

RESIDUAL AMBIGUITY IN PLATO'S *STATESMAN*

Books that have been read, interpreted, and argued about for centuries, enduring books that come to be called “great” or “classic,” are characterized by a mixture of under- and over- determination. They are underdetermined: there is not enough textual “data” to yield a definitive interpretation of them, for at critical junctures it is impossible to know for sure what the author (or the text) exactly means. After all, if the meaning, content, or teaching of the text were unambiguously available, there would be one account of it agreed upon by all good readers, and the discussion would be over. But, of course, about such books the discussion never ends. As a result, they are also overdetermined: more than one plausible and coherent interpretation can be generated.¹

For at least four reasons, the Platonic dialogues are extreme examples of the hermeneutical situation just sketched. First, the text is often breathtakingly sparse. Think, for example, of the divided-line in Book VI of the *Republic*. The philosophical reader longs to understand the metaphysical relationship between mathematical objects such as “the odd and the even, the figures, and the three forms of angles” (510c), and the Forms that stand above them on the line. Socrates, however, says virtually nothing about it. Instead, he describes the work of the mathematicians who treat these mathematical objects “as known” and who then employ them as “hypotheses” in their demonstrations (510c). Such thinkers use sensible objects as images of mathematical originals, but “don’t think it worthwhile to give any further account of [these originals] to themselves or others, as though they were clear to all” (510c). Presumably, this task of clarification is reserved for practitioners of “dialectic” who “make the hypotheses not beginnings but really hypotheses –that is steppingstones and springboards– in order to reach what is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole. When it has grasped this, the argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end; making no use of anything seen in any way, but using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms” (511b). Again, the philosophical reader is eager to have dialectic explained, but instead is treated only to another complex image, that of the “cave.”²

This example suggests the second reason why the dialogues are paradigms of underdetermination: Plato’s characters make extensive use of images instead of conceptual argumentation. In a related vein –and this is the third reason– his characters, such as the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*, often tell strange myths or stories. The fourth reason is the simple fact that the dialogues are themselves stories; they are dialogues. Plato never articulates a theory he unequivocally tries to defend in his own voice. Regardless of how confident a reader may be that either Socrates or the Eleatic

¹ The hermeneutical situation just sketched need not imply a crude form of relativism. Even if there is no definitive interpretation of a text, some readings can still be superior to others. Even if the text refuses to yield the entirety of its meaning, it nonetheless functions as a stable object by which to evaluate various readings. Rather than being the measure of the text, a good reader is measured by, and so must be responsible to, the text.

² I cite Bloom’s translation (NY: Basic Books, 1969).

Stranger is Plato's representative, the equation between author and character can never be certain.³

To reformulate: because they are underdetermined, the Platonic dialogues are residually ambiguous, i.e., capable of sustaining two or more distinct meanings. Needless to say, they are also overdetermined. One need not agree with Whitehead's characterization of the history of European philosophy as a series of footnotes to Plato to acknowledge the extraordinary range of interpretations and intellectual traditions –some wildly at odds with others– that have arisen from readings of these works.

Even if they are prime examples of the hermeneutical fate of “great books,” the dialogues are perhaps unique in one regard. At crucial moments, characters explicitly acknowledge the limited clarity of what they are saying. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates confesses that his “affinity argument” on behalf of the immortality of the soul (78b-84b) is far from complete or convincing. “There is,” he says, “still room for suspicion and many points remain open to attack, if anyone cares to discuss the matter thoroughly” (84c).⁴ He adds a similar sort of qualification when introducing the long myth he tells at the end of the dialogue: “To prove that it is true would, I think, be too hard for the art of Glaucus” (108d).

Occasionally a Platonic character will not only acknowledge that his speech is incomplete or unclear, but also suggest an explanation for why it is so. In the *Republic*, for example, Socrates, while discussing the “three forms” in the soul, says, “But know well, Glaucou, that in my opinion, we'll never get a precise grasp of it on the basis of procedures such as we're now using in the argument. There is another longer and further road leading to it. But perhaps we can do it in a way worthy of what's been said before” (435b). The metaphor of the longer road is repeated at 504b, in the preface to the discussion of the Idea of the Good, about which Socrates says this: “let's leave aside for the time being what the good itself is, for it looks to me as though it's out of the range of our present thrust to attain the opinions I now hold about it.” Apparently, the best Socrates can do, given the limited nature of his interlocutors, is “tell what looks like a child of the good,” namely the sun (506e).

