Plato’s dialogues are the first systematic philosophical works in the Western tradition, and skill or expertise – or rather the Greek notion of techne, from which we derive ‘technology’, ‘technique’, etc. – is their central heuristic. When, that is, Socrates sets out – especially in the early dialogues – to test a knowledge-claim, or interrogate some purportedly coherent and well-founded practice, it is usually to the techne model that he turns. For instance, the question ‘Does the orator know what he is talking about?’ is tantamount to asking whether the orator has a techne. ‘Does the politician know what he is doing?’ is tantamount to asking whether the politician has a techne. This techne-centric approach stands to reason, Socrates maintains, since even at a pre-theoretical level the techmai (plural of techne) constitute an epistemic and practical paradigm. As he remarks to Protagoras:

When … the city has to take some action on a building project, we send for builders to advise us; if it has to do with the construction of ships, we send for shipwrights … But if … a person not regarded as a craftsman \([\text{dēmiourgon}]\) tries to advise them, no matter how handsome and rich and well-born he might be, they … laugh at him and shout him down.

Protagoras 319b–c

To contemporary readers, this looks like plain good sense, since as moderns we too are prone to look for the ‘experts’ when in epistemic or practical difficulty. But Plato’s conception and treatment of skill or expertise go against modern expectations in two vital respects.

First, the Greek concept of techne has a wider and more diverse extension than any related English concept. It covers the semantic range of ‘craft’, ‘skill’, ‘art’, ‘expertise’, ‘profession’, and in fact any ordered, systematic body of knowledge-cum-praxis. True, Socrates often has recourse to crafts that are banausic or artisanal, and that yield a separate, physical product. As Callicles jibes: ‘By the gods! You simply don’t let up on your continual talk of shoemakers and cleaners, cooks and doctors, as if our discussion were about them!’ (Gorgias 491a). But Socrates also makes frequent reference to techmai that go beyond the productive. The dialogues speak often of techmai whose result (or ergon) is either internal to their own activity (such as lyre-playing or dancing), or purely theoretical (such as astronomy or mathematics). Indeed, as I shall document below, it is the purely theoretical techmai – in particular, mathematics – that function as an
The more a claim or practice approaches the condition of mathematics, the more precise it is, and hence the more reliable – a quality that, as we shall see, is integral to technē. In brief, the Platonic dialogues contain an incipient hierarchy of technai, which is indexed primarily to the degree of precision and reliability they embody. (I will outline the other generic goods associated with technē shortly.)

Second, while ethics and skill or expertise are rarely conjoined in modern philosophy, Plato’s interest in technē is overwhelmingly ethical. That is, his deployment of the concept is determined largely by his prior interest in virtue (aretē, or character excellence). The question which thus preoccupies Socrates throughout the early dialogues, and even later in the Platonic corpus, is: can aretē be construed as a technē? That is, is there an expertise in virtue? Prima facie this is a bizarre question, given the modern tendency to disjoin virtue and skill. But when it is recalled that virtue is Socrates’ central concern, the idea of a virtue-technē no longer seems so strange. After all, Socrates famously holds that a good man cannot be harmed (Apology 30c–d), implying that everyone has overriding reason to be virtuous. He maintains, moreover, that ‘with that part [namely, one’s soul] corrupted that unjust action harms and just action benefits’, one is far worse off than with a corrupted body, since ‘the most important thing is not life, but the good life’ (Crito 47e, 48b). And he holds that ‘[I] neglected all my own affairs … for so many years while … approaching each one of you like a father or elder brother to persuade you to care for virtue’ (Apology 31b). Given, then, aretē’s overriding value for Socrates, and given that, as we have seen, technē is his methodological lodestar, the notion of a technē in aretē looks eminently attractive: it would, in effect, guarantee the good life. (There remains the prior question of whether such a technē is possible: I aim to answer that question over the course of this chapter.)

I have argued, in sum, that although the Platonic dialogues echo modernity’s strong affirmation of expertise, they calibrate the latter’s nature and role differently. Technē picks out a wider range of phenomena than any cognate English concept, and it is subordinated to an ethical project. But why, exactly, is Plato attracted to the technai in the first place, especially as a vehicle for exploring the structure of virtue? I have already indicated a partial answer to this: that he saw in them a model of precision [akribeia], and that this held out the prospect of virtue approximating an epistēmē or ‘science’. But this, in turn, needs to be unpacked further: what, exactly, is the good of virtue qua science? The answer to this can be elaborated, I think, under five main headings.

