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## Introduction

What is politics? For the ancient Greeks, the question had a simple answer: Politics was concerned with matters relating to the polis: the city-state (as it is usually although not entirely satisfactorily translated) at the center of Greek life. The polis, however, has disappeared, and it is doubtful whether polis life could be recovered and, if so, whether such a recovery would be welcome. Politics today, despite the etymological connection to the ancient Greek city-states, is situated primarily in the context of the nation-state. For us, therefore, the meaning of politics is somewhat more complicated: On the one hand, we have a narrower understanding of politics because the nation-state usually separates politics and culture, or politics and society – things that went together in the polis. The scope of politics thus is reduced because we tend to distinguish between – as they are so often phrased – the personal and the political.

Yet, on the other hand, our understanding of politics is significantly broader than the Greek usage. For the Greeks, politics was concerned with life in the polis. We, however, speak of politics in a variety of settings: international politics, family politics, and even political economy. Such a broad use of the term would strike the people who first formulated it as odd insofar as they understood politics to be something unique and different from other kinds of human communities.

Or so it is usually supposed. That the polis, and therefore politics, differs from other kinds of human communities is insisted on by Aristotle, who opens the *Politics* by declaring that his subject is not just any community but rather the community that aims at “the most authoritative good of all.” Yet, Aristotle also indicates in this passage that he is responding to a somewhat common view that denies that the polis differs from other human communities in any meaningful way. This view holds that the only difference among kingly rule, political rule, household rule, and

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despotic mastery over slaves is the number of people over whom the rule is exercised. Such a view, Aristotle says, is neither noble nor true. Politics differs from the other kinds of rule because the polis differs in an important way from the other kinds of human community.

What the difference involves, Aristotle suggests, is not the size of the polis – something that he introduces but does not discuss until Book VII – but rather whether the political community indeed is defined by its pursuit of the highest and most authoritative good of all. For Aristotle, the polis is distinguished from other communities by the fact that it, and it alone, has as its end the good life for human beings. It is having this unique end that makes the polis different from the other communities and, indeed, limits the size of the political community. Therefore, Aristotle's restriction on the scope of politics to the polis is due less to etymology than to his belief that the best life for human beings can be achieved only in the polis. In smaller communities, the necessities of mere life can and, perhaps, do tend to take precedence over living well. Moreover, he suggests that part of living the best life, for political animals, is to live politically. That is, thinking and deliberating in conjunction with others about the good, the just, and the advantageous are part of what it is to lead the good life. Such activities, in his view, are the very essence of and unique to politics.

The modern view is significantly different: Contemporary political science often still reflects Harold Lasswell's (1990) famous maxim that politics is about who gets what, when, and how – in short, politics is about power. This view enables us to speak about politics more freely; it becomes a concept that can be extended from the polis not only to the nation-state but also to the economy, the family, and even the world. Such a view, however, may neglect important realities about politics, particularly what it involves beyond power and the way in which politics differs from but is connected to other kinds of communities. The debate between Aristotle and those who blur the distinctions between political and other communities, therefore, is one that we should take seriously, for if Aristotle is right, then perhaps we err in speaking about office politics, international politics, and even national politics.

Despite the fact that we speak as though Aristotle is wrong about the uniqueness of politics, much contemporary literature in political science has appropriated elements of Aristotle's political theory. He is obviously an important resource for virtue ethics and the communitarian critique of liberalism, but he also has been a resource for debates about the rule of law, the mixed regime, pluralism, the dangers and possibilities of

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commerce, political deliberation, and even environmental politics and biopolitics. Perhaps Aristotle's guidance on the practice of politics can be preserved without adhering to his belief about what politics is, but such a judgment first requires understanding that belief.

Placing Aristotle in opposition to those who believe that there is nothing special about politics therefore would seem to be a particularly good way to grasp his understanding of the distinctiveness of political life. After all, it is in response to their claims that he begins to present his own argument. This also recommends to us an examination of those against whom Aristotle is arguing, and in the opening pages of the *Politics*, the most obvious target of his critique is the Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Statesman*. As I show in this book, reading the *Politics* through the lens of the *Statesman* offers rewarding insights about the origins, purpose, and practice of politics.