These self-acknowledgements open up at least four lines of explanation of the underdetermination of the Platonic text. The first is that the dialogues are, as Dillon puts it, “certainly not straightforward presentations of [Plato's] most serious speculation.”⁵ The true teaching was not written; it was articulated orally in the Academy and, again according to Dillon, can be partially reconstructed by drawing on passages in Aristotle, Speusippus, Xenocrates, and even Plato himself. On this account, characters like Glaucou or the Young Socrates are representatives of possible or actual students in the Academy.⁶

³ This issue is discussed at length in the essays found in *Who Speaks for Plato?* Edited by G. Press (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

⁴ I translate Burnet's Oxford Edition of the *Phaedo*.

⁵ John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 17.

⁶ Consider Mitchell Miller, *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980): “Young Socrates... is a general representative of the young generation of Academicians, and the dialogue is an indirect communication with them.” (p. 24).

As sketched in the dialogues, they are incapable of absorbing the full teaching on their own. In short, the dialogues are ambiguous because their purpose is not to communicate an unambiguous teaching, but to provoke, even to advertise, the work being done in the Academy.

Second is the chronological interpretation. On this account, Plato developed as an author. In his later works he abandoned teachings he had expressed, but then found inadequate, in his early and middle dialogues. The ambiguity of the dialogues is thus explained by their author's process of self-correction. (Of course, this account would have the most force in explaining the early and middle dialogues).

A third option is that the dialogues are essentially pedagogical. They are deliberately underdetermined because their intention is to teach readers how to become actual philosophers, and this teaching can only be effected by forcing readers to do the work themselves. As Eva Brann puts it, Plato wants his readers to "join" the conversation, "to be converted from passive perusal to active participation."⁷ Or as Kenneth Sayre, who draws heavily on the *Seventh Letter*, says, "[w]hat Plato is doing with his dialogues...is attempting to set up conversations he shared with Socrates, in hopes of producing a similar effect in the mind of the reader." For this reason he describes the dialogues "as conversations between author and reader."⁸ To return to the example of the divided-line, while the passage itself (509d-511e) contains insufficient textual data to determine the relationship between mathematical objects and forms, if readers add to it what Socrates says throughout Books VI and VII, a coherent story can be generated. On this interpretation, an unambiguous teaching lies behind what are only the superficial ambiguities of the dialogue, but it can be found only in the soul of the reader.

A fourth option is that Plato is simply a bad thinker. Ambiguity is what philosophers should avoid, and the fact that Plato failed to do so is thus entirely to his discredit. This might be called "the Cartesian reading." In *The Discourse on Method*, Descartes says "philosophy has been cultivated over several centuries by the most excellent minds...nevertheless, there is nothing about which there is not some dispute, and thus nothing that is not doubtful."⁹ This characterization provided, at least for Descartes, a reason to abandon the history of philosophy altogether and embark instead on a methodical, self-directed program for the attainment of clear and distinct, and altogether "new," knowledge.¹⁰

By focusing on the *Statesman* this paper will explore a fifth possibility. Platonic ambiguity is residual and cannot be eliminated, because the teaching of the dialogue—its

⁷ Eva Brann, *The Music of Plato's Republic* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), p. 88.

⁸ Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Literary Garden* (Notre Dame: 1995), p. 26-27.

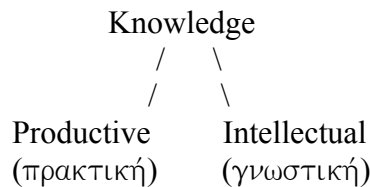
⁹ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, translated by D. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p. 5.

¹⁰ Another version of the Cartesian thesis is the philological one, namely that the manuscript tradition can never be sufficiently disambiguated to generate a completely reliable text.

content, what it takes to be the truth— is itself ambiguous.¹¹ To illustrate this proposal, I will explore one thread that runs throughout the *Statesman*: the ambiguous relationship between “theory” and “production.” It is introduced at the beginning of the Stranger’s division at 258b, it can be felt in the “myth of the reversed cosmos,” and, most significantly, it reverberates near the very end of the dialogue, at what I will describe as the ambiguous defense of democracy at 303a-b.

