The Politics of Plato’s Socrates


Examining in this way what would be the virtue of a good leader, he [Socrates] stripped away all the other qualities but left this remaining: to make whomever one leads happy. (Xenophon, Memorabilia III.2.4)

1. Introduction

Modern readers of Plato find it easier to admire Socrates as an exemplary citizen in relation to his polis than as a political philosopher. As a citizen, Socrates refused to obey the orders of a violent and unscrupulous regime to arrest a fellow citizen for execution (Apology 32ce); he was the sole member of the Council to oppose the illegal mass trial of the generals who had failed to rescue the survivors of the Battle of Arginusae (Apology 32bc); he openly criticised his city’s government, and was willing to die for his principles—do no injustice (Apology 32ce; Crito 49ab); obey the god’s command to philosophize even if the cost of doing so is death at the hands of your city (Apology 29d, 38a); abide by the decision your city makes concerning you even if it is unfavourable to you (Crito 50a-53a). On the other hand, the reasoning Socrates provides for abiding by the city’s decision—that not doing so would constitute an attempt to destroy the law; that since the laws are like a citizen’s parents, it is not permissible to retaliate against them; that by remaining in the city and not expressing dissatisfaction with its laws the citizen agrees to obey those laws—fails to recognise reasonable limits on what a city may require of its citizens. And the leitmotif of Socrates’ political thought—the criticism of democracy as rule by the ignorant (Crito 44d, Protagoras...
319bd, *Gorgias* 454e-55a, 459a-61c) in the pursuit of desire-gratification (*Gorgias* 502e-503d, 521e-22a) resulting in the corruption of the citizens (*Gorgias* 515d-17c)—seems to be based on an implausibly low estimate of most people’s capacity for political judgment and an implausibly high estimate of the specialised knowledge required for politics. Finally, there is no avoiding Karl Popper’s criticism that Plato mistook the fundamental question of politics to be ‘who shall rule the state?’ and ignored the far more important question of how to design institutions so as to check the abuses of political power,\(^2\) a matter which greatly occupied Athenian democratic practice and thought.

In these circumstances, it is tempting to distinguish the exemplary individual Socrates from the theorist Plato. Popper himself excuses the historical Socrates (who survives in Plato’s *Apology* and *Crito*) for neglecting the issue of checks on political power on the grounds that because of his ‘emphasis upon the human side of the political problem, he could not take much interest in institutional reform.’\(^3\) According to Popper, Socrates was engaged with the Athenian democracy critically but constructively, attempting to reform its (usually oligarchic-leaning) political élites by forcing them to think critically. By contrast, Popper argues, Plato betrayed the legacy of Socrates by having him speak on behalf of an anti-democratic constitution in the *Republic* (189-97).\(^4\)

More recently, Terry Penner has argued that Socrates’ intellectualist moral psychology commits him to the view that only the non-political activity of engaging with one’s fellow-citizens in philosophical dialogue can benefit them.\(^5\) Socrates’ response to politics is, on this view, to ‘change the subject’—that is, to try to reform the characters of the politically ambitious young men with whom he interacted. And this project of moral reform through critical conversation must soften Socrates’ attitude towards democracy.
As Richard Kraut puts it, Socrates ‘thinks that the many will always rule badly, and he would prefer a society of moral experts [in this regard he is as authoritarian as Plato]. But he sees little hope for anything better than democracy, and he values the intellectual freedom provided by this political system.’

Approaching Socrates’ politics as politics in some extraordinary sense, consisting of critical and oppositional activity focused on individual intellectual transformation, has the advantage of reconciling Socrates’ claim that he does not participate in politics (Apology 31d) with his claim that he alone of all the Athenians undertakes the true political expertise and engages in political affairs (Gorgias 521d): there is a sense, a special Socratic sense, in which Socrates’ moral engagement with individuals is political; yet this is not politics in the ordinary sense at all. But while there is something to this conception of Socrates, if criticism and the attempted moral transformation of individuals were the whole of Socrates’ contribution to politics, it would be hard to see why courses in political theory or the history of political philosophy should, as they commonly do, begin with the Socrates of the ‘early dialogues’. Surely the more plausible beginning would be Plato’s Republic, which both describes an ideal constitution including the details of an educational system for moral cultivation and systematically criticises other actual and ideal constitution-types.

