

The Practicality of the Theory of the Good: An Interpretative Reconstruction

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Plato's political philosophy is for the sake of directing people towards the good life: this purpose is manifest from his theory of the Good. Nevertheless, Platonic scholarship has often criticized this theory for being impractical. Against this criticism, I argue that this theory has a practical aspect because of its strategic and methodological nature. This essay reconstructs Plato's induction towards the absolute Good, through his justice theory and educational recommendations, with a view to the intended practicality of the theory of the Good. The major conclusion is that the theory of the Good provides a formula to achieve the greatest good in an everchanging, sensible world.

Intro

Political philosophy is indebted to Plato for his theory of the Good. Leo Strauss once wrote that the purpose of political philosophy is to study the good, and it has had this purpose since Plato's innovations (Strauss 1959, 10; Haarmann 2017, 11). According to Plato, philosophy is a matter of human affairs when its purpose is to ascertain the Good, and once philosophy is about human affairs, it becomes political (Dancy 2006, 70). Further, Christopher Rowe argues that Plato's purpose with the political art is to make people as good as possible; what is politics to Plato is not mediating between competing interests or allowing the goods of individuals to clash under the name of liberty (2007, 53). Plato's *Republic* is political insofar as it investigates the Good, through the practice and theory of dialectics, to inform decision-making, but it is the ideal decision-making that Plato seeks to inform. As Rowe puts it, for Plato, "having a rational policy is what matters: getting priorities right" (2007, 41). The study of the Good provides this rational policy. Nevertheless, a contradiction seems to arise when rational policy is put side-by-side and in conjunction with Plato's idealization of the Good, for achieving the ideal appears impractical (White 2006b, 362).

Is there a practical understanding of Plato's theory of the Good? In this context, a practical understanding means that the theory has influence over political strategy and its consequences. This question is advantageous to the history of political thought both because scholarship on it is unavailable and the mainstream criticism towards it since Aristotle has deemed it impractical and nonsensical, framing it as unproductively abstract (Klosko 2012, 172-173). Political theorists can accept this criticism but if they do then they will miss or marginalize Plato's philosophical and political purpose in developing a theory that

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directs people — through high standards of knowledge and vigilant verification — towards the Good. I argue that the theory of the Good is highly practical because of its strategic and methodical nature. Not only does this theory demand a rigorous verification of opinions and beliefs for the purpose of political strategy, but it also consists of a formula that attempts to ascertain the many goods of an everchanging, sensible world (*Republic* 6.504c; White 1992, 279). This formula anticipates the mistakes governors may make in this uncertain world: it offers a method of achieving the greatest good among uncertainty.

Is there a practical understanding of Plato's theory of the Good? The best approach to answering this question is to divide it into sub-questions. First, what are the countervailing criticisms towards the theory of the Good? Aristotle holds that the Good cannot be a metaphysical principle to categorize things and knowledge by, which George Klosko agrees with (2012, 170-173; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1096^a15-1097^b15). Aristotle and Klosko also argue that this theory is unproductively abstract because people, whether craftsmen or politicians, need only know the Good of their particular profession, not Plato's absolute Good. I also clarify that Aristotle has divided this theory down, reducing it from its inductive framework, making it appear nonsensical. The purpose of this section is to present the prominent criticisms of this theory in the history of political thought in order to clarify the obstacles to understanding it as practical.

Second, what is Plato's metaphysical definition of the Good? The theory of the Good is meant to address problems of subjectivity in determining what is good and bad (Kraut 1992, 311). The Good refers to an idea, whether a physical thing or quality (Cox 2007, 5). It can be good per se or for its consequences or both (*Republic* 2.357b-2.357c). This theory oversees the arts and sciences, ensuring that they have a productive aim that contributes to the greatest good. Lastly, the Form of the Good exists eternally and rationalistically; this form is not a sensible object. The Form of the Good is comparable to mathematical variables or expressions and is not a physical representation of a sensible thing.

Third, how does Plato induce towards his theory of the Good? In *Republic* Book One, Plato moves from the specific discussion of justice towards the argument for education and the absolute Good in *Republic* Books Six and Seven. This section outlines Plato's discussion of virtue and justice and shows how Plato moves from the justice of the soul towards the greater good of the polis, which he calls political unity (*Republic* 5.462a-5.462c; Mouracade 2004, 222). The absolute Good to Plato is unity and his theory of the Good can be interpreted as a method of ascertaining this unity. Wherefore, this method proceeds inductively.

