

Abstract

Note : Ce résumé est en anglais, mais la communication pourrait être donnée indifféremment en anglais ou en français.

Title : **Politics and Dialectic in Plato's *Statesman***

Although since 1995 Plato's *Statesman* has been the subject of renewed scholarly attention¹, it is by no means generally considered, by Platonists and classicists alike, one of Plato's most important dialogues². As a contribution to political theory, the *Statesman* seems to lack the philosophical depth of the *Republic*'s utopianism or the concreteness of the *Laws*, let alone their respective importance in the history of political thought ; as an exercise in dialectical method, the *Statesman* seems rather short of the clarity of the *Theaetetus*' structure ; finally, as a sequel to the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*'s approach to its specific subject matter appears far more indirect and convoluted than the one developed in its two companion pieces.

Prejudices have, just as much as philosophical concepts, an interest of their own, provided one can trace their origin and philosophical significance : as the introduction to this paper will sketch out, modern prejudices against the *Statesman*'s lack of unity, lack of method or lack of concreteness regarding its obvious political object have their roots in Antiquity. Indeed, the Platonic tradition has offered merely partial readings of the *Statesman* focusing either on logic and dialectic method (Speusippus, and later on Thrasyllus³), or on the myth alone (Iamblichus and Proclus who read the *Statesman* as a dialogue *περὶ φυσικῶν διδασκοντα*⁴). The *Statesman*'s first critical commentator, Aristotle, read the dialogue as a serious, albeit misleading, Platonic political contribution⁵ as well as a treatise on dialectic method⁶. So, from as early as one can go back, the *Statesman* has always been conceived as a piece dealing with two subject matters at once : political theory and dialectical method. Unsurprisingly, then, modern commentaries on the dialogue tend to privilege one topic over the other and scarcely consider the dialogue a coherent whole⁷.

Yet it has to be said that this way of reading the dialogue, focusing on only one of its dominant aspects and neglecting the other, has its origin in the text itself. A first glance at the *Statesman* could indeed convince any modern reader of Plato that in this piece dialectical method has obviously gone astray. In none of his other dialogues more than in the *Statesman* does Plato take a malicious pleasure in insisting on the dialectical wanderings occasioned by the pursuit of the *definiendum*. He even seems to offer a justification of so tortuous an approach, having the Eleatic Visitor say at 285b : 'What then about our inquiry now on the

¹ See especially Rowe ed. (1995) and Rowe (1995), Rosen (1995), Migliori (1996), Lane (1998), Delcomminette (2000) and very recently Sayre (2006) and White (2007).

² This is a mere euphemism. Among the many negative judgements on the dialogue, see e.g. Taylor (1961) 250 ; Ryle (1966) 285-6 ; Benardete (1984) 73 ; Annas (1995) XXII.

³ Cf. DL III 57.

⁴ Cf. *Anon. Proleg.*, 26, 40 (Westerink). Although the text is badly corrupt here, Westerink's reconstruction seems convincing.

⁵ See e.g. *Politics*, I, 1, 1252a sq.

⁶ See, e.g., *P.A.*, I, 2-3 ; *A.Pr.*, I, 31 ; *A.Po.* II, 5, although, on that specific matter, it is more likely that Aristotle has Speusippus' use of divisions in mind rather than Plato's in the *Statesman*. See L. Tarán, *Speusippus of Athens*. A critical study with a collection of the related texts and commentary, Leiden, Brill, 1981, p. 64-72.

⁷ On that diagnosis, see Rowe (1993) 3. For a solely political reading of the dialogue, see, e.g. Skemp (1987) ; for a reading focused on method only, see Sayre (2006) and, to some extent, Migliori (1996), although each spells out very differently the connection between method and metaphysics displayed in the *Statesman*.

statesman? Has it been set before us more for the sake of that very thing, or for the sake of our becoming better dialecticians in relation to all subjects?’ (trans. Rowe). How is one to interpret such a statement? As Plato’s confession that the *Statesman* is a mere dialectical exercise for young pupils at the Academy⁸? As the negative proof of the incapacity of statesmanship to deal with ever-changing human affairs⁹? Or, more likely, as a key to the understanding of the whole dialogue?

