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MEASURE AND THE ARTS IN PLATO'S *STATESMAN*\*

The section on measure in Plato's *Statesman* has given rise to a large and sometimes strange literature.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have seen in it an unnecessary detour in the argument of the dialogue, a personal riposte by Plato to his critics concerning the length of the section on weaving;<sup>2</sup> a foreshadowing of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean;<sup>3</sup> a teaching completely different from Aristotle's;<sup>4</sup> or even the key to the whole dialogue, given its central location.<sup>5</sup> Great amounts of energy have been expended connecting various pronouncements of the Eleatic Stranger (Plato's philosophical spokesman in the dialogue) with various supposed unwritten doctrines of Plato. In sum, scholarly consensus on its meaning has proven elusive.

In this paper, I propose an interpretation of the basic argument of the section on measure that attempts to bring out its plain meaning. My purpose is not to draw out the connections of this section with the rest of the dialogue (except incidentally), or to connect its arguments with other Platonic positions (written or unwritten), but merely to clarify the sense of an opaque passage. It is my contention that Plato's argument is in fact both less obscure and more philosophically interesting than a variety of commentators have made it seem.

I argue that the two types of measure of which the Eleatic Stranger speaks are not specifically Platonic concepts depending on obscure and unacceptable Platonic doctrines, but (sometimes opaquely expressed) formulations of a real insight into the way in which we measure things. This insight is then developed by the Stranger into a claim about the dependence of all human know-how on the possibility of measuring things in a specific way, namely, according to what he sometimes calls the "mean." I attempt to show below that this claim rests on certain presuppositions regarding the regularity of nature, but that it is *not* connected to any specifically teleological conception of nature, and in particular that the mean is not itself the good.

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\* I wish to thank Catherine Zuckert, Kenneth Sayre, and the anonymous reviewers for this journal for their generous comments and criticism.

<sup>1</sup> See, for a critical account of some of the more bizarre interpretations of the section on measure, Yvon Lafrance, "Métrétique, mathématiques et dialectique en *Politique* 283c-285c," in *Reading the Statesman: Proceedings of the III. Symposium Platonicum*, ed. Christopher Rowe (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1995). A very careful reading of this section, from which I nevertheless sometimes differ, is Kenneth Sayre, "Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C," *Plato: The Internet Journal of the International Plato Society* 5 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hamilton and Cairns's prefatory notes to Skemp's translation of the *Statesman* in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues: Including the Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961) p. 1018, as well as Julia Annas and Robin Waterfield, *Plato: Statesman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 47, note 45. Cf. also Michael S. Kochin, "Plato's Eleatic and Athenian Sciences of Politics," *The Review of Politics* 61, no. 1 (1999): p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., A. E. Taylor, *Plato: the Sophist and the Statesman*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Elizabeth Anscombe (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1961; reprint, 1971, Barnes and Noble, New York) p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Statesman: the Web of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> See Auguste Diès, *Le Politique*, vol. IX, *Platon Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1935), pp. XLIV-L. For the literal centrality of the section on measure, see Sayre, "Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C," p. 10.

The paper is divided into three sections, which follow the order of the argument of the *Statesman*. First, I discuss the distinction the Stranger makes between the measure of things relative to one another and the measure of things relative to the mean. In the second section, I clarify the relationship between the measurement according to the mean and the arts in the Stranger's argument. Finally, I show how the mean differs from the goals or purposes we pursue through the arts or forms of know-how, including statesmanship. I conclude with some brief general reflections on the implications of the view of measure I take the Stranger to be presenting for the argument of the dialogue as a whole.

### *The two measures*

The Stranger introduces the section on measure as a consideration of “excess and deficiency.” To measure excess and deficiency is, in the Stranger's account, to find a “measure” of the great and the small for a given thing, which in turn allows one to say whether and how something is great or small (in relation to something else). But this, the Stranger argues, can be done in two ways ([283c3-284a5](#)).

