

3-2018

A Series of Footnotes to *Plato's Philosophers*

Kevin M. Cherry

University of Richmond, kcherry2@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications>Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)**This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.**

Recommended Citation

Cherry, Kevin M., "A Series of Footnotes to *Plato's Philosophers*" (2018). *Political Science Faculty Publications*. 239.
<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications/239>

This Post-print Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

A Series of Footnotes to *Plato's Philosophers*

Kevin M. Cherry¹
University of Richmond
kcherry2@richmond.edu

Catherine Zuckert's *Plato's Philosophers* begins by referring to Alfred North Whitehead's "quip" that, in her formulation, "all subsequent philosophy is merely a footnote to Plato" (Zuckert 2009, 1).² What is remarkable is that in a book of nearly 900 pages, there is an omission of something, namely, Mortimer Adler's retort that "Aristotle wrote most of the footnotes" (Adler 1988, 72). As the meticulous use of secondary literature throughout the book makes clear, it is unlikely that this is an accidental omission. Indeed, upon reading *Plato's Philosophers*, I am left with the impression that Zuckert believes the history of Western philosophy has generally served to detract from, rather than clarify—much less add to—Plato. Aristotle seems to be chiefly responsible for these departures (e.g., 2009, 5).

Perhaps because of this culpability, Zuckert's criticisms of Aristotle often serve to reveal the unique character, and benefits, of Platonic philosophy. In particular, they highlight the importance of what I call the Platonic meta-dialogue, the fact that "Plato presents a variety of philosophers speaking to different interlocutors, in different circumstances, with different results" in such a way as to juxtapose the problems identified and solutions proposed by these various philosophers (2009, 6, 19). Within this meta-dialogue, the first sustained contrast to be developed is between the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* and Plato's Socrates, especially about the possibility of "real political reform" (2009, 31-3, 51-62). In the second part of the article, I summarize Zuckert's articles on Aristotle's political science—which are, I fear, somewhat

¹ I am grateful to Jeffrey Church and Richard Dagger for comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

² Whitehead's own statement is a bit more moderate, claiming "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (1978, 39).

overshadowed by her monumental work on Plato—and suggest that, in her view, Aristotle ultimately sides with Socrates on this important question insofar as he is skeptical that political communities will ever encourage the acquisition of virtue.

Plato's Use of the Dialogue Form

To say that Plato made Socrates his hero, as Zuckert emphatically does (2009, 815-62), generally leads to an emphasis on Plato's use of the dialogue form. This would have been a more radical claim a few decades ago, but the importance of the dialogue form is no longer in much dispute. Studies of Plato's dialogues which emphasize the action as well as the argument are now the norm.³ It is therefore not surprising that the dialogue form, though important, is not at the center of *Plato's Philosophers*. After all, other companions and followers of Socrates—most famously Xenophon—wrote dialogues.⁴ Aristotle even gave this genre a name, *Sōkratikoilogoi* (*Poetics* 1447b11), and wrote dialogues himself, although they are largely lost to us.⁵

More relevant, it seems, is that these other philosophers who, like Aristotle, wrote dialogues also wrote treatises, whereas “Plato wrote *only* dialogues” (Zuckert 2009, 1, emphasis added). Plato is the one philosopher who never calls attention to himself. He leaves us nothing, save for “his selection of the characters, the setting, and the topic to be discussed . . . as well as the outcome or effects of the conversation,” to discern his own thoughts (2009, 5).⁶ Perhaps

³ In his introduction to the most recent collected edition of the dialogues, John Cooper remarks that rather than beginning from assumptions about the chronology of composition, readers should “concentrate on the *literary* and philosophical content” (1997, xiv, emphasis added).

⁴ See Clay 1994. Cf. Zuckert 2009, 768-9.

⁵ For what it is worth, Aristotle's literary practice had little in common with Plato's: As Walter Nicgorski has informed us, Cicero reports that in Aristotle's dialogues, the author himself was the central character, who engaged in lengthy speeches rather than the short exchanges typical of Socratic dialectic, and often included prefaces in his own name. See Masters (1979, 546) and Nicgorski (2016, 89-90 n 46 and 93-5 n 71).

