

# SOCRATES ON PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS: ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

*Filosofía y política en Sócrates: interpretaciones  
antiguas y contemporáneas*

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## ABSTRACT

Socrates can be said to have left the subsequent philosophical tradition with the *problem* of the relation between philosophy and politics. Already in the *Republic* the proposal of philosopher-kings represents more a tension than an identity. While Aristotle responds by insisting on a sharp distinction between politics and philosophical wisdom, this distinction proves on closer examination much less sharp than might appear. Heidegger characterizes philosophy as the only authentic politics and the philosopher as ruling just by virtue of being a philosopher. In contrast, Foucault insists that, if philosophy can play a role *in relation to* politics by transforming the subject who lives politically, it plays no role *within* politics. In this contrast can be seen the ‘fallout’ of the tension bequeathed by Socrates through both Plato and Aristotle.

*Keywords:* Aristotle, M. Foucault, M. Heidegger, Plato, political philosophy.

## RESUMEN

Podría decirse que Sócrates le dejó a la tradición filosófica posterior el *problema* de la relación entre filosofía y política. Ya en la *República* la propuesta del rey filósofo representa más una tensión que una identidad. Mientras que la respuesta de Aristóteles insiste en una clara distinción entre la política y la sabiduría filosófica, un examen cuidadoso demuestra que esta distinción es menos clara de lo que parece. Heidegger caracteriza la filosofía como la única política auténtica y al filósofo como gobernante por el mero hecho de ser filósofo. En contraste, Foucault insiste en que si bien la filosofía puede desempeñar un papel *en relación con* la política al transformar al sujeto que vive políticamente, aquella no desempeña papel alguno *dentro de* la política. Este contraste ilustra el resultado de la tensión legada por Sócrates a través de Platón y Aristóteles.

*Palabras clave:* Aristóteles, M. Foucault, M. Heidegger, Platón, filosofía política.

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With the proposal that philosophers become rulers or that rulers become philosophers, Socrates in the *Republic* can be said to have left the subsequent philosophical tradition with the *problem* of the relation between philosophy and politics. In the first part of this paper, I wish to show that already in the *Republic* the relation is more a tension than an identity. If the philosopher and the ruler should be the same person, the *Republic* does not try to hide the extent to which these two roles conflict, as seen especially in the account of the philosopher's descent into the Cave and the account at the beginning of book VIII of how the ideal city will meet its end. In the second part of the paper, I consider Aristotle's response to Plato. Despite distancing himself in crucial ways from the idea of philosopher-kings, Aristotle, it will be argued, repeats rather than resolves the problematic tension and unity of philosophy and politics expressed by this idea. In the last part of this paper, I turn to two very different contemporary readings/appropriations of the philosopher-king ideal, those of Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault. If I choose these two thinkers, it is because they will be seen to appropriate this ideal in diametrically opposed ways. Heidegger's appropriation of the ideal at the time of his involvement with National Socialism results in an identification of philosophy and politics. Foucault's appropriation, in contrast, leads to the conclusion that philosophy and politics bear any relation to each other only in remaining absolutely distinct. These two very different legacies of Plato's ideal clarify in conclusion what is at issue here for us today.

### Socrates on Philosopher-Kings

The idea of rulers becoming philosophers or philosophers becoming rulers is introduced by Socrates as a condition for the possibility of the ideal constitution he has been describing up through book V and thus as the paradoxical proposal on which the other two depend, *i.e.*, the proposal of the same jobs for different sexes and the proposal of wives and children in common. The famous analogies that follow in books VI-VII are explicitly attempts to illustrate the kind of education and knowledge that will distinguish the philosopher from non-philosophical guardians. But precisely because these analogies are meant to explain not only what it means to be a philosopher, but also what it means to be a *philosopher-ruler*, they describe not only the philosopher's ascent to knowledge, but also a descent, a return to those aspects of reality that the quest for knowledge had to leave behind. Such a descent is not explicit in the first analogy comparing the Good to the Sun as is neither the ascent, but the fact that the ultimate object of understanding for the philosopher is identified

with the Good by which alone all other things are rendered good and beneficial (including, presumably, a city and its citizens; δὴ καὶ δίκαια καὶ τᾶλλα προσχρησάμενα χρήσιμα καὶ ὠφέλιμα γίνονται, 505a3-4), could be taken to imply the application of what the philosopher understands in a political context. The analogy of the Divided Line, in contrast, while describing the philosopher's ascent via dialectic to an ultimate principle beyond 'hypotheses', also explicitly describes the need for a descent back down from this first principle (511b). Yet in this analogy the account of the descent remains very abstract and is not explicitly related to the demands of ruling. The first two analogies, in other words, describe philosophy in a way that abstracts from politics even while gesturing, either implicitly or explicitly, to the descent that would be required by the philosopher's political engagement. Thus the importance and indispensability of the third analogy: the analogy of the Cave.

In comparison to the preceding analogies, the Cave greatly sharpens the contrast between the movement of ascent and the movement of descent. Indeed, it goes so far as to *oppose* them. The philosopher who has ascended out of the Cave does not naturally, as a matter of course, descend back down to it, as if this were simply the next step in his philosophizing. The desire of the philosophers as philosophers is to remain outside the Cave, *i.e.*, to continue in their exclusive devotion to the pursuit of truth. They must therefore be persuaded to return to the Cave. The only argument persuasive enough is an appeal to *justice* (*R.* 520e1), not some abstract idea of justice, but a very concrete principle of political justice: having been educated by the city and being thus indebted to it for having become philosophers, they must repay this debt, even at the cost of sacrificing the full enjoyment of that philosophical life which their education has made possible. It is only just for them to give back to the city what the city gave them by assuming the burden of rule (520a-e).

