1. Introduction: Why Philosopher-rulers?

Plato is famous for the view that philosophers ought to rule and rulers ought to be philosophers (Republic 473c). Socrates introduces philosophers’ rule as the condition which could bring about a city most like the just and happy city he describes in the Republic (472e-73e). Yet he worries the idea will earn him ridicule and contempt (473c-e). He seems to think the problem is to explain who philosophers are (474b)—to distinguish them from other intellectuals, perhaps, or those trained by sophists, and to explain the recondite knowledge that they possess and how it qualifies them to rule. Modern commentators have been more concerned that it is not possible for human beings to be so perfect that they can be entrusted with absolute power. According to Karl Popper’s (1962, 120-21) influential criticism of Plato’s political thought, the real problem is with the question to which philosopher-rulers is Plato’s answer: the fundamental question of politics is not, as Plato thought, ‘who should rule?’ but rather, ‘how should political institutions be designed to minimize the possibility of abuse against individuals?’ This chapter asks what led Plato to propose philosopher-rulers in the first place. The hope is that an improved understanding of the motivation for philosopher-
rulers will improve our ability to evaluate the idea and to hold on to what is of enduring value in it.

Most accounts of Plato’s political philosophy answer these questions by appeal to Plato’s experiences of politics: in his lifetime, the democracy illegally tried the generals who had failed to rescue the survivors of the naval battle of Arginusae en masse and in absentia (Apology 32b); the so-called Thirty Tyrants, who overthrew the democracy and whose numbers included Plato’s relatives, acted in flagrant disregard of the law in order to commandeer citizens’ property (Apology 32c-d, Seventh Letter 324b-25a); finally, the restored democracy condemned Socrates to death for impiety and corrupting the Athenian youth (Apology, Seventh Letter 325b-c). Such events caused Plato to lose hope in existing political structures and to conclude that a just political order would require rule by extraordinary individuals who would be guaranteed to make wise judgments, viz., philosopher-rulers. Plato’s later political thought replaces philosopher-rulers by the rule of law and a mixed constitution with extensive checks and balances either because of his disastrous experience trying to convert Dionysius II, tyrant of Sicily, to philosophy (as recounted in the Seventh Letter) or because he began to see the allure of pleasure as so great that he despaired of even philosophers’ wisdom guaranteeing moderation in an absolutely powerful ruler (for such an account, see Klosko 2006).

If we are interested in Plato as a political philosopher, however, we will want to see how his views engage with the political thought of his time, rather than how they grow out of his idiosyncratic life-experiences. In this chapter, I argue that like the sophists Protagoras and Gorgias, Socrates is interested in the idea of a political expertise (politikē technē or rhetorikē technē) that makes its possessor successful in politics, but
that unlike these sophists, he thinks there is a problem specifying the content of such an expertise. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates examines the formal features of an expertise, and particularly of an expertise that has the superior status the sophists claim theirs has, to offer a new kind of answer to the traditional question about the best constitution (politeia). The traditional debate is conducted in terms of who should rule; Plato effectively changes the subject to, ‘what should rule?’ that is, ‘given what ruling is for, what brings about this end?’ ‘Philosophers’ rule’ is his answer to this question.

2. **Searching for Political Expertise**

In Plato’s early dialogues, Socrates specializes in refuting those who claim expertise, e.g. showing that Protagoras, who claims to teach political wisdom and virtue, doesn’t even know that if virtue is teachable, the virtues must be one in wisdom; and that Gorgias, who claims to teach the skill of speaking persuasively, at first can’t say about what subject matter, and when he agrees that it is about matters of justice and injustice, both affirms and denies that he makes his students just. However, to the extent that Socrates (or Plato) agrees with the sophists that there is some political expertise, he too incurs some responsibility to say what it is (e.g. for those who have admitted their ignorance about justice and are now eager to remedy it, cf. Clitophon 410b-c). Plato seems to recognize such a responsibility in the Gorgias when he has Socrates say that he is one of the only Athenians to take up (epicheirein, ambiguous between ‘practice’ and ‘attempt’) true political expertise (521d). We may begin, then, by asking: what views about political expertise does Plato’s Socrates share with the sophists?
The very label, ‘expertise’, implies some things. First, many expertises improve the materials with which they work to produce some good object—for example, shoemaking turns leather into shoes; medicine heals sick patients. These expertises not only produce good and useful products, but do so with an understanding, capable of being articulated, of the cause-and-effect relationships that they employ (*Gorgias* 465a). Other expertises are not productive, but they nevertheless have a distinctive subject-matter about which they are authoritative: for example, astronomy’s subject-matter is the motions of the heavenly bodies (451a-d). So to count as genuine expertise, political expertise must produce something good, and/or be authoritative about some determinate subject-matter. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates proposes that politics, the sub-branches of which are legislation and (corrective) justice, aims at the good of the soul (464b-c), so that the way to evaluate a political leader is by whether he actually makes citizens as good as possible (513e).

