



Sacred Heart  
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University  
**DigitalCommons@SHU**

---

Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty  
Publications

Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

---

1-2014

# Taking the Strict Account of Techne Seriously: An Interpretive Direction in Plato's Republic

Kenneth Knies

Sacred Heart University, [kniesk@sacredheart.edu](mailto:kniesk@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel_fac)



Part of the [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Knies, K. (2014). Taking the strict account of Techne seriously: An interpretive direction in Plato's Republic. *Scholar: Ancient Philosophy and the Classical Tradition* 8(1), 111-126.

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferriby@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferriby@sacredheart.edu), [lysobey@sacredheart.edu](mailto:lysobey@sacredheart.edu).

# TAKING THE STRICT ACCOUNT OF TECHNE SERIOUSLY: AN INTERPRETIVE DIRECTION IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

KENNETH KNIES  
Sacred Heart University, USA  
[kniesk@sacredheart.edu](mailto:kniesk@sacredheart.edu)

---

ABSTRACT: I argue that the strict account of techne agreed to by Socrates and Thrasymachus in *Republic I* provides a useful framework for addressing a central question of the dialogue as a whole: how philosophy might belong to the polis. This view depends upon three positions: 1) that Plato invites us to interpret the relationship between techne and polis outside the terms of the city-soul analogy, 2) that the strict account contributes to a compelling description of vocational work, and 3) that this description determines what Socrates means by a true polis, and thus frames the problem of philosophy's political inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Techne, Polis, Plato's *Republic*, Thrasymachus.

---

The theme of the polis is the occasion for Socrates to investigate several topics in *Republic*. According to his most explicit methodological framework, Socrates treats the polis as a large surface upon which dim eyes can read the logos of justice, the proper place of which (443c) is the individual soul. The polis theme thus serves the needs of a peculiar sociological and psychological inquiry in which the discussion of society is something slightly more than a veiled discussion of the individual soul.<sup>1</sup> The relation of the city to the soul, however, is only part of the story. The topics of philosophical psychology and sociology are overtaken at the center of the text by a question about whether the whole of philosophy itself, as a vocational interest, belongs to the polis.

---

<sup>1</sup> A concise account of how to analyze this relationship can be found in Ferrari 2005.

In the early books, the pursuit of this question already leads to a way of talking about the polis that clearly exceeds the terms of the city-soul analogy. The citizen-workers who are the sole inhabitants of the “true” city in book two are not merely an external manifestation of the appetitive or money-loving division of the soul. Even when Socrates considers this basic class of citizens as one part of a political unity, he does not understand them exclusively in terms of their procurement of material goods.<sup>2</sup> The *demiourgoi* also represent the way in which one properly belongs to a polis in general. In turn, belonging to the polis through one’s work is not merely an image for how psychological functions belong to the individual soul. Socrates’ investigation of this issue is already preparation for the central question of whether the philosopher can belong to the polis through philosophizing.

In *Republic*, the way in which one belongs to the polis is by having a techne.

Socrates will consider as technai the work of all three classes that make up his ideal city, as well that of the philosophers themselves. As Leo Strauss has noted, in *Republic* citizenship itself is equated with being a craftsman of one kind or another.<sup>3</sup> Provisionally, we can understand techne to mean job, task, and calling, according to it the range of meanings we can discern in “vocation.” Because it is by virtue of one’s techne that one belongs to the polis, the question of the philosopher’s political inclusion must be oriented by the analysis of the meaning of techne. The natural starting point for this analysis is the “strict account” of techne initiated by Thrasymachus in book one. While Socrates’ interest in “taming” Thrasymachus may suggest that he never actually assents to the positions he adopts during this discussion, we will try the experiment of taking the strict account in all philosophical seriousness. Socrates’ agreement to pursue this account, and his inquiry into its implications, lays the basis for his development of the polis theme throughout *Republic*, and, at its center, the question of philosophy’s political inclusion.

The strict account of techne is strict because it forces us to abandon commonsense interpretations of what it means to “have a job.” Normally, everyone speaks about technai as if they belong to people. Someone is a doctor or a cobbler because it is what she does. Her reasons for doing it, and doing it in the way she does, are only apparent when considered in the context of her personal motivations and the circumstances from which they arise. As against this ordinary way of speaking, the account considers doctors or cobblers exactly insofar as they are doctors and cobblers; it views the worker from the perspective of that which makes her a worker.

---

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Schofield (2006, 257) has precisely identified the point at which Socrates begins speaking of the producer class as concerned with money and material acquisition. This comes at 434a, directly before the partition of the soul, as if to prepare that class to function in the psychological discussion: “From then on, his way of identifying the third class is to talk of the business or money-making class...anticipating the specification of ‘gain-loving’ as one of the three species of human being in book 9.”