In one way we measure “excess and deficiency” by relating the “greater” exclusively to the “smaller” and vice-versa ([283d11-e1](#)). This means that given two objects A and B of some kind (such as two pieces of woolen cloth, for example) we can find some respect (such as length, breadth, or area, all “numerable” dimensions; cf. [284e4-5](#)) such that we can say that A is either greater or smaller than (or equal to) B. B is here the measure of A in that A appears great (or small) *in relation to* B, and vice-versa: hence A and B are measured against each other only ([283e11](#)), regardless of whether the greatness (or smallness) of either is sufficient for anything else. That there is an *art* to this sort of measurement is evident in this example since it is not always immediately clear, given two pieces of woolen cloth of similar dimensions, which one has the bigger surface area. A certain know-how is here necessary to ascertain excess and deficiency, a know-how that may involve (but does not *always* do so) the use of a common measure in the narrow sense (such as the square meter) and the performance of arithmetical calculations that render the two pieces of cloth measurable in the respect of interest (in this case, area).<sup>6</sup> At any rate, the specific procedure which we might use to accomplish this

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rosen, *Plato's Statesman: the Web of Politics*, p. 120. Oddly, Sayre, “Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C,” p. 9, argues that the first sort of measurement cannot be of *specific* quantities (as when we say that Socrates is a foot shorter than Theaetetus), and goes so far as to suggest that these arts of measurements are not really arts at all, but mere guesswork (p. 22). Sayre's argument relies on a peculiar interpretation of ἀριθμός as measure, but seems to be internally contradictory, since it would demand that the art of measurement according to more and less not be an art at all (contrary to the explicit statements of the Stranger), whereas the art of measuring with actual numbers (by correctly judging, for instance, that Socrates is a foot shorter than Theaetetus) must always be an art of measuring according to the mean, even though such “mean” measurement cannot be found in the example. Sayre relies on a specific reading of the *Philebus* for this, but the passages he cites do not support the conclusion that the kind of measurement the Stranger is speaking of here can *never* be numerically precise, only that it sometimes may not be. To use one of Sayre's examples, two armies can indeed be compared to each other “roughly” – without counting

measurement may vary, but the point is clear: such measurement can only tell us that A is bigger (or smaller) than B, never that A is “too small” or “too big” for some X.

In the second way in which we measure excess and deficiency, by contrast, we say that a thing A (such as a piece of cloth) is “too long” or “too short” (or just right) in some respect (such as length, breadth, or area, again), for the production or acquisition of whatever thing or state of affairs X (such as a cloak that can protect a given person in winter), insofar as A falls short or is bigger than the quantity or number C (or range of quantities C) of A’s material in the respect in question (length, breadth, or area, in this instance) that makes X actual. Here A is not measured against any arbitrary thing B, but against that quantity C of something (which may not in fact exist) that actually (and necessarily) produces X. This quantity or number C of G can thus be called the *necessary* quantity or number for the *generation* of X, and hence this sort of measurement can be said to be “*according to the necessary being of the generation* [of something]” (283d8-9). Furthermore, this quantity C (of length, breadth, or area, in this case) is such that we can say that it is “in the middle”: more or less than C means that X fails to be produced or is produced incompletely. C can thus be called the “mean,” τὸ μέτριον (283e11), and this sort of measurement can thus be said to be in respect of C or the mean, πρὸς τὸ μέτριον.<sup>7</sup>

Later, in his formal division of the art of measurement (284e2-8) – an art which would seem to be implicit in all arts, as we shall see below<sup>8</sup> – the Stranger extends his conception of this second sort of measure beyond the mean. He thus speaks not only of τὸ μέτριον, the mean, but also of τὸ πρέπον, the fitting; τὸν καιρὸν, the opportune; τὸ δέον, the necessary; and finally of “everything that is settled away from the extremes into the middle.”

These characterizations of the measure in question are all related, but they nevertheless refer to different things. The mean points to the dimension of quantity (the quantity C of something necessary for producing or acquiring X), the fitting and the

the exact number of soldiers – but they can also be compared “precisely” without for that reason involving the measurement according to the mean.