What role does education play in this induction? Plato recommends a strict educational regime for guardians and philosopher-rulers, which aims to quicken the cognition of guardians and philosopher-rulers (*Republic* 7.526b). Although this education regards mathematics and the mathematical sciences, it specifically treats these arts and sciences in relation to political strategy and warfare. There are two practical factors at play here: education in the theory of the Good seeks to enhance the ability of political actors and teach them about strategy and warfare (*Republic* 7.525b-7.525c). This educational program also regards dialectics, which serves the philosopher-ruler as a knowledge verification process. Through dialectics,

philosopher-rulers can test and ensure the ethical goodness of the hypotheses of the arts and sciences. The education of mathematics, the mathematical sciences, and dialectics also prepare philosopher-rulers for a comprehensive study of the Good (*Republic* 6.510c-6.551e). Again, Plato proceeds from the particulars of education to the general study of the Good.

Finally, what are the practical advantages of knowing the Good? Since knowledge of the sensible world is impossible for Plato, knowledge of the absolute Good equips philosopher-rulers with a formula to understand how to achieve political unity in a given circumstance: with it, philosopher-rulers can know the good of their political actions (Ferejohn 2006, 153; White 1992, 279; *Republic* 7.534a-7.534b). Mathematics and the mathematical sciences supply philosopher-rulers with ready hypotheses potentially good and dialectics verifies if these hypotheses are good for political practice. Nevertheless, it is not simply verification that the theory of the Good is intended for, knowledge of the Good also renders philosopher-rulers independent of another's opinion of the Good (Nichols 1987). With it, philosopher-rulers can formulate equations about problems of the Good themselves; these rulers do not imitate past leaders, whether from poetry or history — at least not without an independent verification to determine if past strategies are replicable in the present.

The Countervailing Criticisms of the Theory of the Good

What are the countervailing criticisms towards the theory of the Good? In answering whether this theory is practical, if I can outline the counterarguments toward it, then the dominant obstacles to understanding this theory as practical will be known. Once the best reasons for rejecting this theory are clear, then they can be verified, and if I can establish a good rationale for declining these criticisms, then significant progress will be made in telling whether the theory of the Good is practical. This layout can be accomplished with a modest summary and verification of Klosko and Aristotle's prevalent criticisms, as I recognize that to give a comprehensive layout of the scholarship critical of Plato's theory of the Good is impossible in a short tract.

Klosko summarizes the preliminaries of Plato's theory of the Good (2012, 170). Plato holds that for anything to become beneficial or useful, one must know the Form of the Good. If people do not know the Good, then all other knowledge becomes useless (Klosko 2012, 170). Ideally, everyone would have such knowledge, but because that situation is unrealistic, Plato argues that people should obey philosophers, who know the Form of the Good. Nevertheless, Klosko finds it difficult to understand how knowledge of the Form of the Good is beneficial or practical.

Klosko follows Aristotle's criticism of the theory of the Good. In summarizing Aristotle, Klosko writes, "the Form of the Good must exemplify a quality or set of qualities common to all things of which good can be predicated" (2012, 171). Aristotle holds that the theory of the Good is vague because things are called good in various ways: the goodness of white paint differs from the goodness of an

athlete. Aristotle argues that there is no single idea of the Good common to all things (Shields 2006, 411, 413). Plato would respond, however, with the argument that goodness represents the beneficial purpose or product of each thing (*Republic* 7.519b-7.519d). Thus, insofar as white paint produces its purpose, whether in construction or pottery, and athletes do likewise, whether for contests or their health, there is a common goodness to both, which qualifies as the same idea, though not the same physical thing (Cox 2007, 5). Plato categorizes the Good as a single idea, seeing that one kind of quality can be a single idea.

Klosko also writes that “Plato probably believes that the Form of the Good supplies the intelligible principle according to which all things are ordered” (2012, 172). What I believe Klosko means is that the Form of the Good to Plato is the categorical principle by which all things are ordered: comparing particular things to the Form of the Good shows the goodness of particular things. Nevertheless, Klosko misrepresents this principle as ambiguous and nonsensical without describing it in sufficient detail. A more accurate representation than Klosko’s point is that the Form of the Good, when applied in an investigation of relational, dependent, or particulars things, makes intelligible the purpose, end, or benefit of these things (Modrak 2006, 137). Plato makes this argument with the analogy of the sun, which, through light, makes possible the sight of the eye: this sight depending on light. Likewise, the theory of the Good shows the benefits of things, for when people understand the goodness in relationships of things, they understand how these things are meant to function in the sensible world, whereof particular things combine and relate (*Republic* 6.508b-6.511e). Hence, Plato argues that with the categorical knowledge supplied by the Good, people understand the goods of particular and practical knowledge which are necessarily heterogeneous.