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss (1964, 79) provides citations showing that soldiers, philosophers, and even God appear as “artisans” in *Republic*.

This means that rather than understanding the *techne* within the context of personal motivations belonging to the worker, the account will only consider the worker insofar as she is motivated by the *techne*. In Thrasymachus' first statement controlled by the strict account, this focusing has a temporal sense. He will consider the worker to be a worker only *when* she is actually working, which means only when she is under the discipline of the *techne*:

According to the strict account...no one of the workers errs. For it is *when* his knowledge fails (abandons him) that the one erring errs – at which point he is not a worker; with the result that not one worker or expert or ruler errs *at the very time* when he is ruling, but everyone would say that the doctor erred and that the one ruling erred. (340e)<sup>4</sup>

At no point will Socrates challenge Thrasymachus' decision to view work as under the perfect guidance of knowledge. Instead, remaining within the parameters of the strict account, he uses the opportunity to focus on the kind of knowledge that a *techne* is. Such knowledge, says Socrates, stands in a particular relationship to the objects over which it is set. Each technical knowledge is organized so as “to seek and to furnish what is advantageous” for its subject matter (341d). The subject matter requires such attention because it is *πονηρὸν*, deficient or lacking in one respect or another. The *techne* itself, however, is not *πονηρὸν*. Its whole being consists in attending to the advantage of its object, and it does not seem to require the attention of yet another *techne* in order to achieve this more perfectly (342a). Clearly, Socrates cannot reasonably deny that other *technai* may furnish the tools or materials necessary for carrying out a certain job. His point is rather that in attending to the advantage of τὸ *πονηρὸν*, the *techne* itself “orders” those tools and materials (both in the sense of demanding and arranging). In this, the *techne* requires no technical assistance and is already as perfect as is possible. From this self-sufficiency of the *techne* and the standing-in-need of its subject matter, Socrates concludes that “the *technai* in fact rule over and are stronger than that of which they are the *technai*” (342c).

There is, of course, a well-known eristic context for this exchange. Thrasymachus introduces the strict account in order to defend his thesis that justice is the advantage of the stronger. His first full formulation of the thesis defines justice as obedience to rulers, who are stronger than the ruled, and are thus able to impose laws that serve their own interests. It is in response to Socrates' objection that rulers can make mistakes, thus enforcing laws contrary to their interests, that he first enforces the strict account. For him, its most important consequence is that all work, strictly considered, is constantly accompanied by knowledge, and thus essentially free of error. By carrying the account further, Socrates discovers that the ruling-ruled relation, which Thrasymachus understood as occurring between two distinct groups of people within the

---

<sup>4</sup> The temporal interpretation of the genitive absolute (ἐπιλειπούσης γὰρ ἐπιστήμης) is justified by the following ὅταν. Throughout, I provide my own translations when something relevant to the argument is at stake in the Greek. Otherwise, I rely on G. M. A. Grube's translation, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (1992), indicating slight modifications as my own.

practice of a particular “ruling” *techne*, is a universal feature of *technai* as such. Thrasymachus’ definition of justice is now in jeopardy. If “ruling” in Thrasymachus’ sense is only a particular species of the ruling that belongs to all *technai*, and if this ruling is essentially concerned with attending to the advantage of what is weaker than itself, then a ruler (in the narrow sense), precisely insofar as he is in the possession of a *techne* (is “one of the workers”), is not guided by his own advantage.

In the development of the strict account, the argumentative fallout of Socrates’ position is not as important as its reinterpretation of interpersonal relationships as occurring within the *techne*’s relationship to *its own* subject matter. Socrates first introduces the topic of *techne* into the conversation through a similar maneuver. Before Thrasymachus’ intervention, the standing definition of justice was that attributed to Simonides: “it is just to give to each what is owed to him” (331e). Polemarchus, steered away from an economic interpretation by Socrates, comes to interpret the definition as meaning that I owe help to my friends and harm to my enemies. Socrates formulates the principle behind this interpretation to be: it is just to give to each what is appropriate to him (332c). Up to this point, the conversation has assumed that justice prescribes what owed or appropriate things one should give to *others*. Now, Socrates introduces *techne* into the discussion:

Then what do you think he’d answer if someone asked him: “Simonides, which of the things that are owed or that are appropriate for someone or something to have does the *techne* we call medicine give, and to whom or what does it give them?”

It’s clear that it gives medicines, food and drink to bodies.

And what owed or appropriate thing does the *techne* we call cooking give, and to whom or what does it give them?

It gives seasonings to food. Good.

Now, what does the *techne* we call justice give, and to whom or to what does it give it?

If we are to follow our previous answers, Socrates, it gives benefits to friends and does harm to enemies. (332b-d, Grube–Reeve. Translation modified.)