Socrates uses the idea that productive expertises in general improve their objects to argue against the idea that there could be an expertise aimed at the good of the expert, qua expert. So a ruler who makes laws to his own advantage doesn’t do so in virtue of his expertise in ruling, but insofar as he is motivated by his own advantage (*Republic* 341c-42e, cf. *Gorgias* 491d-e). While some of Socrates’ interlocutors (e.g. Thrasymachus, Callicles) do not welcome this conclusion, Plato treats it as following from the notion of expertise itself.

Second, the good that political expertise produces is somehow all-purpose or global, and so political expertise is especially important to success. Protagoras famously tells Socrates, ‘What I teach is good deliberation, concerning households, how one might
best govern one’s household, and concerning the city, how one might be as powerful as possible in the city in both action and speech’, and he accepts Socrates’ characterization of what he teaches as ‘political expertise’ (politikē technē) (Protagoras 318e-19a). Later in the dialogue Protagoras owns that it would be shameful for him not to acknowledge that wisdom and knowledge are most powerful of all in human affairs (352d). And Gorgias promises that his rhetorical expertise (rhetorikē technē) (449a) produces ‘freedom for humankind itself and . . . for each person the source of rule over others in one’s own city’ (Gorgias 452d); one reason is that the orator can persuade people about any subject-matter, whether medicine or harbor-building (455d-56c). (For the similarity/overlap between sophistic and rhetoric see Gorgias 465c, 520a-b.) Both claim that their expertise gives its possessor mastery across all different spheres of life. In the Gorgias, Socrates rephrases this as the claim that political expertise is a ruling expertise: insofar as the soul rules the body, politics should rule and use the expertises that aim at the good of the body (465c-d). He uses this to criticize Callicles’ claim that Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades and Pericles were good politicians (515d, cf. 503a), saying that they were only servants of the citizens, for the walls and shipyards for which they were responsible are the products of the subordinate expertise of the builder, which is to be used by the superordinate expertise of politics, which aims at making the citizens better. When not used by a good-directed expertise, the walls and shipyards and so on serve only to gratify citizens’ appetites (517b-c).

Third, the expertises provide an immediately plausible answer to the question of who should perform a given task: it should be the one who can do it best, the expert. Socrates uses this answer to undermine claims to rule based on entitlement. (I discuss
this in greater depth in Kamtekar 2006.) When Callicles says ‘I believe that nature itself reveals that it’s a just thing for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share than the worse man and the less capable man,’ (483d), he is claiming that the superior deserve to have political power in virtue of their intrinsic superiority in wisdom and strength (490a); this wisdom and strength make it the case that the superior not only can but should have more than a ‘fair share’ (491e-92c). In response, Socrates challenges him to produce a rational connection between having a ruling-relevant superiority and taking more for oneself of whatever is in the jurisdiction of that superiority.

Suppose we were assembled together in great numbers in the same place. . . and we held in common a great supply of food and drink, and suppose we were a motley group, some strong and some weak, but one of us, being a doctor, was more intelligent about these things. He would, very likely, be stronger than some and weaker than others. Now this man, being more intelligent than we are, will certainly be better and superior in these matters? . . . So should he have a share of this food greater than ours because he’s better? Or should he be the one to distribute everything because he’s in charge, but not to get a greater share to consume and use up on his own body? . . . Shouldn’t he, instead, have a greater share than some and a lesser one than others, and if he should be the weakest of all, shouldn’t the best man have the least share of all . . .? (Gorgias 490b-c, tr. Zeyl in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997)
There is no rational connection between the knowledge of what and how much food is healthful and the desire to have more food than one’s fair share. Medicine provides a standard for the distribution of food; it is health. What expertise prescribes taking more than one’s fair share? In the first book of the Republic Socrates argues against Thrasymachus that injustice is unlike the expertises in seeking more and more (349b50c)-presumably rather than seeking the right amount prescribed by the expertise.

In Republic I, Socrates also uses the idea that each expertise prescribes the ‘how much and to whom’ in its jurisdiction to criticize a conception of justice as distributing goods. When Polemarchus defines justice as ‘to give to each what is his due or what is appropriate’, Socrates argues that the specialized expertises already do this for the particular goods they produce, challenging Polemarchus to say what distinctive good justice (assuming it is an expertise) distributes. Given that the doctor gives medicine, food and drink to bodies, and the cook gives seasoning to food, ‘what will he [viz., the just person] give, and to whom?’, he asks (332cd). The principle of justice subsequently developed in the Republic is one that focuses on the distribution of jobs or duties, rather than goods. Goods are distributed on the principle ‘to each according to their capacity for benefit’, but this is ‘the aim of the law’ rather than a principle of justice (see further Kamtekar 2001), and that the law should have that aim is something Socrates stipulates for his theoretical city in response to Thrasymachus’ contention that in every existing constitution, the law serves the interests of the rulers. Socrates does not disagree with Thrasymachus’ claim about existing cities, but creates ‘a city in speech’ in which the law serves the interests of the whole city.
Let us return to the view shared by Socrates and the sophists, that there is an expertise of politics. Those who share this view also share a problem. In the case of established expertises, there is a product, and knowing this product enables us to characterize the expertise by which it is produced. In the case of political expertise, there is a question what the product is. When Socrates says in the Gorgias that political expertise makes people better, or more virtuous, he says no more than Protagoras does (Protagoras 318b, 318e-319a), and he opens himself up to the questions he routinely puts to the sophists: what is the goodness or virtue which citizens get as a result of rule by political experts? And what is the intellectual content of the expertise by means of which the expert makes them better?