What is thus shown by Socrates's account of the descent, and what needs to be stressed here, is that even in philosopher-kings, philosophy and politics *are not the same thing*.<sup>1</sup> While a strong unity between the two is doubtless being affirmed, the tension within this unity is also exposed. Philosophy wishes to remain with the truth outside the Cave, political justice demands a return to the Cave; philosophy and its objects are located outside the Cave; governing requires a turning

1 In this sense, the following assertion by George Leroux is on the mark: "Ce que nous apprend le platonisme, c'est que la philosophie n'est pas le substitut de l'action politique, mais son paradigme; et, à l'intérieur de la philosophie, le discours métaphysique n'est pas le substitut du discours politique ou législatif, mais son fondement" (46).

away from the field proper to philosophy and to a radically different field of experience. Indeed, the paradox that Socrates stresses is that philosophers make the best rulers precisely because they want anything but to rule; if the idea of philosopher-kings has any merit at all, it is only because philosophy has a conflicted relation to politics.

One could at this point object that we are only speaking of what philosophers *desire*. Is it not the case that the ideal of philosopher-kings makes philosophical *knowledge* identical to political *knowledge*? While philosophers may in the ascent lose the desire to be rulers, do they not learn on the ascent everything they need to know to be rulers? On the contrary, what Socrates tells us about the experience of a philosopher who has descended back into the Cave suggests that the philosophical knowledge acquired outside of the Cave is quite different from the political skill needed for success within the Cave: so unable is the philosopher to discern and make good judgments about the realities within the city, so unsuccessful is he in trying to persuade and lead his citizens, that he is in serious danger of being killed (R. 516e-517a). And the reason is not hard to see: it is one thing to know the essence of justice and quite another to be able to discern and judge specific and imperfect acts or examples of justice; in fact, knowledge of the essence can initially blind the philosopher to the particulars (σκότους <ἀν> ἀνάπλευς σχοίη τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, 516e4-5) by preventing him from seeing in the particulars anything but the dark absence of the essence. The philosopher must therefore adjust to the darkness before he can see any light at all, and therefore any discernable features, in the objects with which he must deal as a ruler. Without this acclimatization and habituation, without continuous practice in dealing with the realities of the city, the philosopher will not only be a good ruler, but also a disastrous one. Furthermore, Socrates tells us that the time needed for this habituation will not be short (517a2). These words are given extra force by the person who speaks them. Socrates indeed is not only the speaker, but the description of the philosopher in the Cave unable to defend himself in court (517d-e) and ultimately put to death is an unmistakable reference to Socrates' own fate. But in this case we have in Socrates the example of a philosopher who *never* in the course of a long life became habituated to the Cave, who stayed out of politics to avoid getting killed and still ended up being killed, who was, in short, ἄτοπος to the very end.<sup>2</sup> What prospects might then other philosophers have of becoming adjusted to political reality before they die? In any case, what is clear is that a phi-

2 Nightingale observes that "The philosophica rulers are, in crucial ways, foreigners in their own city" (91).

osopher is not solely by virtue of his philosophical knowledge a good or even competent ruler; other adjustments and abilities are required. This is a point that will be confirmed when we look at Socrates' initial defense of the philosopher-king paradox.

The opposition between philosophy and politics only becomes more pronounced if we note another way in which the Cave analogy goes beyond the two preceding analogies: what it describes the philosopher as freeing himself from in the ascent and returning to for the purpose of ruling is a distinctly political reality. As has been often noted, the shadows on the wall of the Cave, *i.e.*, the way in which things like justice and the good appear to the prisoners, are produced and controlled by *other human beings* carrying man-made representations of justice and the good behind a wall situated between the prisoners and the fire that casts the shadows (*R.* 514b3-515a4). Despite the parallel drawn between the inside versus the outside of the cave, on the one hand, and the sensible world versus the intelligible as represented in the other two major analogies (517a8-b7), the inside of the cave is not *simply* the sensible world, but the political world: a world where what appears as true is a product not simply of the senses, but rather of opinions, prejudices, and ideas given circulation by sophists, poets, rhetoricians and other shapers of public opinion. In book VI Socrates describes this arena of popular and sophistic "education" –and recalls that the Cave analogy is introduced as a depiction of our nature with regard to education (παιδεία) and lack of education (514a1-2)– as a great danger for the emerging philosopher:

When great numbers of people sit together in a popular assembly, the courts, the theater or any great mass gathering, and with much noise praise or blame words and deeds, taking both to excess, yelling and clapping [. . .] must one not there be driven to share the same opinions about the noble and the shameful [καλὰ καὶ αἰσχρὰ], to adopt the same aims and to become like the masses? (*R.* 492b5-c8)

In pointing to the artificiality of the objects which cast shadows in the Cave (παντοῖα εἰργασμένα, *R.* 515a1), in putting these objects in the hands of human beings walking behind the backs of the prisoners, and by describing these people as speaking in such a way that the prisoners mistake what they say for what the objects they take to be real themselves say (515a2-3, 515b7-9), Socrates is bringing into the Cave the aspect of the city he described in book VI: appearances of what is noble and just which, far from being "natural" appearances emanating from the things themselves, are artificial opinions produced in the insidious league between the ignorant masses and the clever manipulations of the sophists and rhetors. Like trainers who know the moods

and desires of a wild beast, to use Socrates' example (493a-d), the people behind the wall in the cave presumably know which images to produce when: they know how to put on a show the prisoners will like and this is their "wisdom."

But if this state of "education," or rather lack of real education, is in fact being depicted by Socrates in the Cave, then this state of affairs poses an obstacle and danger not only for the emerging philosopher but also for the philosopher returning to the Cave to rule. This philosopher must contend not only with ignorance, but also with the artificial opinions and prejudices created in the unnatural political relation between the chained prisoners and the puppeteers hidden behind them. This of course was Socrates' own fate: it was not ignorance, nor even the malice of a few individuals, that killed Socrates, but, as the *Apology* insists, prejudices authored by no one in particular, but simply "in the air" and implanted in the people of Athens from a very early age (18a-e).

