Plato and the Idea of Political Office

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Introduction

Earlier this year in Buckinghamshire, on 20 May, the incoming mayor of High Wycombe (Bucks) was 'weighed in' on ceremonial town scales—and the outgoing mayor was 'tolled out'. As the Bucks Free Press reported, 'the 'mayor making' ceremony was first held in 1678 to measure whether local officials had 'gotten fat' over the past year at the taxpayer's expense', in which case, in the seventeenth century, they might have been 'pelt[ed] with rotten fruit and vegetables'.[1] This is a graphic illustration of the basic idea of political office as requiring accountability: That officeholders should have to render an account of how they've used their powers. The most fundamental question is whether they have used those powers to engorge themselves or to benefit the citizen body.

Giving an account in this context can mean, at a minimum, a financial accounting: Showing that public monies were spent properly and not appropriated privately. But a financial accounting might have to be defended with a reasoned explanation answering complaints, and that battle of claims and counterclaims means that political office will always potentially involve a trial by rhetoric. This is why I have taken political office as the topic of my inaugural lecture tonight as the fiftieth Gresham Professor of Rhetoric, a role which I am profoundly honoured to hold. Two historians have described Gresham College as lying at 'the very centre of the traffic between practice and reflection',[2] and I see rhetoric as a mode of political theorizing in exactly that field, requiring us to move back and forth between political institutions and practices, and thinking about their purposes. So that's what I will be doing tonight, seeking to develop new ideas about politics by reflecting on alternative ways in which one might seek to accomplish the purposes of existing institutions, and arguing that Plato himself did the same, reflecting on ancient Greek practices and developing his radically new ideas about politics through that reflection.

In the context of political office and rule, which in Greek are expressed with the same noun and verb (*archē, archein*) that calls our attention to the relationship between the procedures and institutions of offices (in Greek, the order or *taxis* of offices) and their ultimate purpose (in Greek, their *telos*). A *taxis* is an ordered set of roles and practices through which a *telos* might be achieved. Yet a gap can always arise between them, for three basic reasons: Officials may act incompetently; they may act corruptly; or they may act negligently. In other words: they may not know what to do; they may do the wrong thing to benefit themselves or their mates; or they may fail to do the right thing. While ancient Greek polities were different from those of today in some important ways, I believe that those three basic challenges remain applicable—they remain all too recognizable and common.

So, my plan for tonight is this. To start, I'll outline one elected office in modern Britain, to show how its powers and duties match the framework of *taxis* and *telos* that I've just set out. Then, I'll compare its accountability regimen in particular with those of ancient Greek offices and show how much more demanding were their associated audit procedures. That will lead to the first payoff of the lecture, concluding its first half with a reflection on how procedures of that kind might potentially have helped prevent a recent British political

[1] Eleanor Burleigh, 'High Wycombe mayor and MP Steve Baker weighed at 'mayor making' event', *Bucks Free Press*, 21 May 2023 (https://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/23536779.high-wycombe-mayor-mp-steve-baker-weighed-mayor-making-event, last checked 6 August 2023).
[2] Richard Chartres and David Vermont, *A Brief History of Gresham College 1597-1997* (London: Gresham College, 1997), 10.

trauma – using these reflections to suggest new modes of practice. Then, in the second half, I'll introduce Plato as having done exactly the same thing, in reflecting on both the strengths and weaknesses of the *taxis* of office in his day (the fourth century BCE) and arguing that the proposed political constitution of his dialogue titled the *Republic* was seeking even more robust ways to prevent those same three problems of incompetence, corruption, and negligence. In dreaming of an ideal republic, Plato was not ignoring the fault lines of everyday politics; rather, he was precisely thinking through how at a radical level those fault lines could be addressed. As cracks appear in the foundations of political life in societies today, I hope that reflecting on past practices in Athens and ancient Greece, and past reflections on those practices in Plato, will help elicit a more reflective understanding of the predicaments that we face, and perhaps also some ideas of new practices to try.

