Episteme and Techne in the Statesman

What does it mean for the Statesman to be a practitioner of an episteme or a techne? Before beginning the diaeresis in the first part of the dialogue, the Eleatic Guest asks Young Socrates if, after all, the Statesman is someone who has an episteme—Young Socrates readily assents, but we should ask ourselves what hangs on his answer. And, we should ask ourselves why he uses these two terms—he readily interchanges techne and episteme from time to time—instead of sticking to just one.

I will begin the presentation by looking briefly at what these terms mean outside of Plato: techne is the very old concept of a specialized, full-time profession, a rational practice that a member of the lower-class did to make money and something learned either from a family member or a paid teacher who practiced the very same techne. Episteme can denote the same kinds of fields—we know from inscriptions doctors could be hailed for their episteme just as well as their techne—but was really a term of art in the Socratic circle (Wolfsdorf 2017) and quite a bit less marked as low-class. Episteme can also be construed as a component of techne.

I take it that the Statesman has both episteme and a techne; I will defend my view that techne and episteme can be distinguished in this dialogue (episteme alone being associated with doxa and a sort of transcendental knowledge), although in the diaeresis proper episteme mainly operates as synecdoche for techne, making them seem synonymous. This is quite common phenomenon in the Platonic dialogues (indeed, many terms, including phronesis and sophia can be used apparently synonymously with episteme, yet it would be a mistake to infer that they are precise synonyms).

In the Statesman, we can see how the concepts of techne and episteme are deployed. I’ll focus on three important moments in the dialogue. The first two show the importance of characterizing the statesman’s knowledge as episteme; and the last one is a puzzle raised by this idea. The first moment regards rationality: this is an important theme raised by the idea of relative measurement. The second moment regards specialization: this is important because Plato uses the idea that the statesman has an episteme to criticize democratic politics.

At the end, I will turn to a controversial idea: the relationship between episteme and virtue in Plato. A problem comes up at 293a-e, where the doctor and statesman are compared, and both are said to act in their proper role when they act both according to their art and justice. While it is not surprising that the doctor’s episteme is not sufficient for virtue, here it looks like the statesman’s episteme is not either—which seems odd both from the perspective of other dialogues, which regularly assigned the role of determining how to justly use the products of other crafts to this very episteme, and from the perspective of this dialogue. Surely the kingly episteme, if it knows anything, knows what the good is. This puzzle highlights what’s at stake, and what’s still unexplained, by characterizing the Statesman’s knowledge as a techne/episteme.