Socrates owns this problem in the Euthydemus. Having argued that everything save knowledge is neither good nor bad in itself, but bad when used ignorantly and good only when used with knowledge, Socrates concludes that this knowledge must be the ruling expertise, and the good it produces cannot be to make citizens free, rich, or without faction (for these conditions are themselves neither good nor bad), but only to make them knowledgeable. But now if we ask the natural question, ‘knowledgeable about what?’ the natural answer, ‘knowledgeable about good and bad’, is unhelpful, because good and bad just are, respectively, knowledge and ignorance. Yet knowledge and ignorance have to be of something.

It was due to this [viz., the ruling art] that generalship and the others handed over the management of the products of which they themselves were the craftsmen, as if this art alone knew how to use them. It seemed clear to us that this was the art
we were looking for, and that it was the cause of right action in the state, and, to use the language of Aeschylus, that this art alone sits at the helm of the state, governing all things, ruling all things, and making all things useful. . . Now . . . when this [ruling art] rules over all the things in its control—what does it produce? . . . it certainly must provide us with something good . . . [but] nothing is good except some sort of knowledge . . . Then the other results which a person might attribute to the statesman’s art—and these, of course, would be numerous, as for instance, making the citizens rich and free and not disturbed by faction—all these appeared to be neither good nor evil; but this art had to make them wise and to provide them with a share of knowledge if it was to be the one that benefited them and made them happy . . . is [the kingly art] the art which conveys every sort of knowledge, shoe making and carpentry and all the rest? . . . [Since it is not] . . . what knowledge does [the kingly art] convey? It must not be the producer of any of those results which are neither good nor bad, but it must convey a knowledge which is none other than itself. Now shall we try to say what in the world this is . . .? (Euthydemus 291c-92d, tr. Sprague; cf. Charmides 171d-75a, which also argues that knowledge of all the particular expertises is not the knowledge required to make one happy).

According to Malcolm Schofield, the conception of political expertise as an architectonic (i.e. ruling) knowledge that knows and controls the other expertises is incompatible with the conception of political expertise as consisting in substantive ethical knowledge of what is good (2006, 136-93). Schofield’s only argument for
incompatibility, however, is that the notion of an architectonic knowledge ‘founders’ when it is identified with knowledge of the good. But what causes the ‘foundering’ in the *Euthydemus* is the assumption that nothing is good but knowledge. And, from the *Republic* on, Plato’s political thought rejects this assumption.

3. Specifying the Content and Product of Political Expertise

The *Republic* answers the *Euthydemus*’ content problem by specifying both a distinctive subject-matter for the political expert to know—the Forms, especially the Form of the Good—and a distinctive product that the political expert produces—political virtue. Whereas in the *Euthydemus* Socrates contends that the only good by itself is knowledge, which makes other things good by using them correctly, in the *Republic* he distinguishes the form of the good from the goods that depend on it for their goodness, on the one hand, and the knowledge of the form of the good from the knowledge of good things that it enables, on the other.

. . . you’ve often heard it said that the form of the good is the most important thing to learn about and that it’s by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial. . . and if we don’t know it, even the fullest possible knowledge of other things is of no benefit to us, any more than if we acquire any possession without the good of it. Or do you think it is any advantage to have every kind of possession without the good of it? Or to know everything except
the good, thereby knowing nothing fine or good? (*Republic* 505a-b, tr. Grube-Reeve)

The *Euthydemus’* problem of saying what good is produced by knowledge if knowledge is the only good by itself is here resolved by allowing the good product to be different from the good that is known and the good of knowing. To know the Form of the good is to be in contact with—perhaps in a way to ‘participate in’—a supremely good object, and that is a good condition for us to be in, for it is the perfection of our reason (518c-e). Further, knowing the Form of the good has a distinct product: knowledge of ‘fine and good things’, which presumably specifies how much, when, etc. the ‘knowledge of other things’, should produce. For since the form of the good is the cause of the goodness of each thing, knowledge of it enables one to tell whether, and to what extent, each particular law, policy, person, and action is good in the circumstances. Plato suggests that knowledge of the Forms makes judgments about their sensible instances more accurate. He explains to Glaucon that philosophers, who know what each thing is, alone have a clear model in their souls to which they can refer when they establish conventions about what is just, fine, and good (484c-d). In his imagined speech to the reluctant philosopher-rulers urging them to rule, Socrates says,

> When you are used to [the darkness back in the cave] . . . you’ll see vastly better than the people there. And because you’ve seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you’ll know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image (520c, tr. Grube-Reeve).
So the knower of the Form of the good benefits, *qua* philosopher, from his very contact with it, and *qua* ruler, from the correct judgments that knowing it enables.