As observed by almost everyone, Aristotle opens the *Politics* with a criticism of the Eleatic Stranger's claim that there is no difference among despotic, household, political, and kingly rule except that of size.<sup>1</sup> What few have noted is the way that the entirety of the first book of the *Politics* serves to distinguish the various kinds of rule. Yet, Aristotle's contention that the specific difference of political rule is that it seeks the good life is one that guides the rest of the *Politics*. The disagreement about the kinds of rule therefore is rooted in a disagreement about the end, or purpose, of politics. These disagreements are the subjects of Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. As I argue in Chapter 2, Aristotle and the Eleatic Stranger emphasize different purposes of politics because they have different understandings of nature – in particular, about how human beings relate to the wider world around them. These competing claims about nature also impact the way each author understands philosophy.

As I show in Chapters 3 and 4, the different theoretical views about the purpose of politics are reflected in different practical political recommendations and different approaches to the study of politics. In these chapters, I focus on two aspects of Aristotle's thought that several recent commentators have argued are compatible with if not derivative of what the Eleatic Stranger says. In Chapter 3, I focus on the sixfold regime typologies advanced by Aristotle and the Eleatic, as well as their evaluation of the different regimes. In Chapter 4, I analyze how Aristotle and the Eleatic use common terms, such as *phronēsis* and the mean, but in

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, I use the word "Stranger" to refer to Plato's Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, not the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws* and the *Epinomis*.

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different ways. Despite superficial similarities, close examination reveals significant differences between Aristotle and the Eleatic and sheds light on both the *Politics* and the *Statesman*.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I move beyond the immediate textual encounter between Aristotle and the Eleatic Stranger to explore the relevance of their disagreement for our understanding of Plato and Socrates, as well as contemporary political thought and practice. Both chapters, therefore, are more suggestive than conclusive, although I hope that what I suggest confirms the merits of approaching the *Politics* with the *Statesman* in mind.<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 5, I explore the relevance of Aristotle's critique of the Eleatic Stranger for our understanding of Socrates by way of exploring the Eleatic's conception of philosophy, Socrates' conception of politics, and Aristotle's criticism of Socrates. In Chapter 6, I propose that the debate between the Eleatic Stranger and Aristotle has resonance in our own day. In particular, I suggest that precisely what makes Aristotle attractive to critics of liberalism – that is, his emphasis on the good life – depends on a particular conception of nature that has been called into question by modern science. This argument, again, is more abbreviated than my account of the differences between Aristotle and the Eleatic; but here, too, the contrasts reveal aspects of Aristotle's thought that are relevant to the way we think about, if not the way we practice, politics today.

In what follows, therefore, I explore features of Aristotle's political thought by using the thought of the Eleatic as a foil, and I show why doing so is a worthwhile endeavor. It makes sense of the "winding road" that is Book I and helps to explain why Aristotle begins the *Politics* as he does. Stated briefly, because the Eleatic Stranger advances a view of politics as concerned primarily with the preservation of life, Aristotle finds it necessary to begin his investigation into politics by arguing that politics fundamentally is – or at least ought to be – about the good life. In other words, Aristotle finds it necessary to clarify the end of political life, about which he and the Eleatic disagree, before he can discuss the appropriate means to that end.