<sup>7</sup> As Charles L. Griswold Jr., “Politikê Epistêmê in Plato’s *Statesman*,” in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy III: Plato*, ed. John Peter Anton and Anthony Preus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 154-55, notes, the mean is not an idea or form, though he is less than fully clear on why this is the case. In my opinion, the mean is a specific *instance* or range of *instances* of a class G against which a thing at hand is measured. Thus the “mean” against which temperature for human beings is to be measured is not a class like “the hot” or “the cold” but a specific range of temperatures (the seasons). In this respect there is thus a connection between forms and the mean, as Mitchell Miller Jr. argues in a forthcoming work; for “the seasons” are *mixtures* of the limited and the unlimited, and are thus form *in* the formless. In other words, forms determine *which* instances of the continuum of temperatures are in fact productive of a thing X. See also Sayre, “Excess and Deficiency at *Statesman* 283C-285C,” who connects the idea of measure to the discussion of limit and the unlimited in the *Philebus*.

<sup>8</sup> Sayre, “Excess and Deficiency at *Statesman* 283C-285C,” pp. 21-22, notes that the forms of measure constitute arts separate from the arts that actually produce good things (p. 22), though he does not specify their exact relation. While I am willing to admit that the arts of measure are analytically different from the productive arts, I would suggest that they are like carding and spinning to weaving, i.e., subordinate parts of other arts. (Though in some circumstances they may be developed independently: the critic may be able to measure the beauty of a work of art better than the artist, for example).

necessary to the idea of things that *belong together* (the thing C without which X cannot be produced or acquired perfectly or even at all), and the opportune to the dimension of *time* (the time T at which some specific action must be done so as to produce or acquire X).<sup>9</sup> The final description, everything that is settled away from the extremes and towards the center (a description that is the very center of the dialogue, incidentally) describes a general characteristic of all these measures, namely, that they *define* what the “center” and the “extremes” are. To measure against these “means” thus means to evaluate the length or quantity, completeness, timing, and causal power of a thing against that length or quantity (τὸ μέτριον), completeness (τὸ πρέπον), timing (τὸν καιρόν), and causal power (τὸ δέον) that would in fact produce or acquire X.

Note that these are not measures of *quality*, a common misconception,<sup>10</sup> and in fact they are not even necessarily non-mathematical measures. The weaver (to take the example that motivates the digression on measure) does not measure the amount of wool he has against any random amount of woolen cloth, but against that amount of wool that would be required to create a ἱμάτιον that actually protects a man from the harshness of the weather; and such an amount can often be quantitatively determined. In order to create a good cloak for somebody, the weaver must know *how much* wool he needs, i.e., how much wool is neither too much nor too little if the cloak is to fulfill its function in a particular case; and in actually carrying out this sort of measurement, he must determine whether any particular piece of wool is bigger or smaller than the “standard,” i.e., he must carry out a measurement of the first kind as well. The second kind of measurement may thus (but need not) include the first kind.

Note also that these measures are not *purposes* (or ways of determining a purpose): the quantity of cloth that actually produces a good cloak is not the purpose of the weaver, nor does it help the weaver decide whether or not to produce a good cloak; it is not even a definition of a good cloak. Nevertheless, such measures are nevertheless involved in *all* purposive activity insofar as they allow us to calibrate means to ends, and hence in all *moral* activity, as the Stranger makes clear (283e6). Insofar as the good is an *end*, therefore, being a good or a bad person involves a measurement of one’s activity against that activity that would bring about good things in one’s circumstances. It is thus correct to understand this sort of measure as involved in purposive activity, but incorrect to understand it as a way of *determining* the good except insofar as it determines what actions or things bring about states of affairs that can be said to be good, or, in shorthand, insofar as it helps bring about the good in concrete instances. The mean is not itself the good, but that particular thing C that is required to bring about a concrete good thing in

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<sup>9</sup> For a full defense of the temporality of the καιρός see Melissa Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato’s Statesman* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 132-36. For a contrasting view see Alonso Tordesillas, “Le point culminant de la métrétique,” in *Reading the Statesman: Proceedings of the III. Symposium Platonicum*, ed. Christopher Rowe (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1995), pp. 106-07. Tordesillas notes an interesting etymological connection of καιρός with weaving on p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Diès, *Le Politique*, p. xi for this error. Sayre, “Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C,” p. 23, notes also that the second sort of measurement cannot correspond merely to quality, though it may.

concrete circumstances.<sup>11</sup> More generally stated, the point is that the measure of the mean “mediates” between the general knowledge of the good and the particular demands of a situation – as the argument of the dialogue demands of the statesman (cf. [294a4-b6](#), [295b1-5](#)). We will return to this point in the next section.