It is significant that the philosopher who returns to rule in the Cave is not described as going behind the parapet and assuming control of the puppets; instead, like Socrates himself, he apparently goes directly to the prisoners and tries to engage them in conversation. In initially describing the inside of the Cave, Socrates tells us that *if* the prisoners could converse with one another (Εἰ οὖν διαλέγεσθαι οἰοί τ' εἶεν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, *R.* 515b4), they would judge what they see to be the beings themselves. The implication here is that in fact they do not converse; they see the same shadows, praise and blame the same things by yelling and clapping, but for precisely this reason there is no occasion or need for genuine conversation between them. It is the philosopher who asks the prisoners to say what each thing is (ἀποκρίνεσθαι ὅτι ἔστιν, 515d5), thereby introducing genuine conversation into the Cave for the first time. In doing so, the philosopher is working not only against the inclination of the prisoners to remain focused on the images before them, but also against the manipulators of these images. It can of course be objected that the philosophers who return to rule cannot do so by simply conversing with the prisoners; this may be the only way of converting other philosophers, but to rule they must ultimately take over the whole system of image-production in the Cave. It is presumably this aspect of rule that is being described in the specific proposals of censorship to be found in books II and III: to rule, philosophers must not only be in possession of the truth, but they must also, given that the masses are by nature unphilosophical (494a4-5), be in control of the images that will influence and guide how most people within the city behave. This again shows how different and even opposed the demands of philosophy and politics remain

even in the ideal state: indeed, as rulers, philosophers would apparently need to do what is most opposed to their nature as philosophers (485b10-d4): *lie* (389b7-9). But, in the analogy of the Cave, such control of the entire city by philosophers is not even described and is made to seem a very distant prospect: the philosopher returning to the Cave requires a long period of acclimatization just to be able to talk with the prisoners without being killed; and the clear allusion to Socrates' fate of course inspires no confidence.

If we return now to the very start of book VI, we see that Socrates there, after defining philosophers as those who know the Forms, makes it perfectly clear that such knowledge by itself, in abstraction from its difficult enactment, is insufficient for political rule. While Socrates and Glaucon agree that philosophers will be better rulers than the lovers of sights and sounds, they do so *only on the condition* that philosophers will not fall short in the *other* requirements: these are said to be *experience* (ἐμπειρία R. 484d6) and the possession of practical virtues such as justice, temperance and courage (484d7, 485c ff.). While Socrates then proceeds to deduce these practical virtues from the love of wisdom that defines philosophers, this is possible because the *love* of wisdom is itself a disposition of character and not merely an attribute of reason.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it must be recalled that much of the rest of book VI, before we arrive at the three central similes, is devoted to addressing the apparent counter-evidence of the uselessness and viciousness of philosophers: the abstract argument demonstrating that philosophers have knowledge of the Forms and the deduction of their virtues from their love of wisdom count for nothing in the discussion unless it can be explained why *in reality* philosophers prove useless or vicious. This explanation in turn shows that becoming a useful and virtuous philosopher depends on much more than native intelligence and knowledge. Indeed, the virtues

3 It should be noted here that the tension between philosophy and politics is not a tension between philosophy and *practice*. Philosophy is inherently practical with regard to the effects it has on the philosopher's character and actions. At issue here is philosophy's relation to the politics of governing a state. As Nightingale observes, "Plato does not, then, oppose the *contemplative* to the *practical* life; rather, he differentiates between the *philosophical* and the *political* life even as he tries to bring them together in a utopian context" (133). It should also be said that to speak of a tension between philosophy and politics is not to deny that philosophy is inherently political in the specific sense in which Socratic philosophy is presented as political in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*, *i.e.*, as benefitting others as well as oneself and thereby representing a sort of rule over oneself as well as over others. The tension I speak of here is the tension between philosophy and the specific art of governing a State. I owe this important clarification and qualification to the insightful criticisms of Carolina Araújo.

of the philosophical nature can become the greatest vices under the wrong external conditions (491b7-11).

The idea of philosopher-kings is therefore not the naive idea that philosophers simply as such will make the best rulers, but rather the idea that they could make the best rulers under the right social and practical conditions. It is here, of course, that we run against the infamous paradox: only the ideal state could provide the right social and practical conditions for philosophers becoming successful rulers, but such a state is possible only when philosophers have become successful rulers (R. 497a-d). It is on account of this seemingly vicious circle that Socrates must repeatedly appeal to *the divine* in defending the possibility of philosophical rule: divine help appears needed to save the philosophical nature from corruption before it gets the chance to rule (492a5, 493a1-2); or current kings or children of kings would need to be *divinely inspired* with a love of philosophy (499c1). This would appear to suggest that a state ruled by philosophers is not *humanly* realizable. But what needs to be emphasized now is simply this: only someone who ignores the bulk of book VI and the account of the descent into the Cave in book VII could see in the idea of philosopher-kings the naive belief that philosophers need nothing but their theoretical knowledge in order to be good rulers or that philosophy is in itself politics.<sup>4</sup>

### Aristotle on Philosophy and Politics

Once Plato's position is clarified in this way, the contrast with Aristotle's position becomes much less clear. Though I cannot possibly hope in this short space to do justice to the differences between Plato and Aristotle on the relation between philosophy and politics, I want to look briefly at texts that might suggest differences to show that these differences are not as great as might at first appear.