It is easy to overstate the contrast between Aristotle and the Eleatic Stranger, and although I have tried to avoid doing so in the pages that

<sup>2</sup> Insofar as my primary argument is about the relationship of the *Politics* to the *Statesman*, I do not treat the *Sophist* in great detail, although it is discussed in Chapter 5. I make more use of the *Nicomachean Ethics* insofar as it is intimately connected to the *Politics*, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

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follow, let me be clear about it here. Aristotle defines political communities by their specific end of living well. This is not, however, their only purpose: Political communities are also, and continually, charged with the duty of helping us to live in common with others (*Pol.* 1278b17–30). The polis may exist for the sake of the good life, but it came into being for the sake of life. That earlier purpose never disappears entirely, for, as Aristotle is well aware, there are both external and internal dangers to cities. Indeed, much of the *Politics* is devoted to fostering in cities the kind of stability necessary for the good life to be pursued. This stability, on Aristotle's account, does not come about easily, much less everywhere. Although politics ought to be about the good life, it rarely is – which is why Aristotle's political theory insists on paying attention to that higher end.

Although the Eleatic Stranger believes that politics is concerned primarily with preservation, he is not wholly inattentive to higher aspects of political life. He argues that regimes that are bearable (i.e., restrained by laws) are better than those that are not, and he claims that true statesmen will be concerned with fostering justice and a certain kind of virtue. However, the Eleatic thinks that the demands of necessity are much more pressing than Aristotle does; therefore, he suggests that the first duty of statesmen is preservation, thereby subordinating any higher purposes to that end.

The contrasting perspective of the Athenian Stranger, who appears in Plato's *Laws*, may prove useful for clarifying both views. Unlike his Eleatic counterpart, the Athenian Stranger defines politics as the art charged with caring for souls (*Leg.* 650b). However, the Athenian goes farther than Aristotle would in claiming that nothing, not even the preservation of the polis, is more important than fostering virtue in the souls of citizens (770d). Both Aristotle and the Eleatic Stranger are aware that politics involves more than one purpose. They differ, however, in their judgment about which purpose is most important.

Aristotle is aware of the base elements sometimes associated with politics – and sometimes necessarily associated with it – but he still wants us to raise our expectations for political life, to look higher, lest we become absorbed in those baser elements and ask nothing more of it. It is, in fact, difficult to avoid overstating Aristotle's views about the purpose of politics because he himself often speaks in such a way as to remind us of the higher dimensions, thereby neglecting the lower. The Eleatic Stranger, by contrast, continually reminds us of the lower dimensions, thereby

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subordinating the goals of virtue and justice to those of preservation and stability.

Despite this important difference, it is unusual to use the *Statesman* as the avenue by which to approach the vexing question of Aristotle's relationship to Plato. Although most commentators note that Aristotle refers to the *Statesman* at the beginning of the *Politics*, they do not pursue this reference. Instead, they generally focus on Aristotle's criticism of the *Republic* in Book II of the *Politics*. There are, I think, two explanations for why this has been the case, each of which is rooted in a particular approach to reading Plato's dialogues.

The great difficulty facing any interpreter of Plato is that he wrote *dialogues*, in which philosophical arguments are advanced by a variety of figures in conversation with others while Plato himself remains silent. Scholars have generally taken two approaches to resolving this difficulty.<sup>3</sup> The first is the developmental, or chronological, approach – dominant for much of the twentieth century – which interprets the dialogues by focusing on the order in which they allegedly were written. According to this approach, the *Statesman*, like the *Sophist* and the *Laws*, is a late dialogue in which Plato – perhaps because of his purported failures to influence the city of Syracuse – abandons the idealism of the *Republic* and, in the voice of the Athenian and Eleatic Strangers, offers a more moderate political stance that rejects his earlier Socratic position. This approach emphasizes the difference between the Eleatic Stranger and Socrates, but it maintains that both represent Plato's own views, albeit at different times.

Although adherents of the developmental approach correctly identify differences between Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger, they are – as I suggest herein – incorrect in ascribing those differences to a development in Plato's thought. More important, those who accept the developmental view likely have overlooked the relevance of the *Statesman* to Aristotle's *Politics* because they tend to see it as little more than an intermediate – if perhaps interesting – step in Plato's development from the lofty idealism

<sup>3</sup> Drew Hyland (1995) identifies these as the developmentalist and unified views in Platonic scholarship. The former, he explains, “argue that the disparities in presentation from dialogue to dialogue can be explained primarily by reference to Plato's intellectual maturation” (173; see also 1–4), whereas the latter argue for “a systematic unity to Plato's thought” either through consistency throughout the dialogues or by reading certain dialogues as “pedagogically preparing the way” for fuller treatments (174).