(Before beginning, I must note that this paper is unambiguously inspired by Stanley Rosen’s *Plato’s Statesman*, in which the theme of theory and production is central).¹²

The division passage opens with the Stranger recommending that, as he had done in his initial division in the *Sophist* (219a), “all knowledge” be divided into “two forms” (258c8).¹³ Some forms of knowledge, like arithmetic, are “bereft of actions (ψιλὰ τῶν πράξεων) and only supply knowing (γνῶναι). By contrast, “Those concerning building (τεκτονικήν) and handicraft (χειροργίαν) in general possess knowledge that is inherently present in actions (ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν ἐνοῦσαν σύμφυτον), and with its aid they bring into being bodies (συναποτελοῦσι τὰ γιγνόμενα...σώματα) that were not (οὐκ ὄντα) before” (258d6-8). The first division, then, can be diagrammed as follows:



At first blush, this might already seem ambiguous, at least for those using an English translation, for it is tempting to use the cognate “practical” to render πρακτικήν. But what is unmistakably described at this point is not “practical knowledge”— at least not as that phrase has come to be understood in its official Aristotelian sense— but what is labeled in the *Sophist* (and in Aristotle) as “productive” (ποιητική: 219b7) knowledge.

On the right side of the division we find “intellectual,” or what Aristotle will call “theoretical,” knowledge. It supplies knowledge alone, apparently of objects it did not produce or bring into being. It simply apprehends or sees— and the root of “theoretical” is the Greek verb θεωρεῖν, “to see” or “look at”— an object that already is.

This distinction has significant philosophical implications. Theoretical, non-productive, knowledge implies the possibility of knowing an object as it is in itself, i.e., as free from any sort of interference that would accompany or infect human cognition. In

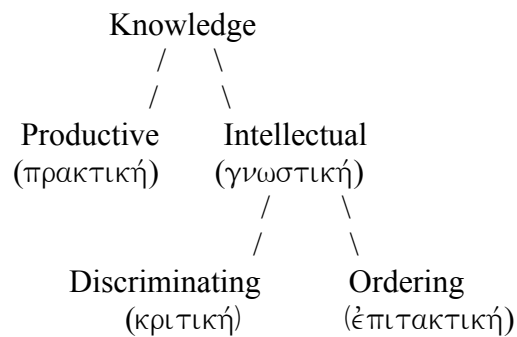
¹¹ Even if it does not follow the detailed description offered in the *Seventh Letter* of the general theme of the weakness of writing, indeed of *logos*, my position is clearly related. In this sense, it has some affinity with Sayre’s view.

¹² Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Statesman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹³ My Greek text is that of Lewis Campbell, *The Sophistes and Politics of Plato* (NY: Arno Press, 1973; reprint of the 1867 Oxford edition). Throughout this paper I will also cite, without annotation, some comments Campbell makes on the text. Translations are my own.

turn, this possibility suggests or presupposes a basic understanding of the relationship between the human “mind” or “soul” and the world it apprehends. If it is possible to know the world without touching or affecting it, then the mind, as Rorty famously characterized it, is “the mirror of nature,” and the fundamental metaphor for knowing is, exactly as the Greek *θεωρία* suggests, seeing.¹⁴ By contrast, were the distinction between theory and production to blur, were it not possible to secure the apprehension of an object as it is in itself, then human beings—their language, conceptual schemes, theoretical frameworks, scientific categories—would be responsible for making the world, or at least for making it cognitively accessible. Such a view is held by the Greek sophists, notably Gorgias, and by modern thinkers, notably Kant. In short, preserving the distinction between theory and production is required in order to make sense of the claim that it is possible to know the world as it really is in itself, a claim that in turn is required for retaining the distinction between philosophy and sophistry, and arguably between Ancient and Modern philosophy. Unfortunately, unlike Aristotle, Plato’s effort to preserve this fundamental distinction is surprisingly ambiguous.