If we look first at Aristotle's critique of the *Republic* in book II of the *Politics*, we must be struck by the fact that in focusing this critique on the second of Socrates' paradoxical proposals, *i.e.*, that of having wives and children in common, Aristotle passes over in silence the proposal of philosopher-kings. How are we to interpret this silence? Is it a condemning silence, as if to suggest that the proposal of philosopher-kings

4 One could of course argue, and with some justification, that for Plato philosophy is not purely theoretical but as inherently practical must naturally seek to realize itself in politics. But what is then striking is the way in which the *Republic* emphasizes, or arguably exaggerates, the theoretical character of philosophy and its subsequent opposition to politics at the same time that it argues for bringing the two together in one person. The reason for this exaggeration, I would suggest, is to prevent us from losing sight of the tension that must persist between philosophy and politics even in their most ideal reconciliation.



is too absurd even to merit comment?<sup>5</sup> Or is it an approving silence? Yet there is another possibility: that Aristotle does not consider an account of the knowledge possessed by the rulers as germane to the present inquiry that concerns the constitution and laws of a state. The relevant passage here is *Politics* 1264b39-1265a1 where, on some translations, Aristotle, in referring to Socrates' account of the education of the guardians, appears to dismiss it as an extraneous matter: "But as for the rest, he has filled his discourse with extraneous matter, as about what the education of the guardians should be like" (1997).<sup>6</sup> This might suggest that Aristotle distinguishes between philosophy and politics much more sharply than Plato does, with the result that the idea of philosopher/kings ceases to be germane to the study of politics. However, as Catherine Zuckert has suggested, Aristotle could be seen

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- 5 Even if Aristotle now rejects the idea, that he would not find it absurd is suggested by his own defense of the idea in the earlier *Protrepticus* (B46-51); there he appears to argue that the lawmaker must be a philosopher, basing his actions on a theoretical knowledge of nature and the divine. See Bobonich (153-75; especially 163-64); also Sophie Van der Meer: "Il ressort en tout cas de ce chapitre que la sagesse théorique et la science représentent la condition nécessaire de l'action politique, conception plus platonicienne qu'aristotélicienne, comme l'ont fait remarquer différents interprètes" (123 fn. 1). Andrea Wilson Nightingale also sees here a Platonic position distinct from the position Aristotle will defend in the treatises (196-97). Marcello Zanatta, in contrast, argues both 1) that the position defended in the *Protrepticus* is not the idea of philosopher/kings because the knowledge said to be necessary is not of separate Forms but only of the nature of happiness and the good (219, 296, fn. 119) and 2) that this position is consistent with the position throughout Aristotle's work if one distinguishes politics as a science that has the *polis* as its object from what Zanatta calls 'politica architetonica' (294-295 fn. 115) which forms a good city and good citizens on the basis of a knowledge of the nature of the good and happiness. Zanatta thereby brings the positions of Plato and Aristotle very close indeed, especially since his first point seems besides the point: the separateness or not of the good that is known appears irrelevant to the thesis that philosophers should be kings. As will appear below, there are significant differences between Plato and Aristotle here (and ones that have nothing to do with the 'separation' of Forms) which Zanatta appears to overlook, but my argument will agree with his to the extent of making the positions of Plato and Aristotle much closer than they are usually taken to be.
- 6 Rackham maintains that the final clause referring to the education of the guardians is misplaced and does not go with the reference to extraneous matter (1944 98). Jowett's Oxford translation does not follow Rackham but is more ambiguous than Simpson: "The remainder of the work is filled up with digressions foreign to the main subject, and with discussions about the education of the guardians." W. L. Newman likewise translates: "But for the rest, we find that he has filled the dialogue with extraneous discussions, and with discourse about the education of the guardians"; Newman suggests the extraneous matter could be "the ethical discussions, such as that on justice," (2010 265).

here as simply following the lead of Socrates who in the summary he gives of the *Republic* in the *Timaeus* (17c-19b) also leaves out the philosopher-kings; the reason Zuckert suggests is that they may have not considered the proposal of philosopher-kings to be part of the regime or constitution itself (cf. 425 fn. 14). Recall that Socrates introduces the philosopher-king as a condition for the ideal city's coming into being, and so arguably as not forming part of the definition of this city. This supports the main point I wish to make: that in the *Republic* there remains a distinction between politics and philosophy. Thus, in summarizing the political proposal in the *Timaeus*, Socrates can leave out the philosophical training and knowledge of the rulers which, if it is what qualifies the rulers to rule and thus what makes the city possible, still lies outside of the city, just as the distinction between the outside of the Cave and the inside will never be overcome.

If we turn next to the *Ethics*, which Aristotle himself calls 'political science' and thus does not sharply distinguish from the *Politics*, we do appear to find an implicit critique of the idea of philosopher-kings in the explicit critique of the Idea of the Good in book I, chapter six. Recall that Socrates introduces the Idea of the Good as the object of the 'greatest study' to be undertaken by the philosophical rulers. Furthermore, Aristotle's critique appears to bring into question precisely that movement of descent, that movement of application that is so critical to Socrates' account of the relation between philosophy and politics. It is hard not to hear in the following passage a reference to the account of the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*:

Perhaps, however, some one might think it worthwhile to have knowledge of it [the Idea of the Good] with a view to the goods that are attainable and achievable; for having this as a sort of pattern we shall know better the goods that are goods for us, and if we know them shall attain them. (1096b35-1097a3)

After significantly admitting that this view has some plausibility, Aristotle objects that arts such as weaving, carpentry and medicine do not seek such knowledge nor apparently require it in producing their distinctive goods. But politics is not to be found among the examples Aristotle appeals to in his objection. Does politics no more need knowledge of some transcendent good (for it is the unattainability of the Good that is at issue in this objection, rather than the universality at issue in the other objections) than does medicine?

If we move ahead to book VI of the *Ethics*, we apparently find there another critique of the idea of philosopher/kings in the sharp distinction Aristotle draws between political science and the knowledge of the highest things:

it would be strange to think that political science or φρόνησις is the loftiest kind of knowledge, since man is not the best thing in the world [...] [W]isdom is knowledge, combined with intelligence of the things that are highest by nature. (1141a20-22, 1141b2-3)

So how much of a departure do we have here from Socrates' position in the *Republic*? On the one hand, we have seen that even in the ideal of philosopher/kings Socrates does not identify philosophical knowledge with political knowledge: the latter requires a descent and has its own distinctive requirements. There is always, therefore, a tension between the two. But Aristotle appears to go further: the two forms of knowledge and their objects are seen as so distinct that there can be no real talk of descent from one to the other or of applying one to the other. The knowledge above politics is simply a different kind of knowledge with different objects and thus irrelevant to the knowledge of our own human good.