Additionally, Klosko agrees with Aristotle’s argument that the theory of the Good is impractical; the problem with this argument, however, is that Aristotle reconstructs Plato’s theory of the Good so as to make its metaphysics seem like it has no practical purpose (2012, 173; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1096^a15-1097^b15). Aristotle divides Plato’s theory of the Good into theory and practice, claiming that the former is uselessly abstract for individuals caught in particular circumstances. Aristotle does not believe that politicians need to know the absolute Good when facing specific predicaments: he believes that Plato’s theory of the Good should be simplified to increase its applicability. Nevertheless, Aristotle is unclear about how the theory of the Good is uselessly abstract, never addressing Plato’s fundamental purpose with the metaphysics of the theory of the Good: to ensure that the application of science and intellect has the same results that science and intellect propose (*Republic* 6.505a; *Republic* 6.508b-6.511e). For Plato, science expresses representations of reality; but, until scientific principles are applied in strategy or policy, the results are unknown. The metaphysics of the theory of the Good studies this problem, and, in this way, has practical utility (Ferejohn 2006, 153). The theory of the Good, in a sense, is a supervisory art because it equips philosopher-rulers with a capacity of ensuring that the hypotheses of mathematics and sciences have good results in political strategy.

Whereas Klosko follows Aristotle's criticism, he forgets to admit that Aristotle implements many tenets or aspects of the theory of the Good in his ethics. For instance, the overall good judge, who determines the common good that a society should aim at, is little different from Plato's philosopher-ruler who constantly contemplates the Good, and, ultimately, the common good of the Kallipolis (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1094^b15-1.4.1095^b5). For this reason, Gunter Figal notes that political thinkers can interpret as closely similar Plato's theory of the Good and Aristotle's discussion of the goodness and ends of political ethics (2000, 85-86). This counterpoint shows some of the inconsistency on Aristotle's part in criticizing the Good and it should inform judgements of accepting these criticisms.

Another hurdle to understanding Plato's theory of the Good is that it has been divided-down by Aristotle, and this division has been accepted and built upon by the scholars who have followed Aristotle's criticisms of the theory of the Good (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1096^a15-1.6.1097^b10; Shields 2006, 403-404). This division is an example of what Christopher Shields means when he says that Aristotle often represents Plato's theories "without the full benefit of the arguments which lay behind them" (2006, 405). Plato's method of induction should be familiar to Platonic scholars and his treatment of the Good in the *Republic* should be understood as an induction, meaning that this theory consists of particulars as a starting-point, which are developed and synthesized into his conclusive and general theory of the Good (Benson 2006, 91). Note that *Republic* Book One uses the term good approximately sixty times in discussing justice, which sets up the induction towards the absolute theory of the Good (*Republic* 1.331c). Plato begins to define the Good with questions and answers throughout *Republic* Book One: he specifies the goodness of a series of things: justice, eyes, doctors, and so on (*Republic* 1.342a-1.342c). After investigating the Good in a variety of species, he confirms that knowledge of the Good, in the abstract, must be beneficial to the philosopher-ruler, for with this knowledge the philosopher-ruler can manage the common good: the many goods adding up to the common good (*Republic* 5.462b-5.462e; *Republic* 5.478e-6.485a). Plato's theory of the Good is not limited to the discussions in *Republic* Book Six, which outline the absolute Good and the Form of the Good (*Republic* 6.508a-6.509b). This argument wholly coordinates with Plato's dialectical methodology of induction, which is evident from any careful reading of the *Republic*.

Conceptualization of the Good

What is Plato's metaphysical definition of the Good? The literature is riddled with problems about the theory of the Good's construction, especially with regard to its practical function. Hence, an exposition of it will be advantageous to ascertaining its practicality. I thus propose to reconstruct an interpretative account of Plato's theory of the Good from his narrative pieces on the Good throughout the *Republic* and secondary literature on the Good.

The problem that the Good addresses is the subjectivity over what rulers deem good or evil (Kraut 1992, 311). Plato's purpose with the theory of the Good

is not simply to keep individual interest in check, but to refute opinions that classify injustices as good and justice as evil (Haarmann 2017, 12). It is highly dangerous for rulers to judge a thing good without a satisfactory standard to develop such a judgement, and so the theory of the Good acts as a regulatory art over the problems of common opinion (Wolfsdorf 2011, 69).

Plato may be said to treat the Good homonymously, as Aristotle argues (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1096^a15-1097^b10; *Categories* 1.1-1.15; Wedberg 1978, 44). This criticism is incorrect, however, because Plato divides the Good into various categories, treating the subject with fullness; he does not conflate the Good and cause homonymy. First, he divides the Good into physical goods and qualities. He also further divides these goods into things good in themselves, things good for their consequences, and things good in both respects (*Republic* 2.357b-2.357c). For example, Plato's Socrates classifies justice as good in itself and for its consequences. In *Republic* Book Two, Plato's Socrates is committed to testing whether justice belongs to the good by surveying whether or why goodness, in his interlocutors' opinion, follows injustice (*Republic* 2.357c-2.357d). Hence, in Plato's analytics, the series of analyses he syllogizes, the Good is simply a general starting-point for his discussions.