Polemarchus does not say that medicine gives health, which is owed or appropriate to the sick, or that cooking gives food, which is owed or appropriate to the hungry. The analysis he gives, and which Socrates approves, considers *technai* as giving what is owed or appropriate to the subject matter over which they are set. We expected to hear that cooking is a friend to the hungry, but have learned that it is a friend to unseasoned food. In the (ultimately ill-fated) attempt to treat justice as a *techne*, “friends” and “enemies” will occupy the structural position, not of the hungry or the sick, but of food and bodies: a subject matter, either a whom or a what, which is in some respect *πονηρὸν*, and to which the *techne* gives what is owed or appropriate.

In the strict account, Socrates will ground this indebtedness of the *techne* to its subject matter in an attitude of devoted focus that defines the worker as such.

No one in any position of rule [i.e. in the possession of a *techne*]<sup>5</sup>, insofar as he is ruling [i.e. working], either looks after or orders what is advantageous to himself but what is advantageous to what is being ruled and for which he would work, and looking (βλέπων) to that and to what is advantageous and suitable to it (τὸ ἐκείνῳ συμφέρον καὶ πρέπον), he says what he says, and does what he does, and so forth (342e).

This account is indeed implausible if it is taken to concern the psychological motives one might have for going to work. In her commentary on *Republic*, Julia Annas takes just such an approach, and accordingly finds Socrates' point of view "artificial," and "absurdly optimistic."<sup>6</sup> Both judgments are based on the fact that the account goes against our normal intuitions about why people work. On our interpretation, however, the strict account of *techne* does not concern the motives behind a *techne*, but rather the kind of looking internal to the accomplishment of the *techne* itself. It considers the worker, not as an individual who works, but precisely to the extent that her looking is brought under the discipline of a *techne*. The elimination of all motives except those grounded in securing the advantage of the subject matter is not the result of a reflection that "artificially" chooses to abstract from certain features of a concrete action. It is instead effected in the working itself. A *techne* is a knowhow that lives in the disciplined look of the working worker. Only to the extent that the speech and actions of the worker are guided by this disciplined looking do they enter into the work at all.

The passage at 342e is a description of *techne* in its living methodical accomplishment. The looking, for instance, that is in the possession of the sewing *techne* looks to the garment, which is in some way *πονηρὸν*: deficient, wanting or even completely lacking. It looks to this in terms of *what is advantageous for it* (τὸ συμφέρον). This means that in addition to looking to what is deficient (what is worked on) it looks to what is needed in order that this deficiency may be provided for (what is worked with). Looking to something is not the same as seeing something; it refers to what is salient, what calls for notice. Something's calling for notice follows strictly from its relevance for giving advantage to what is worked on. The garment (τὸ *πονηρὸν*) is damaged in this way and thus *requires* these needles, these stitches, etc. The sewer is distinguished from the non-sewer because she regulates her actions in strict accordance with such requirements as are discerned by this two-pronged look. The abstract knowledge she may have about methods and tools only testifies to her being in the possession of a *techne* if it was once called forth by live imperatives detected in the field of work itself.

---

<sup>5</sup> The conversation (342c-d) leading up to this statement makes it absolutely clear that a "position of rule" means being in the possession of a *techne*, not being a "ruler" in the narrow, conventional, sense. Directly before stating his general principle, Socrates reminds Thrasymachus that "a doctor in the precise sense is a ruler of bodies" and "a ship's captain in the precise sense is a ruler of sailors."

<sup>6</sup> Julia Annas 1981, 47, 49.

The technical product or result (what is worked for) is also manifest in the field of work. It too appears strictly as fulfilling the requirements of the deficient subject matter, not external human interests. Socrates does indeed hold it essential to a techne that it prove capable of producing a useful result. Already, in his first discussion of technai with Polemarchus (333a), he assumed that the individual in the possession of a techne is a useful individual, someone who can be a good partner or offer help. In the strict account, he introduces this aspect of techne in a more precise fashion:

Don't we say that each of the technai is different from the others in that each has a different power (δύναμιν)?...Therefore each renders (παρέχεται) to us some distinctive service (ὠφελίαν) but not one that is common, for example doctoring the service of health, and piloting the service of safety at sea. (346a)

We have seen that each techne looks to τὸ πονηρὸν in terms of τὸ ξυμφέρον, what it requires. Everything the worker says and does she says and does under the guidance of this looking. Each techne also possesses a distinctive δύναμις in accordance with which it produces an ὠφελία.<sup>7</sup> But the worker at work does not *look to* the result interpreted as a service (ὠφελία); her work renders it up (παρέχεται).