The ambiguity between theory and production commences in the second branch of the division. The “intellectual” form of knowledge is sub-divided into those forms of knowledge, like calculation, whose work is limited to apprehending distinctions, and those like that belonging to the “architect” (*ἀρχιτέκτων*), who although not a worker or producer (*ἐργατικός*) himself, is a ruler of workers (*ἐργατῶν ἄρχων*: 259e7). As opposed to the calculator who, for example, understands the distinction between odd and even numbers, the architect gives orders to workers who then build a building. The division now looks like this:



The Stranger’s use of the “architect” (*ἀρχιτέκτων*: 259e6) to illustrate an intellectual, order-giving form of knowledge is ambiguous because *τεκτονική* (258d6), the knowledge possessed by the builder, was the first example of productive knowledge. Campbell tries to disambiguate this passage. He says, “There may seem at first sight to be a confusion in classing the master-carpenter under *γνωστική*, when carpentry has been placed amongst the practical sciences. But this helps to shew that the ‘commanding sciences,’ although independent of practice, yet have an immediate relation to the practical.” Campbell’s solution fails because if a form of knowledge has “an immediate relation,” i.e., is directly applicable to the production of beings that were not before, then

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1980).

it is hardly “independent of practice.” Architecture is a good example: it is indirectly but essentially productive.¹⁵ In other words, it is a form of “applied” knowledge.¹⁶

As the dialogue unfolds, “political science” is increasingly characterized as a productive or applied (305d) or “architectonic” (305e) form of knowledge. It is, after all, illustrated through the paradigm of weaving, and then characterized as the art of synthesizing courageous and self-restrained souls (308c-d, 310e). Again, there would be significant implications if the statesman’s knowledge were to be characterized as unambiguously productive, for this would drive Plato far closer to Hobbes than to Aristotle. Nonetheless, *politikê* cannot be counted simply as productive. Not the least reason for this is that it is difficult to conceive to what sort of knowledge it would apply. If the city is a construct, woven together from a variety of souls, then would the statesman’s knowledge be psychology? The weaver has a pattern in mind when she constructs her product. What analogous patterns does the Statesman employ?¹⁷

Another sense in which the theory-production ambiguity infects the dialogue concerns the philosophical activity of the Stranger himself. Consider the metaphor he uses to describe his beloved technique of division:

Where will someone discover the statesman’s path? For it is necessary to discover it and separating it out from the others stamp it (ἐπισφραγίσασθαι) with a single idea (ιδέαν), and we must set a sign (ἐπισημηναμένους) of a single form (εἶδος) on the other paths that lead away from this, and make (ποιῆσαι) our souls conceive (διανοηθῆναι) that all knowledges are of two forms (258c).

As Campbell comments, with this metaphor “the mind is here viewed as giving her impress to objects, and not as receiving impressions from them.” In other words, the metaphor suggests a productive activity, not a theoretical one. (See 289b5 for another mention of stamping). If division is like stamping, then are the branches of the division artifacts? A critical distinction that the Stranger soon insists upon –that between a “part” and a “form”– would forbid this. He objects to Young Socrates’ proposal to divide intellectual knowledge that gives self-originated orders (ἀυτεπιτακτική: 260e7) for the sake of either producing or nurturing (γένεσιν καὶ τροφήν: 261d2) living beings– a potentially ambiguous disjunction– into two branches: “one is the nurture of human beings, the other the nature of beasts” (262a). While each of these two is a “part” (μέρος)

¹⁵ This is why Aristotle uses what seems to be a synonym for it, namely οἰκοδομική (NE 1140a6) as an example of an “art” (τέχνη), which in his scheme is a “rational disposition that is concerned with making (ποιητική).” Aristotle is perhaps not entirely consistent with his technical terminology. Political knowledge (πολιτική), a practical form of knowledge, is called “architectonic” (ἀρχιτεκτονική: NE 1094a27). Liddell and Scott list the following Platonic usages of οἰκοδομική: *Charmides* 170c, *Gorgias* 514b, *Republic* 346d.

¹⁶ J.B. Skemp, *Plato’s Statesman* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), translates the πρακτική of the original distinction as “applied.”