That investigating the Good is a general starting-point or first principle is critical to interpreting Plato's theory of the Good. Plato implements the Good to establish starting-points and end-points for discussions, much like how the organizer of games draws the start-line on a course (Mueller 1992, 184; Morrison 2007, 234-235). The theory of the Good ensures that there is a productive aim in studying a terra incognita, for its priority is to clarify the study's purpose, even if it only does so in outline or approximately (*Republic* 7.519b-7.519d; Sedley 2007, 267). Wherefore, dialectics directs towards the first principle, or from the first principle, defining or verifying the Good of a given subject (*Republic* 6.511b-6.511d). Prima facie, knowledge of the Good resides in the philosopher-ruler to supply starting-points or limitations to a study and the practice of policy.

Plato also hierarchizes the Forms, and among them the Form of the Good has metaphysical priority or superiority (Wolfsdorf 2011, 74). Again, Plato holds that there must be a common goodness to each Form, and this quality is what renders practical or beneficial the knowledge of these Forms (*Republic* 6.505a). Knowledge of these Forms is also incomplete without knowledge as to their goodness, a significant omission to any attempt of attaining sufficient knowledge of a subject (Sedley 2007, 269). Additionally, although there are individual abstractions of the Forms, their knowledge is relational or dependent upon the Good, like how sight is dependent on light (*Republic* 6.508b-6.511e). Together the ideas of the given Forms systematized with the Form of the Good become a formula for knowledge, as the Good reveals the purpose or benefit of these other Forms and what they depend on for their goodness.

With this formula, Plato holds that philosopher-rulers can examine the assumptions and hypotheses of arts and sciences preceding or during their practical application. Defining scientific and intellectual concepts with an eye to their goodness for human affairs, philosopher-rulers instrumentalize the sciences and arts; these faculties cease to be arbitrary or vain in any practical sense

(*Republic* 6.511c). Rendering the sciences and arts after this fashion unifies their aims insofar as to achieve the greater good. Hence, knowledge of the Good is absolutely necessary to the philosopher-ruler's statecraft, insofar as the philosopher-ruler's decision-making is to be informed by sciences and arts and insofar as these faculties are to have a productive end.

The Forms, including the Form of Good, also serve as principles around which to define and categorize things (Dancy 2006, 70). The Forms are eternal, rationalistic entities, in contrast to sensible objects that undergo change, whether by necessity or accident (Ketchum 1987, 297). Plato's epistemic commitment in this regard can be demonstrated by what follows: "justice purely, completely, and always, is what it is. Sensible objects are not like this. Sensible objects are not things precisely because they are at times, in respects, etc., and thus are not at other times and in other respects what they are" (Ketchum 1987, 300). Since these Forms, such as justice, are absolute, they offer grounds to successfully make an epistemic judgement and categorize things (Wolfsdorf 2011, 71; Wedberg 1978, 44-45).

Plato also uses knowledge as a term of art or function (Wolfsdorf 2011, 58). Knowledge, to Plato, is a kind of power or capacity. Capacities belong to things and enable them to function in a given way (Wolfsdorf 2011, 65). Hence, knowledge of something enables its proper function, and this concept is practical as function relates to practice. The practicality of knowledge is evident from Plato's definitions and divisions of virtue, for knowledge of a given virtue enables the function of a given action that requires such virtue. Let the above serve as a kind of legend to understand the concept of the Good. I now move on to the subject of virtue, and justice in particular.

Justice Theory

How does Plato induce towards his theory of the Good? This question is momentous because it incorporates the practical particulars, that the *Republic* begins with, into the abstract conceptualization of the absolute Good. My answer to this question clarifies that Plato's theory of the Good is not solely about the absolute Good. This answer is not to devalue the absolute Good in Plato's theory; but, to correct the misconceptualizations extant in the literature (Klosko 2012, 170-172).