One answer to the question: ‘why philosopher-rulers?’ then, is that wise rule requires knowledge of the Forms and philosophers just are those who know forms. A second answer, stressed by Plato as well as by commentators, is that because those in power should rule for the good of the governed, rather than turning against those they are meant to protect, those people should be in power who, because they love wisdom, will have no interest in the material possessions or honors of the others in the city, and so no reason to turn on them. If one’s desires are trained on the objects of wisdom, they are at the same time trained away from the competitive material things that lead most people to injustice (485d-87a). The philosopher-ruler of the *Republic* does not have the leisure to look down at human affairs or to be filled with envy and hatred by competing with people [because] . . . as he looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can [because he cannot] . . . consort with things he admires without imitating them.’ (500b-c, tr. Grube-Reeve)

In particular, philosophers’ love of wisdom and absorption in the Forms makes them uninterested in ruling, which in Plato’s view recommends them for the job (346e-47d, 520e-21b, 540b). Nevertheless, rule they must (519b-20e)—a requirement which raises its own motivational problems. However, philosophers’ harmlessness is an
insufficient recommendation unless they are competent at ruling—contrary to what is claimed by George Klosko (2006, 175), according to whom Plato should have argued that philosophers ought to rule not because their knowledge equips them to make good practical judgments but because of the impact of the knowledge on their moral character.

It is in general a good idea to read Socrates’ claims about the ideal city in the Republic in the light of his conversation with the interlocutors and Plato’s interaction with his readers. Christopher Bobonich (2007) argues on this basis that philosophical knowledge or knowledge of Forms is not required for correct judgments about whether particular laws, actions, etc. are good, fine and just, for without possessing such knowledge (1) Socrates and his interlocutors agree about which acts are unjust (442e-43a), (2) Plato’s readers follow the arguments for reforming the place of women and children in Book 5, and (3) the good and fine inhabitants of the ideal city are able to determine laws regulating market transactions themselves (426e-27a). Bobonich thinks that philosophical knowledge is only required for the task of shaping characters.

Let us take Bobonich’s points in reverse order. (3) Legislation about business dealings may be redundant in a well-governed city because citizens’ attitudes have already been shaped by the same general principles as would be applied to legislation about business dealings. I don’t need a law telling me not to overprice my goods if I’ve been raised not to want to acquire as much money or material gain as possible; if asked, I can come up with a law against overpricing myself. Still, this hardly shows that non-philosophical citizens are capable of determining correct laws for everything aside from character-formation. Socrates’ proposed reforms (2) and the interlocutors’ and readers’ agreement about the justice and injustice of particular actions (1) are possible because
without knowledge of Forms it is still possible to come to a true judgment—indeed that is
the heart of the political virtue that results from the musical education of citizens—but
knowledge of Forms provides a standard that guarantees accuracy in judgments. Still,
virtuous character is the most important product of philosophical rule, as we shall now
see in the way that Plato develops the idea of political virtue, an idea he initially
attributes to Protagoras.

As we saw above (section 2), in the Protagoras, Plato attributes to Protagoras the
claim to teach political expertise (politikē technē, 319a). When Socrates wonders
whether virtue (aretē) can be taught (320b-c), Protagoras begins his affirmative answer
with the natural virtues that everyone shares (323a) because Hermes distributed justice
and a sense of shame to everyone alike (322c-d), a fact evidenced by the human capacity
to live in cities (323a). But, Protagoras continues, in addition to our natural capacities we
need acculturation by means of good examples and punishments, first in the case of
particular actions, then in the case of character, and finally, the law (325c-e). Over and
above all these ways of teaching virtue is Protagoras’ own contribution to ‘making
citizens noble and good’ (328b), which succeeds where fathers and guardians like
Pericles fail. It is not clear whether Protagoras’ contribution is to produce a higher level
of political virtue (politikē aretē) in citizens than is provided by nature and culture, or to
reproduce in them the political expertise (politikē technē) he himself possesses; indeed,
these may not be distinct in his view. (One reason to suppose Protagoras doesn’t
distinguish them is that he says that before the gods gave them justice and a sense of
shame, people were unable to band together for their common protection against animals,
for, lacking politikē technē they wronged one another when they tried to come together
(322b-c); their subsequent ability to do this suggests that the justice and sense of shame they received from the gods was *politikē technē*. Further, Protagoras goes on to explain that everyone in Athens is consulted on matters of policy because everyone is supposed to possess *politikē aretē* (322d-23a), which is not the case with the *aretē* of carpentry, shared only by a few. Perhaps Protagoras assimilates *aretē* and *technē* to make it plausible that *aretē* is teachable; Socrates later points out the inconsistency in Protagoras’ denying that virtue is knowledge while insisting that it is teachable (361b-c.).