Political Office: Definition and Illustration

What do I mean by a political office? Let me define it as a position with a limited set of powers, where the powers typically include the power to issue commands, and the limits typically include term limits, limits on eligibility to serve of other kinds, and accountability mechanisms such as audits. Office lies at the intersection of power and accountability. Or to put it more rhetorically: A political office has an ordered set of powers, including the power to issue orders. Because the powers of any given office must (on this definition) be limited, political offices are typically plural: Multiple offices, each part of an overall constitutional mosaic. (Extra credit for the discussion: On this definition, is a monarchy a political office?)

We can test this definition by focusing on the relatively rare British cases of directly elected executive officeholders: At the level of mayors. I choose Britain as the example as I am giving this lecture here, and of course, there is an elected mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, as well as a Lord Mayor, elected from a more limited franchise of those with certain standing in the City of London; for those who may be watching or listening outside Britain, you can perform a similar test on an officeholder elsewhere, such as the mayor of Boston, Michelle Wu.

In fact, I'm going to take as my main illustration the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who is at present Andy Burnham. So, to Greater Manchester—where the public information about the Mayor's role speaks in terms remarkably similar to the kinds of powers and limits that I have just abstractly described.

Consider this statement from https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/the-mayor/:

> ***'What the Mayor does***
>
> *Accountable to and representing the people of all 10 boroughs in Greater Manchester, Andy steers the work of Greater Manchester's Combined Authority, leading on issues such as the economy, transport, police and fire services, to ensure Greater Manchester is one of the best places in the world.*

There it is Accountability intersecting with powers to command (sometimes requiring consultation and approval):

> *'Andy is able to make some decisions independently, but others involve consultation with, and approval of, all 11 members of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Some decisions need unanimous support, others need a majority.'*

More on the powers, underlining those that are executive in function:

> '*The job of the Mayor ranges from setting budgets and priorities for Greater Manchester's public services to acting as an ambassador for the region.'*
>
> - *He is responsible for the transport budget our region receives from the Government, as well as the future of bus services in Greater Manchester.*

- *The Mayor is the public's voice on policing matters, taking on the responsibilities of the Police and Crime Commissioner.*
- *He makes strategic decisions about the fire service and sets its budget, taking on the responsibilities of the Fire & Rescue Authority.*
- *The Mayor is also responsible for a £300 million housing investment fund and the creation of a spatial framework for the whole of Greater Manchester. The spatial framework must be approved by the 10 councils.'*

And on term limits:

> *'Andy Burnham was elected Mayor of Greater Manchester in May 2017, and was re-elected for a second term in May 2021….'*

In the US, there are more directly elected executive officeholders. Think governors as well as mayors and, of course, the President. Like the Mayor of Greater Manchester, each of these has a limited set of powers and is subject to lots of other limits as well. For example, term limits, both in the sense of the length of a given term, and how many terms one is eligible to serve; limits on how they are chosen for office (electoral districts, thresholds, eligibility).

What about accountability—how is that achieved, given that "Accountable to" is the opening definition of "What the Mayor Does"? If you look again at the website, you'll find various ways in which answerability for the Mayor's actions is imposed:

- '*Oversight Committees:* https://democracy.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/mgListCommittees.aspx?bcr=1
- *Complaints:* https://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/who-we-are/accounts-transparency-and-governance/complaints/
- *Mayor's Question Time*

Starting in June 2017, the Mayor has hosted a question time event, giving local people the opportunity to quiz the mayor about a range of local issues...Mayor's Question Time is now held quarterly across Greater Manchester.