First, and at the most general level, a science of virtue would professionalise the ethical life. As Rachana Kamtekar puts matters, ‘Describing a new discipline as a technē (profession, craft, art) or epistēmē (science) is a way of claiming for it a status possessed by better-established practices like medicine’ (Kamtekar 2009: 220). Granted, there are passages in the dialogues which caricature the technai as merely banausic or artisanal, thereby heaping on them the shame associated with the lower orders and their ‘illiberal’ pursuits. But these passages are relatively rare, and depend on a tendentious selection of crafts, such as cobbling and blacksmithing. For the most part, acting or speaking ek technēs has positive connotations. Well-made products — technikōs ergasmena (Charmides 173c) — are to be approved of, and imply approval of their expert makers (cf. Laws 921b). As Socrates remarks,

[I]t is … necessary to investigate first of all whether any one of us is an expert [technikos] in the subject we are debating, or not. And if one of us is, then we should listen to him even if he is only one, and disregard the others.

Laches 184e–5a; cf. Crito 48a–f
To be technikos, moreover, is contrasted in the Gorgias with having a mere empeiria or ‘knack’ (see 500a ff., 503c–d): the implication being that a genuine craft or skill is reputable, raising the professional practitioner above the level of a mere amateur. Would it not be good, therefore, if virtue itself were an expert matter, to be taken out of the hands of the mere empeiros?

Second, while minimal rational reflection is compatible with practical competence in some areas, the expert or technikos still aspires to give a logos, or rational account, of his expertise. And the more systematic and precise such an account, the better; hence mathematics is the paradigmatic technē. Any technē is nonetheless superior to forms of cognition and practice that prescind from rationality altogether. This is why the antithesis of the expert, according to Socrates, is the person who relies solely on a ‘divine gift’ (theia moira). The enthousiazēn, or divinely inspired person, finds the rationality and structure of his purported discipline wholly beyond his grasp. In the early dialogue Ion, this is characteristic of the eponymous anti-hero, who claims to practise the art of rhapsody, but under Socratic questioning (or elenchus) is shown, quite literally, not to know what he is talking about. As Socrates quips, ‘that’s not a technē you’ve mastered – speaking well about Homer; it’s a divine power [theia dunamis] that moves you’ (533d). And Socrates applies this critique also to the poets: ‘none of the epic poets, if they’re good’, he adjures, ‘are so ek technēs; they are divinely inspired [enthousiōai], and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. The same goes for lyric poets’ (533e). In fine, the poet ‘goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him’ (534b), or as the Athenian in the Laws charges, ‘when a poet takes his seat on the tripod of the Muse, he cannot control his thoughts’ (719c). This places poets on the level of ‘seers’, who, as Socrates asserts in the Philebus, ‘make their prophecies, not in virtue of any technē’ (44c; cf. Apology 22b–c, Meno 99c). Clearly, even if such enthousiazontes are capable of impressive results, they do not produce them expertly; they thus make bad models for the virtuous, who should have a rational grasp – akin to the expert – of what they are doing.

Third, and as the above suggests, being able to give a rational account of one’s practice – ‘And I refuse to call anything that lacks such a logos a technē’, says Socrates (Gorgias 465a) – is of a piece with the good of mastery or control. As Martha Nussbaum puts matters, technē ‘is a deliberate application of human intelligence to some part of the world, yielding some control over tuchē [chance]’ (Nussbaum 1986: 95). And this contrast between technē and tuchē occurs often in the Platonic dialogues. As Polus puts it, without any opposition from Socrates: ‘experience … causes our times to march along the way of technē, where inexperience causes it to march along the way of tuchē’ (Gorgias 448c). In the Laws, the Athenian maintains that ‘a professional man [ho echiōn tēn technēn] … could hardly go wrong if he prayed for conditions in which the workings of tuchē needed to be supplemented only by his own technē’ (709d). And Socrates holds that ‘it is by virtue of this technē [arithmetic] … that a man … has under his control [hupocheirious] pieces of knowledge concerning numbers’ (Theaetetus 198b). It is plain, then, that the rational structure of technē is not only a good per se, but also a good insofar as it affords the technitēs (or expert) mastery over his subject-matter. It thereby affords him, in many cases, mastery over his environment as well. As Socrates summarises things in the Lysis (210 a–c):

In those areas where we really understand something … [t]here we will be free ourselves, and in control of others … But in areas where we haven’t got any understanding … there we are going to be subject to the orders of others; there things are not going to be ours.