Socrates takes up the topic of political virtue in the *Republic*, distinguishing it from perfect virtue (the virtue of philosophers) (430b-c) and describing philosopher-rulers as craftsmen of political virtue (*dēmiourgos dēmotikēs aretēs*, 500d). The philosopher-ruler *qua* craftsman of political virtue ‘looks often in each direction, towards the natures of justice, beauty, moderation, and the like, on the one hand, and towards those they’re trying to put into human beings, on the other.’ (501b, tr. Grube/Reeve) After having seen the form of the good, philosophers ‘must each in turn put the city, its citizens, and themselves in order, using it as their model.’ (540a-b).

In the *Republic*, political virtue is an education-inculcated, good but not perfect, condition of soul, consisting in true beliefs about how to live one’s life. This condition of soul in citizens is responsible for the city’s possession of the virtues (see further Kamtekar 1998 and 2004). So, for example, the city is moderate because its citizens believe in common that their rulers should rule, political moderation being correct opinion about who should rule and who should be ruled (431c-d). Socrates defines political courage as ‘the power to preserve through everything the correct and law-inculcated belief about what is and isn’t to be feared’ (430b-c), and contrasts it with the
philosopher’s (wisdom-based) courage, which is ‘the preservation through pains and pleasures of the declarations of [one’s own] reason about what is and isn’t to be feared’ (442b-c), for the philosopher knows that death is not terrible, because he knows that human life is not great by comparison with the whole of being which he studies (486a-b).

It is important but not obvious that the beliefs that constitute political virtue are true. The obstacles to seeing that these beliefs are true are two: first, Socrates recommends that certain untruths be told to the citizens of the ideal city, notably the ‘noble lie’ that they are all children of the earth and that they have metals of different value—gold, silver, and bronze—in their souls, which determines their social role (414b-15c). Second, Socrates approves in general lies that keep friends or co-citizens from harm and that relate deeds of the gods about which we can have no knowledge; he says these merely ‘spoken falsehoods’ can be ‘medicinal’ in value (382a-d). However, in the same passage Socrates criticizes ‘true falsehoods’, that is, false beliefs about the standards for how to live, and his main principle for determining which stories about the gods may be told in his city is whether the stories are true—whether they represent the gods as they are (377d-e), good and consequently the cause of only good things, unchanging in character, and undeceiving (379a-83c). The key here is to distinguish between truths about value, about which Socrates is uncompromising, and truths about events, about which he is cavalier. Indeed, the premise of the whole musical education of the guardians is that children are taught through stories which are as a whole false although they have something of the truth in them (376e-77a). From this point of view we can see that the ‘noble lie’ tells a truth about the important matter that the citizens are all interdependent and have different natural capacities that suit them for different jobs.
It is also worth noting that Socrates cannot insist on the truth of many of the beliefs about how to live taught in the musical education until he has established that virtue is better than vice at the end of Republic 4. If he did, he would be assuming what he has to prove (cf. 392a-c, and for further discussion, Kamtekar 2010.)

When we see that the Republic specifies political expertise’s goal of producing virtuous citizens as the goal of producing politically virtuous citizens, we understand how the individual goal fits with the Republic’s more collective-sounding aims for the constitution or the law, such as the happiness and unity of the city. First, the city’s institutions contribute to individual citizens’ virtue and individual citizens’ virtue constitutes the city’s virtues. Take for instance, the limit on wealth and poverty to free the city from the faction between rich and poor that divides most cities (422e-23a), the community of wives and children among the guardians to replace the biological family so that instead of having privatized concerns they might all be pleased and pained by the same things (461e-62e), and the terms of address for each class to use for the others that remind them of each other’s civic contributions, viz., ‘nourishers’ rather than ‘slaves’, or ‘preservers and auxiliaries’ instead of ‘masters’ or ‘rulers’ (462e-63d). These institutions reinforce the citizens’ true beliefs in their mutually beneficial interdependence, and the beliefs are, in turn, the condition of the city being truly unified.