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of the *Republic* to the grounded realism of the *Laws*.<sup>4</sup> The consequence of this, I believe, has been a general neglect of the *Statesman* among those who study Plato from a developmental perspective, a neglect that has been remedied only recently.<sup>5</sup> In addition to minimizing the significance of the *Statesman*, the advocates of this view generally neglect the differences between the two Strangers. As I have suggested, the Athenian Stranger differs significantly from the Eleatic Stranger on the fundamental question of the purpose of politics.

There are more general difficulties with the developmental approach. This approach more often than not assumes rather than shows that the various philosophical figures in the dialogues are simply spokesmen for Plato. As George Klosko, a primary representative of the developmental view, states, the Eleatic Stranger is “*obviously* Plato’s mouthpiece in the work” (2006: 201, emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, because advocates of this approach contend that Plato changed his mind, or developed, over time, understanding him requires knowledge of the order in which his

<sup>4</sup>One example of this approach is Charles Kahn, who argues that the *Statesman* is “a ‘bridge’ or intermediate stage between the *Republic* and the *Laws*” (1995: 51). Kahn suggests that in his old age, Plato came to see the impossibility of rule by philosopher-kings and decided to emphasize the rule of law as a bulwark against individual power (53). It is not Plato’s “political ideal” that changes or develops, according to Kahn, but rather Plato’s understanding of power that changes, which can be explained only by “a biographical or developmental perspective” (54).

<sup>5</sup>The bibliography of Richard McKirahan (1978), which covers the years between 1958 and 1973, includes eleven articles about the *Statesman*, which is slightly more than the number of articles devoted to the (possibly spurious) *Alcibiades I* and *Epinomis* (nine each), equal to the *Critias*, and one less than the *Ion*. By way of comparison, Plato’s other non-Socratic political dialogue, the *Laws*, was the subject of forty-two studies, whereas the *Statesman*’s companion dialogues, the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, were the focus of fifty and seventy-two studies, respectively. It is not surprising that the *Republic* was the most common dialogue, with 197 studies written about it in this period. No bibliography is ever fully comprehensive – in the case of the *Statesman*, oversights include J. S. Morrison (1958) and Frederick Crosson (1963) – but there is no reason to think that the broader point does not hold true: The *Statesman*, until recently, was a neglected dialogue, and its increasing prominence is largely due to the work of Mitchell Miller (2004, originally published in 1980) and, in general, to those who adopt a more unified approach.

<sup>6</sup>Klosko accepts the developmental approach without reservation; he explains the differences between the *Statesman* and the *Republic* as the result of “Plato’s new-found regard for the rule of law” (2006: 216) – a consequence of the disastrous expeditions into Syracuse (196–8) – that is evidence of a new concern for the world of political practice rather than political ideals, and that will be further explored in the *Laws*. His insistence that the various philosophers – Socrates (18), Parmenides (22), and the Athenian (18), as well as the Eleatic Stranger – are simply Plato’s mouthpieces is evident throughout the text.



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works were written.<sup>7</sup> The difficulties here are twofold: First, there is no indication in Plato's corpus, including the letters, or anywhere else in antiquity that he changed his views. Second, and more important, the effort to arrange the dialogues in the order in which they were written has been a more difficult task than originally envisioned.<sup>8</sup> Even Holger Thesleff, who is sympathetic to the effort, concludes that the project is "in a deplorable state of confusion" (1982: 18). In light of these problems, John M. Cooper, editor of the most recent collection of the dialogues, suggests that the usual chronological arrangement of Platonic dialogues is "not compelling" and lacks "sufficient basis" (1997: xiii). Therefore, he urges "readers not to undertake the study of Plato's works holding in mind the customary chronological groupings of 'early,' 'middle,' and 'late' dialogues" (xiv).