### *The measure of the mean and the τέχνη*

The Stranger claims that not only is the mean involved in all purposive activity, but indeed that all human know-how – all the arts – exists as know-how only insofar as the kind of measurement he has just described (measurement “against the mean”) also exists ([284a5-b2](#)). Their inquiry itself, he claims, would be fruitless should this sort of measurement not exist ([284b4-5](#)), since statesmanship (which is an art) would be impossible. So they “must compel the existence of a measure in relation to the generation of the mean” ([284b7-c4](#)).<sup>12</sup> Yet he claims that the *testimonia* of the τέχνη themselves is at this point and for their purposes sufficient to guarantee that such a form of measurement exists ([284d2-d9](#)). In other words, the dependence of τέχνη and this sort of measurement is mutual: if one exists, the other does, and *vice versa*.

Note that the Stranger does not show that any particular art exists (and hence that any particular variety of measurement of the mean exists), only that some arts exist, and hence that some forms of measurement of the mean (some arts of measurement) exist. Yet it is not entirely clear why all forms of human know-how must be connected to the existence of measurement “against the mean.” Why is this sort of measurement connected to the τέχνη?

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<sup>11</sup> I thus take it that the “mean” as the Stranger describes it is *not* the Aristotelian mean, *pace* the majority of scholarly opinion (see, e.g., Taylor, *Plato: the Sophist and the Statesman* p. 221), though they are related concepts. The Aristotelian mean *defines* a virtue, whereas the Stranger’s mean merely determines that thing necessary to produce a state of affairs X. This means that if X is good then the mean *is* a virtue, but it does not *define* it antecedently. To be sure, the Stranger does say that “the good and the bad” differ most of all in the bringing about of the nature of the mean ([283e3-6](#)), but this means only that the good are those who are most able to find out the right measure of things that bring about the good in concrete circumstances: the good measure correctly, the bad incorrectly, to put the point briefly. Rosen, *Plato’s Statesman: the Web of Politics*, p. 127 thus goes too far in thinking that the Stranger is confusing technical efficacy and moral virtue.

<sup>12</sup> This is yet a third formulation of the sort of measure of which he is speaking, and perhaps the most controversial one. The problem centers on what is meant by saying “the genesis of the mean,” i.e., whether it means that the mean itself or a thing that embodies the mean is brought into being, and what measuring against such a standard would mean. See Sayre, “Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C,” pp. 6, 19 for some useful discussion. I do not think this formulation substantially modifies my interpretation of the sort of measure the Stranger is talking about; in fact, if we take that quantity C of G that makes X possible to be the mean, then to measure A or B against C is to measure them against that quantity of G that must be generated or brought into being if X is *also* to be brought into being. Hence A or B are measured not against C “abstractly” but against the coming into being of C, which would ensure the desired effect X.

Since the τέχνηαι are the forms of human know-how,<sup>13</sup> to have a τέχνηη is to know how to reliably produce or acquire (cf. *Sophist* [219d1-3](#)) some X in some restricted field of human endeavor, and this implies being able to determine what quantity or number or kind of a certain thing A reliably produces or acquires X under any given circumstances. Thus the doctor must know the proper dosage of a drug to cure a disease for a given person of a certain size and age, and the shoemaker must know how much leather he needs to use to create shoes that are comfortable and durable for a given person of a certain size, among other things. Should this sort of measurement not exist at all, all the τέχνηαι would be no more than experienced guesswork, precisely the situation of cookery and rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (cf. *Gorgias* [463a6ff](#)).