⁶ In her discussion of the *Phaedrus*, Zuckert connects Socrates' indirect speech about love to Plato's indirect depiction of philosophy in the dialogue form (2009, 304-5, cf. 775).

because of this uniqueness, subsequent commentators—beginning, Zuckert notes, with Aristotle—have tended to read and present his views as if he had written treatises (2009, 5).

However, *Plato's Philosophers* ultimately concludes that the real genius of Plato is not that he wrote dialogues, nor that he wrote only dialogues, but that he wrote only dialogues that incorporated different, competing philosophers. In other words, if Plato had left us *only* Socratic dialogues, he would not have offered the comprehensive account Zuckert claims because it would have omitted the approaches of the Eleatic and Athenian Strangers, Timaeus, and Parmenides.⁷ The most important dialogue, therefore, is found not in any single writing of Plato but in what we might call the Platonic “meta-dialogue,” the conversation that thoughtful readers can imagine between Socrates and the other Platonic philosophers—precisely the conversation Zuckert’s book offers.

Yet Zuckert’s emphasis on the dialogue form raises the question of whether Plato has, in effect, rigged the contest between Socrates and his rival philosophers. To be sure, Timaeus presents his cosmology mostly in a single long speech.⁸ The Athenian Stranger seems familiar with dialectic, but he, too, veers into lengthy speeches (as in Book V).⁹ Both Parmenides and the Eleatic Stranger, however, are reluctant to engage in Socratic dialectic; they would prefer to present their long-standing views in speeches and hence are selective in their choice of

⁷ We see this in the way that Plato’s philosophy was understood by those in the Christian Middle Ages who had only the *Timaeus*. Gretchen Reydam-Schils has observed, however, that the *Timaeus* might have been preserved precisely because of its resonances with the biblical account of creation found in *Genesis* (2003, 10).

⁸ He also, as Zuckert notes, fails to answer the question posed by Socrates (2009, 422, 462).

⁹ The Athenian Stranger is the only philosophic rival whom Socrates does not directly encounter. On the basis of the historical events mentioned, and not mentioned, in the dialogue, and on the basis of the philosophy articulated by the Athenian Stranger, Zuckert sets the dramatic date of the *Laws* in the decades between 480 and 450 BC (2009, 54). The dramatic setting of the dialogue would therefore preclude Socrates’s presence, but, given the anachronisms of the *Menexenus* and Plato’s ability to depart from the demands of historical accuracy, I wonder if there is more to be said about why Plato has Socrates encounter a predecessor (Parmenides) to whose philosophical problem he responds but not one (the Athenian) to whose political problem he responds (2009, 47).

interlocutors (see, e.g., *Parm.* 136a ff.; *Soph.* 217b-e, 236d; *Stat.* 262ab, 265a, 275c).¹⁰ By choosing to have the various philosophers present their views in a form closely associated with Socrates' own practice, perhaps the merits of Socrates' approach, and the flaws of his rivals, are more visible than they might be if he had written treatises. Is this choice of dramatic form a reflection of Plato's ultimate preference for Socrates and his efforts "to seek wisdom" (2009, 31)? Is it more appropriate for Socratic philosophizing than Eleatic or Timaeian?

Problematic History and Problematic Philosophy

In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle famously contrasts Socrates' concern with ethical matters rather than nature with Plato's belief—mistaken, of course, according to Aristotle—in the separate existence of unchanging and thus intelligible concepts (987ab, 1078b, 1086a).¹¹ His intimation of a difference between Socrates and Plato eventually led some to look for a historical Socrates by distinguishing earlier from later Platonic dialogues (2009, 46), despite legitimate questions about whether Aristotle's history of philosophy ought to be believed (2009, 5 n11). Indeed, some even took Aristotle's statements as the basis for ascribing an unwritten and esoteric teaching to Plato (2009, 29 n45).

