

A Philosophical Discussion on Plato's *Statesman*

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Plato's dialogues have always been a challenge for interpreters and a good stimulus for reflection. This does not apply, however, to the dialogue *The Statesman* (*Politicus*), which has unfortunately been treated in a stepmotherly way in academic research. Christopher Rowe, one of the leading Platonists, claims that *Politicus* is "one of Plato's least read, and least loved, works."¹ Nevertheless, prominent Platonists who have written extensively on *Politicus* include Mitchell H. Miller, Julia Annas, Kenneth M. Sayre, Christopher Rowe, Malcolm Schofield, John Sallis, Dimitri El Murr, Friedo Ricken, Rafael Ferber, David A. White, Jacob Klein, M. S. Lane, Staley Rosen, and others. Experts agree to an extent that in regard to representations of Platonic political philosophy, *Politicus* occupies a place midway between the middle *Republic* and the late *Laws*. The Platonic question of good rule and good form of government remains the central theme of this dialogue. The topic of inquiry (*διαζήτην*, 258b) is statesmanship and the statesman, which is actually the continuation of the Socratic questions, as Malcolm Schofield has pointed out: "Of all Plato's charges against democracy, its inability to accommodate true political knowledge is the most fundamental as well as the most Socratic."²

The present volume should be an important contribution to filling the gap in research and deepening the understanding of this dialogue. Melissa Lane gives a precious overview of the volume's explorations, the authors of the first two chapters (Gavin Lawrence; Fabián Mié) offer an analysis of Plato's method of "collection and division" (*sunagōgē* & *diairesis*) and demonstrate that this method is, after all, important and relevant for Plato's late work.

¹ C. J. Rowe "Killing Socrates: Plato's Later Thoughts on Democracy" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 2001 (121) 2001, 63-76, p. 64. Cf. Platon, *Politikos*. Übersetzung und Kommentar von Friedo Ricken. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2008, 7.

² Malcolm Schofield, *Plato. Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, 122.

The *Politicus* forms a quintet of Platonic dialogues that include *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and the fugitive *Philosopher*, which Lawrence calls Plato's most important achievement. The *definiendum*, the *politikos*, is specified with the help of the dialectical method (258b7-d3). The visitor from Elea divides, at the beginning, the expert knowledge (*epistēmē*) (258b4) into practical (*praktikē*) and theoretical (*gnōstikē*) (258e5) because the politician is close to the knowledge. Further, he takes the theoretical knowledge and divides it into critical or judgmental (according to the model of computation) and ordering knowledge (260b3-5). In the third cut, he chooses directive knowledge and divides it into both those who pass on commands given by others (as heralds and speakers) and self-directive knowledge (i.e., those who produce commands and give them to others to carry out or implement) (260e5). El Murr argues for the pursuit of a unified dialectic approach throughout the dialogue, which is very clearly evidenced by the stranger in 292B3-D1 at the beginning of his analysis of the various forms of constitution: The *Politicus* starts from the premise that the statesman is one of those "who possess knowledge" (258b4), namely the knowledge (*epistēmē*) of ruling over men which is "practically the most difficult and the most important thing of which to acquire knowledge". The question remains whether "a mass of people in the city are capable of acquiring this expertise" (292d4-e2).³

David Bronstein explains, referring to Stephen Mann, that the method of collection is not merely enumerative in character, it is a matter of coming to an awareness of 'a nature identically present in...different objects'. It is a process of recognizing (*gignoskein*) something as something while differentiating it from everything it is not. Since the structure of political knowledge is often unpredictable, it remains impossible to achieve a clear overview of the entire field of the political and one can at best have a true opinion. Thus, if one strives to orient oneself according to the paradigm of successful governance, one has at best a true opinion and by no means exact knowledge.

Plato's philosophy is usually discussed and characterized as a form of moral idealism or dualism. Therefore, it is interesting to note Rachel Barney's attempt here in *Politicus* to determine Plato as a moral realist: "We are now in a position to see that *Statesman* 283b1-287b3 is an important and surprisingly rare thing: a Platonic argument for moral realism. It goes unrecognized as such because the emphasis is not where modern readers

³ The translation is taken from *Plato: Statesman*. Edited with an Introduction, Translation & Commentary by Christopher J. Rowe. Warminster: Aris & Phillips 1995.

would expect it to be, on vindicating the objectivity of *ethical* judgement in particular.” (134) The analysis of the passage (349a-350c) shows that in the case of ruling, the competence for the task already presupposes ethical judgments, for example, about justice and practical wisdom, *phronēsis*. It is the most obvious overlap between the domain of craft and that of virtues, as in the Socratic Early Dialogues. Absolutely certain knowledge is not attainable in this area of the practical; one is content with the correct opinion, with the reliable judgment.

This is the reason that the metaphor of “second sailing” (*deuteros plous*) from *Phaedo* (99 c9-d1) as the second-best option is used in this context. The ability of the ruler is compared to a noble navigator and an extraordinary physician (297e-299e) because it is about practically recognized knowledge. The German Platonist Christoph Horn analyzes the demanding passages 293e-297b with the assertion that laws in this context could at best serve in an optimal city as memoranda (*hupomnēmata*: 295c4) given by the person who has the *basilikē technē* at his disposal. This ruler, who has such a form of analysis and judgment, can - like a trainer or a doctor - individually prescribe what is best for the person; and as long as he is present, that is, under ideal conditions, he will do so in every single case, at least approximately. The question of writing down laws (*sungrammata*) also has the dimension of the second-best option, namely the correct opinion (*doxa*), which remains a sign of the lower cognitive orientation because the first option is not attainable. Plato positions himself here between the philosopher-rulers from the dialogue *The Republic* and the rule of laws analyzed in *The Laws*. In *The Republic*, there is a discussion of the laws in the ideal state, and polis is posited as the ideal paradigm in terms of orientation. *The Statesman*, on the other hand, assumes that the ideal constitution will never become a reality (303b4f.9) from which a question arises for the *Statesman* that is not asked in *The Republic*: How can the laws of existing states be judged and improved? Because the judges in the Athenian democracy who examine the conduct of office were chosen from among the wealthy or selected by lot from among the people as a whole, Plato’s criticism is that a layman is incapable of judging the expertise of a physician or a statesman.

The specific skill (*dunamis*) of statecraft is explored by the interweaving of three segments: ruling (over the other forms of expertise), caring (about the laws and about everything related to the city), and weaving (putting everything together in the most proper way) (305e2-6). The right timing (*kairos*) is equally important for right decisions and belongs to the art of the

reasonable ruler. Rachana Kamtekar shows that the statesman must employ the expertise of normative measurement in mathematical terms to prevent conflict in the state. He can do this by focusing on the “thin” ethical standards of the “just”, the “fine”, and the “good”: “Acceptance of these standards of just, fine, and good enables citizens to measure contending proposals, now translated into descriptive and quantitative terms, against the standard laid down by expertise.” (233)

The paradigm of weaving would be chosen for the exercise of the art of ruling because it has, as an activity, in mind the whole. David Bronstein argues that this method, as a paradigm, is based on a “holistic theory of knowledge”, but it is in fact zetetically structured and not taken as an abstract methodological tool.

Gábor Betegh has analyzed the role of myth in dialogue (268d5-277c6), and convincingly demonstrated that it “remains subject to dialectic.” The stringent methodological procedure and the openness to the narrative are essential characteristics of Platonic writing.

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