¹⁷ Furthermore, as I have discussed elsewhere, the very notion of an “architectonic” form of knowledge is inherently problematic. See David Roochnik, *Of Art and Wisdom* (State College: 1996) where the issue of technical knowledge in general is discussed throughout. Also, see Kenneth Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato’s Eleatic Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 204, for a discussion of the ambiguous relationship between theory and production.

of the general form (εἶδος) “living being,” the cut Young Socrates suggests is not “through the middle;” that is, it does not reflect a formal division. His cut is analogous to dividing the human race into Greeks and non-Greeks, or “Barbarians” (262d), a division that might reflect a Hellenic prejudice or desire for ethnic purity, but has no basis in anthropological fact. A better, because more natural, distinction would be between male and female (262e), which are two genuine “forms” (262b2), rather than mere “parts,” of the human race.

If the method of division is to be guided by this distinction between “part” and “form,” if it is to transcend the prejudices that guide most people’s construction of a congenial worldview, then it must be a genuinely theoretical activity; it must uncover formal distinctions that it itself does not make. It must, as the Stranger later says in his description of dialectical men, lead to the “clarification of beings through reason” (287a4), and divide the world at its natural joints, and not into mere parts (287c). The Stranger’s self-description through the metaphor of the stamp, however, compromises this understanding of division. (So too does his statement that the “mean” must be “forced” [προσαναγκαστέον: 284b10] into existence).

A similar situation obtains in the *Phaedo*. In discussing recollection, specifically how knowledge of the “Equal Itself” must be prior to the measurement of two equal sticks or stones, Socrates says this:

For our present *logos* is no more about the Equal than it is about the Beautiful Itself and the Good itself and the Just and the Holy and, as I was saying, about all those Beings which we, in the asking of our questions and the answering of our answers, stamp with the seal of ‘that which is’ (75c).

Here the stamp metaphor compromises the theoretical character of the soul’s cognitive access to the Forms. The passage implies that what is actually responsible for the “stamping” is the discourse of the philosopher, or, as Socrates puts it, “the asking of our questions and the answering of our answers.” In the dialectical process of question and answer human beings “stamp” some object with the impress “that which is.” So, for example, Socrates frequently engages in conversations that begin with the question “what is X itself?” The *Meno* begins with “what is virtue itself?”, and the *Euthyphro* treats the question, “what is piety itself?” These kinds of conversations imply, it seems, that the speakers “stamp” the object of the question –virtue, piety– with the intensive pronoun “itself” and thereby declare them to “be.” If we take the metaphor seriously, then without such conversation these entities would not “be” in the intense sense suggested by the “itself.”

This description threatens to undermine what is apparently the salient feature of the Platonic Forms, namely their ontological independence. Because they are said to be “themselves by themselves” they should not require any contribution from the human subject. As Sayre puts it, “forms are absolute in the sense of being autonomous...the

Forms in no way depend upon other things for being what they are.”¹⁸ Instead, they should be intelligible entities that simply “are there” for theoretical inspection by the rational mind. They should function as fundamental principles on which the rest of reality, and knowledge, depends. The metaphor of the stamp challenges these familiar characterizations of Platonic metaphysics. If we take it seriously, we must acknowledge the possibility that the human subject does indeed affect the object and that philosophical discourse is quite possibly productive in nature. This possibility is explicitly raised in the *Statesman* by another of the Stranger’s self-descriptions: he is, he says, “like a statue-maker” (277a).

Rather than being a deficiency to be overcome, this ambiguity between theory and production may be residual and expressive of a view Plato takes to be true. This would be the case if, in fact, cognitive access to the world is ambiguous, if it is unclear whether we make or see formal distinctions, if there is only incomplete, temporary, precarious, or impeded access to the Forms. This is what is suggested by the *Phaedo* passage cited above. Philosophical conversation is potentially intrusive. In its forceful search for answers to the “what is it?” question, it might impose itself. Insofar as it presupposes the possibility of an answer, it may presuppose the existence of a Form, for an articulation of a Form would provide an answer to the question. Philosophers, as several of the dialogues (but not the *Statesman*) emphasize, are animated by powerful desires; by the “love of the sight of truth” (*Republic* 475e), or more simply by the desire to have the “what is it?” question answered. And, as Hesiod teaches, and Plato understands full well, Eros (meaning both “love” and “desire”) is the “limb-loosener” and runs the risk of driving us crazy. If this is the case, then the ambiguity between theory and production may, as an ambiguity, capture something truthful about the relationship between philosophical inquiry, animated by the “what is it?” question, and its objects.

The above is no more than a suggestion. It does, however, receive some support from the Stranger’s myth of the reversed cosmos.

