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INTRODUCTION

METHOD AND POLITICS IN
PLATO'S *STATESMAN*

As the discovery of truth and the direction of life are the twofold function of philosophy, so Plato saw a twofold counterfeit of his ideal educator and governor in the professors of wisdom and the public men of his time. The one corrupted inquiry with controversy, the other spoiled politics with faction.

Lewis Campbell¹

A colleague once remarked to me that the *Statesman* is a 'very lonely' dialogue. Interpreters as different as the dean of Anglo-American analytical scholarship, Gilbert Ryle, and a leading Straussian have found it wearying and rebarbative to read.² It has won little reflected glory from the analytical attention paid to its companion the *Sophist* in the last thirty years.³ Some have taken it to be mainly a discourse on the method of division, itself a procedure of dubious import, and in any case presented more fully in the *Sophist*, *Philebus* and *Phaedrus*⁴. Others consider it essentially a discourse on

¹ Campbell (1973) i, referring to the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* together in introducing his edition of both dialogues.

² Ryle (1966) 285 calls it 'this weary dialogue'. Benardete (1984) Vol III.73 asks, 'Does the *Statesman* demand a special effort on our part not to grow tired?', though it should be said that unlike Ryle he finds this wearying quality to be part of the dialogue's message about the application of knowledge to politics. See also Grene (1950) 181: 'The *Sophist* and the *Statesman* are among Plato's work unique in that they are dull.'

³ An exception is McCabe (1994). Studies in the Straussian tradition have tended to treat *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman* together: Benardete (1984), Klein (1977); see also Dorter (1994), though his discussion of the *Statesman* is mainly a summary of its text. A recent and welcome wave of studies of the dialogue includes the papers of the Third International Symposium Platonicum held in Bristol, 1992, selected in Rowe (ed.) (1995), with others in Nicholson and Rowe (1993); the translation introduced by Annas (1995), the masterful edition with commentary of Rowe (1995), and Rosen (1995). Miller (1980) is also thoughtful.

⁴ Taylor (1961) 9 says that 'the really serious business of both dialogues' is with method rather than the identification of sophist, statesman, or philosopher. Ryle

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political theory,⁵ though pallid beside the poignancy of the *Apology* and *Crito*, the vitriol of the *Gorgias*, the grandeur of the *Republic*, the monumentality of the *Laws*. Seldom have studies of the method and politics of the dialogue been combined in more than a consecutive way.⁶ This book explores their intimate connection.

Both the method and the politics of the *Statesman* hinge on the question of the authority of political expertise and how it is to be distinguished from rival forms of expertise rampant within the city. The statesman cannot be defined without distinguishing him from similar rivals, nor can he rule without using his knowledge to command these rivals within the city. In both cases a key rival is the rhetor. He is not banished from the city, but allotted a strictly subordinate role within it, while his concepts for argument and skills in politics are appropriated and revised in defining the statesman. To resolve the challenge of rivals requires a method of definition which appropriates the rhetorical notion of 'example', and a politics of the authority to command which appropriates the rhetorical notion of the '*kairos*' or the appropriate action at a given moment. Both method and politics, moreover, strive to reform assumptions and puncture delusions about the evident worth of certain forms of expertise or political action.

In its fundamental concern with the nature and authority of political expertise, the *Statesman* provides one answer to the problem posed in the second protreptic of the *Euthydemus* (288–92): what could be the subject matter of political expertise? After all, Socrates and Crito muse inconclusively

(1966) 285–6 sees whatever value the divisions have as the value of the dialogues: he considers division in the *Statesman* a demonstration 'for beginners only', compared to the more advanced *Sophist*. Contrast Rosen (1995) 2: the dialogue is 'a demonstration of the inappropriateness of diaeresis to the study of human affairs'.

⁵ Skemp (1961) 67 finds the interest of the dialogue in the politics and the 'myth': he considers the divisions in the *Statesman* as at best 'a gentle satire' on the clumsy arrogance of the Academy youth.