Matters, however, are far from being so simple. If we turn to the account of wisdom in the *Metaphysics*, it turns out that its highest object, *i.e.*, god as primary substance and unmoved mover, is not only *good* but good precisely in the sense we desire and aspire to in our own lives, not only individually but presumably also collectively. "On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. And its life is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy but for a short time" (*Met.* 1072b14-16). In this case it is hard to see how ethics and political science would *not* be grounded in first philosophy and metaphysics. To know the first principle of the heavens and the world is to know the good to which we ourselves aspire. In other words, a politician who was not a philosopher could not fully know the good to which human beings aspire and thus could not fully know what constitutes a good state.

That, despite the critique of the Idea of the Good in *Ethics* I as unattainable and impractical, the ultimate object of ethics turns out for Aristotle to be a transcendent and divine good is made clear not only in the *Metaphysics* but in book X of the *Ethics* itself. Indeed, what Aristotle concludes in this book perfectly mirrors what is said in the *Metaphysics*, thus showing how ethics and metaphysics are ultimately inseparable for Aristotle. The best human life is concluded to be one lived according to the *divine* element in us, that is, a life focused not on a distinctively human good, but rather on those higher, divine things that are the objects of wisdom. The divine element of which Aristotle speaks is indeed 'in' us, but at the same time transcends our 'composite nature'. Indeed, in what appears to be a clear allusion to Socrates' description in the *Republic* of the transcendence of the Good beyond

being “in power and honor” (*R.* 509b9), Aristotle describes our divine element as surpassing everything else “in power and honor” (*EN* 1178a1).

Perhaps the best indication that the differences between Plato and Aristotle on the relation between philosophy and politics may not be as great as they seem is that in book x of the *Ethics* Aristotle is faced with a problem similar to that illustrated by the Cave analogy in the *Republic*: the tension between “strain[ing] every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us [*i.e.*, the divine element]” (*EN* 1177b34) and the fact that “in so far as he is a man and lives with a number of people, he chooses to do virtuous acts [*i.e.*, the practical virtues as opposed to *θεωρία*]” (1178b5-7). How is this not a repetition of the dilemma facing the philosopher outside the Cave? One’s existence as a political animal and thus politics demand one thing, while the philosophical knowledge of the highest divine good on which politics itself depends demands something else. Those who best know that good to which humans aspire will at least want to live a distinctly human, political life. We thus appear to be left with a tense, problematic relationship between politics (ethics) and philosophy, not so different from that encountered in the *Republic*. If Plato, in attempting to reconcile politics and philosophy also shows them to be in conflict, Aristotle, in attempting to keep them sharply distinct, also shows them to be implicated in one another.<sup>7</sup>

This of course is not to deny any difference between the two positions. Even if Plato is aware of the tension between theory and practice, we do not find in Plato the sharp distinction between *σοφία* and *φρόνησις* on which Aristotle insists nor therefore the insistence that the former does not concern itself with the human good.<sup>8</sup> However, the difference becomes less great than it might first appear when we add that for Aristotle *σοφία* is itself the highest human good and has as its highest object a being (the divine) that embodies this good. Therefore, theoretical philosophy represents for Aristotle the

7 To note that there is a similar tension between politics and philosophy in Aristotle and Plato is of course not to deny other differences, e. g., differences in their assessments of democracy. Even on this issue, however, the difference is much more ambiguous than at first appears. Making precisely this point, Foucault (*cf.* 2009 50-51) draws attention to the chapter in the *Politics* in which Aristotle, after defending the justice of ostracism, concludes that if men of exceptional virtue turned up in the city, the natural thing would be not to ostracize them but to obey them, so that they would become kings for all time (*Pol.* III, xiii 1284b30-35).

8 On this difference see Nightingale (189 ff.). In agreement with the argument of this paper, Nightingale nevertheless sees Plato and Aristotle *agreeing* on the distinction between philosophy and politics: “Like Plato, Aristotle contrasts the philosopher and the politician, and sees them as living different kinds of lives” (205).

highest aim of a politics that aims at the highest human good. This is strikingly evident in book VIII of the *Politics* with its insistence that what the city should seek to promote above all in its system of education is *useless* knowledge (see especially 1338a9-13). Correspondingly, when confronting the debate concerning whether the contemplative or the political life is better, Aristotle chooses the former but only in insisting that it is the most genuinely *active*: a *praxis* that is 'exoteric' in aiming at some end external to itself is less truly active, rather than more active, than a *praxis* that is pursued entirely for its own sake (1325b16-23). If this argument makes theoretical contemplation (τὰς αὐτῶν ἔνεκεν θεωρίας καὶ διανοήσεις) more truly active (πρακτικὰς) than other activities, it also makes more active a city that promotes such contemplation and is as little dependent as possible on external goods and other cities. It is in the context of this argument that the *Politics* must appeal to the *Metaphysics*: that an activity, whether of an individual or of a city, is not less active, but indeed more so, when it has no external end or product, is confirmed by the activity of god: we would hardly want to deny that the divine is active, but the divine activity clearly can have no end or result beyond itself (οἷς οὐκ εἰσὶν ἔξωτερικαὶ πράξεις παρὰ τὰς οἰκείας τὰς αὐτῶν, 1325b28-30). In conclusion, one could perhaps best express the difference between Plato and Aristotle as follows: while for both of them philosophy and politics remain distinct, for Plato philosophy can serve politics while for Aristotle politics serves philosophy.