We can clarify this distinction between the product seen as a service and the product seen as the advantage of a deficient subject matter by way of an example. Early in his discussion with Thrasymachus (341e), when he is trying to establish techne as a form of rule over τὸ πονηρὸν, Socrates says that the doctoring art was discovered in order to provide for the deficiency of the body by seeking its advantage. Now, when he is explaining the place of ὠφελία (346a), he identifies the service of doctoring as “health.” Within the structural analysis of the medical techne, are not the advantage (τὸ ξυμφέρον) of the deficient body (τὸ πονηρὸν) and health (ὠφελία) one and the same? They do indeed refer to the same object: the human body as healthy. For the one doctoring, however, the healthy body is never salient as something serviceable in the sense that it satisfies a human need or requirement.

Whatever appreciation the doctor may have for the healthy body as a source of happiness or vitality, it is not to this that she looks in her work. To the doctor in the strict sense, the healthy body does not appear as something someone needs or requires. And this holds whether she is working on herself or on someone else. The look under the discipline of the techne only apprehends the healthy body as something πονηρὸν, which thus has *its own requirements* to which the indebted technician must respond. One in the possession of the sewing techne does not look to the garment as something providing warmth, protection, or concealment. It is the wearer of the garment who looks to these things, and it is not the special business of the sewer to put herself in the wearer's place. The sewer's knowledge that warm gar-

---

<sup>7</sup> Socrates will distinguish the δύναμις of each techne on the basis of the ὠφελία that it makes possible. This is in accordance with his general doctrine of powers that he lays out while considering the epistemic possibilities of the soul (477c).



ments are a help to cold people is in fact incidental to the knowledge that defines her craft and makes her a sewer.<sup>8</sup>

It is according to this technical distinction between τὸ πονηρὸν and its τὸ ξυμφέρον, on the one hand, and ὠφελεία on the other, that we should understand the famous exchange between Socrates and Thrasymachus about shepherding. Having listened to Socrates demonstrate how the strict account implies that every worker is interested solely in the advantage of the weaker thing over which his *techne* rules, Thrasymachus, accusing Socrates of naïveté, attempts to root the worker's self-interest in his directedness toward the anticipated product of his work. Thrasymachus' shepherd only "seeks the good" of his sheep in "looking to" (βλέποντας) the good of his master and himself (343b). In the eyes of the shepherd, everything he so carefully works on and works with is taken up into an encompassing concern for the satisfaction provided by the product. Mediating social relationships may mean that this product directly satisfies people other than the shepherd himself (indeed, Thrasymachus speaks of the shepherd's master). But every worker, insofar as he is in the possession of a *techne*, attends to his work only because he is first of all attending to his own satisfaction. At the highest level of abstraction from his product's use-value, this would mean that he looks to make money. Socrates' response, which is where he first introduces the terms δύναμις and ὠφελεία into the account (346a), amounts to an insistence on the technical suspension of all personal interests:

Shepherding is concerned only to provide what is best for the things it is set over, and it is itself adequately provided with all it needs to be at its best when it doesn't fall short in any way of being the *techne* of shepherding. That's why I thought it necessary for us to agree before that every kind of rule, insofar as it rules, *does not seek anything other* than what is best for the things it rules and cares for... (345d Grube-Reeve, modified with my emphasis)

This approach to *techne* does not, as Strauss for instance supposes, imply the thesis that the genuine worker is altruistic. Strauss points out that in the paradigmatic case of statecraft, Socrates claims that the rulers rule by looking to the advantage of the ruled. It seems natural, then, that we should recognize concern for others as a general feature of all *technai*: "For the artisan in the strict sense proves to be concerned not with his own advantage, but with the advantage of the others whom he serves: the shoemaker makes shoes for others and only accidentally for himself; the physician prescribes things to his patients with a view to their advantage." The artisan in the strict sense, he concludes, "is only concerned with the well-being of oth-

---

<sup>8</sup> In his study of *Republic*, Leon Craig (2003, 163) writes of a basic "conflict of interest" between the craftsman and the consumer. The craftsman wants money, and the consumer wants quality. Such an observation belongs to a psychology of economics. Within the strict account of *techne*, however, we may speak of a deeper conflict of interest between the worker and the consumer. The worker at work is interested in products solely as fulfilling the needs of the worked-on subject matter. The consumer is interested in them as serving human needs.



ers.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the strongest evidence in the strict account for Strauss’ interpretation is a passage often translated to the effect that “no doctor, insofar as he is a doctor, looks after or orders what is advantageous to the doctor, but what is advantageous to *the patient*” (342d my emphasis). Does this not show that Socrates’ technician, precisely insofar as he is guided by his disciplined look, looks after others?