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates claims that cookery, cosmetics, sophistry and rhetoric are not really arts, but forms of “flattery” that achieve their effects by means of perceptual “guesswork” rather than knowledge ([464c5-7](#)). These knacks “imitate” the real arts of medicine, gymnastics, legislation, and justice in that they claim to reliably provide good things, but in fact fail to do so, since, according to Socrates ([465a2-7](#)), they have no account of the cause (τὴν αἰτίαν) of the things they bring about. In the Stranger’s terms, this means that these knacks have no way of *measuring* the right amount of those things whose coming into being is the cause of the effects that the arts bring about: their production of effects is haphazard, though not altogether random.

The cook cannot know in advance, for example, given a person of some size or age, how much sugar will be necessary to give that person pleasure. Experience can make cooks learn to please particular people, and even large classes of people, but they cannot reliably produce pleasure by their art. To say that this sort of measurement does not exist in any given area, in other words, is thus to say that there is no reliable way of determining what quantity or number of C of something produces or acquires X in any given situation, and thus whether or not quantity or number A of something, which is at hand, is in fact too much or too little for producing or acquiring X.

To be sure, in the *Gorgias* Socrates also contrasts the arts and the ἐμπειρία partly on the basis that the former aim at the good and the latter aim at pleasure, which might suggest that “measure” is always related to the good (assuming that the views expressed by Socrates in that dialogue are identical to the views expressed by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*). But in the *Statesman* the Stranger accepts the possibility that the “measure of the mean” might be used in an effort to determine if a given speech will produce pleasure or not, and more generally that a sophistical rhetoric might be an art, if not precisely a good art (cf. *Sophist* [221d1-6](#), *Statesman* [286d4ff](#)). Thus, in contrast to Socrates in the *Gorgias*, the Stranger believes that an art remains an art even if it does not aim at the good strictly speaking;<sup>14</sup> and while Socrates demands that an art be able to give

<sup>13</sup> For a different account of the mutual dependence of the arts and the mean, see Sayre, “Excess and Deficiency at Statesman 283C-285C,” pp. 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> The contrast between the (apparent) position of Socrates in the *Gorgias* and the position of the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist* on the “technical” status of pure sophistical rhetoric has often been noted; see, for example, Annas and Waterfield, *Plato: Statesman*, p. 75, note 73. Consideration of the art of measuring pleasure in the *Protagoras* would complicate the picture, however, suggesting that Socrates and the Eleatic



an account of the causes of its effects (a somewhat vague demand left unexplored in the *Gorgias*), the Eleatic substitutes the more precise demand that arts should be able to say *how much* of X or Y actually causes the desired effect.

To admit the possibility of this form of measurement *in general* is to admit that nature is normally regular in its causal relations; and this means that the τέχνηαι are only possible if nature is reliably regular in its productive aspect. Whether or not nature is actually regular is nevertheless an open question, something implicitly acknowledged by the Stranger in saying (284a8-b1) that the τέχνηαι preserve the mean only with difficulty, though he implies that they do preserve it, i.e., that the determination of the more and the less than the mean is not something impossible (as it would be if nature were completely irregular) but only difficult. Showing that this kind of measurement according to the mean does exist, therefore, requires more than pointing to the empirically existing arts, which do not always “preserve” this mean, since they are not always sharply distinguishable from guesswork (cf. *Philebus* 61d7ff). A consideration of “the precise itself” (i.e., of the limits of measurement, and hence of art) is thus necessary, a demonstration which the Stranger says would be longer than the demonstration of non-being in the *Sophist* (284c7-d2).<sup>15, 16</sup> At best, the myth of the *Statesman* suggests (in a playful, not strictly “precise” way) that the world we live in moves toward the “sea of dissimilarity” (273d6-e1) but is not quite “there” yet, and so perhaps we can say that nature is neither wholly regular nor wholly irregular in its causal relations.<sup>17</sup>

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are not always as far apart on whether arts that aim at pleasure are really arts *strictu sensu*. For a discussion of the art of measuring pleasure in the *Protagoras*, see Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 4.