During the age of Cronus, when the cosmos was revolving in a direction opposite of what it is “today,” and human beings were born very old from the earth and became progressively younger, “God ruled and cared for the whole revolution” (271d4). The first consequence of this fact is the following:

Over every herd of living creatures, divided according to their kind (κατὰ γένη), was set a divine spirit to be its shepherd. Each of them was in every way self-sufficient for his flock (271d).

The animal kingdom was formally divided, and each division, each kind, was properly guided by its self-sufficient deity. The divisions were thus stable, for God had “harmonized” (269d1) the whole. As a result, no animals were “wild” (272e1) and because they each had a self-sufficient guardian they did not need to compete against other species. When it comes to human beings, the presence of such a divine shepherd

¹⁸ Kenneth Sayre, *Plato’s Late Ontology* (Princeton: 1983), p. 6.

eliminates the need for cities or families (as well as the possibility of making a mistaken division such as “Greek v. Barbarian”).

Young Socrates is unable to determine whether the age of Cronus was a time more blessed than our own (272b). The Stranger explains that it would be, but only if its inhabitants took advantage of their leisure, and their ability to communicate with all the animals, and engaged in philosophical inquiry. If they did that, then, the Stranger insists, it would have been a far happier time. If, however, the inhabitants merely ate and drank and only just chatted with other human beings and animals, if they squandered their opportunity to gain wisdom, then the Age of Cronus would have to be counted as being worse than our own.

In the Age of Cronus, no labor, method of division, construction, or stamping is needed to articulate the kinds, because they are already given to human beings as part of a stably harmonized world. In other words, theory is a strong possibility in the Age of Cronus, for all the inhabitants have to do in order to understand the formal divisions of the world is look around. The Stranger makes it clear, however, that the pre-given nature of these formal distinctions might not make much of an impression on human beings. After all, he has suggested that the inhabitants of the Age of Cronus might squander their leisure and merely eat, drink and chat. Apparently, the pre-given nature of the formal divisibility of the world will not consistently trigger philosophical desire.

When this cycle runs its course, and the “pilot” of the cosmos drops the tiller and withdraws to his “viewing place” (272e4), from which he can look all around (i.e., engage in pure theory), the cosmos reverses direction. This produces destructive earthquakes. But the cosmos and its inhabitants recover. Now, however, they must care for and rule themselves (272b). At least in the first generation following the cataclysm they can recollect the God who ruled and a world perfectly supervised and divided “according to kinds.” But as generations pass this recollection dims. The course of this, the normal cycle, tends towards progressive deterioration, which the Stranger describes as a descent “into the unlimited sea of unlikeness” (273d8).¹⁹

This image suggests a situation quite at odds with a divinely supervised world harmoniously divided “according to kinds.” Stable division implies stable identity as well. During the Age of Cronus beings are self-identical. A being is itself and not another thing. But this sort of stability atrophies under the sway of the tendency towards “unlikeness.” A being would no longer simply be itself; it would be in the process of becoming unlike itself. As a result, the theoretical work of articulating formal distinctions would progressively get more difficult, and finally become impossible. At the moment before the final drowning in the sea of unlikeness, the God would intervene and restore the cosmos by reversing the direction of its rotation.

In sum, the myth implies that during the Age of Zeus human access to formal structure is precarious. While there might be some memory of a time when formal

¹⁹ Campbell prefers τόπων to πόντου, arguing that the “vagueness” of the former “exactly suits the passage.”

distinctions stood hard and fast, that time is gone, and our memory of it is slipping. Even in the Age of Cronus there is slippage. After all, its inhabitants keep getting younger and younger. The situation implied by the myth, then, parallels the cognitive situation opened up by the ambiguity between theory and production. To reiterate: theory requires a strong distinction between part and form. Without it, no division could be drawn “down the middle,” and all divisions would be like that between Greeks and Barbarians. These might be illuminating, but only of the desire motivating the division, and not of the nature of reality. In short, given both the worldview implied by the myth, and the residual ambiguity of the distinction between theory and production, the dialogue teaches that there is no sure method by which we can attain knowledge of the formal divisions inherent in reality. We cannot guarantee the purity of theory, nor the ontological independence of the objects of cognition. Philosophy, then, is inherently a precarious enterprise. Its objects may be contaminated, “stamped,” by the activity of the subject trying to know them.²⁰

So far only epistemological or psychological implications of the theory-production ambiguity have been discussed. But it has political implications as well. I conclude with a brief look point at the Stranger’s discussion of second-rate regimes, especially his explicitly ambiguous characterization of democracy.