Scholars (for example, Williams 1973) have debated whether the Republic’s city-soul analogy is really consistent with Socrates’ claim that cities get their characters from their citizens. Jonathan Lear (1992) argues that cities get their characters by the mechanism of ‘externalizing’—individuals imposing their characters on the city—and individuals get their characters by ‘internalizing’ the values of their city. Against this,
John Ferrari has argued that the defective cities of *Republic* 8-9 are not ruled by the correspondingly defective characters—for example, the timocracy is ruled by men who are secretive and stingy with their money, whereas the timocratic character begins life despising wealth and ends life openly enjoying it (2003, 66) and the oligarchy is not ruled by thrifty oligarchic types but by spendthrifts (70). However, these differences can be explained by how the circumstances of a given constitution influence how the corresponding type manifests his character when ruling. Presumably the timocracy’s ruler needs to be secretive about his love for money because he is supposed to love and pursue honor alone; the timocratic character, not being in the public eye, need not worry about this. Again, the difference between the ruler in an oligarchy and the oligarchic type is explained by whose money they are spending or saving (others’ or their own?) and how much they have at their disposal. Finally, it is worth noticing that, apart from Socrates’ remarks in the *Republic* that constitutions get their character from the citizens in them (435d-e, 544d), for which the most plausible mechanism would seem to be rule by citizens of that character, in the *Gorgias* too Socrates argues that to have power in a given regime, one’s character must be like that of the regime (510a-d).

It does seem a general principle in the *Republic* that constitutions are identified by the values that dominate in them—whether these values dominate by being the dominant values of their rulers or in some other way. So because of the predominance of spirit in the timocracy, a predominance due to rule by the spirited and military types (547e, 549a), what is most manifest in it is the love of victory and honor (548c); the oligarchic constitution, ‘the constitution based on a property assessment, in which the rich rule, and the poor man has no share in ruling’ (550c-d), and in which the rich are praised and
admired, is the constitution in which the love of money and the practice of money-making dominate (550d-51a); the democratic constitution values freedom above all, and so allows individuals to be of whatever constitution/character they wish (557b, 562b-c).

Identifying constitutions by their dominant values rather than by the class that rules them changes the discourse around constitutions, which before Plato has been in terms of ‘who rules’: when Herodotus imagines Persian nobles debating the merits of various constitutions, they identify constitutions by who rules, whether one, few or many (3.80-82); in the Funeral Oration, Pericles says the Athenian constitution is called a democracy because the power is in the hands of the people (Thucydides 2.37); Aristotle analyzes the constitutions he discusses as ‘combining’ elements of rule by one, a few, and many. This way of classifying or identifying constitutions goes along with a certain way of analyzing constitutions and constitutional arrangements in terms of interests—one clear example would be the ‘Old Oligarch’s’ Constitution of Athens, which shows how Athenian institutions empower the people, who rule. In Plato’s Republic the sophist Thrasymachus asserts that in every constitution the laws serve the interests of the rulers (338c); in the Laws the Athenian Stranger reports that many people hold this view and himself speaks indifferently of the interests of the constitution and of its rulers (714c-d). Critical minds add to the question ‘which constitution is best?’, ‘best for whom?’ By taking as his task the design of a city whose law aims to make the whole city as happy as possible, the Republic changes the question to, ‘what [value] should rule?’ Plato retains this focus in the Statesman, where the Stranger explicitly rejects the classification of constitutions by ‘who rules’. Having first catalogued these classifications—whether the rule is by one, few, or many, and then, with a finer grain, whether the rulers rule with or
without law, whether they rule with or without the consent of the ruled, and whether the rulers are rich or poor, to yield the constitutional forms, kingship, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, and two kinds of democracy (291d-e)—he then dismisses them on the grounds that the only criterion for correctness of constitution is whether the ruler(s) are wise (292a-c) about how to benefit the ruled (296d-e). A consequence is that in the absence of wise rulers, a constitution should adopt the rule of law as the embodiment of wisdom (293e-303b). Here it seems clear that Plato takes the question ‘which constitution?’ not as ‘which class should have political power?’ but as ‘what should be the main principle/archê/telos of the constitution that determines the collective way of life of the citizens?’

Plato’s question is a possibility already latent in earlier ideas about constitutions. Pericles’ Funeral Oration glosses ‘constitution’ as ‘way of life’ (Thucydides 2.36). Isocrates says that the soul of a city is its constitution, having power over it just as intelligence does over the body, for it is the constitution that deliberates about how to preserve what is good and avoid what is bad, and makes the laws like itself (Areopagiticus 14, cf. Panathenaicus 138). The political question of which constitution is best thus runs parallel to the ethical question, important to Socrates but also to others (cf. Euripides’ Antiope), what bios (individual way of life) is best? In moving from ‘who rules?’ to ‘what rules?’ Plato is merely taking the analogy between soul and city, or bios and politeia, one step further, for an answer to ‘which is the best individual way of life?’ would be stated in terms of the overarching goal pursued by a given way of life. This suggests that not only does Popper wrongly attribute to Plato a mistake about the fundamental question of politics (who should rule?) that Plato inherits from his
predecessors, but he also fails to notice that in Plato’s hands, the ‘who should rule?’ question becomes a ‘what should rule?’ question. Popper could no doubt also object to the question, ‘what values should our community adopt?’ on the grounds that this is a question for individuals to answer freely for themselves. But this ignores the reality that before individuals are ready to ask this question, state, market, and society influence us unawares by shaping our beliefs and desires: we acquire beliefs and desires because they are widely held, or are held by those who are widely admired—for example, consumerist values in our time, pleonectic values in Plato’s. As adults we have the ability to step back and examine the processes by which we came to have the values we do, but by the time we acquire this capacity those values have become habits very hard to change by reason alone.