Leo Strauss wrote that Socrates was ‘the founder of political philosophy’. The present paper attempts to show in what sense this is true—and it will be for rather different reasons than Strauss thought (see below, section two). In brief, the argument is that Plato’s Socrates transforms the traditional ‘who should rule?’ question by yoking its consideration to the idea that ruling is a profession; Socrates thereby introduces a non-
partisan basis from which to discuss that question. In section two of the paper, I sketch the ancestry of the ‘who should rule?’ question in Socrates’ predecessors and identify two justifications they offer for the privilege of ruling. In section three, I argue that Socrates’ contribution to this debate develops out of his internal criticism of a quite separate discourse, that of the advertisements, made by contemporary sophists and orators, for a new professional education in politics. These figures professionalise political rule in the sense that they describe it as an activity success in which can be achieved by mastery of the skills which can be acquired by studying with them. Socrates accepts their characterisation of political rule as a profession, and uses this characterisation to insist that success in this profession consists in improving the citizens—rather than in any personal advantage of the ruler. Thus (although the teachers of the political profession are not eager to admit it) the professionalisation of political rule has implications for the constitutional debate because it entails a certain account of what correct rule is, and what its goal is. Socrates’ criticism of the professional discourse results in a novel and nonpartisan basis for answering the question, ‘who should rule?’ but it does so by replacing a prevalent conception of political rule as a privilege, the claim to which demands justification, with a conception of political rule as a profession, the claim to expertise in which demands a show of credentials. Referring the debate about who should rule to a discussion of what skills the job of ruling requires not only inaugurates non-partisan evaluation of political regimes, it also invalidates some considerations previously given in support of certain partisan answers. I discuss these results of Socrates’ reconceptualisation of the question ‘who should rule?’ in section four.
2. The Constitutional Debate

In Plato’s *Laws*, the Athenian lists seven bases on which people may claim to be worthy to rule others: that they are their ancestors, that they are of higher birth, that they are older, that they are masters and the others slaves, that they are stronger, that they are wise and the others ignorant, and finally, that having been chosen by lot, they are favoured by the gods and fortune (690ac). Readers of Plato will associate the sixth claim, of the wise to rule the ignorant, with Socrates. But just how does Socrates argue that the wise should rule the ignorant? To understand Socrates’ contribution to the debate about who should rule, we need first to get a sense of the shape of the debate before Socrates. (The first evidence that Socrates is concerned with the question ‘who should rule?’ may be in the *Crito*, where the Laws remind Socrates he has always praised Crete and Sparta for being well governed (53a), but this may have been praise for the conformity of behaviour in Crete and Sparta to Cretan and Spartan law, rather than for the laws themselves.)

Herodotus puts in the mouths of sixth century Persian nobles who have lately seized power a debate about which form of government—democracy (the rule of many), oligarchy (the rule of a few), or tyranny (the rule of one man)—they should choose (the discussion is a little anachronistic because it refers to fifth-century Athenian institutions like the selection of officials by lot and public examinations for officials). The argument for the superiority of democracy to tyranny is that there are no checks on a tyrant, the result of which is that the tyrant becomes arrogant and commits many atrocities; by contrast, democracy’s institutions allow no one that kind of power; instead, in a democracy, all citizens are equal before the law. The argument for the superiority of
oligarchy adds to the criticisms of tyranny criticisms of democracy: democracy puts in power ignorant men who are even more arrogant than a tyrant; oligarchy, on the other hand, puts the best men (present company included) in power, and the best men will produce the best policies. The argument for the superiority of tyranny adds to the criticisms of democracy criticisms of oligarchy: oligarchy leads to feuding and bloodshed; further, conflicts within oligarchies and democracies lead to tyranny anyway; finally, if the tyrant is the best, then nothing is better than his government. (III.80-82)

Herodotus may have taken these arguments from a sophistic source, perhaps Protagoras, who is said to have written a Peri Politeias (DL IX.55) and whose Antilogikai is said by Aristoxenus to have been the source of Plato’s Republic (DL III.38). (The Herodotus passage’s exhaustive rehearsal of all arguments on all sides supports the attribution to Protagoras’ Antilogikai.)

Common to debates about who should rule is the view that ruling is a privilege the possession of which has to be justified; those who would rule have to show themselves to deserve the privilege of ruling—either in exchange for something they provide or because they are simply worthy of ruling. The giving of justifications for ruling may even precede any debate about or contestation of any leader’s claim to rule. For instance, Homer’s Sarpedon gives a general justification of elite privilege when he explains that aristocrats have the privileges that they do (and common people don’t) because they fight where the battle is fiercest (Iliad 12.310-21). The suggestion is that the courage of the aristocrats is both intrinsically good and valuable to the community.