Abandoning the bifurcatory procedure of the earlier division, the Stranger names sixteen different “arts” that help him identify the knowledge belonging to the statesman. There are the “indirectly responsible arts,” which range from the production of raw materials to the art of providing nourishment (287c-289c), and those, belonging to heralds, clerks, diviners, etc., that are “directly responsible,” i.e., provide actual services to the city (289d-305e).²¹ This latter group includes men who would normally be identified as politicians (291a-b). Here the Stranger shifts his focus away from the analytical work of division and towards an examination of actual regimes. Of these he first proposes three basic kinds: rule by one, by the few, and by the multitude (291d). Each will later be sub-divided depending on whether the regime is law-abiding or not. Monarchy is divided into “kingship” and “tyranny,” and rule by the few into “aristocracy” and “oligarchy.” Strikingly, however, rule by the multitude has only a single name, “democracy,” to cover both its lawful and lawless version.

On the one hand, this division into six regimes is almost meaningless. None of them is “real,” for this designation is reserved for the regime ruled by the genuine, i.e., knowledgeable, statesman. (See 301b, and 303c where all incorrect rulers are described as “partisans” rather than as statesmen). As the Stranger says, “It is necessary that of the regimes, as it seems, this one is preeminently correct and is the only regime” (293c7). On the other hand, this division may contain the most important result of the entire dialogue. Because it issues in a scheme that allows for the evaluation of existent regimes, it may actually provide some political, some “practical,” guidance. As the Stranger puts it,

²⁰ Another instance of this ambiguity: the “mean” is required for non-relative, non-artifactual judgments. But this mean must be “forced” into being. See 284c3.

²¹ These terms come from Miller, 1980, p. 82, p. 84.

We must see which of the incorrect regimes is least difficult to live with, even though all are difficult, and which is the most burdensome. With respect to the subject we have now presented to ourselves, this is a digression. And yet, perhaps everything all of us have been doing has, on the whole, been for the sake of it (302b).

(Note that the Stranger had characterized the purpose of his dialogue with the Young Socrates in at least two additional ways. It has, he says, been undertaken (1) “for the sake of becoming more dialectical about everything,” 285d7; (2) for the sake of understanding “the greatest and most beautiful immaterial objects,” 286a).

The one true regime, in which the knowledgeable statesman rules, does not require law, nor does it matter if its citizens are willing or unwilling to be ruled, or even if violence is used against them (293a-d). All that matters is whether the ruler acts with “intelligence and mind” (297b1). In the absence of such a ruler, however, law plays a significant role and becomes the “second best” option (297e, 300c). To reiterate, the role of the law is what bifurcates the three basic forms of regime—rule by one, few, or many—and turns the three into six.

It would seem that democracy, rule by the multitude, would come out worst in this analysis. The multitude are inherently incapable of acquiring knowledge (292e1, 297c1), and democratic procedures are antithetical to those employed in the arts and sciences. No one would allow a problem in geometry to be solved by a vote, nor would they follow the recommendations of the Assembly on how to fix a broken arm. No one would allow a pilot of a ship to be selected by lot. Apparently, then, no regime could be farther from rule-by-knowledge than a democracy. This hostile view is reinforced by the polemic the Stranger delivers at 298c-299c, where the trial of Socrates by the Athenian court is obviously highlighted. Democracy is pilloried as “absurd” (298e4), “difficult to conceive” (298e8) and “ruinous to the arts” (299e5).

Finally, however, the Stranger’s treatment of democracy, like the word itself, is ambiguous.²² As mentioned, “democracy” designates both the lawful and unlawful rule by the multitude. This ambiguity is telling, and I suggest it is residual. This is because, in the Age of Zeus, the Age of politics—our age—the boundary between law and lawlessness is porous. Recall that this cosmic cycle naturally and inevitably tends towards “the unlimited sea of unlikeness.” As a result, no law can be permanent and thus every existent regime is gradually heading towards lawlessness. (This is why one must be amazed (θαυμαστέον: 302a2) when a regime attains any measure of stability at all).