Political Office in Ancient Athens: Accountability and Scrutiny

Question Time sounds like a great initiative of the current Mayor to enhance accountability. But consider an even stronger mechanism of that kind – the annual accountability audits as practised in ancient democratic Athens, known as *euthunai.* The basic institution of the audit was widespread, in oligarchies as well as democracies, though the Athenian version was especially demanding (and I will present it as practised there in the fourth century BCE). In Athens, this kind of audit:

- Had by law to happen at the end of every single officeholder's term (typically one year)
- Required officeholders to account for all public monies they had been charged with spending (the literal meaning of accountability as the settling of financial accounts), as well as to answer any charges or complaints, on any topic, that any citizen might make before specially appointed boards of auditors, who had the duty and power to investigate them and refer if necessary for judicial trial.
- Moreover, the community maintained control over the actions of officials in their private lives until they had passed their audits (and any resulting trial), as the scholar Jennifer Tolbert Roberts has observed, '[o]nly when his *euthunai* was complete...was it legal for a man to set out on a journey, transfer his property to anyone else, be adopted into a different family, or even make a votive offering to a god. In other words, the state had a lien on the property and civic freedom of all officials until their accounts were settled'.[3]

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[3] Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Accountability in Athenian Government* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 18.

- And for those officeholders ultimately found guilty of abuse of power, the penalties could be severe: from fines to exile to death.

This mechanism went far beyond what typical offices require today. An ancient Athenian would say: "Don't rely on occasional media exposés, public inquiries, or even well-meaning voluntary Question Times. Instead, impose regular, retroactive, open, transparent, consequential procedures of accountability on each and every officeholder." By instituting such demanding formal procedures, one could also protect officeholders against trial by the media, which is a danger, especially in the modern age. The more that regular accountability is built into a system, the less the fate of an individual would lie in ad hoc claims and accusations made outside a procedure where there is a chance to answer them. Rhetoric as an institutionalized practice of claim and response builds in more safeguards than rhetoric by hashtag alone – though this can also have its place, especially where formal procedures are lacking or toothless.

So that is an introduction to ancient Athenian offices: which had the answerability to audit built into their core definition. Let me say a bit more about the parallels, and then the differences, between those ancient Greek offices and political offices today. Each Greek officeholder had a defined set of primarily executive powers, in that they could issue commands, impose fines, manage public funds, and supervise public works, as well as (for most Athenian officeholders) a judicial role in presiding over particular kinds of lawsuits in the courts.

In democratic Athens, all of these officeholders, like the Mayor of Greater Manchester, were subject to term limits, eligibility limits (in most cases, they had to be over thirty years of age), and specified selection procedures. Now to be sure, not all those selections were made by election, as in the case of the Mayor of Greater Manchester or most offices today. Instead, about 600 out of 700 of what we might call the executive offices, plus 500 more members of the Council, were chosen by lottery. However, contrary to what is sometimes assumed about ancient Greek politics, about 100 of the Athenian officeholders were elected: all the military officeholders, and some of the highest financial ones.[4]

We might talk more in the question-and-answer period about the significance of the use of the lottery for some of these offices. All Athenian officeholders had also been subject to a prior check before anyone chosen either by lot or by election was allowed to take up any office. This was called *dokimasia*: it was scrutiny to make sure that the candidate chosen was actually a citizen in good standing, for example, that they had paid their taxes and fulfilled all their basic civic duties. it means that the ancients weren't committed to a conception of the lottery on which absolutely anyone who might happen to be selected should be judged as competent or qualified to serve, but rather, imposed a basic competence threshold that was about civic duty. Moreover, all of the officeholders, however selected, were subject to the audits that I have described: individual, annual, and stringent audits.

Ancient and Modern Politics: Differences and Similarities

To be sure, there are some major differences from ancient Greece to modern societies, and I will pause on those for a moment. Ancient Athens was far smaller than most modern states—the number of full male citizens in Athens at its peak was about 30,000, with a total population of about 250,000 including women, children, resident foreigners who were not enslaved, and those who were enslaved—and of course the presence of legalized slavery and its central economic and social role is a profound and crucial difference from then to now. For one thing, slavery underpinned the leisure that allowed even poor Athenians time to attend the assembly and jury courts. Already in 1764, Jean-Jacques Rousseau insisted for this reason that 'Ancient Peoples is no longer a model for modern ones; they are too alien to them in every respect', emphasizing especially the difference between the contemporary immersion in pursuit of economic 'private interests' and the ancients' ability (rooted in their enslavement of others to do the work) to devote their leisure to political life'.[5]