### Heidegger as Philosopher-King

In courses from the 1920's Heidegger credits Aristotle with avoiding the confusion between ethics and ontology supposedly found in Plato's Idea of the Good.<sup>9</sup> One might therefore expect to find in Heidegger a rejection of the idea of philosopher/kings. And indeed in a 1937-1938 course entitled *Grundfragen der Philosophie*,<sup>10</sup> Heidegger describes the making of philosophers into kings in the *Republic* as "the essential degradation [*Herabsetzung*] of philosophy." (Heidegger 1992 180). Yet when Heidegger four years earlier assumes the Rectorship of Freiburg University and joins the National Socialist Party, he sings a very different tune. Delivering a course entitled *The Essence of Truth [Vom Wesen der Wahrheit]*,<sup>11</sup> the first part of which

9 See Heidegger (GA 19 123-24). See also my *Plato and Heidegger: A Question of Dialogue* (30-35).

10 All translations are my own.

11 Published together with a course from the summer semester of 1933, *Die Grundfrage der Philosophie*, in *Gesamtausgabe* 36/37, *Sein und Wahrheit* (2001). An earlier version of this

is devoted to an interpretation of the Cave Analogy, Heidegger seeks in the ideal of philosopher-kings justification for his own political involvement.

Heidegger observes that this idea does not mean that philosophy professors should become *Reichskanzler*, something that would prove from the outset a misfortune (*Unglück*, cf. GA 36/37 194). One can certainly agree with this statement and one can certainly imagine Plato agreeing, since he would most likely put philosophy professors into that class of vicious and/or useless sophists and thinkers described in book VI. However, it becomes clear from what Heidegger says that for him the idea of philosopher-kings does not mean any kind of actual involvement in concrete politics on the part of philosophers of any type. What he does say, after having characterized the Idea as the rule (*Herrschaft*) and the origin (*Ursprung*) for beings, is that “the rule of the being-with-one-another of human beings in the state must be essentially determined” through philosophical men and philosophical knowledge (*id.*). But what does this mean, if it does not mean philosophers actually ruling the state? The following sentence provides the answer:

Plato posed the question of the essence of knowledge [Wissen], not because it belongs to a school-concept [Schulbegriff] of the theory of knowledge, but because *knowledge* [das *Wissen*] forms the innermost enduring substance of *political being* [den innersten Bestand des *staatlichen Seins*], insofar as the state is a *free one*, that is, at the same time a force that *binds* a people. (GA 36/37 195)

Philosophers do not need actually to rule because philosophical knowledge, *i.e.*, knowledge of *das Wesen* of truth and being, is already in itself the enduring matter of political reality. This is why Heidegger, after dismissing the idea of philosophy professors becoming *Reichskanzler*, compensates by asserting that philosophers “carry within themselves” (“in sich tragen”) the rule of the state (GA 36/37 194). Here we see at its clearest the complete identification of philosophy and politics or, more precisely, the complete absorption of politics into philosophy: the enduring substance of political reality is philosophical knowledge and philosophers are *in themselves* rulers of the state.<sup>12</sup>

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 course was given in 1931/32 and published as *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Gesamtausgabe* 34 (1988). One thing that distinguishes the later version of the course under discussion is the introduction of political, and specifically National Socialist, rhetoric.

12 This identification of philosophy and politics is also clear in Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle’s description of man as the “political” animal: “*De Mensch ist ein solches Lebewesen, das von Haus aus zugehörig ist einem Miteinander im Staat [...] als miteinander zugehörig dem Staate, aus dem Staate heraus existierend; und zwar vollzieht*

Heidegger's interpretation of the Cave analogy, which can only be alluded to here, accordingly eliminates the descent understood as a political requirement. If the philosopher must return to the Cave, this is not a demand of justice, but only an illustration of the fact that truth is never fully separable from untruth (*cf.* GA 36/37 187) and that therefore the philosopher, and man as such, exists always in between truth and untruth (*cf. ibid.*). And if Socrates describes the philosopher who returns to the Cave as in danger of being killed, this for Heidegger does not not a tension between philosophy and politics but only the philosopher's being misunderstood (*cf. id.* 182). On Heidegger's reading, in short, there is no descent from philosophy to politics, no struggle and danger in the philosopher's attempt to become politically effective. The philosopher is in himself and as such king; the people must come to him.

Once we understand this, we see that Heidegger's rejection of the philosopher/king idea in 1937-1938 is less of a reversal than might at first appear. Heidegger affirms the philosopher-king ideal to the extent that politics can simply be identified with philosophy; to the extent, however, that politics proves to be something quite different and much more "messy," as it no doubt did during Heidegger's *Rektorat*, Heidegger dismisses any association between philosophy and politics as a degradation of the former. Whether Heidegger brings politics out of the Cave or dismisses it as a descent and debasement, in either case he remains outside the Cave. What he describes still in the late 1930's as the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism<sup>13</sup> is all he ever saw in the movement; what changed was only his assessment of the extent to which the National Socialist party and its members lived up to this "inner truth and greatness".<sup>14</sup> The failure of the National

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 und gestaltet sich diese Existenz durch die Rede, den λόγος. Die Wissenschaft, die sich auf das Redenkönnen bezieht, die *Rhetorik*, ist die Grundwissenschaft vom Menschen, die *politische* Wissenschaft" (GA 36/37 158).

13 "der inneren Wahrheit und Größe dieser Bewegung" (Heidegger GA 40 208).

14 In the *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, written 1936-38, Heidegger, after claiming that "weltgeschichtlichen Begebenheiten" cannot determine essential "Entscheidungen," qualifies: "Wenn aber innerhalb dieser Begebenheiten und z. T. nach ihrem Stil eine Sammlung des Volkes bzw. seines Bestandes auf es selbst eingerichtet wird, könnte da nicht ein Weg in die Nähe der Entscheidung sich öffnen? Gewiß, aber mit der höchsten Gefahr zugleich der völligen Verfehlung ihres Bereiches" (GA 65 98). We have here a clear reference to Heidegger's disillusionment with National Socialism: it missed, in his view, the realm of essential decision. Referring to a remark Heidegger supposedly made to Ernst Jünger to the effect that Hitler had let him (Heidegger) down and therefore owed him an apology, Wolin remarks: "By this claim, Heidegger meant that it was not he who had erred by entrusting the Nazis with this support; it was Nazism itself that had gone astray by failing to live up to its true philosophical potential" (180).

