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AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL

THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

Introduction to *Studies on Plato's* Statesman [*]

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Plato's *Statesman* is an enigmatic dialogue. Any reader of this conversation between the Eleatic Stranger and Young Socrates must

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immediately confront a staggering array of interpretive puzzles. What is, for instance, the precise nature of the political expertise held up as the essential element of ideal political rule? Should the political expert be thought of as ruling solely by particularist decrees, or as also making use of general laws? Next, why does Plato rank imperfect constitutions as he does? And are these imperfect constitutions really constitutions in the first place? Furthermore, how does Plato's method of division work in the dialogue, and how should we connect this method's employment in the *Statesman* to its other instances in the rest of the Platonic corpus? How should we understand the Eleatic Stranger's puzzling myth, and what role does it (and the other paradigms of political rule in the dialogue) play in the larger philosophical investigation? What ties together the *Statesman* as a single, unified dialogue in the first place, given the remarkable range of subjects Plato discusses?

The essays in our collection wrestle with all these questions and more. Our first three papers (by Christopher Rowe, Jeremy Reid, and Catherine McKeen) all center on the set of problems that surround Plato's treatment of non-ideal constitutions in the *Statesman*, offering importantly different responses to the question of why the Stranger ranks the different forms of political organization as he does in the dialogue. Evanthia Speliotis then turns to explicit questions of philosophical methodology, offering a detailed discussion of the nature and role of paradigms in the Stranger's investigation. Finally, Sarale Ben-Asher, Freya Möbus and Justin Vlasits consider the nature and role of Plato's method of division in the dialogue—with Ben-Asher focusing on the definitions of human beings provided by the Stranger, and Möbus and Vlasits investigating the role of the Stranger's likening of philosophical division to the practice of ritual animal sacrifice.

Each of these papers makes a novel and important contribution to our understanding of Plato's dialogue, and they together represent a rich addition to recent discussions of the *Statesman*. In what follows, I offer a brief survey of the chapters and their contributions to recent literature on the dialogue.

Rowe's article ("Contemporary *Politikoi* [Statesmen] and Other Sophists in Plato's Political Dialogues") begins by offering a daring re-reading of the Eleatic Stranger's division of constitutions into two

sets of three constitutions, the first three (kingship, aristocracy, and polity) described as 'law-governed' and the latter three (tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy) as 'contrary to law' (Rowe, 2024). On Rowe's reading, which pushes back against widely shared opinions in the secondary literature, *none* of these six kinds of political constitution in fact qualify as a constitution 'in the strict sense.' Although we can, when speaking loosely, refer to them as constitutions, Rowe argues that it is *only* the seventh kind of constitution (that governed by a ruler with political expertise) that will properly qualify as a constitution in the strict sense.

Instead, Rowe suggests that members of the first trio of constitutions qualify as 'law-governed' and therefore relatively better only insofar as they involve a specific kind of law, namely, laws which preserve the rule of the one, few, or many rulers and prevent the larger political system from sliding into a worse form of rulership. The first trio of constitutions thereby offers a form of political stability that the lesser trio lacks. Rowe thus argues that we should understand the Stranger's description of some constitutions as law-governed and others as contrary to law not as indicating that the first trio has laws and the latter trio has no legal framework whatsoever, but instead as showing that the first set of constitutions include laws of a specific kind pertaining to the stability of the rulers in question—which allows him to maintain that while some constitutions are described as law-governed and others as contrary to law, none of these six constitutions are, *sensu stricto*, a real constitution.

In the second part of his paper, Rowe then proceeds to consider how his new interpretation of the relationship between the six lesser constitutions and the ideal seventh connects to Plato's political philosophy in the *Laws* and *Republic*, arguing that we should view the *Laws* and the *Statesman* as endorsing the same general approach to non-ideal political theory. Rowe argues that although the Stranger enjoins rulers in imperfect constitutions (which are, we should remember, not really constitutions at all—strictly speaking) to not alter their laws, this is not because there is anything that is good or worth preserving *per se* about such imperfect laws; rather, the injunction not to alter an existing political system flows entirely from the recognition that the rulers of these imperfect systems lack the requisite philosophical expertise to guarantee that they will replace bad laws with better laws, and so should avoid intervening in their

political systems lest they unwittingly prompt a descent from bad to worse.