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[4] For a detailed account of Athenian offices in the fourth century BCE, see Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes,* trans. J.A. Crook, 2nd edn (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).
[5] Rousseau, 'Ninth Letter from the Mountain', published in 1764, as translated in Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain, and Related Writings*, edited by Eve Grace and Christopher Kelly,translated by Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (The Collected Writings of Rousseau, Vol. 9; Hanover, NH:

But while Rousseau's point challenges those seeking to recuperate the more participatory parts of ancient Greek politics today, it does not dispute the fact that in antiquity, as in the eighteenth century and still today, some individuals were regularly selected for terms of holding political office—and some of them, even in Athens, were elected to do so. Moreover, another oft-mentioned difference, that ancient societies lacked modern bureaucracies, and that the ancient Greeks did not distinguish between political office and civil service, is similarly not a decisive difference from my point of view tonight. That feature of ancient Greek politics highlights a core commonality between political office and civil service offices, and so between ancient and modern offices of all kinds, that we might otherwise tend to overlook: their shared fundamental role in issuing orders for the good of those being ruled, while being subject to limits on their powers, including being liable to be held to account. In my view, this basic commonality gives strong grounds for considering ancient Athenian and modern democratic offices in tandem, notwithstanding the many and real other differences between their eras.

Ancient Greek Accountability Audits and a Modern British Catastrophe

So, let's see how this Greek-inspired approach to accountability might play out in practice. I want to test its potential bearing on one particular and profoundly painful political catastrophe, the Grenfell Tower disaster in which 72 lives were lost and many more survivors and others lost members of their families, their friends, their homes, and their wider community. The public inquiry is still preparing its final report, but much of its work, including former Prime Minister David Cameron's testimony, is already in the public domain and was presented for example in a recent National Theatre production. To be sure, not all the failings documented by the inquiry so far were those of elected officeholders or those in the civil service whom they oversaw: the inquiry has tracked the choices made by companies as well in putting flammable materials on the building (and other buildings) and failing to publicize tests showing dangerous outcomes of such materials. Nevertheless, let us take up the challenge posed by Stephanie Barwise KC, a barrister for the bereaved and survivors, who said in December 2021: "'Grenfell is a lens through which to see how we are governed'[6]—and do so by putting an ancient Greek filter of accountability over that lens with respect just to the actions of government in the months and years before 14 June 2017.

So: imagine if the elected councillors of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, or the Ministers for the Department for Communities and Local Government, had been subject to a regular, open, transparent, consequential procedure of accountability every year, in which ordinary citizens could have raised questions that had to be addressed, on pain of referral to a court for consideration of malfeasance. The failure of the minister in charge of building regulations in September 2014, Stephen Williams, even to respond to a follow-up letter from Sir David Amess on behalf of an All-Party Parliamentary Group, could have been made public.[7] Had Grenfell been located in an ancient Greek *polis*, every single elected officeholder in the years leading up to the disaster would have had to pass their *euthunai* as an individual. No hiding behind the collective. No right to refuse to respond to ordinary citizens raising challenges: as one tenant is presented as saying in the play *Grenfell: in the words of survivors*:

> *ED [DAFFARN]: They said that we were barraging the council with emails. We were challenging the council, we were trying to hold them to account…We don't have a right to write emails*?[8]

And no right of officeholders to continue in public life if their failings were judged severe.

I hope that you find that idea powerful. In some ways my lecture could stop here: this is already food for thought about offices from ancient Greece—though we could also discuss the dangers of malignant accusations, and the demandingness of officeholding itself, in trying to balance multiple claimants and duties.

University Press of New England, 2001), 292–3; also quoted in Lane, *The Birth of Politics*: Eight Greek and Roman Political Ideas and Why They Matter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6-7 (first published as *Greek and Roman Political Ideas: A Pelican Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 2014)).

[6] Peter Apps, *Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen* (London: Oneworld, 2023), 3.

[7] Peter Apps, *Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen* (London: Oneworld, 2023), 74–75.