Yet Zuckert observes that, although Aristotle's statements about Plato are problematic, his depiction of Socrates generally "fits the character presented in Plato's dialogue" as one concerned about "ethical matters," rather than "the world of nature as a whole." As Zuckert observes, "Nowhere in the Platonic dialogues does [Socrates] articulate a view of the cosmos" (2009, 587 n1). Indeed, Aristotle is himself more judicious than many contemporary scholars,

¹⁰ Socrates, of course, is also selective (hence his *daimonion*), but his willingness to engage Anytus, Callicles, and Thrasymachus is evidence he does not limit his interlocutors to those who will give him "the least trouble" (*Parm.* 137b).

¹¹ Paradoxically, the fact that Aristotle ascribes an unchanging theory of the forms—pun intended—to Plato is used as evidence against the developmental view (2009, 4, cf. 46 n46).

for he observes that while investigating these ethical matters, Socrates sought universal definitions (Zuckert 2009, 14 n28, 148, 181 n2). However, Aristotle, seemingly intent on distinguishing Plato from Socrates, obscures the fact that Socrates, in dialogues like the *Gorgias*, tried to give his ethics a “philosophical foundation” (2009, 540 n55). So, too, in the *Phaedo* Plato presents “Socrates’ search for definitions” of the various virtues as connected to his attempt “to look beyond our immediate circumstances to what is purely intelligible, for direction in living our lives” (2009, 587). According to Zuckert, Aristotle’s account of Socrates fits best the Socrates who appears in the Platonic dialogues set during the first part of the Peloponnesian War, who investigated primarily “human affairs” (2009, 595). These dialogues are not, however, the entirety of Socrates’ story, nor are they intended to be biographical. In Zuckert’s view, Plato goes to great lengths to indicate that the dialogues are not historical reconstructions but literary, if philosophic, dramas. He thus stands behind Socrates as depicted in the dialogues just as—no more and no less than—he does the Eleatic and Athenian Strangers, Parmenides, and Timaeus.

Aristotle’s potentially misleading history of philosophy is perhaps of less concern as the developmental approach to Plato has waned in influence. Of greater concern, according to Zuckert, is that Aristotle combined what Plato kept separate, namely, philosophy as a way of life, a search for self-knowledge as depicted by Socrates, and philosophy understood as comprehending and contemplating the cosmos, exemplified best by Timaeus (2009, 39). The problem with Aristotle, therefore, is not that he fails to employ the dialogue form exclusively, nor that he writes treatises, nor even that he ascribes to Plato teachings he did not hold (2009, 587), but that he brings together competing and incompatible ways of philosophizing that Plato took great pains to distinguish by “attributing them to two different individuals.” Because

Aristotle combined these, subsequent readers have failed to notice their separation in Plato (Zuckert 2009, 39).

Let me put these two pieces together. Aristotle combined in a single form—the treatise—the distinct approaches to philosophy that Plato dramatized. In so doing, he obscured the true nature of philosophy and the Platonic corpus. The corpus, properly read, according to Zuckert, shows us that “philosophy is not an activity undertaken by a solitary individual in his or her study, attempting to replicate or ascend to Aristotle’s first principle of thought, thinking itself” (2009, 1).¹² Though the dialogue form does not guarantee a properly Platonic approach to philosophy, the treatise form, with its overwhelming authorial presence, inherently prevents it. This is, perhaps, why subsequent philosophers have, with few exceptions, adopted “the Timaeian model” of philosophizing, seeking to explain the universe on the basis of “empirical observations” about “sensible things” rather than pursue self-knowledge through conversation with others, as Socrates did (2009, 480, 586).

Zuckert and Aristotle’s Political Science

Plato’s Socrates may have avoided the Timaeian model of philosophy, prioritizing the quest for self-knowledge over an attempt to provide “a comprehensive view of the intelligibility of the whole” (2009, 14). However, as Zuckert acknowledges, this quest had only limited political significance; it culminates instead in philosophical friendship. By contrast, Zuckert argues that the Athenian Stranger’s manner of proceeding allows him to have “a much greater and more direct effect on politics than Socrates” (2009, 33; cf. 80, 138, 827-30). In this section, I argue that on Zuckert’s reading, Aristotle—despite his shortcomings—is a better guide to political practice than the Athenian Stranger in part because of a fundamental agreement with

¹² And yet one cannot but think of Plato’s own presumably solitary activity in writing the dialogues: “Plato’s understanding is more comprehensive than his chief protagonist’s” (2009, 19).