Rowe thus sketches out a decidedly pessimistic portrait of all six constitutions: none of them have good laws, and they should only avoid changing their legal systems because their lack of philosophical expertise threatens to make their bad laws even worse. Ironically, Rowe suggests, this stability-from-ignorance is, on a formal level, an imitation of the actions of a political expert: just as the ruler with political expertise will refrain from intervening when they lack the necessary information to do so effectively, so rulers in imperfect states ought always to refrain from intervening, because they will always lack the knowledge needed to do so effectively.

Rowe's essay takes aim at several important shared commitments of most recent interpretations of the dialogue's political philosophy, painting an unflinchingly cynical picture of Plato's approach to politics in situations where a ruler with political expertise is lacking. And Rowe's exciting approach to the *Statesman*—providing a creative and innovative re-reading that aims to upset emerging scholarly consensus concerning key interpretive questions in the dialogue—is the perfect way to begin our special issue, as his resolutely non-conformist approach will be shared by many of the other contributors to this volume.

Reid's article ("The Analysis of Constitutions in Plato's *Statesman*") addresses many of the same questions as Rowe, focusing in particular on Plato's justification for the relative ranking of non-ideal constitutions (Reid, 2024). It might be helpful to consider key points of agreement with and divergence from Rowe's analysis in Reid's paper.

Reid agrees with Rowe, for example, that the relative value of constitutions should be judged according to how closely they imitate the expertise of a political expert; but they disagree about how non-ideal systems are able to imitate such expertise. Whereas Rowe argues that non-ideal constitutions can only imitate the political expert insofar as they avoid changing their laws in situations of imperfect knowledge, Reid tries to show how various non-ideal constitutions can positively imitate perfect political expertise: such

constitutions are able to approximate the expert's perfect knowledge (by maintaining stable laws based on shared experiences), his ability to benefit his fellow citizens (by cultivating virtue in citizens, limiting their desires, and giving order to their lives), and his capacity to foster civic unity in his political community (by, among other things, causing citizens to have certain shared beliefs about how their political community ought to function). For Reid, the better a non-ideal constitution approximates the paradigm of rule by someone possessing genuine political expertise, the better the constitution—an interpretive approach that, Reid argues, allows us to better explain the fine-grained differences in rank between non-ideal forms of governance that Plato provides in the dialogue.

Reid thus offers a nuanced defense of the 'traditional' interpretation that Rowe argues against: like some previous scholars but unlike Rowe, Reid argues that Plato believes there are important differences in overall goodness between the various non-ideal constitutions insofar as the laws of each non-ideal political structure will approximate (to varying degrees) a system ruled by a political expert—and Reid also draws on key examples from across Plato's work to argue *pace* Rowe that Plato thinks of these non-ideal political frameworks as genuine (and genuinely if imperfectly beneficial) constitutions. His paper closes with an intriguing speculative reconstruction of possible justifications for Plato's more fine-grained ranking of constitutions (why, for instance, is a lawless democracy better than a lawless tyranny? Because, Reid argues, democratic structures limit the possible harm political rulers can cause to their citizens.)

All this makes for a remarkably productive dialogue between the first two papers in our collection. Both essays urge their readers to reconsider how and why the Eleatic Stranger ranks the various forms of constitutions as he does in the dialogue, and their competing responses to these questions help make clear reasons for and against the other's approach—all while, we hope, helping to stimulate continued discussion of these topics in the future.

McKeen's paper ("Law and Political Expertise in Plato's *Statesman*") is the third contribution to our volume to take up the question of why Plato thinks of imperfect constitutions as he does

(McKeen, 2024). McKeen begins by providing a helpful discussion of the reasons why Plato might think laws cannot themselves function as the ideal form of political governance, namely, because: i) they fail to be adequately responsive to the wide variety of and salient differences between individual human circumstances; ii) they are inherently conservative, preventing them from responding quickly to changing circumstances; and iii) they are not self-justifying, and fail to provide a reason of themselves for why they ought to be obeyed.

McKeen then considers how the two models Plato uses to describe the political expert respond to the problems raised for rule by laws: because the political expert acts like an expert physical trainer (who gives 'rough' advice that applies to most people for the most part) who must sometimes leave and return (and who thus must give written guidance, but who also feels unrestrained by such guidance upon his return), the political expert provides the same non-particularized guidance as other forms of rule by laws but is subsequently capable of changing the laws in light of relevant changes in circumstances. McKeen thus argues against a particularist understanding of the political expert's expertise, where the expert would be able to provide particularized guidance to each citizen that fully accounts for the particularities of his or her unique set of circumstances. Instead, McKeen emphasizes that the expertise of the physical trainer (and technical experts in general) for Plato still relies on generalizations—meaning that the political expert should also rely on the kinds of rough, generalized rules that laws represent.