<sup>15</sup> I thus do not believe that “the precise itself” should be identified with the good, though of course they may be related. Jacob Klein, *Plato’s Trilogy: Theaetetus, the Sophist, and the Statesman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) pp. 174-75 argues that the good and the precise itself are the same thing, and he provides a way of seeing this; but I think one need *not* identify the precise itself with the good to see the Stranger’s point. At any rate the *mean* is not to be identified with the good, as Kenneth Dorter, *Form and good in Plato’s Eleatic Dialogues: the Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) p. 204 observes, since it is dependent on the τέχνηαι, i.e., on production in the broadest sense.

<sup>16</sup> As Lane, *Method and Politics in Plato’s Statesman* pp. 129-30, notes, the Stranger applies a form of “meta-measurement” here, contrasting the sufficient with the precise itself, and thus the τέχνηαι as they really are (ultimately devoid of full precision) with philosophy. For a contrary view, see again Tordesillas, “Le point culminant de la métrétique,” who believes that all of these measures must be independent of chance and the disorder of the cosmos. But that is precisely what the myth of the *Statesman* shows cannot be the case entirely, since the cosmos in this age of Zeus is *not* devoid of chance and disorder. Jacob Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates’ Philosophic Trial* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998) p. 271 seems to go too far in the other direction claiming that the mean is restricted to τέχνη rather than ἐπιστήμη, and can never be known scientifically but only by way of familiarity. I do not think this is necessarily the case, since I think knowledge of the mean is bound up with knowledge of the productive regularity of nature in some field of human endeavor, though it is not necessarily a matter of knowing *rules*. It is true that the mean in any given circumstance is not known “scientifically, after the manner of unchanging beings,” but it is also not known by mere experience. There is a distinction between the cook and the shoemaker or the farmer.

<sup>17</sup> The *Timaeus* suggests a similar understanding of the causal regularity of nature, as the efforts of the demiurge to impose order and measure on matter are never wholly successful.



We should note here, in passing, that the Stranger's account of the relationship between the τέχνη and the mean does *not* depend on a teleological conception of nature, even if it does not exclude it either. The sort of measurement that makes the τέχνη possible remains possible even if all possible human goals are arbitrary, so long as in its productive aspect nature remains regular and thus technically measurable. His conception of a measure of the mean thus opens the way to the modern conception of technology insofar as it conceives of nature as measurable in its productive aspect.<sup>18</sup>

At any rate, the difficulty of the sort of measurement the Stranger has described, shown in the drama of the dialogue by the errors that they committed throughout their discussion (which is always too long or too short for young Socrates), makes it clear that all τέχνη is a fragile achievement, statesmanship perhaps more so than any other.<sup>19</sup> If young Socrates can see this, he will indeed have understood something about statesmanship and about art in general, and will be less willing to believe that his own art, mathematics, which seems more precise than all other arts, gives him any sort of immunity from this human predicament.

### *The goals against which things are to be measured*

Thus far we have seen how the Stranger describes the necessary art of measurement for the production or acquisition of things, but we have not seen how this art of measurement actually relates to purposes worth pursuing, i.e., to the good properly speaking. We have not seen, in other words, in relation to the production or acquisition of *what* state of affairs should the art of measurement be employed. In the particular context of the digression on measure, this means that from what the Stranger has said it would be possible to apply the art of measurement to the Stranger's speeches and find out that they have been *too long* for the production of pleasure or for the presentation of the account of the weaver. But this would be the wrong "mean" to apply. The "means" (pun intended) have been discussed; now the ends against which the measurement is to be carried out must be discussed, if briefly. This the Stranger proceeds to do in the last part of the section on measure ([285c4ff](#)).