Socialist movement and the failure of Heidegger's own brief political involvement are in themselves absolutely irrelevant in Heidegger's estimation. Revealing in this regard is Heidegger's description of his *Rektorat* as "in itself an insignificant case" ("für sich bedeutungslose Fall") (1983 39). The failure of Heidegger's *Rektorat*, and even the catastrophe of World War II, was inessential because it represented nothing but the failure of those within the Cave to open their eyes to what is essential. To criticize Heidegger for his failure as a political leader, or to demand that philosophers become political leaders in the ordinary sense, is to miss what is essential and degrade philosophy. The politics Heidegger identified with philosophy remained untouched by the travails and upheavals of "real" politics. When Heidegger reports having been accused of a "Privatnationalsozialismus" after his *Rektorsrede* (*ibid.* 30), one must grant that this accusation is insightful despite itself. As for how one can have a "private politics", that is of course precisely the problem.

### **Foucault on Politics and the Courage of Truth**

In conclusion, Heidegger 'solves' the problem of the relation between politics and philosophy by simply collapsing the former into the latter: by, in other words, characterizing philosophy (in the form of ontology) as the only authentic politics and the philosopher as ruling just by virtue of being a philosopher. In contrast, Michel Foucault's reading of the *Republic* in his 1982-1983 course, *Le Gouvernement de Soi et des Autres*, insists that the philosopher-king proposal, in claiming only that the same person should practice philosophy and politics, keeps the two completely distinct. Thus Foucault develops his own view that, if philosophy can play a role *in relation to* politics by transforming the subject who lives politically, it plays no role *within* politics.

Foucault insists that the idea of philosopher-kings in the *Republic* is only the idea that those who practice philosophy should be those who exercise political power and *not* a conflation of philosophical discourse and knowledge with political practice (*cf.* 2008 271). Foucault sees this conclusion as supported by a careful and faithful translation of the text 473c-d. Foucault first points out that what the passage describes is not philosophers becoming kings or kings becoming philosophers (as our shorthand of 'philosopher-king' suggests), but rather philosophers beginning to rule in cities or current rulers beginning to philosophize in an authentic and genuine manner. To say that rulers will philosophize and philosophers will rule is not to say that philosophizing and ruling will become the same thing. Yet some translations of the key sentence have it go on to assert precisely such an identity. Thus, in the Grube/Reeve translation we read that cities will have no



rest from evils “until political power and philosophy entirely coincide”. The Waterfield translation likewise reads: “until political power and philosophy coincide.” The Greek in question here asserts of political power (δύναμις πολιτική) and philosophy (φιλοσοφία) that “τοῦτο εἰς ταῦτόν συμπέσει” (R. 473d2-3). This literally says something like: “this falls together towards the same.” The Grube/Reeve translation takes the ταῦτόν to express identity and to qualify political power and philosophy, so that what is being asserted is the complete coincidence of political power and philosophy. This translation seems possible and can appeal for support to the use of a similar phrase at *Theaetetus* 160d to describe the relation that has been demonstrated between the definition of knowledge as perception, the Heraclitean flux theory and Protagorean relativism. However, following Chambry’s Budé translation, Foucault adopts a different reading: “réunies dans le même sujet la puissance politique et la philosophie.”<sup>15</sup> Thus Foucault can take the statement to mean not that political power and philosophy will come down to the same thing or amount to the same thing, but rather that they will come together in the same subject or person. In other words, the identity is not between political power and philosophy, but rather in the subject who exercises both.

This allows Foucault to read the philosopher-king’s proposal as preserving the distinctness of political power and philosophy. As he asserts at one point,

But from the fact that he who practices philosophy is he who exercises power and that he who exercises power is also someone who practices philosophy, from this one cannot at all infer that what he knows of philosophy will be the law of his actions and of his political decisions. (2008 271-72)

Philosophy must speak truth in relation to political action, but this does not mean that it should speak truth *for* political action in the sense of determining how to govern, what laws to adopt, etc. (cf. 2008 265) Foucault can thus find in Plato his own view that “The question of philosophy, that is not the question of politics, is the question of the subject in politics” (*id.* 295). Philosophy can make someone worthy of ruling, can develop in that person the kind of character we want to see

15 Karl Vretska in the Reclam edition offers a similar translation: “wenn nicht in eine Hand zusammenfallen politische Macht und Philosophie,” as does Georges Leroux: “à moins [...] que viennent à coïncider l’un avec l’autre pouvoir politique et philosophie.” James Adam, though not considering the kind of translation followed by Foucault, still adopts something weaker than the Grube/Reeve translation in taking to phrase to mean the coming about of a coalition or coalescence between political power and philosophy (1982 330).

in a ruler (*id.* 273), but ruling itself will require a kind of knowledge and rationality distinct from philosophy. As Foucault states the point more specifically, the ruler must learn through philosophy to govern himself in order to be the kind of person who can justly govern others (*id.* 272; thus the title of the course: le gouvernement de soi *et* des autres).