Rather than dismissing its entire philosophical enterprise on the grounds that the dialogue seems to combine loosely two distinct purposes, I will claim that it is the relation between political theory and dialectic that constitutes its primary subject matter. In a previous publication I have shown that the *formal* unity of the dialogue lies in the single *diairesis* that unifies its dialectical progression¹⁰. Concerning its deeper unity, I shall argue here that the *Statesman* constitutes Plato’s most detailed reflection on a topic he previously addressed in the *Republic*, although allusively, namely the relation between political and dialectical knowledge.

This approach, as will become increasingly clear, is much indebted to Melissa Lane’s 1998 contribution to the understanding of the dialogue. Lane has devoted great care and attention to the topic I wish to address and has convincingly shown that the very skills Plato insists that a true statesman ought to possess, especially his knowledge of the mean and the *kairos*, are the exact same ones exemplified by the protagonists of the dialogue in order to produce a correct definition of statesmanship¹¹. But I think one must take a step further to do justice to the dialogue’s argument as a whole and ask to what extent the dialectical problems raised by the search for statesmanship have not only a methodological but also a political pertinence.

My point is that the *Statesman* does not content itself with illustrating political skills on methodological questions but only meets dialectical problems that have burning political issues, i.e. that are intimately connected to the Platonic conception of statesmanship and to Plato’s specific goal in the dialogue (namely, to define normatively¹² what a true statesman should be). Nowhere in the *Statesman* does Plato lose sight of his subject, which is distinctly and constantly political. As a consequence, the *Statesman* should not be read as a dialogue concerned with methodology and devoted to a political subject *per accidens*, nor as a political dialogue hinting at methodology, but as the definition of the epistemic status, the particular objects and the specific tasks of political knowledge *in relation to* the highest form of knowledge according to Plato.

Obviously, such a controversial claim needs firm grounding, but it is no less obvious that giving a full scale argument in favor of it and considering each and every relevant passage in the dialogue would exceed by far the limits of an hour-long lecture. My aim in this paper is then to provide the core elements of this reading of Plato’s *Statesman* (which will be spelt out in full in a book). In doing so, I will consider some of the very passages that are commonly used as evidence in favor of a distinctly *unpolitical* reading of the dialogue. In his 1967 paper, M. Davis argued for a political reading of the *Statesman* and thus deliberately chose to consider only the second half of the dialogue (i.e. from 287b onwards), arguing that ‘however impressive the artistic unity of the dialogue, from the viewpoint of systematic

⁸ This is Skemp’s view of the first (i.e. diairetic) part of the dialogue : see Skemp (1987) 18.

⁹ More or less, this has been the prevailing perspective in Straussian readings of the dialogue : see e.g. Scodel (1987) and Rosen (1995).

¹⁰ See El Murr (2005).

¹¹ See Lane (1998) 202 : ‘The capacities for exemplifying and dividing, and for finding the mean, which are exercised in the Stranger’s methods of inquiry, are the same capacities on which the political knowledge which it defines will have to rely. Method and politics in the *Statesman* become one.’

¹² Here I build on the important results of Hansen (1983) who showed that, in Plato’s time, *politikos* was never used to refer to statesmen as such.

political science its first part remains barren¹³. In this paper I shall develop the exactly opposite perspective by focusing on the first half of the dialogue (258a – 287b) and by attempting to prove that the Visitor from Elea and Young Socrates's dialectical wanderings have a precise political significance.

My paper will fall into three parts.

A brief sketch of the *Sophist's* use of paradigms will lead us to the *Statesman's* own analysis of that same dialectical tool. Commenting upon *Pol.*, 277d – 279a and especially on the peculiar strategy consisting in giving a paradigm of the paradigm, I will attempt to explain why, whereas the paradigmatic method was unproblematically used in the *Sophist*, it becomes a crucial and problematic topic of a dialogue devoted to statesmanship. I will then argue that this passage, read together with *Pol.*, 285c – 286c, is the key to the understanding of what constitutes the heart of the dialogue, inasmuch as it shows in what sense politics is a paradigm for dialectic according to Plato.

