraordinary, how did Athenians—who took pride in citizens of distinction and had long been fondly tolerant of their exuberantly eccentric philosopher—come to turn against him? Socrates's conviction and execution are even more puzzling given that his trial was a complete farce, at least as Plato presented it in the *Apology*. The philosopher ran rings around Meletus, the man put up to be the prosecutor. Socrates exposed him as ill-informed and perhaps something of an opportunist, ready to declare one thing one moment and then contradict himself the next.

But the date of the trial reveals a polis whose exceptionalist identity had been challenged and whose citizens had been caught off-balance: How great were they, really? Where was their moral compass? Athens was still reeling from defeat in the Peloponnesian War five years earlier—and at the hands of those uncultivated Spartans, who had no high culture to speak of, no playwrights or Parthenon. They could barely string three words together, much less match the rhetorical brilliance on which the Athenians congratulated themselves. It surely didn't help that the Spartans had behaved far more magnanimously in their final victory than the Athenians had behaved during the long and brutal conflict. (The Spartans didn't burn Athens to the ground. They didn't slaughter its males and cart off its females as booty. Sparta's nobility in declaring that it would treat the vanquished city as befit the great imperial power it once had been must have felt particularly galling.)

Aided by a Spartan garrison, an oligarchic government rose to power, composed of aristocratic Athenians (including one of Plato's relatives) who disapproved of democracy. The Thirty, as they were called, employed secret informers and terrorist tactics, drawing many Athenians into ignominious collusion. When, in 403, the oligarchic collaborators were driven out after less than a year, Athenian democracy was restored—under quite unusual conditions. The customary

bloodbath never happened. No vicious rounds of retribution and counter-retribution ensued. A declaration of general amnesty, granted to all but a notorious few at the top, eased the way toward an ameliorating fiction that the Athenians, with the exception of the Thirty and a coterie of their conspirators, had been victims. It was a collective act of willful forgetting. In fact, the citizens were subject to an oath, *me mnesikakein*, which means “not to remember past wrongs.”

The amnesty was an act of political brilliance, and the Athenians, predictably, couldn't stop praising themselves for it. The rhetorician Isocrates joined in:

For whereas many cities might be found which have waged war gloriously, in dealing with civil discord there is none which could be shown to have taken wiser measures than ours. Furthermore, the great majority of all those achievements that have been accomplished by fighting may be attributed to Fortune; but for the moderation we showed towards one another no one could find any other cause than our good judgement. Consequently it is not fitting that we should prove false to this glorious reputation.

But the plaudits they bestowed on themselves couldn't hide the fact that Athenian exceptionalism had taken a hit since the glory days of Pericles, when the statesman had declared that any enemy would be proud to be vanquished by so superior a people. Moral shame accompanied military shame. The grueling war had driven the Athenians to atrocities against fellow Greeks, about which the historian Thucydides was heartrendingly vivid. Along with the amnesty's *me mnesikakein*, the citizens and their leaders might very well have wished to legislate a forgetting of the brutal enslavement and extermination of enemies at Athenian hands.

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T A JUNCTURE like this, as Athenians strived to shore up their vision of themselves, perhaps it shouldn't come as such a surprise that they lost their tolerance for Socrates's hectoring. His fellow citizens could afford

to appreciate a genuine Athenian original in the days when their worthiness was so manifest, as Pericles had declaimed, that no Homer needed to spread word of it. But not now, when their famous rhetoricians had been reduced to extolling how uniquely brilliant they were at handling defeat. And so at the first opportunity, with the Spartan forces withdrawn and democratic government stabilized, the gadfly of the agora was indicted.

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## **Socrates contended that personal fame counts for nothing if your life isn't, in itself, a life of virtue.**

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Socrates's compatriots wanted to make Athens great again. They wanted to restore the culture of *kleos* that had once made them feel so terrific about themselves. It's not hard to understand why Plato fled a citizenry that, in struggling to recover from its sense of diminishment, was prepared to destroy what had been best about the polis—the extraordinary man whose subversive challenges to blinkered opinion and self-righteous patriotism held the key to resurrecting any exceptionalism worth aspiring to.

And yet eventually, after his years of self-imposed exile, Plato came back to Athens, bringing his newly gathered learning along with him, to take up where Socrates had left off. Except Plato didn't philosophize where Socrates had. He abandoned the agora and created the Academy, the first European university, which attracted thinkers—purportedly even a couple of women—from across greater Hellas, including, at the age of 17 or 18, Aristotle. Foremost among the problems they pondered was how to create a society in which a person like Socrates would flourish, issuing stringent calls to self-scrutiny, as relevant now as ever.

Athens may never again have presided as the imperial center it was before the war. Instead, it staked what has proved to be a far more enduring claim to extraordinariness in becoming a center of intellectual and moral progress. Empires have risen and fallen. But the bedrock of Western civilization has lasted, built upon

by, among many others, America's Founders—students of Plato determined to create a democracy that could avoid the flaws Plato observed in his own.

In establishing the Academy, Plato didn't forsake the people of the agora, who, as citizens, had to deliberate responsibly about issues of moral and political import. It was with these issues in mind that he wrote his dialogues—great works of literature as well as of philosophy. The dialogues may not represent his true philosophy (in the *Seventh Letter*, he explained that he had never committed his teachings to writing), but for more than 2,400 years they've been good enough for us, as inspiring and exasperating as Socrates himself must have been.

In 25 out of Plato's 26 dialogues—and we have them all—Socrates is present, often as the leading spokesperson for the ideas that Plato is exploring, though sometimes, in the later dialogues, as a silent bystander. It's as if Plato wants to take Socrates along with him on the intellectual quest he pursues during the course of his long life. It's as if he wants us, too, to take Socrates along as we return again and again to the Herculean effort of applying reason to our most fervently held assumptions. Socrates's message could not be more timely. The mantle of glorified greatness belongs to no society by right or by might, or by revered tradition, he taught. It belongs to no individual who, ignoring the claims of justice, strives to make a name that might outlast him. Exceptionalism has to be earned again and again, generation after generation, by citizens committed, together, to the endlessly hard work of sustaining a polity that strives to serve the good of all.

After his beloved mentor was put to death, condemned by his fellow citizens, a despairing Plato left the city-state of Athens.

But he returned.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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