Plato's Socrates about the limits of politics. In making this argument, I rely on the three articles and one book chapter Zuckert has published on Aristotle. The first article, "Aristotle on the Limits and Satisfaction of Political Life," was published in 1983. The book chapter, "Aristotle's Practical Political Science," was published in 1992. After more than twenty years, two closely related articles appeared: "Do Virtue Ethics Require Virtue Politics?" (2013) and "Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and Modern Liberal Democracy" (2014).¹³

In the two earlier works, there is no suggestion of differences among the various philosophers. In these Zuckert accepts Strauss's conclusion that Plato demonstrates the "superiority" of philosophy to politics (1983, 185) and characterizes Plato's political thought as abstract (1992, 144). She even ascribes the communal institutions of the *Republic* and its principle of specialization to Plato rather than Socrates (1983, 192-5, cf. 206; 1992, 151). It seems, therefore, that Zuckert underwent a "Platonic turn" away from the usual Straussian position that Plato's principal philosophers—Socrates and the two Strangers—ultimately say the same thing (see Strauss 1987, 78) to arrive at her own understanding of the relation between the Platonic philosophers. Whereas Socrates pinpoints his dissatisfaction with Anaxagoras, in particular, as the reason for his turn to the human things (*Phd.* 98 ff., cf. Zuckert 2009, 184-5), there is no mention, as far as I can tell, in *Plato's Philosophers* of what brought about her new understanding.

The Limits of Politics

In her earliest article on Aristotle, Zuckert argues that he presents politics as "both a more noble and a more limited human endeavor than we generally recognize." The political community arises to provide what we need for life, but living in community with others

¹³ The second of these articles is a fuller exploration of the questions addressed in the first.

inevitably leads to disagreement about the value of various contributions to the community and, ultimately, disagreement about who should rule (1983, 186). Yet the “practical reason” necessary to resolve this disagreement and to rule well—as well as to make virtuous choices in our individual lives—can arise only within those communities (1983, 186-7). Those who develop their practical reason more fully ought to rule, and their rule advances the good of all—but not equally (1983, 190). The lower activities that are necessary to politics point to its limitations, “the extent to which it can be free, reasonable, just and beneficial to all” (1983, 191).

These limitations are pronounced in the necessary, albeit not always natural, hierarchies in the production of economic goods that result in economic conflict (1983, 191-2) and the problematic treatment of women and slaves (1983, 195).¹⁴ Although the majority of people “will be content merely to be left alone” and pursue the goods of mere life, others will be motivated by “a desire for recognition.” This difference allows for the possibility of “civil peace” when the few wealthy accept honors while the majority pursue their own preservation (1983, 192, 196-7). Yet if the many are, on Aristotle’s understanding, mistaken about the end of human life, so, too, are the few: the political offices for which they are ambitious are similarly limited in the satisfaction they bring (1983, 197).

Like Plato, Zuckert argues, Aristotle holds that “[t]he only source of pure pleasure is philosophy,” but it is “primarily intellectual” virtue that political leaders require, imitating the work Aristotle himself does in the *Politics* by investigating “what is just not only in general but also in the specific circumstances” (1983, 197). Such deliberative activity is necessary, difficult, and all-consuming but also “inherently satisfying,” even though it is never free of the various

¹⁴ Zuckert argues that his economic insight remains relevant: According to Aristotle, “scarcity does not result so much from the limits of natural goods as the unlimited range of human desire”—something modern production cannot change (1983, 192).

limitations of political life, especially the inability of the many to understand the deliberations of prudent rulers (1983, 198).