Building on the results of the previous part, the second part of the paper will be devoted to a retrospective reading of the partially inadequate paradigm of shepherding, as displayed in the first divisions (264b – 267c) and the myth (271c – 272d) : I will claim that the reasons explaining the mistakes made in the first divisions and the myth are essentially political and can be seen as Plato's way of reinterpreting afresh a political Homeric stock-motif, used in the oligarchic literature of his time, and which he intends to supersede with his own minutely constructed paradigm of weaving¹⁴.

Part III will finally move backwards even further, up to the beginning of the dialogue, and consider the very first divisions conferring its epistemic status and proper object upon political knowledge. I will focus on the well-known passage devoted to genus and species (262a – 264a) and argue (controversially) that the surprising definition of man that emerges from this passage (man is a featherless two-footed biped) ought to be taken seriously in the light of Plato's political theory and dialectical method.

References :

- ANNAS, J. et WATERFIELD, R. (1995), *Plato. Statesman*, translation by R. Waterfield, Cambridge, University Press.
- BENARDETE, S., (1984), *Plato's Statesman*. Part III of *The Being of the Beautiful*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.
- BLONDELL, R. (2005), « From Fleece to Fabric : Weaving Culture in Plato's *Statesman* », *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 28, 23-75.
- DAVIS, M. (1967), « The *Statesman* as a Political Dialogue », *American Journal of Philology*, 88, 3, 319-331.
- DELCOMMINETTE, S. (2000), *L'inventivité dialectique dans le Politique de Platon*, Bruxelles, Ousia.
- EL MURR, D. (2002), « La symplokè politikè : le paradigme du tissage dans le *Politique* de Platon, ou les raisons d'un paradigme arbitraire », *Kairos* 19, 49-95.
- EL MURR, D. (2005), « La division et l'unité du *Politique* de Platon », *Les Études philosophiques* n°3, 295-324.
- EL MURR, D. (2006), « *Paradeigma* and *diairesis* : a response to M.L. Gill's *Models in Plato's Sophist and Statesman* », *Journal of the Internet Plato Society* 6 (<http://www.nd.edu/~plato/plato6issue/contents6.htm>).
- HANSEN, M.H. (1983), « The Athenian 'Politicians', 403-322 B.C. », *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 24, p. 33-55.
- LANE, M.S. (1998), *Method and Politics in Plato's Statesman*, Cambridge, University Press.
- MIGLIORI, M. (1996), *Arte politica e metretica assiologica. Commentario storico-filosofico al « Politico » di Platone*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero.
- ROSEN, S. (1995), *Plato's Statesman, The Web of Politics*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

¹³ Davis (1967) 321.

¹⁴ On that topic, Blondell (2005) has very useful analyses. See also El Murr (2002).

Dimitri El Murr

Maître de conférences en Histoire de la philosophie antique – Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne

- ROWE, C.J. (1993), « Preface : The Third Symposium Platonicum », *Polis* (Plato's Statesman : Selected Papers from the Third Symposium Platonicum), vol 12, n°1 & 2, p. 3-7.
- ROWE C.J. (1995), *Plato. Statesman*, edition, translation and commentary, Warminster, Aris and Phillips.
- ROWE, C.J., (ed.) (1995), *Reading the Statesman*, Proceedings of the III Symposium Platonicum, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin.
- RYLE, G. (1966), *Plato's Progress*, Cambridge, University Press.
- SAYRE, K. (2006), *Method and Metaphysics in Plato's Statesman*, Cambridge, University Press.
- SCODEL, H.D. (1987), *Diairesis and Myth in Plato's Statesman*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.
- SKEMP, J.B. (1987), *Plato's Statesman*, A Translation of the *Politicus* of Plato with introductory essays and footnotes, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952, 2nd ed. with Postscript, Bristol, Classical Press.
- TAYLOR, A.E. (1961), *Plato. The Sophist and the Statesman*, London.
- WHITE, D.A (2007), *Myth, Metaphysic and Dialectic in Plato's Statesman*, London, Ashgate.