4. Philosopher-rulers After the Republic?

Although the Republic’s account of philosophical rule is able to solve the content problem for specifying the distinctive subject-matter and good product of political expertise, the philosopher-ruler seems to disappear from the dialogues after the Republic. The Timaeus’ reprise (17c-19a) of what otherwise sound like the political proposals of the Republic stops just short of philosopher-rulers; the Statesman classifies political expertise as theoretical knowledge but makes no mention of philosophy or at least of philosophers’ distinctive objects of study, forms; in the Laws, the Athenian warns that with unchecked power, even one who has an expert’s grasp of what unites a city will favor himself and pursue pleasure rather than acting for the sake of the common good (875b-c), whereas in the Republic (412c-d) Socrates had said that the rulers should be
those citizens who most of all identify their own good with the good of the city; this is the Athenian’s third assertion that there is no-one of such a nature as to wield great power without being corrupted and becoming arrogant and unjust (691c, 713c-d).

Glenn Morrow (1993/1960) argues that Plato’s commitment, from the Republic to the Laws, is to the rule of philosophy, with the replacement of philosopher-rulers by laws being only a change of emphasis in how philosophical rule is to be institutionalized. On the one hand, the philosophers who rule the established city of the Republic rule through laws—they are, after all, called guardians of the laws (421a, 484b, 504c). On the other hand, the guardians of the laws in the Laws must, in addition to supervising magistrates’ adherence to the laws, revise laws when necessary (770a-e), which must require them to understand the aim of the law and be able to reflect critically on the existing laws.

Further, the Nocturnal Council, a select group consisting of the ten oldest guardians of the laws, distinguished priests, the present and past magistrates in charge of education, and young men of their choosing (951d), receive a philosophical education (pp. 573-76).

In support of Morrow, the Nocturnal Council answers to the Republic’s requirement that the best city always have among its citizens some who have an account of the constitution (497c). The passages in the Laws about the corruptibility of people wielding absolute power all deny the existence of a person who by his nature could withstand the temptations opened up by great power (cf. the Republic’s warnings about the corruptibility of the philosophic nature, 492a-95b). It does not follow that philosophical education could not enable this—and when it comes to the Nocturnal Council (969b-c), the Athenian seems to think that the city can be entrusted to its care. Further, the Statesman’s discussion of law shows that Plato is not simply introducing law
because he has given up on rule by an expert person. At *Statesman* 294d-95c, the Visitor explains that even a political expert must rule with laws. Because the expert cannot be by the side of every individual, advising them what exactly is the right thing to do in their circumstances, he gives the group laws that prescribe roughly the right thing to do for most of the people in most of the circumstances. So law is not only for cities in which there is no political expert. Further, the Visitor is clear that its claims about the *superiority* of the rule of law are for the common circumstance in which ‘a king does not come to be in cities as [a king-bee] is born in hives, one straightforwardly outstanding in body and mind’ (301d-e; in this it is not so different from the *Republic*, according to which it is unlikely, although not impossible, for philosophers to become rulers or rulers philosophers). In common circumstances law must be sovereign because there is no political expert at hand, and law preserves the wisdom of legislators of the past (294a-303b, cf. *Laws* 875d).

Establishing whether and/or how much Plato changed his mind about the possibility of philosophers’ rule from the middle to the late dialogues would take far more space than is available here, because of the many dimensions of his thought that bear on the issue: ethical psychology, politics, epistemology (for which see Bobonich 2002). So instead, I conclude by mapping the connections between the presence or absence of philosopher-rulers and the dialogues’ different conceptions of the knowledge that qualifies one to rule well. One, explored in the *Statesman*, is of something very like Aristotelian practical wisdom; the other, explored at the end of the *Laws*, is of the philosophy of Plato’s late dialogues, in which God (*nous*) plays a central role.
In the Statesman, as in the Republic, political expertise is identified by its product: the kingly art weaves together into a unity the naturally courageous with the naturally moderate by means of a bond of true opinion about what is fine, just and good (309b-c). But unlike the Republic, the Statesman says nothing about knowledge of forms, instead concentrating on the political expert’s control of all other expertises, mastery of timing (305d) and grasp of due measure, the correct quantity for bringing something into being (283d-85c). Whereas in the Republic decline from the best constitution is inevitable because not even philosopher-rulers with their knowledge of forms can grasp the marriage number that determines the correct time for reproduction through calculation and perception (546a-e), the Statesman admits no deficiency in political expertise (although it also excludes breeding as belonging to ‘rearing’). Finally, the Statesman is silent about the moral dispositions of the political expert.