When we consider the passage in context, another interpretation suggests itself. This comment about doctoring occurs within a list of examples by which Socrates hopes to illustrate that no *techne* seeks the advantage of *anything else* other than that of which it is the *techne* (342b). Medicine, says Socrates, considers the advantage only of *the body*, horsemanship only that of *horses*, etc. (342c). These subject matters, these things of which each respective *techne* is the *techne*, are what technical knowledge “rules over” (342c). Having established this, he now asks Thrasymachus about the doctor once more: “Then, isn’t it the case that no doctor, insofar as he is a doctor, looks after or orders what is advantageous to the doctor but to τὸ κάμνοντι [literally: what is sick]? For the doctor in the precise sense was agreed to be a *ruler of bodies*” (342d, my emphasis). To drive home his point, Socrates then asks Thrasymachus the same question about the captain, who has been strictly defined as “a ruler of sailors”(342d). Such a man looks after the advantage “of the man who is a sailor and is ruled.” (342d). On the basis of these cases Socrates now states that no one in the possession of a *techne* looks after or orders his own advantage, but the advantage of that which his *techne* rules. Clearly, the participial phrase τὸ κάμνοντι refers to the sick body, the designated subject of medical rule.

For Socrates, what is worked for is what is worked on. The only advantage *looked to* by a *techne* is that of its subject matter, the deficient object over which it properly rules. In certain cases, such as captaining or statecraft, Socrates formally identifies this subject matter with human beings considered in some particular respect. But in the case of shoemaking, for instance, the object whose advantage is sought is the shoe itself, not other people (and accidentally the shoemaker himself) insofar as they require shoes. Thrasymachus understands Socrates’ intent well enough. The latter, he says, is under the delusion that shepherds ultimately look to the good of *the sheep* rather than the good that may come to themselves and their masters. He does not accuse Socrates of believing that shepherds look after the advantage of the hungry and the cold. The thesis that Thrasymachus challenges Socrates to defend is not that technical accomplishment is altruistic, but rather that it does not look to its ὠφελεία, its product understood as a fulfillment of human needs or interests.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Strauss 1964, 79.

<sup>10</sup> We can see why Socrates’ attempt to posit wage-earning as a distinct *techne*, which can operate concurrently with all the others, raises difficult structural issues for the strict account. If wages are the service of wage-earning, then what might its deficient subject matter be? By categorizing wage-earning as a *techne*, Socrates rules out the possibility that the wage-earner, insofar as he is a wage-earner, looks after his own interests, or those of anyone else.

The rigorous separation between τὸ πονηρὸν and ὠφελεία indicates that a techne becomes what it is under a suspension that sets it off from engagement with human interests. My being in the possession of a techne does not imply anything about my interest in helping others or in helping myself. The strict account of techne does not break work apart into an abstract knowledge and an application of that knowledge as determined by the “moral character” of the worker. Someone who uses “her skills” or “her knowledge” in order to satisfy a personal need or damage the object of work is not, to that very extent, working. She is outside the discipline of techne. When technical vision looks into the dimension of human interests, it will do so only insofar as these figure in the field of work defined by τὸ πονηρὸν and its τὸ ζυμώρον. The looking itself is not engaged by these interests. For it, the ὠφελεία has no salience. Questions about self-interest and altruism are not relevant in a reflection on the worker in the strict sense imposed by the account. Indeed, there is a kind of inhumanity about the technician. She is not interested in the benefits that accrue to the community through her work because she responds solely to the work-object itself. Yet, in this very devotion, she is of value to the community, a good partner.

This being the case, we are left to wonder how the categories δύναμις and ὠφελεία enter into the rigorous analysis of techne. First with Polemarchus (333a) and then again with Thrasymachus (346a), Socrates conducts the pedestrian exercise of listing off the powers and services of various technai. The method involved here is based on the simple perception of use-values within a given social context. Educated perception already understands products as such, i.e. as the result of human activities and as meant for specific uses. From here, one can explicitly identify various serviceable products as the result of various productive activities, thereby understanding the social value of the activities themselves. One thus sees how the various technai fit into the life of a community. For the acculturated adult, an exercise like this is child’s play. Socrates has his interlocutors carry it out in a removed overview of technai, not by an inward consideration of technical looking in the manner imposed by the strict account. So the question remains as to whether and how the δύναμις and ὠφελεία become present for the worker in the strict sense.

When Socrates conducts the pedestrian exercise in the identification δύναμις and ὠφελεία in the case of various technai, he speaks as someone imbedded in a particular social world in which people go to work at useful things. Of course, this understanding of how any given techne “fits-into” the whole of social life is not the sole prerogative of administrative reflection. It also functions as an interpretive background available in the work itself. But if the suspension of personal interests carried out by the worker at work takes place against an interpretive background in which the product of work remains comprehensible as an ὠφελεία, is not the basic point Thrasymachus wanted to make about workers still valid? Perhaps he misspoke in claiming that the shepherd, as such, looks only to the advantage of his master and himself; but he nonetheless understands his work within a context of human interests. Since Socrates has no doctrine of altruism to oppose to Thrasymachus, should

we not admit that once we have taken this context into account, each will pursue self-interest (broadly understood) so far as she is able?