The alternative to the developmental view is the unified approach, as exemplified by Paul Shorey (1965, originally published in 1933), which argues that the teachings of the dialogues are ultimately compatible.<sup>9</sup> Differences among the various dialogues – even those with a different primary philosophical figure – are due to, proponents argue, different dramatic features, such as the character of the interlocutors, the setting of the dialogue, and the particular question under investigation. In discussing the *Statesman*, Mitchell Miller states it this way:

Plato wrote dramatic dialogues, situating every speech as the response of one *persona* to another in a specific and unfolding context of inquiry and contest; to reach his thought, accordingly, he himself requires that we begin by attending to a concretely drawn setting, to the specific perspectives and

<sup>7</sup> As A. E. Taylor stated, "To understand a great thinker is, of course, impossible unless we know something of the relative order of his works, and of the actual period of his life to which they belong" (1960: 16).

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Howland (1991) is, perhaps, the most trenchant critic of the effort to order the dialogues according to the chronology of composition. Christopher Rowe similarly urges readers to avoid basing interpretations on chronology of composition except as a last resort, for the very simple reason that we lack sufficient information about the order in which Plato wrote the dialogues (2001: 64). Nevertheless, he elsewhere "assume[s]" that the Eleatic Stranger is Plato's mouthpiece (1995: 10). Most efforts to identify when the dialogues were written agree that the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, as well as the *Laws*, were late dialogues; however, it is still premature to adopt the developmental view, particularly in light of the differences I identify between the political theories of the Eleatic Stranger and the Athenian Stranger.

<sup>9</sup> A recent expression of the view that the teachings of Socrates and both Strangers are fundamentally compatible is found in Mark Blitz (2010), who argues that "the political differences among the political dialogues . . . stem from different purposes and themes, not different understandings" of politics (276, cf. 309–10, n53). He contends that an emphasis on perceived differences among the philosophers is no more than an "after-the-fact explanation" for Socrates' absence (309, n53).



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commitments written into the fictionalized identities of his characters, and to the dramatic sequencing – the “plot” of the “action,” so to speak – that integrates the drama of their conversation. (2004: xi)

The unified approach argues that the dialogues, particularly those that feature different philosophical spokesmen, are if not identical then at least consistent, particularly when one reads through the *ad hominem* arguments and reaches a deeper level of philosophic understanding.<sup>10</sup>

According to the adherents of this view, Plato does not reject the teachings of Socrates and then critique them in the persona of the Athenian and Eleatic Strangers, as the developmental view claims. Rather, the teachings of Socrates are supplemented by those of the two Strangers. Each of the three perspectives is necessarily incomplete and requires the others; they are different from but ultimately consistent with and indeed dependent on one another. As Seth Benardete explains the relationship, “In the *Republic*, political things are examined in the light of justice, and in the *Laws*, of legislation, but in the *Statesman*, in the light of knowledge” (1984, III.83).<sup>11</sup>

Although adherents of the unified approach to the dialogues take the *Statesman* seriously, they generally insist that the Eleatic and Athenian Strangers are fundamentally compatible not only with each other but also with Socrates.<sup>12</sup> As I argue in Chapter 5 – and suggest throughout this book – the significant differences in the conceptions of both politics

<sup>10</sup> Leo Strauss stated it this way: “The *Republic* and the *Statesman* reveal, each in its own way, the essential limitation and therewith the essential character of the city. They thus lay the foundation for answering the question of the best political order. . . . But they do not set forth that best possible order. This task is left for the *Laws*” (1987: 78).