Some of these differences are best explained as due to the two dialogues’ different projects: in the case of the Republic, to describe the best constitution, which includes the way of life of the city governed by this constitution, and that importantly involves the education and character of its rulers, and in the case of the Statesman, to define political expertise. That difference would explain why the Statesman might not mention the moral dispositions of the political expert: these dispositions are (as in the Republic) pre-conditions or effects of wisdom, and so do not belong, strictly speaking, to the definition of political expertise. It may even explain the Statesman’s silence about knowledge of forms: strictly speaking, if the product of political expertise is political virtue, then the expertise itself is just that intellectual ability that brings political virtue into being, whatever its content and whatever the conditions of its development. Aristotelian
practical wisdom, the ability to deliberate well and to grasp salient particulars, is Similarly a black box.

Attempts to find a more radical rejection of philosopher-rulers in the *Statesman* have not succeeded. According to John Cooper (1999), the Visitor ‘puts a question mark’ over the dialogue’s initial identification of political expert with king. For the Visitor says that general, orator, judge (304a) and educator (308d) are co-causes of citizens’ virtue, which requires the use of persuasion rather than force to inculcate reasoning-based true opinions. But the Visitor unequivocally identifies kingship with political expertise (258d-59d, on which see Brown 2010; cf. 279a, 284b, 289d, 294a, 301b) and permits the political expert to use force rather than persuasion (292c-93d, 296b-97b)—although this is consistent with Plato’s *predicting* that the political expert will use persuasion given his goal of inculcating true beliefs (for one thing, force does not result in stable true beliefs, *Republic* 536e).

Perhaps the bit of text most suggestive of a radical rejection of philosopher-rulers is the Visitor’s distinction between the way humans were supposedly reared by a god in the age of Cronus (or the way sheep are now reared by a shepherd) and the way a human ruler who is like his subjects in nature and education should rule (267d-76e; for this reading see Morrow 1993/1960 585). Yet the point of this distinction is that the human ruler is not a nourisher (*trophos*, 268c) of his subjects, who must provide for themselves, and that the human ruler rules over willing subjects—neither of which conflicts with philosopher-rulers. In any case, the Visitor subsequently dismisses as irrelevant to correctness of rule or constitution citizens’ prosperity or consent to rule; the only relevant thing is the ruler’s knowledge of how to improve the citizens in virtue (292c-93d, 296b-
97b). The point of this seems to be that prosperity and consent are *consequences* of the political virtue brought about by expert rule, and not (as is virtue) expert rule’s defining goal. (For further discussion see Kamtekar 2004.)

I conclude this discussion with two speculative alternatives. It is tempting to imagine that Plato’s silence about philosopher-rulers, or more generally about the content of the theoretical knowledge that constitutes political expertise in the *Statesman* is in reaction to Aristotle’s arguments in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1) that the form of the good could not explain the ways in which the different kinds of things that are good are good and (2) that making something good requires not knowledge of the form of the good but instead deliberative excellence, sensitivity to salient particulars, and so on (cf. Klosko 2006, 207). If that is the case, then the knowledge that qualifies someone to rule (or live) well, the goodness or benefit of the knowledge need not in any way derive from the goodness of the object known—what is known might be quite prosaic facts about human character and what makes us happy. By contrast, the Forms are such objects that their very grasp motivates us to imitate them (*Republic* 500b-c).

The figure that best corresponds to the philosopher-ruler of the *Republic* in the late dialogues is the creative Demiurge of the *Timaeus*, who uses the Forms (30c-31b) to order the world to make it as good as possible, because he lacks envy (29e). (However, insofar as the Demiurge is not part of the world he creates, he is even more like the *Republic*’s law-giver.) Unlike the philosopher-ruler, the Demiurge does not have a Form of the good to look on and imitate; instead, his intelligent ordering activity is the source of the goodness found in the created world. But could a human ruler or legislator be moved by a grasp of the intelligent design of the created world? Being mostly concerned
with the principles, aims, and means of legislation for the second-best state, the *Laws* does not directly address this question. At the end of the work, the Athenian says that the Nocturnal Council should know the definitions of the virtues and what they have in common; similarly for goodness and beauty; also astronomy and theology, in particular that the soul is senior to the body, and that the heavenly bodies are ruled by intelligence (*nous*). Such education enables people to rise above ordinary virtue and to rule (968a). In this case perhaps the orderliness of the cosmos is a descendant of the Form of the good, the grasp of which can transform its knowers morally as well as intellectually.

**References and further reading**


Brown, E. 2010 ms. ‘Plato on the Unity of the Political Arts (*Statesman* 258d-259d)’


**Related chapters**

13. Plato: Virtue and the good life
14. Plato: Philosopher-rulers
15. Plato: Metaphysics
17. Plato’s Poetics
24. Aristotle on the good life: a guide to the *Nicomachean Ethics*
25. Aristotle: The political life