[8] Gillian Slovo, *Grenfell: in the words of survivors* (London: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2023), 9.

I don't mean to underestimate those challenges: the point isn't to demonize public officials but to explore ways in which their duties could be differently achieved by embedding them in a more open process of accountability.

So now, in the second half of the lecture, I want to turn to how Plato engaged in his work, the *Republic*, in a very similar kind of process to the one that I've just done: reflecting on the point of political accountability, identifying not only the strengths of the existing Greek *taxis* of office in achieving that underlying *telos* or purpose, but also on its weaknesses and vulnerabilities in doing so, and exploring some new and more radical ways in which the duties of public officials might be differently achieved, by embedding them in a more stringent process of education as well as a more stringent set of constraints on their entitlements.

In other words, if current regimes of political office lack sufficient accountability mechanisms compared to the ancient Athenians, as I've just been arguing, theirs would also appear lacking in certain respects in Plato's eyes, when he considered the point of accountability itself and how reliably it could be achieved. Thus, Plato directs us to return to the question of what the *purpose* (*telos*) of accountability is, namely, to try to keep the use of public power aligned toward (or, one might say, oriented to) the good of the ruled—and to explore how radically imaginative alternatives to existing Greek procedures and institutions of office (their *taxis*) might be other ways to achieve it.

Plato on the Purpose of Political Office

Plato's *Republic* is today the most famous of his writings and the one on which I'll concentrate tonight—though I'd be happy to talk about others of his works, which I read similarly, in the discussion. The *Republic*, like all of his other writings deemed unquestionably authentic, is written in the form of a dialogue, in ten books (like long parts or chapters) in this case led by Socrates and for most of its length portraying a conversation between Socrates and two of Plato's actual brothers. All three of these people (indeed all the characters named in the *Republic*) were based on real people, but for tonight's purposes, I am going to read the *Republic* as Plato's dramatic presentation and as conveying his ideas. The *Republic* is one of two dialogues in which the constitution of an imagined potential city is laid out 'in speech' or 'in words' (though not realised 'in deeds'), and famously, in the *Republic*, this constitution is to be ruled at its pinnacle by philosopher-kings (and philosopher-queens: the case that qualified women should rule equally with men is explicitly made).

In considering the *Republic*, I shall argue that (as highlighted previously), rather than ignoring the problem of accountability, Plato was trying to solve it at its roots.[9] This is my answer to a notorious critique of the *Republic* which was launched during the Second World War by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), vol. 1: *The Spell of Plato*, arguing that Plato was the first totalitarian. Popper claimed that the *Republic* hinges on 'the...general assumption that political power is practically unchecked, or... the demand that it ought to be so', and that Plato had simply ignored the question, '*How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?*'.[10] By contrast, on my reading, the *Republic*—which in Greek is titled *Politeia*, or 'Constitution'—was precisely an attempt to outline a constitutional way of organizing political institutions to prevent incompetent—or corrupt—or negligent—rulers from doing such damage, as I'll argue once I've introduced that constitution in some further detail.

Rulers and Officeholders in the Constitution of Plato's *Republic*

As I said, the *Republic* delineates a constitution in which philosopher-kings, and also philosopher-queens, are to rule. However, many readings of the dialogue have stopped short at this point, assuming, with Popper, that it simply envisages a generalized, absolutist rule, without any constitutional ordering or structure. In contrast, by attending to the ways that Greek vocabulary operated in practice and noting the same patterns in Plato's writing, I have identified specific references to officeholders in the dialogue, and also, to a complex

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[9] The remainder of the lecture draws significantly on Melissa Lane, *Of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).
[10] Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* 2 vols, vol.1: *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963 [first published 1945]), 121, 120-21.

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pattern of rule which Plato may have modelled on another feature of democratic Athens, in which these officeholders are to be supervised by a higher set of rulers whose role is to safeguard the officeholders and keep them oriented to the *telos* of the good of the ruled.