The varying circumstances of cities and the competing claims to rule complicate the exercise of the practical reason of statesmen. “Although reason can solve the political problem, Aristotle suggests that it is not likely to be effective very often – at least not fully effective” (1983, 199). He thus recommends as the “best regime generally possible” one in which the rich and the poor balance each other, which often relies on “a substantial middle class” (1983, 199-200). Because most people are primarily concerned with satisfying their desires for the goods of mere life, they will often resist laws that try to restrain those desires and must therefore be persuaded that obedience to the laws is “in their own economic interest” (1983, 201), fostering “a relatively low order of moderation or self-control” among citizens (1983, 202). Even if capable of ascertaining how to reconcile “the general principles of politics with . . . the specific circumstances” in a city, most statesmen will legislate for existing, rather than new, regimes and will struggle to make even the best reforms (1983, 202, 203-4). Few citizens are able “to live or understand a fully satisfying life” and willing to accept laws toward that end, preferring instead laws that secure their pursuit of material well-being (1983, 204).

These limitations point once more “to the essential tension between the necessary conditions for political life and the realization of its end,” living well (1983, 202). Politics arises from a desire to live well, but that same desire places limits on political life and justice (1983, 205).¹⁵ As Plato suggests, “perhaps” only “the entirely private philosopher” can be happy (1983, 205), but “Aristotle suggests that politics may also be an inherently satisfying activity” at least as he practices it: “in thought or deliberation rather than in effect” (1983, 206, cf. 185).

¹⁵ Even the regime according to prayer sketched in Books VII-VIII evidences only “limited justice” insofar as it depends upon unnatural slavery (1992, 220 n4).

The satisfaction of politics arises from its character as a rational activity. Its limitations arise from the fact that its rationality is never complete: Politics never reflects fully what practical reason discerns, but though it involves, it is not reducible to, coercion. Insofar as self-interest leads us to form political communities, Aristotle does not reject it as unnatural but instead encourages statesmen to be realistic about the way it limits what good government can do and how it can be done. By indicating the limits of politics alongside its satisfactions, he addresses himself to statesmen who are neither “utopians” nor “nihilists” (1983, 206).

The Practicality of Political Science

In her second publication on Aristotle’s political science, Zuckert summarizes the advice that Aristotle gives to such statesmen, arguing that Aristotle’s “emphasis on the value or virtue of moderation” makes his political science “explicitly ‘activist’ but emphatically nonrevolutionary” (1992, 144). Because political communities are “essentially pluralistic,” and because those groups who contribute to the city deserve recognition, the fundamental political question of “who should rule” can “only be answered in light of the particular circumstances” of a given political community (1992, 145-7). Aristotle thus seeks only to outline “the relevant, unfortunately sometimes conflicting considerations” a prudent statesman must know (1992, 146). Aristotle’s delineation of these contributions—including the dialectical encounter between oligarchic and democratic partisans in Book III of the *Politics*—is “a model of political deliberation” (1992, 147).

Unlike what is done in speech in the *Republic* or in deed in the *Laws*, Aristotle argues that most statesmen will be responsible for reforming, rather than founding, regimes and so the core of his political science is understanding how to improve and thus stabilize existing regimes. Doing so requires understanding regimes not on the basis of their number and end, as Book III

suggested, but on the basis of the variety and strength of the various parts within it (1992, 147). This understanding allows a better knowledge of the varieties of regimes than his Platonic predecessors—Zuckert refers to Socrates and the Eleatic Stranger—or modern political theorists or even contemporary political scientists (1992, 148). Aristotle insists on looking behind the particular institutions of a regime to the “understanding of the good life or of living well” that animates the regime (1992, 149). The laws of most regimes will always be tilted in favor of the “strongest or dominant” part of the city, or else they will be neither enforced nor followed. However, insofar as laws that reflect partial justice and partial reason restrain bad rulers more than no law at all, Aristotle emphasizes that “an important, arguably the most important, criterion” by which to distinguish regimes is the presence or absence of law (1992, 149-50).