⁶ Taylor (1961) 192 is representative: '[T]he *Politicus* [the Latin name for the dialogue] has a double purpose. It is meant to provide a second and still more elaborate demonstration of the method of "division" ... and also by leading us to a sound definition of the statesman, to enforce certain fundamental material points of constitutional theory.'

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there, the 'kingly art' can't possibly know how to carry out the specialties of other experts, be they doctors or carpenters, as well as they can. Yet the kingly art, which is wisdom, must know how to use the goods these other specialists provide if they are to be beneficial rather than harmful. How can the kingly art know how to use what it does not know how to produce? And in virtue of what kind of knowledge, then, can the political expert (or possessor of the 'kingly art')⁷ claim to rule?

In the *Republic*, the philosophers are to rule not in virtue of any peculiarly political knowledge they possess, but rather in virtue of their synoptic and pervasive understanding of the Good. If the question were to be pressed, however, what specifically counts as political knowledge in the *Republic*, it is not clear what the answer would be.⁸ This is the question which is pressed in the *Statesman*. Given how many forms of expertise there are in the city – cobblers, generals, navigators and so on – two questions must be asked about the postulate of a purely political expertise. First, what does it know? Second, how does it rule? The *Statesman* answers these questions (and so circumvents the problem of possession and use) by distinguishing between knowing what to do and knowing when to do it. In assigning to statecraft the unique role of commanding when each expert should perform his work and so coordinating the work of different experts, the dialogue emphasises time as the dimension of political action. Political expertise is neither meta-knowledge nor another species of knowledge, but rather knowledge of the relation

⁷ The *Euthydemus* talks only of 'wisdom' and the 'kingly art' (*basilikē technē*) in this context. The *Statesman* alternates indifferently between '*politikē epistēmē*', '*politikē technē*', and '*basilikē technē*', though it should be noted that the *Sophist* uses *technē* and never the sometimes more prestigious *epistēmē* for the dubious art of the sophist. I follow Rowe (1995) 1–2 in usually translating all the *Statesman*'s terms by 'political expertise' while using 'statecraft' or 'the art of ...' in contexts where 'expertise' would be awkward. Note also Rowe's discussion *ad loc.* of the contrived technical formation of *politikos* (statesman), which he suggests may be a neologism.

⁸ Myles Burnyeat has argued in lectures at Cambridge that the *Euthydemus* can be read as postdating and critically commenting on the *Republic*. His lectures stimulated my interest in the problem about the kingly art in the *Euthydemus*. However, the present argument does not depend on accepting any particular view about dating the dialogues.

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between other forms of knowledge and the temporal demands of the moment of action, or the *kairos*.

Based on mastery of the *kairos* and command of the other experts, the political expert's authority is exalted against the static and inflexible authority of the written and unwritten laws. But at the same time, legal authority is defended against the vagaries of personal rule, whether of tyrant or faction, in the absence of a true political expert. It is this double move, first attacking and then offering a limited vindication to the law, which has led some scholars to identify a newly realistic attitude in the *Statesman*,⁹ one which is more favourable to democracy¹⁰ (a law-abiding democracy being classed as better than any lawless regime), and which marks a transition toward the insistence on the rule of law rather than men which characterises the *Laws*. The eagerness to find evidence of softening and transition,¹¹ however, risks obscuring the uncompromising vindication of the nature, possibility, and authority of political expertise (in relation to its rivals) which I claim to be the central concern of the dialogue. Indeed, one advantage of my interpretation is that it rescues the *Statesman* from the halfway house of transition, dependent on a dating of the works impossible to establish with certainty, and finds in it a philosophical identity which is based rather on its pressing of certain questions which are not pressed so far or so hard – for whatever reasons – elsewhere in Plato.

To say that the *Statesman* presses its own philosophical questions is not to say that its answers are wholly stable, or satisfactory from a modern perspective. The idea of certain

⁹ Annas (1995) exemplifies this view of the dialogue as, on the one hand, taking a new interest in the 'real world' (x) but, on the other hand, 'unstable because Plato has not yet thought through the degree of compromise that these new ideas demand' (xvi). Cf. also Barker (1918) 330: 'Plato makes his peace with reality ...'