In Athens, the higher rulers were the Areopagus Council, composed of duly selected and tested ex-officeholders. An Assembly decree of 403 BCE stated that the laws were to be 'placed under the caring charge of (*epimeleisthai*)' of the Areopagus Council so that 'the officeholders (*archai*) will use only the laws that have been laid down' (Teisamenos' decree, as reported in Andocides 1.83-84, trans. Lane).[11] The rhetor Isocrates opined that when Athens was well governed in more ancient times, the Areopagus Council had enjoyed the distinctive role of 'caring (*epimeleisthai*) for the good order of the city' (Isocrates 7.39, trans. Lane). In the *Republic*, the higher rulers are the fully-fledged senior philosophers, safeguarding those who hold the offices under them. Let me show you how that works.

First, here are unambiguous references using the plural Greek noun *archai,* or alluding to a standard phrase involving that noun, as established vocabulary for offices and officeholders. First, the *Republic* refers in this way to educational officials:[12]

> *'the officials (archai)…who may be either men or women or both, since these offices (archai) are common to both women and men'* (5.460b6-8, trans. Lane)
>
> *'…those destined to share in the highest offices in the city'* (7.525b10-c1, trans. Lane); this uses in Greek a version of the phrase *hai megistai* [*archai*] which was a standard way of referring to offices)

Here the noun for offices, and officeholders, in the plural, indicates a common structure in Greek vocabulary, which is then alluded to in the second phrase, which indicates (while truncating) a version of the phrase *hai megistai* [*archai*] which was also a standard way of referring to offices.

The dialogue then makes clear that military and other offices are to be held by the trainee philosophers who are aged 35-50:

> *'You must make them go down into the cave again and compel them to exercise <u>rule (archein)</u> in matters of war <u>and such offices (archai)</u> belonging to young people so that they won't be inferior to the others in experience'* (7.539e3-6, trans. Lane)

So, these officeholders are subjected to a kind of term limit (they are only eligible to serve during a certain age period) and are both scrutinized in advance and held accountable after, their period of office. Instead of being performed by randomly selected boards as in the Athenian democracy, however, the functions of scrutiny and accountability are assigned to the senior group of philosophers who have themselves already successfully passed this earlier test. Moreover, the senior philosophers have training in philosophy which is said precisely to have enabled them to perfect 'giving an account' (*logon…didonai*) of the nature of what is good (*Rep.* 534b). So, this is a version of the double structure of safeguarding in Athens: a senior group of ex-officeholders, taking care that those junior to them perform their duties properly. I think of the senior philosophers as engaged in ruling as reigning, taking seriously the description of them as philosopher-queens and -kings, with oversight of their juniors who are engaged in holding what are described in more standard terms as particular 'offices'.

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[11] Robert W. Wallace, 'Councils in Greek Oligarchies and Democracies', in Hans Beck (ed.) *A Companion to Ancient Greek Government* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 191-204, at 200, refers to this decree, and also to the account in Aristotle or Pseudo-Aristotle, *The Constitution of Athens* (4.4) of the archaic Athenian constitution established by Drakon [sometimes transliterated as Draco], according to which the Areopagus Council '"was guardian of the laws, and watched over the *archai* [officeholders] to see that they exercised their *archai* [offices] according to the laws"'.

[12] The Greek is quoted from the Oxford Classical Text (ed. Slings) of Plato's *Republic*,

So how would this constitution cope with the three problems identified above, of preventing potential incompetence, corruption, and negligence? I will consider each of those in turn, each asking the question of 'Who will guard the guardians?' which would later be made proverbial in Latin by the satirical poet Juvenal.

Incompetence

First, incompetence. Neither election nor lottery on the front end of selecting officeholders can guarantee that they will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to do the job. Indeed, in an uncompromising mood, one might say that neither election nor lottery is especially well-designed to do so. That's certainly what Plato's Socrates says about the lottery in some of the Platonic dialogues: that lotteries are culpably indifferent to expertise (though on behalf of Athenian democracy, the classicist Josiah Ober has argued that the very practice of officeholding helped to cultivate the skills and competence needed to do it well).[13] Even elections are not necessarily going to reliably track competence; they are endorsed in certain forms in Plato's *Laws* but only when set in the context of independently generated excellent laws.