Again, Plato often treats virtue as a kind of art to view it functionally (*Republic* 1.332d-1.333e). Kosman explicates Plato's treatment of virtue as a good: virtue is a quality inasmuch as it enhances the function of an actor (2007, 118, 119, 121). Kosman adds that virtue is a moral condition (2007, 119). Courage renders goodness at actions that require audacity, just as wisdom renders leaders good at decision-making and justice renders one dutiful in following laws. Kosman adds that justice as a virtue, to Plato, is a quality that enables an entity to do well what that entity is *characteristically* good at. As Kosman notes, this property of function embedded in Plato's idea of virtue is the meaning of Socrates' question to Thrasymachus in *Republic* Book One: "does there seem to you to be a

virtue for each thing that has some function assigned to it?” (*Republic* 1.353b). Kosman continues, “a function is an activity that is characteristic of a being; it is what something is engaged in doing when it is most being itself” (2007, 120). Hence, the virtue of an eye is excellent sight no less than the virtue of the philosopher-ruler is judicious decision-making (*Republic* 1.342a-1.342c; Keyt 2006, 344-345)

Recall that Plato’s definition of justice is the division of function or labour. In interpreting Plato’s justice theory, Kosman notes that justice is the organizing force of society and is thereby the first principle of a society (2007, 118). Plato’s justice theory is interested in organizing the moral habits and modes of individuals to lead them towards the Good. In the *Republic*, Plato accepts that not everyone is capable of ruling to his philosophical standard, and so he sets up a division of labour (Keyt 2006, 345). For example, Plato’s Socrates argues that practiced ship-builders should build good ships and spirited guardians should guard well. In this way, people remain productive, produce goods, and avoid the trouble-making of extending their efforts beyond their natural limits or meddling in affairs that they cannot productively contribute to (*Republic* 4.434a-4.434b; Blossner 2007, 349). Plato’s theory of justice is a critical particular to his induction towards his theory of the good (Kraut 1992, 315).

Justice as the division of labour is also critical to Plato’s theory of the Good because the division of labour contributes to Plato’s idea of the greatest good — political unity. Everyone must fulfill their part, and none is to take advantage of another, and so, to Plato, there is an equality of happiness (Miller 2006, 286; Ferrari 2007; Parry 2007). The greatest good is the greatest amount of happiness to each member of the Kallipolis; but, only respecting the whole: no individual is disproportionately happier than another (*Republic* 4.421a-4.421c; White 1979, 26). Hence, to Plato, members of the Kallipolis — rulers, auxiliaries, and producers — will share in pleasure and pain (*Republic* 5.462a-5.462c; Mouracade 2004).

Furthermore, the philosopher-ruler will tend to the *souls* of the Kallipolis’ members to direct them towards the Good, and, ultimately, the greatest good (Mouracade 2004, 220). This ruler harmonizes the calculative, spirited, and appetitive parts of each members’ *soul* (Miller 2006, 286; Parry 2007, 404). Civil strife and dissent Plato sees as the greatest evil and he derives this dissent from the inner-conflict of *souls* left unchecked (*Republic* 5.462a-5.462c). Just as the philosopher-ruler brings harmony, equality, and peace in oneself, the philosopher-ruler creates this same balance in the collectivity of individuals (White 2006b, 358). Equality here means an equality of happiness. For Plato, political unity is synonymous with political harmony, the equality of happiness, political equality, and peace (Mouracade 2004, 222)

Education of the Philosopher-Ruler

What role does education play in Plato’s induction towards the theory of the Good? Education is another practical particular in this induction for it underlines

the necessity and power of rulers understanding mathematics and science to govern goodly. The education of dialectics verifies and applies mathematics and science, ensuring that their functions in policy correspond with the goodness of human affairs, and hence gain the possibility of becoming advantageous. Plato argues that good political strategy is informed by mathematics and science, and metaphysically verified through dialectics (*Republic* 6.510c-6.551e; White 2006a, 230). Plato's discussion of education shows that his theory of the Good is practical insofar as mathematics and science are useful for rulers and inasmuch as dialectics can practically verify these arts' purpose in political strategy.

To understand the Good, Plato insists on a strict education for philosopher-rulers (*Republic* 7.537b-7.541b). He recommends an education in mathematics and the mathematical sciences, then a study of dialectics, and then a full-force study of the Good (Benson 2006, 89). The first study begins at the age of twenty; the second study begins at the age of thirty; and, the third study begins at the age of fifty (White 2006a, 232). These divisions are not arbitrary: mathematics and the mathematical sciences are introduced at the age of twenty when potential philosopher-rulers are keen of the mind and fully developed bodily; dialectics is introduced at the age of thirty to equip the potential philosopher-rulers with an independent capacity at understanding good and evil; and, the full-force study of the Good is introduced at age fifty because this is when philosophers must fulfill their duty of ruling, a time when they must understand to the best of their ability the public good and the greatest good (Devereus 2006, 336; White 1992, 298).