¹⁰ The question of whether the *Statesman* is really kinder toward democracy than other Platonic works will be looked at in the context of fourth-century debates in Part III.

¹¹ Annas (1995) xxii is again representative in viewing the dialogue as transitional: 'The *Statesman* is in some ways a record of complication and even confusion. But not only does it help us to see how we get from the *Republic* to the *Laws*, it is a record of the entanglements that only a very great and original thinker, defending and qualifying his boldest work at the same time, could get into.'

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knowledge of the *kairos* founders on two difficulties: the multiple variables involved in having such knowledge, and the touchy problem of knowing how to recognise who does. The statesman must know precisely what needs to be done at every moment and by whom, surmounting the stunning difficulties of calculation of the future in a prospective judgment without the benefits of hindsight. Although concentrating on the practical and temporal knowledge of the statesman, the dialogue does not separate the unity of reason.¹² The *Statesman* recognises the need for reason to be practical but considers this still a purely intellectual achievement and one which can in theory be perfect. There is no place in this conception of practical reason for the lesser precision allowed it by Aristotle, nor for the latter's emphasis on the contribution of habituated perception and judgment to its success.¹³ Later political thought tended either to accept the Aristotelian version of practical reason or even to strip away all claims to reason from the practical effects of will or virtue.¹⁴ The *Statesman* can claim, in this regard, very little influence on the subsequent history of political thought; even where its themes of temporal knowledge and decision are taken up, they are associated with the mild counsels of prudence rather than the knowing commands of the statesman.

In insisting on an objective *kairos* knowable by the political expert, the *Statesman* even more than the *Republic* remains within the ambit of the Platonic agenda identified by Karl Popper: its question is not, 'How can we so organise political

¹² *Phronēsis* is occasionally mentioned in the *Statesman* but never defined or explicitly linked to knowledge of the *kairos*, while the claim that the statesman has *epistēmē* is never renounced: for these reasons I find no grounds for distinguishing the statesman's knowledge as a special form of practical wisdom, *pace* Rosen (1995) vii: '[t]he central theme of the *Statesman* is the relation between *phronēsis* . . . and *technē*'. Griswold (1989) 152–3 notes the cosmos' possession of *phronēsis* in the *Statesman's* story (269d1) but observes that the dialogue's focus on *epistēmē* and *technē* renders this 'rather far' from Aristotelian *phronēsis*.

¹³ Lear (1988) 170–4 gives a clear account of Aristotle's distinction.

¹⁴ One version of seizing the moment was offered by Machiavelli's *virtù*, on which see Skinner (1978) Vol. 1, 128–38; other Renaissance conceptions emphasised the importance of virtue, in particular the virtue of temperance, in being able to act prudentially in line with the *kairos*; see the suggestive remarks in Hutson (1996).

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institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?' but rather 'Who should rule?'¹⁵ The *Republic* had only asked this after identifying the needs of the soul, the city, and the relation of the virtues to knowledge. The *Statesman* takes for granted that the person with knowledge should rule, and goes on to ask, 'what does rule consist in, and how is knowledge related to rule?' and the theoretical interest of this question will concern us in this book. Still, it is significant that neither the *Statesman* nor any other Platonic dialogue asks a further question which might be thought to arise for a commitment to wise rulers: 'is there a way for non-experts to know who should rule?'

We will see in Part III that the *Statesman* discusses what should happen when people meet with a true political expert, and even discusses why what should happen (recognition and obedience) might not, but offers no instruction beyond this as to how the people should discriminate between, as it were, a true and a false prophet. The comparison with prophecy is especially telling because at stake in the claim to know the *kairos* is the claim to know the future. To be told that one ought to submit to a true prophet, and even be told what such a true prophet would know and be able to do, is of little use if false prophets abound on every side. In this light it is not surprising that the *Statesman* has proved so infertile in later political thought. Though I hope to show that it is rewarding to think through, it has evidently been a difficult text to think with in the development of the tradition.