What Aristotle aims to show rulers is that by moderating, “either by circumstance or through legislation,” the “partial notion of justice” that underlies their laws, they actually act in their own self-interest (1992, 150). Most regimes are distinguished by the “economic function or occupation” of the rulers, especially insofar as this trait often affects whether the regime is ruled by law or decree. Regimes in which the citizens are dispersed and property divided equally will result in a “middling, dominantly agricultural” community in which “the law will rule” and stability will follow (1992, 152). As economic and political power become concentrated, however, oligarchies and democracies become more extreme and “inherently unstable.” Understanding the intersection of economic and political activity thus enables us to understand the varieties of oligarchies and democracies and why “some are more stable than others” (1992, 153).

More important, it is only by understanding these economic factors that political scientists can “show legislators how to improve most existing regimes” by moving them toward

a mixed regime (1992, 153).¹⁶ Aristotle calls his mixed regime a *polity* insofar as it reflects the “different functions, contributions, and sharing in political office or honors” necessary to all political communities (1992, 153). Polities foster “sharing of political power by the stronger party with the less powerful” and are thus more stable, insofar as they prevent oppression by one class, as well as “more just” because they better reflect the various contributions to the city (1992, 154). Their success, however, depends not only on institutional arrangements but also on having a large middle class. The political benefits of the middle class reflect their “particular economic situation” more than “virtue,” as they are neither hubristic nor envious (1992, 154).

Aristotle does not, according to Zuckert, “expect most regimes or laws to aim explicitly at forming the character of citizens or at making them excellent people,” although a prudent “combination of economic circumstances and legislation” can “indirectly” achieve “some of the same results” (1992, 155). Prudence will have “real political effects” by fostering the growth and incorporation of the middle class (1992, 156). In a similar way, although rulers will rarely act moderately to preserve their rule, legislators can require them “to recognize the interests and contributions of other classes in order to obtain office.” This is a kind of “moral education” of rulers, although it “proceeds implicitly, through experience, more than explicitly by precept” (1992, 156). Such a regime is “nonoppressive” rather than “virtuous,” as it avoids the tyranny of one class by giving “implicit if not express recognition” to the various parts of the city (1992, 157, 159).

Zuckert emphasizes that the “major advantage” of Aristotle’s political science is “probably that it is nonideological” in not providing a universal answer to the question of who

¹⁶ In her recent book on Machiavelli, Zuckert highlights in the *Florentine Histories* the difficulties that arose when the “‘men of the middle’ . . . did not know how to design institutions” that would “satisfy the opposed interests” of the classes (2017, 394).

should rule (1992, 161). That answer depends upon facts and circumstances that can only be ascertained in particular cases. He offers instead a framework for considering “the interaction of the several components” that are found in every regime (1992, 161-2). Unlike modern political science, which tries to re-found rather than reform political communities, Aristotle’s political science is aware of the limited extent to which justice can be practiced in politics (1992, 165).

In short, Aristotle, as presented by Zuckert in these two publications, is deeply skeptical of the possibility of perfectly just political communities. Rather, he expects the best outcome to be a mixed regime that balances the various parts of a city. Its stability results from its moderation; that moderation, however, is pursued not for its own sake but because it is in the self-interest of the different parts of the city.

Politics and Virtue

In *Plato’s Philosophers*, Zuckert acknowledges that the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* can have “a much greater and more direct effect on politics” than Socrates but contends that this influence cannot last because it lacks a sufficient philosophical basis (2009, 33). Although, like Aristotle, the Athenian emphasizes the importance of learning “from the experience of others” (2009, 140), his efforts for practical political reform ultimately hinge on a knowledge no human being can ever acquire (2009, 829-33). Indeed, it may even be contradictory: “the two kinds of studies or investigations he says are necessary presuppose two incompatible views of the universe,” as the investigation of the heavens emphasizes motion while the unity of virtue presupposes order.” In short, “the ‘truths’ the philosophers would teach are not coherent” (2009, 144-45).

On the basis of Zuckert’s earlier articles, Aristotle’s political science may be of greater use insofar as it does not depend on a controversial account of a cosmos in strife (1992, 165; cf.