Since knowledge is a general good but is difficult to attain, Plato is interested in enhancing the cognitive abilities of philosopher-rulers with mathematics and the mathematical sciences. He comments that people with an education about these topics are far quicker cognitively than those without such an education, Plato's Socrates makes this clear in the following lines: "have you ever noticed this, that natural reckoners are by nature quick in virtually all their studies? And the slow, if they are trained and drilled in this, even if no other benefit results, all improve and become quicker than they were?" (*Republic* 7.526b) These arts make easier the vision of the idea of the Good (*Republic* 7.527a). For their cognitive advantages, Plato believes a vigilant education about these arts should be maintained throughout the life of philosopher-rulers (White 2006a, 230; Barker 1964, 193, 229).

Plato then moves on to discuss the practicality of knowing these arts. Plato raises the example of geometry, which is as difficult to know as it is decisive in war (*Republic* 7.525b-7.525c). Plato understands that all military maneuvers depend on geometrical knowledge, whether enveloping the enemy, establishing a strategic position, or simply pitching war camps (Klosko 2012, 175). Plato's Socrates repeats that those generals practiced in geometry are infinitely quicker in cognition than those generals who are not (*Republic* 7.527c; Sedley 2007, 261). Now Plato also mentions the study of astronomy, in a rather riddled fashion following the tradition of his times on this study, but he alludes to the necessity for generals to know the seasons (*Republic* 7.527d). I suppose no one would object if I fill in the details for Plato regarding the practicality of astronomy, or, in modern terms, meteorology. It would be highly dangerous to pitch a tent in December, in a

foreign land, without meteorological knowledge: pitch the tent near seashore and a tempest could hit and wide-out the camp. If philosopher-rulers must at times assume the role of general, then they must know the good of these arts inasmuch as they relate to war (Barker 1964).

Plato is keen on philosopher-rulers having abstract knowledge regarding mathematics and the mathematical sciences insofar as to derive significant meaning from these arts (Benson 2006, 89). The abstractions can be reapplied to the problems and plans of philosopher-rulers: they supply philosopher-rulers with ready hypotheses about a given plan or problem (Muller 1992, 175, 184; Benson 2006, 90). Nevertheless, these arts can only supply hypotheses; Plato thus looks to dialectics for successful rendition and argumentation (*Republic* 6.510c-6.551e; Wolfsdorf 2011, 69; Robinson 1978, 108). Remember that a starting-point in dialectics can begin with social opinion as much as scientific hypothesis.

Now dialectics is not purely rational calculus. Philosopher-rulers are not merely adding together the many goods to determine the greatest good without ethical scrutiny; this is not rational choice theory (Rachlin 1985). Surely, dialectics investigates the advantage of a subject; but, an advantage, a good, or the greatest good is ethically qualified, and a calculation is insufficient to establish these grounds. Whereas calculation is necessary to understand greater than and lesser than while questioning and answering, dialectics is concerned with defining and categorizing the essence of a topic, its ethical nature included (Robinson 1978, 104-108, 111). Dialectics also supplies the dialectician with strategies of question and answer to verify or establish the validity of an argument or concept, which always subjects these arguments or concepts to ethical scrutiny (Ferejohn 2006, 153). Ethics concerns the standards of the Good, and these standards are applied to an argument or concept. Indeed, mathematics and the following sciences allow philosopher-rulers to quantify and apply measures; but, there needs a discussion of the moral desirability or acceptability of a topic (Barker 1964, 60-61).

Practical Advantage of Knowing the Good

Finally, what are the practical advantages of knowing the Good? This knowledge informs good strategy and policy, reducing the likelihood of mistakes in the policy and strategy formation or implementation process. Through its rigorous and vigilant verification, this knowledge thwarts off the illusions of advantage posed by the constantly changing sensible world (Ferejohn 2006, 153; White 1992, 279; *Republic* 7.534a-7.534b). Although knowledge of the Good has high standards, it involves a formula for philosopher-rulers to govern goodly, and to do so independent of another's judgement: philosopher-rulers, with the theory of the Good, are self-reliant (Modrak 2006, 136). With this formula, these rulers need not imitate the past practices of heroes from myth or leaders from history; they have a method to understand the good independently.

For Plato, the study of the Good is the finest pursuit because knowledge of a thing, without knowledge of its goodness, would be of little to no advantage (*Republic* 6.505a). Hence, Plato's philosopher-ruler is to be prudent about the

good of things (*Republic* 6.505b). Furthermore, in following Thales, Plato does not divide his theory into theory and practice (Barker 1959, 23). The practice of good strategy or good policy cannot be removed from the theories of mathematics or science or the Absolute Good: theory and practice are meant to consist together (*Republic* 7.521b-7.521e; Ferejohn 2006, 153). Plato is interested in enhancing the cognition of rulers through theory insofar as to best ensure the success of their practice.