In this context, democracy does not come off too badly. Of the six regimes, a lawful monarchy, i.e., a kingship, is counted as best; a lawless one, namely a tyranny, the worst. If the dynamics operative in the Age of Zeus are as described above, then this implies that kingships will eventually become tyrannies. This same point can be made by

²² Here I take issue with C. J. Rowe’s view as expressed in “Killing Socrates: Plato’s Later Thoughts on Democracy,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 121(2001), 63-76, and in the paper he delivered at this conference.

noting that in addition to “democracy,” “kingship” is also explicitly ambiguous for it refers both to the true king, the true statesman, and to the lawful version of monarchical rule.

When one man rules according to laws, imitating the knowledgeable king, we call him a king, not differentiating in name the man who rules with knowledge and the one who does so by opinion according to the laws (301b).

To complicate matters, note the following description of the tyrant:

When one man rules but acts in accord with neither the laws nor with the customs, claiming, just as the knowledgeable king does, that one ought to do what is best even if it is contrary to the laws, and he is led towards this imitation by desire and ignorance, wouldn't this sort of man be called a “tyrant?” (301c).

The answer is, “of course.” Both the “king” and the “tyrant,” then, imitate the true and knowledgeable “king.” The tyrant is lawless and self-aggrandizing, while the “king” follows the law. In doing so, however, the “king” is not really a king at all, for following the law is antithetical to genuinely kingly behavior, which is guided by knowledge and not law. “Lawful king” is therefore close to being an oxymoron. This means that the line between the “king” and the tyrant is precarious at best. The former will become the latter once he realizes that it is in the nature of the true king not to follow laws. All he has to say is, “hey, I'm the king, I can do what I please,” or “I'm the king, and I know what's best for my subjects.” Because he does not possess genuine knowledge, once he says this he becomes a tyrant, the most oppressive of rulers. In short, the best of the incorrect regimes will surely become the worst.

At the other end of the spectrum, democracy is the worst of the three lawful regimes, but best of the lawless. The reason for this is as follows:

The government of the many is in every way weak, and capable of neither great good or bad when compared to the other forms of government on account of the fact that the various powers in this regime have been divided into small bits among many (303a).

Precisely because of its limited efficacy, democracy, under conditions of increasing lawlessness, is the most livable of regimes because it is least intrusive in the lives of its citizens. As Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, a democracy maximizes the possibility of privacy for in it there is “no compulsion to rule” (557e). In a parallel vein, democracy maximizes the possibility of “freedom” (562b).

To sum up this line of thought: not only is the word “democracy,” referring to both the lawful and lawless rule by the many, ambiguous, but so too is the regime itself.

It is poised between law and lawlessness and thereby accurately reflects the basic condition of the Age of Zeus.

There is another sense in which the regime is ambiguous. Its rulers are bereft of knowledge, but because it is ineffectual it allows private citizens the possibility of seeking as much knowledge as they please. As Socrates says in the *Republic*, “it is probably necessary for the man who wishes to organize a city, as we were just doing, to go to a city under democracy” (557d). In other words, in a democracy, where there is no compulsion to rule and the government is largely ineffectual, some citizens, like Socrates, and some visitors, like the Stranger, who perhaps has been attracted by the freedoms available in Athens, can engage in any form of inquiry, including inquiry into the nature of political regimes, they wish. While sometimes this will bring disaster, as it did in the trial of Socrates, freedom of thought and of private conversation is still substantially present in a democracy.²³

To conclude: as with all “great” books, the teaching of Plato’s *Statesman* is not fully clear, and so we continue to talk about it at this conference. Our goal as readers should be clarity, for what else could a philosopher possibly want? But we must be modest in our theoretical aspirations, because the *Statesman* is residually ambiguous. The ambiguity begins with the fact that the line between theory and production cannot be sharply drawn, and it weaves its way throughout the entire dialogue. By its end we might be forced to concede that however ambiguous “democracy,” both the word and the regime, really is, it is probably the best regime we will come up with while living in the Age of Zeus.

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²³ See S. Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements* (Princeton: 2001) and David Roochnik, *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato’s Republic* (Ithaca: 2004) for full defenses of this notion.