Two kinds of considerations in support of the different forms of government inform the debate as to who should rule. One consideration is the protection of the
citizens—so just as democracy promises protection from the whims of one who would place himself above the law; the tyrant too is described as a guardian of the people, whose rule preserves them from the violence of faction and feud. A second consideration is that the ruling individual or group be ‘the best’. This consideration might be expressed in terms of divine right, as in Homer, by Zeus’ gift of the sceptre to the king (Iliad 2.100, cf. 7.412, 9. 96). Even though these two considerations—providing protection and being superior—usually go together in actual arguments, as long as the content of the superiority is not simply superiority in providing protection, they are quite separate considerations.

The pseudo-Xenophon Constitution of the Athenians is one text that distinguishes superiority in protecting the citizens from some other kind of superiority. The author disapproves of the Athenian constitution because the Athenians prefer the well-being of the inferior at the expense of the superior (chrêstoi) (I.1). But he also suggests that it is just for the (inferior) common people to have more than the nobility, on the grounds that it is the common people—that is, the navy rather than the hoplites—who defend Athens. (I.2) So his point of view seems to be that it would be best if the intrinsically superior on the one hand had more, and on the other hand, did more by way of protecting Athens. However, since they don’t protect Athens, justice doesn’t demand that they have more; rather, it demands that those who actually protect Athens have more. Still, despite their failure to protect Athens, the ‘superior’ surpass the common people by their many intrinsic merits: they have the least injustice, the most self-restraint and concern for good things (I.5) The Athenians (i.e. common Athenians), for their part, can tell who’s superior and who’s inferior, but they prefer the inferior because the inferior are more
useful to them (II.19).

The most remarkable instance of the view that intrinsic superiority entitles one to rule is of course Callicles’ speech in Plato’s *Gorgias*, which characterises as ‘nature’s justice’ the rule by the superior (482e-84c). Although Callicles does not explicitly oppose the condition in which the stronger and more capable have a greater share to the condition in which the common good is achieved (he opposes it instead to the condition in which all have a ‘fair share’), his examples of the superiors who by nature’s justice have a greater share are conquerors, raiders, and lions. And the reason the lion is king of the animals is not that he protects them.

Callicles’ is obviously an extreme position, but it is evidence that a party’s intrinsic superiority could be taken as by itself a reason for that party to rule. This may be the sentiment in, for example, Democritus’ pronouncements that it is by nature fitting for the superior to rule (DK 267), that it is hard to be ruled by an inferior (DK49), and that it is proper to yield to a law or a ruler or someone wiser (DK47). Alongside this belief in a reason for the superior to rule, Democritus remarks that poverty under democracy is preferable to prosperity under a dictator to the same extent as freedom is preferable to slavery (DK 251); perhaps the thought is that democracy at least limits the extent of an inferior’s power over one. That Democritus is no Calliclean is shown by his advice that his audience not try to acquire power for themselves contrary to the common good (DK 252).

The other consideration in favour of a kind of rule—that it protects the people—is more widely used, and there is usually more to be said about just how a ruler/rule of that kind can or will protect the people. So, for example, in Thucydides’ account of the
debate at Syracuse (6.39), the oligarchs contend that the wealthy are best able to rule because they are the least tempted to take the city’s money for themselves and the democrats counter that the ‘dêmôs’ whose interests are served by democracy includes all the citizens, and that all citizens in a democracy have a fair share—by contrast with the oligarchy, in which the dangers, but not the profits, are shared.

I have documented the use of and emphasized the distinctness of these two considerations in favour of someone’s or some group’s rule in order to bring out Socrates’ distinctive contribution to the debate. By contrast, Leo Strauss argues that the question, ‘who should rule?’ arises naturally out of the politically engaged stance of the classical political philosopher, and the answer, ‘the best should rule’ arises equally naturally and prephilosophically, and needing the philosopher only to spell out its implications and defend it against objections by ‘bad or perplexed men’. But this account assumes that ‘rule by the best’ is not a controversial ideal. Yet the interpretation of ‘best’ is seen to be a matter of contention in Thucydides’ Syracusan debate. And the democrats in Herodotus’ constitutional debate do not even try to claim on behalf of democracy that the démôs are the best.

In the constitutional debate, the alternatives for rule—by the many (the poor), the few (the rich or historically rich), or one man—are idealisations of actual constitutions. It is not as if Socrates can argue in favour of rule by the wise by pointing to or idealising some existing constitution in which the wise rule. Yet to make a case for rule by the wise, it would seem necessary to address the claims to rule of the wealthy, the nobly born, the military, and so on. In the Republic, when Plato does describe and argue for the superiority of a constitution in which the wise rule, he helps himself to the conception of
a ruler who is motivated to rule because his ruling is necessary rather than because ruling is something fine or good (347cd, 520e-21a) and whose rule is justified by his qualifications. There has been a quiet revolution between the idea of rule as privilege, claim to which requires justification, and this idea of rule as a job the performance of which calls for certain qualifications. The question ‘who should rule?’ has come to depend on the question ‘what does the job of ruling demand?’ In section 3, I argue that Socrates takes the conception of ruling as a job requiring certain skills from contemporary sophists, but that he argues that determining what the requisite skill is depends on the answer to the question, ‘what is the goal of ruling?’