Plato's proposal that philosophers should rule as guardians of the polity, is clearly an alternative way to address the competence problem. This is the point of having the older guardians oversee the education of the younger ones in training, testing them in a functional equivalent to scrutiny in advance of taking up each new role, and accountability or audit on their performance afterwards. And this has the function of attempting to keep power oriented to the *telos* of the good of the ruled, the very same purpose that accountability mechanisms like *euthunai* were also trying to achieve. Think of this as a political version of Gresham's Law in economics (discovered by the founder of this College, Sir Thomas Gresham) that 'bad money tends to drive out good'. If there is no sustained and deliberate mechanism for choosing competent rulers, bad rulers will tend to drive out any good ones who happen to make it through.

An important part of the way that this competence is to be established is that each cohort of officeholders has to be tested by the previous one (inverting the way that ancient Athenian auditors would be audited by those chosen, and successfully already scrutinized, to succeed them in that role). In other words, no more than in Athens does anyone in the constitution of the *Republic* get to be self-certifying. But the difference from Athens is that the test applied is no longer simply having paid one's taxes (or similar basic requirements). Nor are these offices to be open to whoever might otherwise be chosen by election or lottery. Rather, the testing in the *Republic* is much more demanding, both in terms of the educational level needed and the specific demonstration of competence in fulfilling one's role as an officeholder required.

Now while I've argued that no group of guardians gets to self-certify their own competence for power in this system, you may have noticed that the group of guardians will get to choose how to reproduce itself over time—and so risks becoming a self-certifying cabal. The fear of a self-appointed elite is a profound one and its dangers are real. Indeed, this opens the door to the second dimension of the potential gap between *taxis* and *telos*: the possibility of corruption.

Corruption

But, as I'll now show, the *Republic* takes great pains to prevent corruption, and in particular, the kind of corruption that Lord Acton warned would result from absolute power (in his famous dictum, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'). In that dialogue, Plato's Socrates (whom I read as his avatar) takes the extreme measure of preventing the rulers from possessing any substantial private wealth or property, such that they can't use their power to acquire more. He proposes that:

> '*None of [the guardians] should acquire any private property that is not wholly necessary…none of them should have a house or treasury into which anyone who wishes cannot enter…for them alone in the city, it is unlawful to touch or handle gold or silver*'
>
> (Plato, *Republic*, Book 3, 416d5-417a1, trans. Lane)

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[13] Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Instead, the rulers of the ideal republic must live on their subsistence-level wages, be deprived of private land and wealth, and forsake family life. Just as I earlier pointed out a root for the idea of accountability as lying in the giving of a financial account, so here, we can see a root for the idea of a 'public servant' in Plato's proposal that the rulers and officeholders in the *Republic* should be paid wages (just as some Greek officeholders were, especially under some democratic constitutions). The *Republic* stresses the need for a fine balance. The rulers and officeholders should see themselves as dependent on the public as their 'paymasters' and 'provisioners' (*Republic*, Book 5, 463b2, trans. Lane); in other words, they should see themselves as public servants hired to do a job for the citizens, rather than as deities above society. And yet, it is important that the rulers also maintain their autonomy, their ability to use their judgment, rather than be turned into mere tools of those who see themselves as paying their wages. The challenge of maintaining that balance, so that rulers and officeholders see themselves as servants of the public without becoming mere tools or delegates of public opinion, is one that we continue today to face.

All these radical restrictions on the rulers and officeholders, Plato says, should be 'established as law' (*Republic*, Book 3, 417b8, trans. Lane). Notice that these laws are said to be needed to govern even the wise and the just. Plato already assumed that the rulers of the republic had achieved extraordinary levels of wisdom and virtue (that is what being a philosopher meant for him). Yet Plato still argued that the more ultimately powerful an elite, the more society needed to rein them in. Without strict legal constraints, the rulers won't be guardians, but exploiters:

> *'If they acquire private land and houses and coined money… [they will become] despots and enemies instead of allies of the other citizens'* (Plato, *Republic*, Book 3, 417a6-b1, trans. Lane)

In other words, wisdom and virtue are not enough to exempt the rulers from living under extensive legal constraints. It might be objected that such laws would deter talented people from wanting to rule. But Plato had an answer to that: he explained the only rulers whom one can trust are those who aren't motivated by wanting power and privileges in the first place. The price of power must be to prescind from the usual perks. Otherwise, public servants will see themselves as the public's 'despots and enemies' instead of their allies and servants.