Understanding the practicality of Plato's theory of the Good may still pose difficulties because of his metaphysical commitments, namely that the sensible world is unknowable (Ferejohn 2006, 153). In Plato's theory of the Good, Plato followed the principle that everything is in a state of flux (Barker 1959, 62), or as Richard Ketchum puts it, what changes is unknowable (1987, 292). Things that change threaten thinkers because they raise uncertainties as to the knowledge of them. In explanation, what Plato would say is that you do not need to know to make mistakes; but, you do need knowledge, qualified by a high standard, to succeed without the hand of fortune (Modrak 2006, 136). In this regard, Plato adheres to Herodotus, who put in the mouth of Solon, "often enough God gives man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him" (1968, 26). Hence, as problematic as Plato's standard of knowledge is, it is desirable (Morrison 2007, 238). People without knowledge, even mere lovers of wisdom who fail to own absolute knowledge, are bound to mistake their courses of action and cause instability and injustice in turn. The philosopher-ruler, however, circumvents these problems of ignorance.

It is not that Plato is uninterested in the constructive or productive results from arts or sciences; he simply ranks the knowledge of art or science higher than their production. There must be something that comes before productivity or practice; something that is not one day productive and another day not — such is the formula of the Good (*Republic* 6.509a). Hence, Plato follows the maxim of the mathematician Thales, who warns to *never be sure of suretyship* (*Masque of the Seven Sages* 7.175).¹ Plato does not rest with political assertions regarding the sensible world; he puts his trust in this abstract formula.

Furthermore, philosopher-rulers must constantly verify the *means* to the supposed production of the arts or sciences with absolute knowledge (Ferejohn 2006, 153; *Republic* 7.534a-7.534b; *Republic* 6.504c). Again, the verification process is dialectics, and so Plato's Socrates says "is not dialectics the only process of inquiry that advances in this manner, doing away with hypotheses, up to the first principle itself in order to find confirmation there?" (*Republic* 7.533d; White 1992, 279). Part of the definition of dialectics, then, is the application of

¹Thales was one of the seven sages of ancient Greece and has been regarded as the first philosopher. Plato was a student of maxims, and the maxims of this sage profoundly impacted Plato. In Plato's *Protagoras* he argues that the ability of someone to utter wise maxims is a product of their perfect education, and he says that among the people who have made such remarks is Thales (*Protagoras*, 342e-343b). Apropos, Thales' maxim is meant to have practical force: it is a reason for politicians to study science and verify their findings in the moment of practice. Plato has integrated this idea into the practical aspect of his theory of the Good.

science to reality: scientific expressions are tested to see if they represent reality and if they are grounds to proceed with a given strategy.

One practical purpose of Plato's inductive method is to show the invalidity or triviality of specific goods. Plato's theory of the good is wide-ranging in the goods it discusses; but he does such comparatively to arrive at the best of these goods (White 2006b, 362-363). The sake of this discussion is to equip the philosopher-ruler with a method of determining what is the greatest good, or better put, how political unity is maintained or rendered (Mouracade 2004, 222). Wherefore, Socrates asks Glaucon in *Republic* Book Five: "shall we try to find a common basis by asking of ourselves what ought to be the chief aim of the legislator in making laws and in the organization of a State, --what is the greatest good, and what is the greatest evil, and then consider whether our previous description has the stamp of the good or of the evil?" (*Republic* 5.461e). Plato's inductive method concerning the Good clarifies what the chief aim of legislation should be, which in abstract terms is the greatest good and in particular terms can be solved with Plato's formula of the Good.

Lastly, the Form of the Good can serve as an ideal to live up to. By fashioning after the ideal, philosopher-rulers can preserve or create goodness. Plato also notes that there is no disadvantage into investigating the ideal (*Republic* 5.472d-5.742e). Even if its understanding proves beyond capacity or its finding has little import in practice at a given time, Plato is not intimidated or dissuaded from its study. The Good for Plato is invaluable, for it serves both as a starting-point or end-point and as a frame or point of reference (Morrison 2007, 234-235). Nevertheless, modeling the ideal is not uncritically modeling rulers as portrayed by history or poetry.

To limit Plato's discussion of modeling the overall Form of the Good, he is concerned with rulers imitating other people, and these rulers not knowing the good themselves. Knowledge of the absolute Good may provide a mark to aim at, but philosopher-rulers, with this knowledge, know the mark themselves, they are not merely imitating the good governance or example of past leaders (White 1979, 96; Moss 2007, 415). What comes to mind is Plato's recommendations not to follow the figures of Homer's poetry (Freydberg 2000, 109). Homer's famous portrayal is of Achilles. Mary Nichols writes that Achilles was reputed for his warrior-qualities: speed, agility, and strength (1987, 70). Nevertheless, Achilles' virtue leads to his pride and arrogance, rendering his rage as vicious to his enemies as to his friends. Plato forces upon the reader a counter-intuitive: rulers often mirror successful princes; but, Plato demands that philosopher-rulers scrutinize the good of imitation, of whichever kind, independently. Thus, philosopher-rulers are self-reliant and can thwart off the possible negativity that follows from imitating what is supposedly good, or only partly good.