3. Professionalising Political Rule

In all likelihood Socrates takes over the idea that political rule is a job requiring certain skills from some of his older contemporaries. Plato includes among these Protagoras, who claimed to teach ‘sound deliberation (euboulia), both in domestic matters—how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs—how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action’ (Protagoras 319a\(^1\)) and Gorgias, who claimed to teach rhetoric, ‘the ability to persuade by speeches judges in a law court, councillors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place’ (Gorgias 452e) which produces ‘freedom for humankind itself and . . . the source of rule over others in one’s own city’ (452d).

Both Protagoras and Gorgias characterise politics as a field in which one can excel when one has achieved the mastery over the skills (deliberation, rhetoric) which they teach.

Before we delve into Socrates’ engagement with the sophists and orators, a word about what they were doing in Athens. The demand for sophists and orators seems to
have arisen with two changes in Athenian circumstances in the fifth century which made traditional elites’ claim to political power and prior political skills obsolete: democracy and empire. If the vote of the demos was required for a politician’s plan to carry, it was no longer enough to be a great general; the politician had to be able to speak persuasively to the assembled demos, and since he did not have a common culture and education with them, he had to learn what appealed to them in particular. In addition, Athens’ new status as an imperial power complicated its affairs and this, combined with the requirement that any issue be decided by the assembly in a single day, created a demand for politicians who could devote themselves to mastering Athenian political affairs. Plato’s contemporary Isocrates expresses one kind of response to the complexity of Athens’ affairs when he denies the possibility of scientific knowledge (epistêmê) of ‘what we should do or what we should say’ and instead upholds the importance to the politician of ‘insight’ (phronêsis) and the ability ‘by his powers of conjecture (tais doxais) to arrive generally at the best course’ (Isocrates, Antidosis c. 271). But however desirable mastery of political affairs or good judgment may have been in a politician, the democratic system made the ability to speak persuasively not just a desideratum but a necessity.

In this context, ‘professionalising’ political rule amounts to claiming that there is a body of knowledge, sufficiently wide in scope and precise in formulation, upon learning which the would-be political leader should expect success. Describing a new discipline as a technê (profession, craft, art) or epistêmê (science) is a way of claiming for it a status possessed by better-established practices like medicine. That status derives in part from the professional’s ability to bring about a valued result (such as health) on the
basis of some understanding of the factors involved (rather than by luck.) (I have chosen the term ‘profession’ to translate technê rather than the more usual ‘craft’ or ‘art’ for several reasons. First, in English ‘craft’ sounds as if it refers to something one does with one’s hands and ‘art’ to something in the fine arts, perhaps as opposed to the sciences, whereas technê has none of these connotations; like the technai about which there are disputes, such as medicine and politics, a profession is thought to have an important intellectual component. Second, in contemporary English ‘professional’ has normative connotations that seem to resonate with those of technê: people speak today of professional standards and professional (or unprofessional) behaviour.  

I mean this to be a minimalist account of what is entailed by calling the subject one practices or teaches a technê, and I want a minimalist account because it seems to me that more substantial accounts reflect controversial innovations by Socrates (and other fifth century intellectuals) to which we will want to pay special attention. So, for example, Aristotle characterises a technê as involving knowledge of universals, by contrast with experience (empeiria) or knowledge of particulars; as involving knowledge of causes; and as teachable (Metaphysics I.1). But these may be peculiarly Socratic emphases (on the contrast with experience, and on knowledge of universals and causes, see, e.g., Gorgias 464c-65a; on teachability, Protagoras 319be, 361ac). Aristotle’s characterisation is quite different from that of the late fifth-century Hippocratic On Ancient Medicine, according to which medicine’s claim to be a science rests on its answering a need, having a starting point and longstanding method for discovery and being explicable to laypersons (2). While this text also insists on medicine’s having a precise and complete understanding of causes and their effects on the body (20), it insists
that these are found out by experience, which allows distinctive causes to be investigated by the method of difference—by contrast with causal and explanatory principles that derive from a more general physical investigation. Again, Socrates’ insistent demand that any claimant to a *technê* specify its product (*ergon*) (*Gorgias* 447d-54b, *Protagoras* 318a-19a, *Euthydemus* 288e-92d, *Cleitophon* 409bd) builds on what must have been a widespread expectation that a professional could name or point to the beneficial product he had on offer, but it goes beyond that expectation in demanding that the professional give an account of this product. After all, a doctor might be expected to tell his patient the symptoms of his disease and of his cure, but it is not reasonable to expect him to give a non-expert an explanation of how the disease produces the symptoms, or how the treatment effects the cure, or of what health is, particularly in any given case. (However, Socrates is himself subjected to this higher standard of giving an account of the product of a craft when Thrasymachus demands that he say what the just [which Socrates has been treating as the product of the *technê* of justice, *Republic* 332dFF] is without saying that it is the advantageous or beneficial and so on [*Republic* 336cd, cf. *Cleitophon* 409cd].)