It was precisely in order to appeal to such a context of interest that Thrasymachus first introduced the concept of the polis into the discussion. Until that point (338d), Socrates and his interlocutors had considered justice as the source of norms for individual behavior without considering its function in collective life. Thrasymachus wants to address justice within a critical political economy that takes the polis as its primary unit of analysis. His polis is a context of struggle between rulers and ruled in which each worker-citizen with open eyes understands everything in terms of self-interest. It is by appropriating the polis theme that Socrates will extend the strict account of techne into the dimension of technical δύναμις and ὠφελεία.

When we follow Socrates here, we adopt a highly artificial perspective on the polis. It is not in view as a complex sociological phenomenon, but solely as a community of workers in the strict sense. Just as one is permitted to understand obviously unrealistic aspects of Socrates' political descriptions by anticipating that the polis functions as the soul writ large, so can we also understand them within the methodological context determined by the search for the proper interpretation of δύναμις and ὠφελεία. For this inquiry, the polis is under consideration strictly as a coordination of technai in terms of their serviceability and correlative power. Strauss observes that "when Socrates speaks about the primary needs which bring men together, he mentions food, housing, and clothing but is silent about procreation. He speaks only of those natural needs which are satisfied by means of arts...He abstracts from procreation in order to be able to understand the city as an association of artisans..."<sup>11</sup> It is not some inattentiveness to the facts of city life that causes Socrates to present the polis in this fashion. He is rather concerned with the fitting together of technai themselves in order to approach the particularly problematic case of philosophy.

Each polis of *Republic* is a coordination of technai considered on such a scale that it serves no further technical goal.<sup>12</sup> Because of this lack of an external aim, the polis can function as a work-world from whose horizon the serviceability of techne becomes understandable in a unique form. The doctor, for instance, may understand herself as a hospital worker, or a functionary of healthcare as a whole, thus situating her work within a broader cooperation of technai guided by its attendance to an enlarged subject matter. But if she were to understand herself as a polis-worker, she would interpret her work as accomplishing nothing other than the polis itself as a coordination of technai. To achieve a political understanding of one's techne would be to understand why, apart from the production of any particular result, one coordinates one's work with that of others at all. The enumeration of technical services

---

<sup>11</sup> Strauss 1964, 95-6.

<sup>12</sup> Only under this definition does the polis make sense as the appropriate analogy for the tripartite soul in the consideration of justice. When the individual soul is investigated as an articulated whole, it is from the perspective of its inward ordering, not the goal at which it aims.

and powers that Socrates attempts with Polemarchus and Thrasymachus is a way of distinguishing technai from one another. It does not consider the criterion of serviceability that makes the various services serviceable. Such a consideration can only occur from the perspective of the polis as a whole, or for the citizen who makes herself responsible for that perspective. It will remain for Glaucon and Adeimantus to discover the principle of technical serviceability. They do so through the building of cities.

If the polis were not a context that already encompasses every work-world, each worker, in “going to work,” could choose to bring her working capabilities and products into relation with those of others for the first time. In making this choice, she might understand why it was important to go to work in the polis at all. She would thus gain insight into the originating principle (ἀρχή) of the polis as a coordination of technai. In *Republic*, we have privileged access to this principle because Socrates and his interlocutors build their cities in speech. Their words are the source of its very origination. Socrates and his pupils will not only carry out their work as founders in accordance with this ἀρχή, at key points they will also reflect upon it as an explicit theme, and attempt to formulate it. Glaucon and Adeimantus, the builders of these cities, have just provided a trenchant justification for Thrasymachus’ political economy of self-interest, a justification from which they want to be dissuaded. The discussion regarding the ἀρχή of the polis will thus proceed by distinguishing the true principle of city construction from a pseudo-principle, with which it is initially confused. Only a polis constructed according to the true ἀρχή will prove capable of including the philosophical vocation according to its proper ὠφελεία and δύναμις.

It is according to the pseudo-principle that Socrates and Adeimantus explicitly construct the first city of *Republic*. Though this polis will contain both justice and injustice (369a), Socrates guides Adeimantus into understanding its foundation according to the following ἀρχή:

Well then, a polis is born, as I suppose, since it happens that each of us is not self-sufficient, but in need of many things – or do you mean to found the polis in some other principle?... Indeed, then, one seeking out another for one need (χρεία), and another for another, we, needful of many things (πολλῶν δεόμενοι), assemble in one dwelling place, many partners and allies – for this dwelling together we established the name “polis.”...Indeed, one man gives a share to another, another to another, if he gives something or receives it, *believing it to be better for himself*. Come then, let us make a polis in speech from this principle. Our need (χρεία), as it seems, will make it. (369b-c)<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> We translate ἀρχή as “principle” or “originating principle,” rather than “beginning.” The ultimate justification for this decision comes in book IV at 433b-c, when Socrates, referring to their city-building in book two, says εὐθὺς ἀρχόμενοι τῆς πόλεως οἰκίζεῖν κατὰ θεόν τινα εἰς ἀρχὴν τε καὶ τύπον τινὰ τῆς δικαιοσύνης κινδυνεύομεν ἐμβεβηκέναι. “Immediately upon our beginning to construct the polis, we happen, with the help of some god, to have hit upon something of a principle and blueprint of justice.” The precise part of the conversation to which Socrates here refers is most likely 370b, where Socrates first introduces the idea that

It is because human beings are naturally πολλῶν δεόμενοι that each goes to work in the context of the polis. It is as if each pre-political worker were to say to herself: I can better fulfill my own multifarious need (χρεία) by entering into commerce with others than by attempting to accomplish this on my own. Each worker uses the polis for his own purposes. The founders themselves act according to this motive. Socrates and Adeimantus will construct the polis according to *their need*, conjuring into being the workers capable of fulfilling it.

In such an understanding of the polis, the virtue of the division of labor is that each can better fulfill his own needs through the mediation of exchange. Specialization, says Socrates, results in “more plentiful and better quality goods” (370c). Each goes to work in her own field because the ὠφελεία she thereby renders will better fulfill the needs of others and, ultimately, her own. Others are partners and allies for me in my fulfillment of my own needs. The political δύναμις of work lies in its ability to procure this fulfillment. The principle governing the coordination of *technai* is thus economic in nature. Economics is the secret of political association. Each worker will understand her fitting into or belonging to the polis because she knows that her needs, whether basic or extravagant,<sup>14</sup> bind her to the work and needs of others. A polis is essentially a need-coordinating mechanism. This conception conforms perfectly to Thrasymachus’ account of technical accomplishment. Socrates himself will assert that every existing polis of which he is aware has been built up according to this principle of association. The principle is completely at odds, however, with Socrates’ own account of the citizen-worker in the strict sense.

The true ἀρχή of the polis (or the ἀρχή of the true polis – 422e) is political justice itself, defined as doing that task for which one is by nature suited (433a). A true polis is not a need coordinating mechanism, but a vocational horizon. The coordination of *technai* serves to free vocational work from the material interests of life and allows it to become an end in itself. Already in the construction of the first city, Socrates shows that the political division of labor responds to concerns other than the effi-

---

the polis affords each the opportunity to carry out a single task (ἔργον) to which he is by nature suited.

<sup>14</sup> The admission of extravagant needs or luxurious products into the polis is the result of Glaucon’s intervention that begins at 372c. Socrates consents to building a luxurious city only after remarking that the “true” or “healthy” city is the one constructed to satisfy modest or basic needs. Of course, it is in the attempt to satisfy these multiplying needs that the founders confront the necessity of war, and thus of training the guardians that will ultimately require a philosophical education. This distinction between the healthy and feverish cities, and the development through which the later is ultimately reformed, are important features of polis-construction in *Republic*. However, we must not confuse this issue with the more basic problem animating the polis-construction. This is to distinguish the true ἀρχή of the polis, which will indicate the definition of justice. Socrates clearly holds that the construction of the first (moderate) city already allows for a research into its justice *and injustice* (371e). He reacts to Glaucon’s complaint that he has built a city fit only for pigs by saying that studying a luxurious city will *also* serve the purposes of such a research (372e).

cient production of high-quality products. It is right for each citizen-worker to perform one task, not only because it will yield a greater quantity of better goods, but because it gives expression to the diversity of human nature and because each worker is one person, not many (370b). Later (423d), Socrates will assert that the worker *becomes one* by doing the one task for which she is suited. It is in order to be able to undertake this kind of work that one would enter in the polis in the first place. Each *techne* has a δύναμις and ὠφελεία insofar as it frees up each worker for dedication to her own vocational work.

Farming is not serviceable because it satisfies the potter who is happy eating corn. The happiness that comes from the fulfillment of multifarious need is not political happiness. Those called potters may be happy eating corn and those called farmers dining on fine china. It is possible to construct a “city” in this fashion, but then “a farmer wouldn’t be a farmer, nor a potter a potter, and none of the other schemas of work, from which a polis is born, will at all hold up” (421a). The strictness of Socrates’ account of the polis as a coordination of *technai* is here quite evident. If one “is talking about farmers and banqueters who are happy as they would be at a festival rather than in a polis, then he isn’t talking about a polis at all, but about something else” (421b, Grube–Reeve. Translation modified). Geographically speaking, a festival may be in a city. For the strict account, it is in principle an extra-political affair. To enter into the polis by going to work is precisely to renounce the self-interested directedness towards χρεία. The aim of the city is not consumption,<sup>15</sup> but the life of production itself: vocational repayment of debts to τὸ πονηρὸν. Each *techne*, no matter the nature of its product, renders a service and exercises a correlative power because it contributes to a thriving vocational life for all. The polis exists in order that each might be able to pursue her own work.