The distinction between philosophy and politics becomes clearer in Foucault's continuation of the course in 1984, recently published under the title *Le Courage de la Vérité*.<sup>16</sup> A central theme of this course is the transposition of this courage of truth the Greeks called *παρρησία* from its original political sphere to a distinct philosophical sphere. From a speaking of truth to power, whether the Assembly in the case of democracy or the Prince in the case of a monarchy, *παρρησία* becomes a provocation to the individual to know himself, to discover the truth within himself (see, e.g., the explanation on Foucault 2009 215). The soul rather than the *polis* becomes the correlate of *παρρησία* (*cf. id.* 61). The most important figure in this transition is Socrates who in the *Apology*, as Foucault points out, describes his divine mission of speaking the truth to his fellow citizens as *turning away from politics*. (31c-32a) If Socrates' philosophical *παρρησία* aroused the hatred of others and ultimately resulted in his prosecution and death, he tells us that he would have met his end much sooner and would have not been able to accomplish anything if he had entered politics (*cf. id.* 74). For Socrates, in other words, *παρρησία* as the courage of truth is no longer possible in the political sphere and must therefore be transposed to the domain of the individual soul and its taking care of itself. Foucault proceeds to identify a third form of *παρρησία* which he identifies with the cynic: here we have not a courage to speak the truth but a courage to *live* that truth which, while acceptable to others on the level of general principles, scandalizes them as a form of life (*cf. id.* 215-16). Philosophy as such a way of life that is always *other* (*cf. id.* 226-27), that in principle cannot conform, appears to be especially opposed to politics.<sup>17</sup>

16 Translations are my own.

17 "Disons, encore une fois très schématiquement, que nous avons dans le cas des cyniques un mode de rapport du dire-vrai philosophique à l'action politique qui se fait sous la forme de l'extériorité, du défi et de la dérision, alors qu'on va avoir chez Platon un rapport du dire-vrai philosophique à la pratique [politique] qui sera plutôt de l'ordre de l'intersection, de la pédagogie et de l'identification du sujet philosophe et du sujet exerçant le pouvoir" (Foucault 2008 265). In the subsequent course *Le Courage de la Vérité*, Foucault makes a similar contrast, there characterizing the Cynic, in distinction from Plato's philosopher-king, as "le roi anti-roi, qui montre combien la monarchie des rois est vaine, illusoire et précaire" (2009 252). This

If Heidegger conflates philosophy and politics, one could argue that Foucault is no more faithful to Socrates' proposal in making philosophy and politics seemingly irreconcilable. However one interprets 473d2-3, and Foucault's reading appears hard to defend,<sup>18</sup> it seems clear that for Socrates the knowledge the philosopher attains as such *will* be the law of his political actions and decisions. However, Foucault can also be seen as developing a tension between politics and philosophy that has been seen to be already there in Plato's text. Furthermore, if Foucault only reinterprets rather than outright rejects the idea of philosopher-kings, that is because even for him philosophy and politics do not diverge to such an extent that they cease to have anything to do with each other. At one point in the 1984 course Foucault describes philosophy as existing between the poles of ἀλήθεια, πολιτεία, and ἔθος, where none of these three is reducible to the others (cf. 2009 63, 65). If philosophy can never be politics, it nevertheless always exists in an essential relation to politics. As Foucault notes in the case of Socrates, if the παρρησία he practices is not political, it is also the case that it exists in an essential relation to the good of the city (cf. 2009 83). After all, Socrates describes his philosophical mission as a great good to the city and thus as a gift of the gods (*Ap.* 30a). And Foucault's reading of the *Laches* notes that if Socrates there introduces a courage of truth distinct from political παρρησία, he does so in dialogue with two prominent political men. Philosophy must speak to politics, but always from the outside. Even if philosophers become kings, to be a philosopher is never the same as to be a king.

For Foucault, unlike Heidegger, the ideal of the philosopher-king is therefore *not* the ideal of an identity between philosophy and politics. Foucault can indeed be said to provide a diagnosis of Heidegger's error when he attributes what he calls "the misfortune and the equivocations in the relations between philosophy and politics" to the fact that philosophy understands itself, or allows itself to be understood, in terms of "coinciding with the contents of a political rationality" (2008 266). Yet, as Foucault continues, this misfortune can also arise when inversely "the contents of a political rationality have sought to justify themselves through making of themselves a philosophical doctrine" (*id.* 266-67). This is an important point in the context because,

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 opposition to the politics of the state was at the same time characterized as the true politics of the entire world (*id.* 278).

18 It is hard, if not even impossible, to justify a translation of ταῦτόν as "the same subject." Carolina Araújo has pointed out to me another problem: having the same subject do two different jobs would violate the principle of "one person-one job" that is central to the account of justice in the *Republic*.

if Heidegger was able to identify with National Socialism, this is not only because he saw his philosophy as coinciding with a politics but also because the National Socialists saw their politics as coinciding with a philosophy. Hitler apparently insisted repeatedly that “Anyone who understands National Socialism only as a political movement knows virtually nothing about it. It is even more than religion; it is the will to a new creation of man” (qtd. in Fest 214).<sup>19</sup> It is this identification of its politics with a philosophy that made National Socialism particularly deadly. In emphasizing, and perhaps also exaggerating the difference between philosophy and politics he finds in Plato’s text, Foucault can be seen as providing a corrective to Heidegger’s reading.

We are left, then, with the paradox of an essential relation that can never be an identity. This of course only takes us back to the problem bequeathed by Socrates. The philosopher is he who should but cannot rule. We will always be ruled by sophists. The task of the philosopher is to challenge such politics by always living an *other* life. The ultimate explanation of the tension between philosophy and politics can perhaps be found in the very last sentence of Foucault’s manuscript for the 1984 course: a sentence he did not have time to deliver. What he states there is that truth is always characterized by alterity, that the truth always has the character of being *other* and that the true life is always an *other* life: “truth, that is never the same; there can be no truth except in the form of the other world and the other life” (2009 311). In this case the truth could never be institutionalized, could never be expressed in an unchanging set of structures, prescriptions and laws. Could there ever then be a “true politics”? It is perhaps only in this tension that philosophy and politics are inseparable.

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19 Fest’s biography repeatedly draws attention to Hitler’s “essentially unpolitical relation to the world” (51), despite his obvious political skills: see also 610-11. At one point Fest observes: “In this sense Hitler actually had no politics; what he had, rather, was a large, portentous ideal of destiny and the world” (381-82).

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