In his conversations with the sophists and orators, Socrates accepts the formal claim that expert knowledge in politics brings about good political results. His questions focus on the content of the expert knowledge they profess (What is it about? What is the evidence that they really have it?), on their conception of good political results (Are these really good? If not, what are the good results to be brought about by political rule?) and on the relationship between the two (Does their expertise really have the results they claim it does? Or what sort of expert knowledge would it take to bring about these
results, or genuinely good results?) So, for example, in the Gorgias, Socrates counters Gorgias’ claim that rhetoric is an expertise which produces the good political result of enhanced social and political power for the orator-politician (452de) by pointing out that however rhetoric achieves its effects, it is not through any knowledge of the matters of justice and injustice about which it makes speeches (459ae, 461b), and that even if it enables the orator-politician to visit evil upon anyone he likes, it does not enable him to bring about any good for himself or anyone else (466b-68e). So rhetoric fails to be political expertise on two counts: it lacks knowledge of central political matters (the just and unjust), and it fails to bring about any genuine good.

The sophists and orators contemporary with Socrates cannot have welcomed his agreement with their claim that expert knowledge in politics brings about good political results. For Socrates not only agrees with them that expert knowledge brings about successful political rule, but also adds that only those with expert knowledge are qualified to (thus should, or may) rule. Sophists and orators like Gorgias, Protagoras and Thrasymachus, non-citizens in Athens, would have shied away from being seen as telling the Athenians how they should run their city; they claimed only to be helping aspirants to political power within the existing constitution, thereby allowing their professional training to be equally attractive to partisans of democracy and oligarchy. Socrates, on the other hand, was centrally in the business of evaluating ways of living, both individual and communal. Further, while the need to attract students led sophists and orators to allow the conception of successful political rule to depend on the would-be student’s conception of success or advantage, Socrates’ insistence on a substantive account of the
(goods) produced by successful political rule brought into the limelight the difficulties of making recommendations without any views on what is non-instrumentally good.

In *Republic* I, Plato points out both the common ground and the differences between Socrates and a contemporary sophist, Thrasymachus. It is Thrasymachus who introduces the idea of a professional expertise of ruling which enables its possessor, insofar as he is a professional, to rule unerringly (340c-41b). Socrates accepts the idea that there is a profession of ruling; he disagrees with Thrasymachus, however, about the goal of this profession. According to Thrasymachus, the professional ruler rules to his own advantage. But the introduction of the idea of a professional ruler opens up other dimensions of the profession of ruling. Socrates argues, by analogy with the other professions, that a profession’s goal is always the improvement of that over which it has power. He seems to be reasoning: if [as you, Thrasymachus maintain] ruling is a profession, then [you must concede that] its product is like that of other professions, and the product of any other profession is the improvement of that over which it has jurisdiction. For example, the doctor in the precise sense is so called because he treats the sick, the healing of the sick being the advantage which the profession of medicine is directed towards (341cd, 342c). He generalises, ‘No kind of knowledge seeks or orders what is advantageous to itself. . ., but what is advantageous to the weaker, which is subject to it.’ (342cd; tr. Grube-Reeve). If political rule is rule over citizens, then its goal must be their betterment, not the ruler’s. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates announces that he himself is a practitioner of the political profession (521d), perhaps the only one. If improving citizens is the goal of the political professional, then, since Socrates’ protreptic
and elenctic activities have that goal, he can reasonably count himself a political professional.