Negligence

Finally, what about the danger that public officials might act not necessarily incompetently, not necessarily corruptly, but simply negligently? Negligently in a broad sense that might include gaslighting, stonewalling, or simply not caring enough to bother responding to citizens or pursuing their good. This is the fine line that officeholders would ideally walk: between not caring about power for their own sake and caring about exercising it for the good of others. A paradox of the *Republic* is that the best rulers are those who don't want to rule (in this sense of not wanting power for its own sake) but who are willing to rule nevertheless, for the sake of others.

This caring orientation is again a fundamental, and explicit, dimension of Plato's *Republic*—albeit one that usually goes unrecognized in caricatures of him as a proto-totalitarian. Caring about the good of the ruled is actually *part* of the competence for which the guardians of the *Republic* will be selected: they must be people able and willing to:

> *take the initiative concerning being knowledgeable, capable, and also being caretakers (kēdemonas) of the city* (Plato, *Republic*, Book 3, 412c13–14, trans. Lane)

The word here for 'caretaker' is a word for legal guardianship, as of an orphan, or someone acting with power of attorney on behalf of others. It implies a duty of care on behalf of the ward (just as in Britain today, someone assigned power of attorney on behalf of someone else must 'act in the best interests' of the person on whose behalf they are acting). Now this might sound paternalistic, and of course, in a sense, it is (as well as maternalistic, given the dialogue's defence of the equality of female and male rulers, as I've noted). Yet there is room even in modern democratic politics for the idea of guardianship. Think of the need to have rulers, or other officeholders, who can act as guardians for future generations, of non-human animals, rivers, and wetlands. The role of acting as a caretaker is one that all societies need and in different ways have sought to protect. And this brings the avoidance of negligence back into the understanding of competence. For Plato, it would be a mistake to think of competence as purely technocratic skill. On the contrary, it includes

the right kind of motivation—the virtues of character, in Platonic terms—that will ensure that their exercise of power is oriented in the right direction. That's not an idea that either ancient or modern electoral politics is necessarily well designed to ensure.

Thus, we can learn both from Athens, and also from Plato, to appreciate both the ways that accountability mechanisms and their functional equivalents can be beefed up, and also, to recognise how any accountability mechanisms that remain purely procedural might still go wrong. Failing to care about stewarding public power, failing to respond, failing to engage, pay attention, and take seriously, are profound political dangers that no legal or political mechanism can entirely prevent—but that we need to think about doing our best to avoid. So, while democracies won't countenance Platonic self-reproducing elites, even ones that are designed to track caring expertise, we can use Plato's writings and ideas to engage with how to close that gap between official powers and public purpose—just as Plato himself was doing, as I read his work.

How to do that? We can intensify and regularize accountability procedures for a start. If officeholders have aggrandized themselves, using public powers for private gain (whether literal weight gain, as in High Wycombe, or another kind of self-enrichment), holding them to account means that they should be appropriately punished. If they've served well, using public powers for the public good, they deserve appropriate civic honours. But such honours should again not be a matter of mere procedure: if once elected, always to be honoured. On the contrary, in Plato's *Laws*, if an auditor of the other officeholders acts improperly, they are to be stripped of the honours that they would otherwise receive both in life and after death. The honours go with the behaviour, not just the role. Certainly, Plato would suggest that those who violate the spirit of their public trust, who act incompetently, corruptly, or negligently, do not deserve the honour—or the honours, as in the British 'honours system'—of their office. It is up to us to reflect on what these ideas might mean today.

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