The difference between the political expert's rule and other constitutions, for McKeen, thus does not lie in the political expert's avoidance of generalized laws; rather, though both rule by a political expert and other constitutions will make use of generalized laws, the difference lies in the expert's ability to expertly modify those rules (like the expert trainer who modifies his original guidance to his pupils upon returning from his time away) to account for changes in the relevant circumstances. McKeen makes a forceful argument against understanding Plato's theory of political expertise as only involving a fully particularist rule by decree: the political expert should be thought of as using laws in the same way, she argues, as any practical expert in a Platonic context should be seen as using rough rules and generalizations. McKeen's paper thus provides a further contribution to the conversation already begun between Rowe

and Reid, making a clear case why we should not think of the difference between the ideal rule of a political expert and non-ideal constitutions as turning on the difference between particularist political guidance and generalist rule by law, but rather as involving the difference between two different kinds of rule by law.

Speliotis' contribution ("Paradigm and Method in Plato's *Statesman*") provides a detailed reading of the nature and role of paradigms in the dialogue (Speliotis, 2024). Paradigms (in particular, the Stranger's myth and the art of weaving) feature prominently in the *Statesman*, and Speliotis offers a compelling account of the nature and role of paradigms more generally in order to offer new insight into the role these particular paradigms play in our dialogue. Speliotis contends that a Platonic paradigm allows us to grasp simple structured wholes (like the basic syllables of a language), which then enables us to construct more complex structures out of the simpler parts grasped through the paradigm. She then applies her understanding of the nature of paradigms to the paradigms provided in the dialogue.

First, Speliotis argues that the Stranger's myth functions as a paradigm insofar as it allows us to move from more 'basic' parts of the world that we grasp through perception and experience to 'greater' things, namely, the ideal form of divine political rulership—because, on Speliotis' interpretation, such a divine skill is not something we can learn about directly through experience, hence the need for a paradigm in the first place. However, Speliotis believes that this first paradigm proves inadequate insofar as it is too divorced from our lived, corporeal reality—which compels the Stranger to turn to a second paradigm, that of weaving, which is yet more closely connected to our lived experience. On her reading, the mythic paradigm thus allows Young Socrates to recognize his initial state of ignorance concerning political expertise, making possible the constructive project of the second paradigm. Speliotis then offers a detailed reading of this second paradigm, showing how the Eleatic Stranger uses the paradigm of weaving (and the other conditions that make weaving possible) to outline the structure of political rulership as understood within the larger structure of the political community as a whole. Speliotis' discussion of the paradigm of weaving and the

lessons to be drawn from it for our understanding of political expertise is particularly illuminating, helping to show how each part of the Stranger's discussion helps develop a complete account of such expertise.

In general, Speliotis argues that Platonic paradigms allow us to move from smaller models, whose parts we understand from our experience and whose structure is more readily discernable, to a grasp of structures that are more difficult to grasp. She thus offers an intriguing reading of the nature and role of the paradigms in the *Statesman*, while also making an important contribution to our understanding of Plato's philosophical methodology more generally, insofar as her account of paradigms in the *Statesman* might be helpfully applied to Plato's use of paradigms in other contexts.

Ben-Asher's piece ("Herds of Featherless Bipeds: Division and Privation in Plato's *Statesman*") develops a new interpretation of the unity of the dialogue out of a novel contribution to debates surrounding the nature of Platonic division and the worth of the Eleatic Stranger's accounts of human nature (Ben-Asher, 2024).

In the dialogue, the Stranger uses the method of division to provide two different definitions of human beings: humans, we are told, are two-footed, non-interbreeding, hornless land animals, or alternatively, they are featherless, two-footed land animals. Previous scholars have responded dismissively to these definitions, claiming that the negative properties like 'hornless' and 'featherless' that appear in these accounts fail to articulate the essence of human beings. In her essay, Ben-Asher urges her readers to take these proposed definitions more seriously. On her understanding of Plato's method of division, the essential properties used to divide groups can sometimes include privations, so long as these privations still pick out essential features of the class under investigation. Ben-Asher then argues that the Stranger's two proposed definitions, which may initially appear to employ non-essential traits of human beings, in fact point to a key part of the human essence: that we are essentially *vulnerable and defenseless*, without the natural features (like horns and wings) that allow other animals to protect themselves.