In this argument, Socrates claims that the professions ‘by nature’ aim at the betterment of whatever they have jurisdiction over; for example, medicine was discovered to remedy the deficiencies of the human body (341de). This seems a deliberate departure from the common line of thought that the professions were discovered for the benefit of mankind: Protagoras’ myth gives us many other examples of the deficiencies to remedy which Prometheus and Zeus gave humans the various professions (Protagoras 321c-322d). The common line is, although initially more plausible, perhaps more vulnerable to misuse than Socrates’. If we specify the goal of a profession by the benefits it gives us humans—saying with Thrasymachus that the goal of shepherding is surely not the welfare of the sheep but rather the production of the meat and wool the sheep provide for the shepherd’s benefit (343b)—then it is open to someone to specify the goal of another profession by the benefits it gives some one subgroup of humans, perhaps even by exploiting another subgroup. (Thrasymachus’ choice of an example is particularly striking, given the standard characterisation of the ruler as a shepherd [e.g. Homer, Iliad II.243, Xenophon Memorabilia, III.2.1, Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics VIII.11, 1161a12-15, criticised at Statesman 267cFF]) Safer, then, to look for an internal connexion between a profession and its goal. And to specify specify the internal connexion when we also have to determine the goal, it makes sense to turn to the other professions as models, on the assumption that the professions resemble each other. Resemblance between the professions seems to be the basis of Socrates’ argument that injustice isn’t an expertise and the unjust person isn’t clever or good
because the unjust try to outdo each other whereas experts only try to outdo non-experts, not other experts, 349a-50c.

Socrates’ conception of the relationship between a profession and its goal is stronger than might be thought. Socrates does not claim that in no circumstance can it ever benefit the practitioner of a profession to practise his profession (a view which, as long as he wants to treat justice as a profession, would deliver him right into the hands of Thrasy machus, who claims that justice is another’s good, 343c). He only claims that benefitting its practitioner is not the goal of any profession. Benefit to the practitioner might be an incidental result of the profession; it might be the result of practising the profession, perhaps in a given social context: doctors might get monetary payment, recognition, or gratitude for practising medicine, but the goal of medicine remains healing. Similarly, rulers may get wages, honours, or they may only avoid the ‘penalty’ of having worse people than themselves ruling (347ad), but it will not do to confuse the job of ruling with any of these socially-mediated consequences. But that is just what people who think of ruling as a privilege, like Thrasy machus, do.

Socrates’ answer to the question, ‘what is the goal of the job of ruling?’ converges with one answer to the question ‘who should rule?’: the goal of the job of ruling is the benefit of the ruled; that individual or group should rule who is best qualified to benefit the ruled. 15 We saw in section 2 above that advocates of democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny all claim to benefit the ruled—so Socrates is hardly being controversial by claiming that political rule aims at the benefit of the ruled. Rather, he is showing that the sophists, who would prefer to remain silent on the ‘who should rule?’ question, are committed by the very notion of a profession of ruling to the answer ‘he who best fulfills
the goal of ruling’—for any profession has action-guiding norms which are structured by the profession’s goal(s)

Socrates’ use of the notion of a profession deprives Thrasymachus of the respectability associated with being a professional practitioner or teacher—insofar as Thrasymachus himself pursues the injustice he praises (343c-44c). If one’s motive for engaging in a profession conflicts with the goal of that profession, one’s claim to be a professional of that sort is invalidated. Not everyone will care about this loss, and this marks the limits of the normative force of the notion of a profession. Anyone who can swallow the loss of prestige that goes with having to take a position that says, “I don’t care about being a professional, I just want my own advantage,” will need a deeper response than Socrates gives to Thrasymachus. (On this point, it is worth noting that while Thrasymachus is unmoved by Socrates’ argument that someone who uses his power to benefit himself rather than those he rules is, contrary to Thrasymachus, no expert ruler, he sweats and blushes when Socrates argues that the unjust person is neither clever nor good.) It is perhaps in recognition of this need for a deeper argument that from Republic II on, Plato takes on the more fundamental question of why it is better to be just rather than unjust.

4. Consequences for Political Thought

One consequence of defining ruling as a profession aimed at benefiting citizens and using this definition to answer the question ‘who should rule?’ is that it provides a position from which to criticise existing regimes without becoming an ally of any of the parties vying for power—in the particular case of Socrates’ criticism of the Athenian democracy, of the oligarchs. So although Socrates’ criticism of democracy as rule by a
foolish mob resembles the criticism of the oligarchs, because Socrates ties the content of the wisdom that could qualify someone to rule so closely to the job of ruling, and because he defines the job of ruling in terms of its goal of improving the citizens, he cannot but be a critic of oligarchy, tyranny, and the like, as well. Rulers in existing oligarchies and tyrannies are no less ignorant, and so no less incapable of improving the citizens, than the démos.