Though lonely in its recalcitrance to readers, the *Statesman* is less genuinely singular than most other Platonic dialogues. It continues the conversation recorded in the *Sophist* begun when a 'stranger from Elea' is invited by Socrates and Theodorus to ascertain the relative worth of sophist, statesman, and philosopher (*So.* 216c–217c). This Stranger appears only here and conducts only these two discussions exploring two

¹⁵ Popper (1995) 120, a work written during the Second World War and first published in 1945. The question of whether Popper read Plato fairly notwithstanding, this is a ringing appeal to the liberal conscience.

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parts of the same question. Some have claimed that because the *Theaetetus* is also mentioned implicitly at the beginning of the *Sophist*, any interpretation of the pair must encompass it as well.¹⁶ This claim requires examination.

Theodorus opens the *Sophist* (216a) saying: 'Here we are once more, Socrates, as yesterday's engagement requires of us, and we have brought a visitor too.' 'Yesterday's engagement' almost certainly refers to the close of the *Theaetetus* describing a meeting between Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus, ended when Socrates leaves to meet his indictment and instructs Theodorus to meet him again the following dawn (210d). But to insist too much on this back-reference creates some difficulties: are we then to assume that the framing claim of Euclides to be narrating the *Theaetetus* (143a–c) encompasses the two unnarrated dialogues as well?¹⁷ If not, then we have in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* a performed version of conversation,¹⁸ while the *Theaetetus* narrates the previous day's events with the hindsight of several decades. Nor is the *Theaetetus*' topic explicitly linked to the next day's reunion. In this, as in the presence and leadership of the Stranger from Elea, *Sophist* and *Statesman* are tightly bound together to an extent much beyond the claimed chronological proximity of the conversation narrated in the *Theaetetus*. The extent of the textual connection between them justifies a common reading of the pair without prejudice to the possible connections of the *Theaetetus* or of other dialogues.

Such a common reading is offered here only in part. I have not attempted a global interpretation of the two dialogues – the epigraph is as stimulating a remark as I know on the subject – or the vexed question of the 'missing' philosopher.¹⁹

¹⁶ Miller (1980) 1–2, Klein (1977) 3 and Benardete (1984) xvi, though the last acknowledges that the relation between the pair is closer. Dorter (1994) tries to argue for a quartet of 'Eleatic' dialogues, including the *Parmenides* on the basis of Socrates' remark to Theaetetus that he once met Parmenides as a young boy (*Tht.* 183c).

¹⁷ Myles Burnyeat once asked me this.

¹⁸ Perhaps conducted without a break: Diès (1935) vii.

¹⁹ Sprague (1976) 100 and Klein (1977) 177 identify the statesman with the philosopher; Griswold (1989) 163 n.13 seems to me right in observing, against them, that

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I have, however, attempted here to lay out the methodological relationship between the Stranger's two inquiries, since the methods of division and example are introduced in the *Sophist*, and more fully explored in the *Statesman*. Perhaps these comments will ease the way for further attention to the oddly neglected task of interpreting the two dialogues together.

On this note it must be said that I have taken one liberty and refused another. I take the liberty of identifying the Eleatic Stranger's arguments with Plato's, in the spirit of identifying what the arguments are on their own terms rather than seeking clues that they are to be disregarded or minimised. I refuse the liberty of speculating here on the relationship between Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger, or Socrates and Plato. Such speculation would require at the very least that fuller interpretation of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* as a pair suggested above.

The discussion tries not to assume knowledge of the dialogue, but inevitably those able to follow along with a text either in English or Greek will gain more from the proceedings (and find them more interesting).²⁰ The introduction to each Part, and the conclusions to Parts I and III, are designed to be so far as possible free-standing, summarising the main lines of interpretation and linking them to wider issues in philosophy and the history of political thought. Those who turn to them first, or solely, will find the principal results of the book on the trust that the sections in between have established the textual evidence. To conclude this introduction I sketch the progress of the argument through the three parts.