This account coheres with Plato's recommendation for mathematics, science, and dialectics, which allow philosopher-rulers to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical cases. Rulers could surely model successful governance from history; but, the reapplication of past ideas requires mathematics, science, and dialectics for success in the new circumstances. When the dice are thrown, it is the skill and intellect of rulers that carry their plans to success: Plato's philosopher-ruler does

not rely on other governors as models but on the education and knowledge of the Good.

Conclusion

Did Plato intend his theory of the Good to be practical? Quite possibly the answer to Plato's riddle is that he was so concerned with practicality in his theory of the Good that he raised the standards of goodness, truth, and knowledge to only accept those ideas that would be resilient to the many mistakes found in practical politics (Sluga 2014, 12). Again, the process to understand goodness is dialectics, and its purpose is to produce wise or prudent decision-making, for it is with knowledge of the good that philosopher-rulers govern best (Ferrari 2007, 198). Knowledge of mathematics and the forms supplies philosopher-rulers with formidable strategies to overcome the difficulties of a changing sensible world.

From familiarity with the Forms, philosopher-rulers can develop a formula to apply true knowledge to a changing world: they can test hypotheses and opinions in real life. This verification strategy also renders philosopher-rulers self-reliant, as they need no one else's judgement, whether past or present, to come to knowledge of the good (Nichols, 1987). In part, this idea is Plato's practical purpose with his rejections of imitating figures in poetry.

This essay has also contextualized Plato's metaphysics of the Good to give substance to his positions. It is true that Heraclitus' ontology that the world is in flux underpins Platonic metaphysics; but, this ontology fails to capture the strategic nature of Plato's idea of the Good. I referenced Thales and Herodotus, who also impacted Plato's metaphysics, to fill this gap (*Masque of the Seven Sages* 7.175; 1968, 26). Thales and Herodotus taught to introspect upon one's suretyship, plan well ahead, and prepare for the worst, as the sensible world is constantly changing. From a modest discussion, that Plato's metaphysics prioritizes these ideas is evident.

I have already said that Plato's absolute Good is essentially unity, and the political and practical aspect of this equation is clear from Plato's justice theory. He concludes from his discussion of justice that the greatest good is political unity, and what he means is that harmonizing and balancing an equation about justice, along with a dialectical rendition and verification of the terms in use, will give a formula of understanding the greatest good (White 2006b, 358; Cox 2007, 63-64). This formula is practical for whomever can discover and impute the factors and base their strategies on the resultant insights. Plato allocates so much power to philosopher-rulers because he trusts that they will understand this formula and maintain justice and harmony in the polis (Muller 1992, 175, 184; Benson 2006, 90). This formula is also a part of Plato's inductive argument to establish the theory of the Good, for it compounds the particulars of justice to contribute to a method of understanding the Good in a given situation.

This essay has also surveyed the major criticisms in the literature from Klosko and Aristotle to determine the obstacles to understanding the theory of the Good as practical. One criticism was that the metaphysics of goodness cannot be

the organizing principle to categorize things. I clarified that there is no reason why an organizing principle cannot be an idea of a quality (Cox 2007, 5). Related to this criticism is Aristotle's rejection that the metaphysics of goodness are uselessly abstract, for craftsmen and politicians, to Aristotle, need not understand the absolute Good but only the specific good of their profession (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6.1096^a15-1097^b15). My response is that Aristotle does not assess the practical purpose of Plato's metaphysics of goodness, which is to ensure that all sciences and arts function towards the Good. Plato never argued that craftsmen need know the absolute Good; he argued that philosopher-rulers need to know the absolute Good to verify the purpose of mathematics and the sciences when applied in strategy to a changing world (Sluga 2014, 12). Presenting these criticisms serves to ensure that political theorists do not merely assume that Plato's theory of the Good is impractical without knowing the prevailing reasons for this rejection. With this acknowledgement and my endeavours to overcome these criticisms, political theorists can judge whether Plato's theory of the Good was really impractical. If political theorists decide that it is, then they miss a critical aspect of Plato's motivation with his political philosophy: to practically direct people towards goodness. The concluding takeaway is that this theory is practical insofar as it equips rulers with a formula to understand, with a high standard of knowledge, the greatest good.

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