For Plato, himself disillusioned with the injustice of successive political regimes in Athens (Letter VII 324b-26b), it would have been important to find a kind of political criticism that did not play into partisan hands. Plato certainly portrays Socrates as a non-partisan individual: the Apology carefully balances Socrates’ opposition to both democratic injustice against his refusal to participate in oligarchic injustice (32bc and 32ce). Further, among Socrates’ associates are Critias, one of the Thirty Tyrants who terrorised Athens after coming to power in 404, and his cousin Charmides, appointed by the Thirty to govern the Piraeus; but Socrates’ longtime friend Chaerephon, who was told by the Delphic oracle of Socrates’ wisdom, and who was lampooned by Aristophanes for ‘Socratising’, was an ardent enough democrat to go into exile in 404. While we might find it unsettling that Socrates should have associated with both kinds of people, perhaps he found partisan political affiliations none too deep given the example of his beloved Alcibiades, who, after having been an Athenian general, defected to Sparta, then worked for the Persians, but was subsequently forgiven and welcomed back by democratic Athens.16

It may be objected that the position from which to criticise existing regimes provided by the sophistic professionalisation of ruling is redundant because the very
considerations raised in favour of one kind of rule or another—that the rule secures some common good, or that it puts in power the intrinsically superior who deserve to rule—can themselves be given nonpartisan readings. But possibility is not history, and we do not see nonpartisan evaluations of forms of rule prior to Socrates. The *Theaetetus* opposes speech in the service of personal and political interests to speech that seeks the truth about justice and injustice (173ae, 175cd). It is of course contentious to treat these as mutually exclusive kinds of speech—after all, interested speeches from different perspectives could conceivably further an inquiry into the truth—but the distinction between partisan and non-partisan political speech is useful. Prior to Socrates, debates about who should rule are partisan: although the parties offer arguments which can in principle be detached from the partisan point of view advancing them—oligarchic or democratic or monarchic—in practice they are never so detached, and there are no instances of a neutral investigation of the question from some agreed-upon starting point. Perhaps it is the hope of a debate in which each party gives the strongest arguments in favour of its view and against the alternatives that the winner will not only seem best to all concerned but will also be best, objectively. But even in this case, the process leading to agreement involves the parties qua partisans of some or other arrangement, rather than qua investigators who begin with objective or even just shared principles. Further, we should not underestimate the conceptual breakthrough required to go from dealing with political issues only in partisan argument and dealing with them disinterestedly.

Alongside the attitudinal difference between partisan and disinterested, significant conceptual resources have been developed in the tradition of political philosophy since Socrates (the idea of aggregation, the impartial spectator, the technique of
universalisation). My claim here is that the idea of political rule as a profession is the conceptual resource that Socrates uses to engage in nonpartisan evaluation.

A second consequence of Socrates’ professionalising political rule is the invalidation of one of the considerations given in support of answers to the ‘who should rule?’ question; namely, that the superior, just in virtue of being superior, deserve to rule. In the Gorgias, Callicles says that nature’s justice demands that the superior rule over and have more than the inferior (which they may accomplish by force) (488b). Although Callicles identifies the superior, the better and the stronger, he does not believe that these qualities are constituted by having power, as the many do in Athens (488d-89b); rather, his idea is that some people are intrinsically superior and for that reason deserve to rule and have more; at Socrates’ suggestion, he identifies the superior with the more intelligent (489c-e).

Callicles’ invocation of nature shows him to be committed to an ideal of justice different from Socrates’, and so Socrates needs to show him what is wrong with that ideal of justice. The obvious way for Socrates to do this would be to question Callicles: why does superior wisdom justify having more? Or, alternatively, what is the connexion between ruling and having more?

However, instead of raising these challenges, Socrates seems to grant Callicles the point that superior wisdom (about some F) justifies having more (of F)—but, Socrates adds, this must be in order to facilitate proper use (of F). So, Socrates asks Callicles, if you think that the more intelligent should have should have more, then should the doctor, the one who is more intelligent about food and drink, have more food and drink than the others, or should he be given the job of distributing food and drink to everyone including
himself, on the basis of their strength or weakness (which determines how much food they need) (490ce)?

At first sight, it seems as if Socrates is just not hearing the normative claim in Callicles’ words, that the superior or more intelligent deserve to rule over and have more than the others. Socrates speaks as if the only thing that follows from greater intelligence is entitlement to manage whatever the intelligence is about.

In his commentary, Irwin writes, ‘Here and in 490e Socrates does not seem to distinguish ‘have more’, pleon echein, and ‘take more’ or ‘outdo’, pleonektein; cf. 483c.

But ‘getting the advantage’, pleonektein, 491a, seems to be the result of getting a larger quantity, pleon echein. Perhaps Socrates argues: superior wisdom gives no claim to have more, pleon echein, and therefore, contrary to Callicles, it gives no claim to advantage, pleonektein.’