Ben-Asher's novel understanding of the Stranger's proposed definitions then allows her to reinterpret other key elements of the dialogue. When we take the Stranger's definitions of human beings seriously, Ben-Asher argues, we see that the essential vulnerability of human beings means that we are also necessarily in need of the coordinated protection provided by political community, with that protection relying on the careful organization of a political weaver. Ben-Asher shows how the theme of human vulnerability and our collective need for protection runs through the Stranger's myth, highlighting the centrality of human dependance in the myth through an illuminating comparison of the myth of the similar—but saliently distinct—account of the origin of humans in the *Protagoras*.

Ben-Asher thus offers a new approach to reading the dialogue as a well-integrated whole. By refining our understanding of the philosophical methodology underlying the Stranger's divisions, focusing in particular on accounts that have frequently been dismissed out of hand by previous interpreters, we arrive at new insights into Plato's conception of human nature and how political systems are responsive to that nature. In turn, the proper appreciation of the Stranger's account of human nature and the need for political systems to respond to our essential vulnerability helps us make sense of the Stranger's myth. Overall, Ben-Asher's article helpfully suggests that the *Statesman* may be more unified in its thematic structure than has been previously appreciated—a suggestion shared by Speliotis, whose account of the role of paradigms also attempted to connect the Stranger's earlier myth with his later discussion of weaving more closely than other interpreters frequently have.

Finally, Möbus and Vlasits ("Division and Animal Sacrifice in Plato's *Statesman*") also urge their readers to reconsider their understanding of the method of division used in the dialogue and its philosophical consequences (Möbus and Vlasits, 2024). Möbus and Vlasits argue against the belief, widely held in the secondary literature, that Plato's metaphorical comparison of philosophical division to animal sacrifice in the *Statesman* marks a shift from dichotomous to non-dichotomous division, with the Stranger subsequently allowing divisions that result in more than two groups. They contend instead that the model of animal sacrifice is not

intended to mark an advance from dichotomous to non-dichotomous division, but rather to highlight the introduction of a key methodological criterion, which they call *minimization*: that every division, whether into two parts or into many, ought to *minimize* the number of groups that result from the division.

To defend this claim, our authors begin by arguing against the two most common interpretations of the animal sacrifice analogy in the secondary literature, showing how neither reading currently on offer is able to make sense of how the Eleatic Stranger proceeds to perform philosophical divisions after the introduction of the analogy (where he first performs a dichotomous division before subsequently dividing non-dichotomously), nor of how animal sacrifice was actually performed in antiquity (where a sacrificed animal would first be divided dichotomously and *then* divided non-dichotomously, in accordance with a set of highly-developed ritual rules and practices). On Möbus and Vlasits' reading of the analogy, conversely, animal sacrifice is used to articulate the minimization requirement—just as sacrificial butchery begins with a minimal dichotomous division and then proceeds to cut dichotomously if possible and non-dichotomously if necessary, so philosophical division will divide a target genus into two groups when possible and more than two when needed. For Möbus and Vlasits, the relevant necessity in the case of philosophical division derives from the goal of Plato's method, namely, the identification of all and only the essential relations between kinds in the subject of division. Minimization thus functions as something of a philosophical safety check, helping the inquirer ensure that the results of their inquiry will not 'miss' any part essential to their account, or include unnecessary parts—just as the rules governing ritual sacrifice ensure that the right parts of the sacrificed animals are offered to the gods and to humans, that the carcass is properly prepared for consumption, that parts of inedible organs do not spoil the comestible parts of the animal and so forth.

Möbus and Vlasits also show how the methodological framework they extract from the Stanger's analogy is at work in examples of philosophical division in other Platonic dialogues, thus offering an illuminating account of a key part of Plato's larger methodology. They close their paper by considering other possible lessons to be drawn from the analogy of sacrifice, focusing in particular on the fact that animal sacrifice in ancient Greece was

performed as a service to the gods—much as, we might think, Plato thought of the activity of philosophy throughout his works. Overall, Möbus and Vlasits' piece represents an admirable form of close reading, making use of a wealth of evidence for contemporaneous cultural practices to make an important contribution to recent debates about the method of division in Plato.

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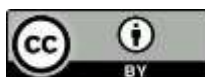
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