It is the law of the polis that upholds this founding principle. The function of law, says Socrates, consists in

harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and constraint, making them give a share of service (τῆς ὠφελείας) by which each would be able to serve (ὠφελεῖν) the community, and when it introduces such people into the polis, it does so not in order that each be allowed to go to work at whatever each wants, but in order that it may dispatch them for the binding together of the polis. (519e-520a)

The citizen-worker does not first of all belong to the polis and then experience the law. It is the law itself that introduces and dispatches her into the polis. In turning to one’s own work out of obedience to the law, and thus understanding one’s *techne* from the perspective of the polis as a whole, one becomes a citizen. Socrates

---

<sup>15</sup> Multifarious need naturally needs to be fulfilled within the polis. The life of need fulfillment is not eradicated. It does, however, become a subordinate part within the functioning of the polis as a whole (just as the appetitive part of the tripartite soul is inside the psychological whole). Needs need to be satisfied because they fulfill conditions necessary for the self-realization of the community according to its originating principle.



usually describes the politically incorporated techne as an ἔργον, which readily translates as work or job. But for work to be political work, for it to be a “vocation of the city” (433a), it must contribute to the proper functioning of the whole. ἔργον thus means assigned task or function. An ἔργον is assigned by the law that enforces the just arrangement of the political whole. By having and fulfilling one’s techne as an ἔργον, one upholds the shape, or the formal constitution (πολιτεία) of the polis.

The question of philosophy’s political inclusion will be posed according to the terms generated by the strict account of techne. Focused engagement (τὸ βλέπειν) in philosophical matters will have to render up an ὠφελεία that harmonizes the community as a whole, thus exercising a political δύναμις within the polis. Philosophy must come to experience its work as an ἔργον in response to an imperative that has the force of a justly imposed law. Only thus will the philosopher become a genuine citizen who contributes to and obeys the πολιτεία. This is what it would mean for philosophy to be included in the polis.

The difficulties associated with this inclusion all stem from the purely theoretical nature of the vision that guides philosophical work. The one who is a philosopher in the strict sense, says Socrates (500c), has no leisure to look toward the practical affairs of human beings (βλέπειν εἰς ἀνθρώπων πραγματείας). It is striking to note that Socrates will consider the impracticability of philosophy as a problem *within* the structural analysis of techne provided by the strict account. Philosophy is also a techne. It is unique, he says, because it

attempts to grasp, concerning everything, according to a methodical route, what each is. All the other technai are either oriented toward the opinions and desires of human beings or toward generation and composition or toward tending to what is being grown and composed – each and every techne being turned toward its work. (533b)

The central books of *Republic* grapple with the difficulties of philosophy’s political inclusion by reflecting on the philosopher as a figure in a hypothetical city. We only enhance our appreciation of these reflections by bearing in mind the structural level of analysis introduced by the strict account of techne. At this level, “the philosopher” is not a psychologically and socially motivated individual who also practices philosophy, but an individual exactly insofar as she is involved in the actual attending that makes of her a philosopher. The structural question is whether *that life*, which lives solely in its orientation to the field of work proper to philosophy, can comprehend its power and serviceability within a social world. Conceiving philosophy’s inclusion in the polis is not a matter of showing how purely theoretical interests remain connected to a broader social context because the philosopher too is a needful human being, with a body that wants rest, food, shelter, companionship, etc. This is surely a sociological fact, albeit an uninteresting one. However, according to the strict accounts of techne and polis, the body of the philosopher would only live



and sleep in the city if her vocational life, according to its own interests and motives, fits into the community.<sup>16</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- Annas, Julia (1981) *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Craig, Leon Harold (2003) *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's Republic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ferrari, G. R. F. (2005) *City and Soul in Plato's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grube, G. M. A. and Reeve, C. D. C., tr. (1992) Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by G. M. A. Grube and revised by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Schofield, Malcolm (2006) *Founders of Modern Political and Social Thought: Plato*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, Leo (1964) *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

---

<sup>16</sup> In *Theaetetus*, Socrates, comparing the philosopher to the “practical man,” asserts that “only the body of the philosopher lives and sleeps in the polis” (173e). His mind, concerned with philosophical things, has no business there. This way of looking at things assumes the commonsense perspective that the polis is a need coordinating mechanism, and addresses the problem of philosophy’s political inclusion on that basis. According to the strict account of *Republic*, however, one does not belong to a polis because her needs motivate her to settle in the vicinity of others.