2009, 855 n18). This is, after all, the claim made by Leo Strauss: Aristotle is the founder of political science insofar as he relegates it to the sphere of prudence, rooted in the common sense of the political actor. On this view, Aristotle's political science can remain relevant even as his natural science—perhaps his Timaeian philosophy—is no longer tenable (1964, 21-25; cf. 1953, 8).¹⁷ However, Zuckert's recent articles on the ongoing interest in Aristotle's virtue ethics indicate a slightly different approach. Drawing on the conclusions of her earlier work—that Aristotle's political science works indirectly to moderate the activity of partisans rather than directly to moderate the partisans themselves—she contends that contemporary attempts to recover Aristotle's virtue ethics are incomplete insofar as they pay insufficient attention to the non-political possibilities of virtue ethics. Aristotle remains relevant not because he avoids the problems of a teleological cosmology that plague the Athenian Stranger but because of the limited expectations he has for political regimes. Political life is not going to be characterized by the pursuit of ethical, much less intellectual, excellence; to the extent that such excellence is acquired, it will be through private, rather than political, means.¹⁸

In emphasizing the non-political acquisition of virtue, Aristotle seems to have more in common with Plato's Socrates than his Athenian Stranger. Although contemporary liberal regimes offer no authoritative view of the good and offer very few people the opportunity for participating in political deliberation, Aristotle nevertheless has something to teach us about “the character and preconditions of morality” precisely because of his realistic expectations for political life (2014, 89).¹⁹ Echoing her earlier articles, Zuckert observes that the best regime

¹⁷ See Zuckert and Zuckert 2015, 144-66.

¹⁸ In her conclusion, Zuckert notes that the political superiority of the Athenian to Socrates is less than it may seem, as he relies on “the force of the laws” to bring people to virtue. Even the Socratic dialogues written by Plato, and others, were not required to be read by law (2009, 830).

¹⁹ Zuckert endorses Aristotle's contemporary relevance in her own name: “this author” (2014, 89).

generally possible for Aristotle is a polity that reflects a compromise between oligarchy and democracy in order to “approximate the common good” (2014, 89). Yet precisely because it is a compromise, there will be “no explicit or intentional moral education undertaken by the government or the regime as such” (2014, 89). Modern democracies ruled by majorities who value the goods of mere life are unlikely to cultivate human excellence, and even in better regimes, Aristotle’s preference for a regime ruled by law limits the development of prudence and its use (2014, 89-90, cf. 1983, 202).

Aristotle himself, though, is an indication that even those who lack political power can “educate citizens and legislators” through speech and through writing (2014, 90). This is true of “novelists and playwrights” as well as philosophers like Nussbaum, MacIntyre, Rasmussen and Den Uyl (2014, 90). Much like the way Aristotle’s political science proceeds on the basis of experience, Zuckert ascribes the enduring interest in virtue ethics to way that most people can experience and understand “what it means to be a good person” through “examples drawn from history, literature, and film” (2014, 91). Such examples do not rely, any more than does Aristotle’s advice to rulers, on an “extraordinary education” or “rigorous investigations” of “human flourishing” (2014, 91).

These examples do need to be shown, however. In concluding her article on Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Zuckert thus emphasizes the role played by educators in reminding students about “the importance of practical wisdom and developing a good character” (2014, 91). She concludes that on Aristotle’s terms “virtue is virtue only when it is chosen for its own sake” (2014, 91), and this reflects the views of both the Athenian Stranger and Socrates: “no one is or can be truly virtuous without choosing to be so” (2009, 830). On her reading, however, the means Aristotle recommends for becoming virtuous have more in common with those of

Socrates than the Athenian. It is not through public coercion but through private education—friendships, literature—that we become virtuous.

This argument, of course, points us toward Zuckert’s work on politics and literature, discussed below by her husband Michael, but it also returns us to the dialogues of Plato, particularly those featuring Socrates.²⁰ After all, what body of literature investigates what is good for human beings, while emphasizing “the importance of practical wisdom and developing a good character,” if not the Platonic dialogues? Indeed, Zuckert argues, Socrates’ political legacy in the *Menexenus* shows how the portrayal of a city’s history can shape the character and future decisions of its citizens.²¹ Regardless of the actual facts of their history, it matters a great deal whether Athenians understand their city like the Thucydidean Pericles or like Socrates, whether they are encouraged to “undertake revolutionary projects” or to abide by “the old laws” (2009, 817).