The fundamental contention of Part I, dealing with method, is that the *Sophist* adumbrates and the *Statesman* develops

the Stranger says explicitly that sophist, statesman and philosopher are three (*So.* 217b). But see the persuasive arguments for finding the philosopher rather in the practice of philosophy in the dialogues in Frede (1996) 146, 149–51, and McCabe (forthcoming).

²⁰ Rowe (1995) is an invaluable critical edition, with introduction, translation and commentary. Translations by Waterfield in Annas (1995) and Ostwald/Skemp (1992) are also widely available.

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a combined method consisting of two elements: division (*di-aeresis*) and example (*paradeigma*). Whatever may be true of division in other dialogues, we fail to understand its role in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* if we fail to recognise its intimate links, in both dialogues, with the use of an example of a special kind. The characteristic features of such examples include their relative insignificance compared to matters of political import, their structured definitions, and their relevance to the subject of the inquiry in hand. Division works adequately to define the main objects of inquiry only when it elucidates the structure of definition either of the example or of the item exemplified.²¹ Moreover, I shall show that the Eleatic Stranger's handling of examples involves attention to their implicit logic of similarity and to their role in inquiry, developing a theoretical construction of example which compares with work in contemporary philosophy of science and contrasts with the use of example in the ancient practice of rhetoric.

The link between method and politics, in the centre of the dialogue and so in Part II of the present book, is provided by the outlandish *muthos* ('story', in my translation, rather than the usual 'myth'). The story has tended to monopolise a literature of its own,²² often with some reference to the politics preceding it in the dialogue, but with none to the politics which follow or to methods other than 'myth' itself. I interpret the story as the fulcrum of the dialogue, which in hindsight makes sense of the preceding method and politics, and in foresight introduces the methodological and political themes still to come. In the aftermath of the story, method and politics are themselves unified. Reflecting on his own story after telling it, the Eleatic Stranger suggests that it was flawed by a political prejudice (a traditional belief in kings as shepherds,

²¹ Contrast Dorter (1994) 227 and *passim*, who seeks a 'method of hypothesis' (like that of the *Republic*) to complement division in the *Statesman*, but is reduced to gesturing at the general 'overcoming of incompleteness' in lieu of textual evidence for such a method.

²² More papers were given on it than on any other topic at the 1992 Third International Symposium Platonicum which was dedicated to the dialogue and held in Bristol.

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ruling a tame and unthinking population) which turned into a methodological prejudice (the telling of an overly long story which cannot be properly used as an example) (*St.* 277b1–6). The puncturing of prejudices, the purportedly common-sense assumptions which often distort both intellectual inquiry and political choices, is signalled in the headings, in all three parts of the book, about the identification and curing of ‘delusions’.

According to the Stranger's self-criticism of his story, the method necessary in its stead is an adequate, and appropriate, example. The example he now chooses is the art of weaving, and this example eventually guides not only the definition of statecraft as an intellectual competence, but also an analysis of its characteristic activity. As argued in Part III, statecraft emerges in a special relation to the other arts, able to judge and coordinate their opportunities for action, which results *inter alia* in the subordination of rhetoric. The political expert is also to carry out the task of weaving together two conflicting factions in the city. Each of these factions is conceived as characteristically disposed to err on one side or the other of the mean, in making evaluative judgments. I shall show that it is essential to recognise the dynamic temporal background assumed in this analysis in order to make sense of both the problem and its proposed resolution; further, that such a conception of evaluative conflict speaks to an important issue in the prior, and subsequent, history of political thought.

The ideal of statecraft is, however, only one half of the political theory developed in the *Statesman*. A wise ruler is, as the story somewhat fancifully suggests, not always available to guide human affairs. Indeed, according to the story, in the present cosmic epoch the god has retired from active guidance, leaving humans to imitate the cosmos in forced self-rule. If the story's cosmology reassuringly insists that the god will someday return to manage human affairs, the political parallel drawn is less comforting. Arrival of a genuine statesman is a theoretical possibility, and must be kept open as a practical one. But in his absence, without the guarantee that the true statesman has ever come or ever will, humans must contrive to rule themselves. And, making use of the idea of imitation