However, if we assume that Socrates (unlike Callicles) does distinguish having more (i.e. having the charge of more) and taking more (i.e. more than one’s share, for oneself), then we can take Socrates at his word: superior wisdom justifies having more of what one is wise about (because one can use it properly); it does not, however, justify taking more of it for oneself (ou pleonekteteon, 490c4). The idea that wisdom justifies possession because it enables correct use is very close to the idea that most things ordinarily thought to be good are only good if accompanied by wisdom, because only wisdom reliably enables the correct use required for such things to benefit us (Euthydemus 280c-82b).

Socrates challenges Callicles’ claim that intrinsic superiority entitles anyone to taking more of anything for himself not by defending some other ground for privilege than intrinsic superiority, but instead, by embracing the idea that intellectual superiority
of some kind is relevant to ruling, and treating it as the basis for assigning responsibilities, just as the doctor’s knowledge of the body dictates that he perform the task of assigning food and drink to bodies in accordance with what they need.

I do not think this recasting of Callicles’ idea is partisan. It does not favour any of the traditional political regimes or parties. And it raises the excellent question what on earth intrinsic superiority has to do with ruling unless it is superiority at ruling. This question is a pressing question for Callicles in a way that it is not for Thrasymachus, for Callicles believes that it is nature’s justice—that is, really just—for the superior to rule and take more, whereas Thrasymachus makes no claim about what is just by nature, contenting himself with an exposé of existing societies’ conceptions of justice as a front for norms that in reality benefit the rulers, and a critique of adherence to these norms as contrary to subjects’ self-interest.

Conceiving of ruling as a profession rather than a privilege leaves a number of questions unanswered. Even if only the professionally qualified can do the job of ruling (i.e. really do the job, so that its goal is achieved), are professional qualifications sufficient to entitle someone to rule? (In the Lysis, Socrates suggests the answer is yes, 209d) And if rule by the professionally qualified alone counts as political rule, what else must be in place to require the professionally qualified to rule? Finally, if ruling is not a privilege or prize, how is a ruler to be compensated? Plato takes up these questions in the main books of the Republic, where detaching jobs from the privileges that usually go along with them frees him to imagine a distribution of social goods which—instead of only compensating citizens for their contribution—enables people to do their jobs and to enjoy whatever goods they can.18
I’d like to return, finally, to the Popperian complaint that Plato’s Socrates misguidedely focusses on the question of sovereignty or ‘who shall rule the state?’ to the neglect of the question of how to design of political institutions to check the abuses of political power. I hope to have shown why his thought has the focus it does. It is not that he (or Plato) subscribed to a theory of unchecked sovereignty, nor that he (or Plato) was obsessed with (re-)establishing hierarchies. Rather, it is that his far more intellectually radical project of transforming the conception of ruling from privilege to profession, and spelling out the normative implications of ruling being a profession, provides a new basis for answering the question of sovereignty.19

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1 But see Vlastos 1994 for a criticism of Socrates as a political actor.
Note that in the *Laws*, Plato does address the issue of checks on political power.

Cf. *Grote* 1875: III.240

*Penner* 2000.

*Kraut* 1984: 244. By contrast, Kraut argues, Plato found this same freedom horrifying (277).

An exception is *Brown* 2000, who attributes to Socrates cosmopolitan rather than local (polis-wide) commitments. However, in Brown’s own expression, the cosmopolitan commitments are part of Socrates ‘extraordinary’ politics of investigating along with anyone, citizen or foreigner (*Apology* 23b). My focus here is on Socrates’ ordinary, i.e., polis-restricted, politics.

*Strauss* 1989: 76

I focus on Plato’s Socrates in works from the *Apology* through *Republic* I not out of a firm conviction that their Socrates represents Socrates’ own teachings rather than Plato’s views, but because I find in them a significant development in political thought that risks being overshadowed by the constructive project beginning with *Republic* II.


Tr. Lombardo and Bell. This, and all translations of Plato, are from Cooper and Hutchinson 1997.

*Norlin* 1928-54.


For discussion of Socrates’ use of the notion of *technê* see *Irwin* 1977.
15 Cf. Parry 1996: 22-23, who says that if Socrates had the notion of legitimacy, he would have said that the legitimate ruler cannot just improve rulers but must improve the ruled.

16 For more on Socrates’ associates, see Nails 2002.

17 Irwin 1979 ad loc.

18 I discuss the Republic’s principles for distributing social burdens and benefits in Kamtekar 2001.

19 For comments on this paper, I’m very grateful to Steve Gardiner and to the audience of the 2005 Arizona Ancient Philosophy Colloquium on The Socratic Legacy.