In order to present the ends against which measurement is to be carried out, the Stranger asks young Socrates ([285c8-d3](#)) whether those learning about letters are supposed to consider a problem about the letters of a specific word (ὄνομα) more in order to learn the letters of *that* specific word or in order to become more expert about

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<sup>18</sup> Thus Rosen, *Plato's Statesman: the Web of Politics* p. 4: "The Stranger is a man of τέχνη in an extended sense as Socrates is not." The Socrates of the *Republic*, of course, has a teleological conception of nature.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Klein, *Plato's Trilogy: Theaetetus, the Sophist, and the Statesman*, p. 161: "*Why is there so much stress on faultiness and inaccuracy in the drama of the dialogue? Is it not because the theme of statesmanship requires it? There is nothing that imposes a greater burden on human lives than faulty statesmanship, and no greater fault than that which occurs in governing states. The marked faultiness in speech seems to correspond to the weighty faultiness in deed*" (italics in the original).

letters in general, and thus to be able to spell all sorts of words.<sup>20</sup> Young Socrates of course answers that learners tackle such problems for the sake of learning about letters generally; learning about one thing is not yet knowledge, as was already clear in the section on paradigm ([277d1-279a6](#)), but merely a part of a practice that leads eventually, and after much effort, to τέχνη or ἐπιστήμη, i.e., to *know-how* rather than to mere *knowledge-that*.<sup>21</sup>

Tackling a particular spelling problem thus makes sense mostly in the context of a *practice* in spelling that will allow one eventually to read and thus to learn about other things, not just about words. The Stranger therefore poses the question more generally. Is the search for the statesman *more*<sup>22</sup> for its own sake or [more] for the sake of becoming more expert about the eidetic structure of all things, i.e., becoming *περὶ πάντα διαλεκτικώτεροις* ([285d5-7](#))? Clearly, young Socrates answers, it is for the sake of learning about the eidetic structure of all things. Hence, *a fortiori*, the Stranger points out, learning about weaving is not for its own sake ([285d9-10](#)).

This does not mean, however, that learning about the statesman is without value. The argument of the Stranger clearly implies a hierarchy of things to be learned, at the bottom of which are those things that are perceptible or have perceptible likenesses, and at the top of which stand the things that have no such likenesses, and thus require to be shown by means of λόγοι alone. The former are “smaller,” the latter “bigger,” not only in mere size but also in honor ([285d10-286b1](#)).<sup>23</sup>

The Stranger does not tell young Socrates to *what* category the statesman belongs. It is not entirely clear from his language whether the statesman has a clear perceptible likeness (as the facts that he can be shown in part by means of the weaver, and that the statesman has a body, suggest) or not (as the facts that a long argument is necessary to bring him to light, and cannot be simply pointed out, unlike the weaver, and that statesmanship is a bodiless thing, suggest); but it seems plausible to consider the statesman one of the greatest beings.<sup>24</sup> After all, though it has perceptible likenesses, they are not sufficiently clear to bring him to light (cf. ἐναργῶς [286a2](#)), as the drama of the dialogue amply demonstrates, and his *art* certainly does not have a perceptible likeness.

Whatever the case, it is clear that the Stranger considers that the discussion of the statesman, though important in its own right, is subordinated to the task of becoming expert in understanding those things that have no bodies. Abstract knowledge *about*

<sup>20</sup> Note the Stranger’s use of the comparative μᾶλλον, more ([285d1](#)); even if understanding a specific word is not the *whole* point of learning to spell, it is *part* of the point, however small.

<sup>21</sup> To use Ryle’s useful distinction. See Gilbert Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XLVI (1946).

<sup>22</sup> Note again the comparative μᾶλλον at [285d6](#). See note 20.

<sup>23</sup> This passage has been extensively discussed. The *locus classicus* of the discussion is to be found in G. E. L. Owen, “Plato on the Undepictable,” *Phronesis* Supplementary Volume 1 (1973).

<sup>24</sup> Contrary to what Klein, *Plato’s Trilogy: Theaetetus, the Sophist, and the Statesman*, pp. 176-77, seems to imply by suggesting that weaving is the sensible resemblance of statesmanship. But the Stranger speaks of *sufficiently clear* perceptible resemblances, and weaving can hardly be said to be a sufficiently clear resemblance of the statesman.

statesmanship must always constitute a lower form of knowledge than this other expertise, though it is unclear whether this implies that the expertise *of* the statesman (rather than learning *about* the statesman) is also lower than it, especially since it is likely to involve knowledge of such bodiless beings as justice and the good. I would think that it is not – indeed, that statesmanship must be at least close to the highest form of human wisdom; but it must be acknowledged that the Stranger is not unambiguous about its worth here.