Aristotle’s emphasis on the unlikelihood of virtuous regimes and the necessary acceptance of moderate and partially just regimes leads him to have a Socratic skepticism about the extent to which existing regimes will cultivate virtue among their citizens. Like Plato’s Socrates, he envisions virtue arising from the private education of citizens through literature and friendship rather than law. And although he is never as clear as Plato, it is quite plausible that Aristotle, too, thinks of Socrates as an example of such virtue. Much like Socrates—but not Timaeus (2009, 423 n8, 466)—Aristotle places significant emphasis on friendship, to which he devotes more time than any other topic in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.²² Amidst his criticisms of the *Laws* in Book II of the *Politics*, Aristotle praises the “speeches of Socrates”—the very

²⁰ See Zuckert 1981 and 1990.

²¹ She notes, in defense of its authenticity, that Aristotle refers to it twice in the *Rhetoric* (2009, 816).

²² Burger (2008) approaches the *Nicomachean Ethics* as Aristotle’s dialogue with Socrates.

Sōkratikoī logoi discussed above—as “extraordinary . . . sophisticated, original, and searching” (1265a10-13). And even in those troubling passages in the *Metaphysics* that distinguish Plato from Socrates in order to criticize what is often called the theory of the forms, Aristotle observes that it is possible to “become like Socrates” (*Meta.* 991a, 1079b).

On this reading, Aristotle’s political science is effective insofar as it is Socratic. Yet in other works he clearly philosophizes in a Timaeian way, seeking to explain the cosmos. Even if his political science is independent of that cosmology, he presents both kinds of philosophy in his own name. He thus seems to appreciate Socrates’ skepticism about what human beings can know, a limitation illustrated by the encounters Socrates has with Plato’s other philosophers. It is only by understanding the challenges to Socratic philosophy that we fully appreciate the nature, and the advantages, of Socratic philosophy—that is, why Plato made Socrates his hero. I wonder, though, whether Socrates or Plato would be Zuckert’s hero, for the heroism of Socrates is made clear to us only through the Platonic meta-dialogue to which *Plato’s Philosophers* is such a magnificent guide.

Works Cited

- Adler, Mortimer. 1988. *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*. New York: Macmillan.
- Aristotle. 1999. *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press.
- Aristotle. 2002. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport, MA: Focus.
- Aristotle. 2013. *Aristotle's Politics*. Trans. Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed.
- Burger, Ronna. 2008. *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Clay, Diskin. 1994 "The Origins of the Socratic Dialogue." *The Socratic Movement*. Ed. Paul A. Vander Waerdt. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 23-47.
- Cooper, John M., ed. 1997. *Plato: Collected Works*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 3rd ed.
- Masters, Roger D. 1979. "On Chroust: A Reply." *Political Theory* 7 (4): 545-47.
- Nicgorski, Walter. 2016. *Cicero's Skepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reydams-Schils, Gretchen. 2002. "Introduction." In *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1953. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1964. *The City and Man*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, Leo. 1987. "Plato." In *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, pp. 33-89. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 3rd ed.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. [1929] 1978. *Process and Reality*. Eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 1981. "On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers." *Journal of Politics* 43 (3): 683-706.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 1983. "Aristotle on the Limits and Satisfactions of Political Life." *Interpretation* 11 (2): 185-206.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 1990. *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 1992. "Aristotle's Practical Political Science," in *Politikos II: Educating the Ambitious* (Pittsburgh, PA: Dusquesne University Press), 144-65.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 2009. *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 2013. "Do Virtue Ethics Require Virtue Politics?" *Hungarian Philosophical Review*: 95-108.
- Zuckert, Catherine H. 2014. "Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and Modern Liberal Democracy." *Review of Metaphysics* 68 (September): 61-91.

Zuckert, Catherine H. 2017. *Machiavelli's Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Zuckert, Michael and Catherine. 2015. *Leo Strauss and the Problems of Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.