

Plato and Pericles: Two Funeral Orations

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After the trial of Socrates and his death, philosophy and politics parted company. Platonic political philosophy with its traditional influences is the greatest index of the persistent discord between these two ways of human existence, and modern struggles for the integration of theory and practice have failed to reconcile the *vita contemplative* with the *vita active*. It is necessary to go back to the beginning and reconsider the partnership between philosophy and politics. We need to probe the primordial concept of the political in pre-platonic times. A suitable source is in Thucydides' *History* Vol.II : Pericles' funeral oration.

In this paper I try to compare this famous speech with another, the Platonic funeral oration in his dialogue *Menexenus*. Plato, an observer of the decline of his city-state and a philosophical revolutionary, intended to overcome Pericles' oratory and fame, but only emphasized how brilliant the political ideals of the Athenian past could be. The philosopher based the fundamental principles of the polis on the natal equality (*isogonia*) of citizens, referring to their high birth (*eugeneia*), while the Athenian orator affirmed political equality (*isonomia*) based on the equal freedom of public speech (*isegoria*) as the source of the power of his *polis*.

In this contradistinction we can discern two principal ideas of the political: the natural community and the artificial constitution. If the modern political form of the nation-state belongs to the former, the primordial concept of the political has to do with the latter. Moreover we can recognize the distinction between *physis* and *nomos* as being originally situated not merely at the root of sophism, but also at the very beginning of the philosophical attack against the political.