This discussion thus provides the Stranger and young Socrates the standard against which to evaluate (measure) their own speech, and indeed all speeches. The Stranger argues that they should measure the speech about weaving not so much insofar as it gives an account of weaving, or insofar as it gives one pleasure, or even (except secondarily) insofar as it helps them understand the statesman, but insofar as it helps them (primarily young Socrates and us, the listeners) more able to find out (εὐρετικώτερον [286e2](#)), more able to “read” the eidetic structure of the whole ([286b3-287a7](#)), more “philosophical” (a word the Stranger does not use), not more expert in pleasure or in weaving. The speech is a training in philosophy, not in politics, nor an entertainment, and its length should be measured accordingly. The pursuit of knowledge, and in particular of knowledge of the highest beings, should thus provide the “mean” against which the measurement of the speech is to be carried out, rather than the pursuit of pleasure or the pursuit of knowledge about weaving. But the point should be stressed: a variety of goals imply a variety of means, and the determination of which mean to choose for the purposes of measurement depends on the *antecedent* determination of the value of the goals being pursued, a determination that is *not* dependent on measurement according to the mean except insofar as all goals can be ranked according to how much (or how little) they bring about the good in a human life.

The Stranger leaves open the question of whether he has succeeded, challenging us to find a shorter way of training young Socrates in philosophy ([286e4-287a7](#)). He does *not* actually carry out the measurement of the speech in terms of how well its length, parts, timing, and causal power accomplish young Socrates’ (or our own) training in philosophy; that is left for us to do.

### *Concluding Reflections*

If the view of the “measure of the mean” I have sketched here is correct, we can then see how it plays a key role in the description of the statesman’s knowledge in the dialogue. For the statesman’s art of measure, and the notion of the measure of the mean itself, “mediate” between the statesman’s general knowledge of justice and the good (presumably, though this is not entirely clear in the dialogue, knowledge of the *forms* of the good, the just, and the noble) and the required *particularity* of his judgment (cf. [294a4-b6](#), [295b1-5](#)).

What the statesman’s art must do is produce a well-ordered *polis* by means of particular actions. The problem then hinges not on the statesman’s knowledge of right

order (which is assumed) but on his ability to gauge whether any *particular* course of action will lead to the right outcome for the *polis*. But since any course of action is in principle compatible with some set of circumstances (as the argument on the inferiority of law to statesmanship shows), the problem turns on whether any given course of action is appropriate *right now*. The statesman, in other words, must be able to measure *when* a given action X should be undertaken so as to produce the right outcome for the *polis*, since doing X at the wrong time (too early or too late) would frustrate his purpose. He must thus know the right time, the *καιρός* (cf. [284e2-8](#)) for the greatest actions in the city ([305d1-5](#)); and it is by finding this measure of each of these actions in relation to the good of the city that his rule can be called knowledgeable.

This is particularly evident in the discussion of the two types of “virtue” and the statesman’s educational task at the end of the dialogue. The courageous and the moderate dispositions differ basically in their evaluation of the right time of actions: thus, the moderate think appeasement is always appropriate now, even when it is not, while attack is appropriate only “later” or never. The courageous, by contrast, think attack is always appropriate now, even when it is not, while appeasement and negotiation are appropriate only later or never ([307e1ff](#)). A true statesman would be able to measure the right time for either appeasement or attack, and thus determine whether the one or the other is called for in the specific circumstances; but normal human dispositions are not up to the task, since they are systematically *biased* in one direction or another. Most people, in other words, cannot measure appropriately whether any given course of action will promote the good of the city or not, and so it is the task of the statesman to at least alleviate this bias through education, even if he cannot entirely eradicate it. Education properly, including civic education, is thus partly a training in measurement; and the dialogue shows through its dramatic errors and *longeurs* how difficult an achievement this is.

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