<sup>11</sup> Within the unified tradition, there is more skepticism about the Eleatic Stranger’s compatibility with Socrates than the Athenian Stranger’s (see Harvey Scodel 1987, Charles Griswold 1989, Michael Kochin 1999, Lisa Pace Vetter 2005). Catherine Zuckert (2009) is the exception: Whereas dramatically dating the dialogues is a common response to the problematic attempt to date them chronologically in order of composition, she offers the first attempt to arrange the entirety of the Platonic corpus according to the dramatic chronology and explain the purpose of that chronology. She suggests, on the basis of the dramatic date as well as philosophical content, that the *Laws* represents the limits of pre-Socratic philosophy, depicted by the Athenian Stranger, and thereby makes evident the need for Socratic philosophy (2009: 31–3, 51–146; cf. Zuckert 2004). For an example of the unified approach to the *Laws*, see V. Bradley Lewis (1998) as well as Thomas Pangle (1980) and Leo Strauss (1975).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Stanley Rosen concludes that “the Stranger’s political doctrine is scarcely different from the views of Socrates in the *Republic* or the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*” (1995: 7). See also Leo Strauss (1987: 68–78) and Eric Voegelin (1985: 150). An early advocate of this view was, of course, Paul Shorey, who argues that Plato “did not really regard his *Republic* as realizable, and the beneficent tyrant in the *Laws* is invoked only as the easiest and speediest means of accomplishing the revolution. The serious doctrine of the *Laws* is essentially that which he goes on to expound in the *Politicus*” (1965: 265).

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and philosophy held by Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger are ultimately incompatible.<sup>13</sup> However, insofar as they believe the Eleatic to be compatible with Socrates, adherents of the unified approach have not focused on the way in which Aristotle's critique of the Eleatic differs from his critique of Socrates. Thus, they miss essential aspects of Aristotle's criticism of both the Eleatic Stranger and Socrates.

Unlike adherents of both the developmental and unified approaches, I suggest that far from being Plato's own beliefs – either late in or throughout his life – the political doctrine espoused by the Eleatic Stranger is one that had a great deal of currency in the fourth-century Hellenic world. This explains why Aristotle takes the Stranger's claims so seriously that he begins the *Politics* by rejecting them and reiterates his objection at the beginning of the inquiry into the regime according to prayer. This also explains why Plato took the view seriously enough to place it in a dialogue – regardless of when it was written – that is situated in a context that prompts us to consider what Socrates' response to the Eleatic's views might have been. It is likely that – as Catherine Zuckert (2009) argues – his behavior at and after the trial is just such a response; however, as I show in Chapter 5, the political teachings that Socrates offers in dialogues such as the *Republic* and the *Gorgias* also provide ample material for comparison and contrast.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that an inquiry into politics is necessary for human beings to achieve the good life. The first step of that inquiry, he says, is to examine what “has been well said by our predecessors” (1181b16–17).<sup>15</sup> Most commentators, however, read

<sup>13</sup> One reason for greater skepticism about the compatibility of the Eleatic Stranger and Socrates is that unlike the Athenian Stranger, the Eleatic converses with Socrates; they clearly cannot be the same person. The absence of Socrates from the *Laws* has allowed some scholars to propose that the *Laws* is a Platonic thought experiment: What if Socrates had taken Crito's offer and fled Athens? See, for example, Pangle (1980: 378–9).

<sup>14</sup> Zuckert argues that Socrates tries to show in the *Apology* and the *Crito* that his questions about the opinions that people held regarding the good and noble did not undermine the rule of law, which the Eleatic Stranger identifies as essential to stable political communities (2009: 736–65). In the *Phaedo*, Socrates responds to the philosophical critique of the forms that the Eleatic puts forth in the *Sophist*, emphasizing the way in which the ideas must be not only unchanging but also unmixed if they are to be knowable in themselves (786–807).

<sup>15</sup> Some (e.g., Carnes Lord, 1981: 473, and P. A. Vander Waerdt, 1985a: 79–80) doubt either the authenticity of this passage or its applicability to the *Politics*. However, as Barker notes, “It is Aristotle's first object to collect the received views on the subject which he is discussing, whether they are the ordinary or accepted popular views, or those