When it comes, therefore, to the supreme good of virtue, a virtue-technē looks highly desirable: for ex hypothesi it would enable its practitioners to control the greatest good there is.
Fourth, the above marks of technē – namely, professionalism, rationality and control – each undergird a further key value, namely transmissibility. For if technē embodies knowledge, and knowledge available to rational reflection, it follows that it can also be transmitted to others – i.e. be both taught and learned. The deep connection between technē and education is brought out at many points in the dialogues. Socrates asks, for instance, how one discerns who is most skilled [technikōtatos] at gymnastics, and replies: ‘Wouldn’t it be the man who had studied and practised the technē and who had had good teachers in that particular subject?’ (Laches 185b). He claims that expertise in building requires that ‘our teachers have proved to be good and reputable ones’ (Gorgias 514b–c; cf. Meno 90b–c), while at Phaedrus 270d, he refers to ‘the object regarding which we intend to become technikoi and capable of transmitting our expertise’. More famously, during the ‘ship of state’ passage at Republic 488b, Socrates speaks damningly of certain sailors, each of whom thinks that ‘he should be the captain, even though he’s never learnt the technē of navigation, [and] cannot point to anyone who taught it to him’. This internal connection between technē and transmissibility is significant, since Socrates repeatedly doubts whether virtue – the most important subject of all – can be taught. As he laments: ‘I have often tried to find out whether there were any teachers of [virtue], but in spite of all my efforts I cannot find any’ (Meno 89e); ‘the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit to others the virtues they possess’ (Protagoras 319e; cf. Meno 94b–e). In this context, a virtue-technē seems not only desirable, therefore, but also the only real hope of sustaining the ethical well-being of society from one generation to the next.

Fifth and last, the professionalism, rationality, control and transmissibility embodied by the technai point to their essential role in securing agreement. Socrates highlights this in the Euthyphro, where he cites the technē of mathematics as a (if not the) paradigm locus of agreement: ‘If you and I, he asks Euthyphro, ‘were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies … or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference?’ (7b–c). To this rhetorical question he responds: ‘if we differed about the larger and the smaller, we would turn to measurement and soon cease to differ … And about the heavier and the lighter, we would resort to weighing and be reconciled’ (7c). The implication here is that the more determinate and precise a technē is, the more it is a source of consensus. If only, then, the same consensus that reigns in mathematics could be applied to ethics, where dissension and controversy seem most prevalent, and to have the direst effects. And indeed, this appears to be Socrates’ own hope, since he poses another rhetorical question shortly afterwards (7d):

[Are] the just and the unjust, the noble and the shameful, the good and the bad … not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other?

The clear upshot is that if virtue were subject to the rigours of a technē like mathematics, we would be spared much, even all social disagreement and conflict. While this suggestion is not pursued in the Euthyphro itself, it is taken up in the Protagoras, whose attempt to construct a virtue-technē I will come to next.

All in all, then, I have argued that the great appeal of technē lies in its embodiment of a set of epistemic and practical goods – namely, professionalism, rationality, control, transmissibility and agreement – which are both highly prized and not combined elsewhere. The question is whether these goods can be harnessed to virtue itself. This is, after all, Socrates’ recurrent and definitive desire. He complains:
Technē in the Platonic dialogues

I have had no teacher in this subject ... and yet I have longed after it from my youth up ... I did not have any money to give the sophists, who were the only ones who professed to be able to make a gentleman [kalos k’agathos] of me, and I myself, on the other hand, am unable to discover the technē even now.

Laches 186c; cf. Apology 20a–c

The stakes are high, and the resources at hand: what, therefore, is to prevent the construction of a virtue-technē? In what follows, I will outline the Platonic dialogues’ two attempts at such a construction – the first in the Protagoras, and the second in the Republic – and assess their respective cogency.

Protagoras is a sophist, i.e. a self-appointed ‘wise person’, who (as Socrates suggests at Laches 186c above) is in business – he charges for his so-called wisdom. The sophists do not claim a theia moira, or ‘divine gift’, but are nonetheless pseudo-professionals: they dazzle their customers with jargon and verbal dexterity, suasive powers that are essentially rhetorical and depend on flattery. It is against this background that Socrates seeks a truly professional account of virtue in the Protagoras, and its vehicle – following the Euthyphro’s propaedeutic account above – is mathematical. Contra the vagaries of sophistic rhetoric, this virtue-technē will be impervious to verbal manipulation, and deliver unimpeachable results by a foolproof method. It is a vision nicely captured by Nussbaum: ‘[the] denumerable is the definite, the graspable’, she writes, ‘therefore also the potentially tellable, controllable; what cannot be numbered remains vague and unbounded, evading human grasp’ (Nussbaum 1986: 107). This vision is echoed, moreover, in middle and late Plato. In the Republic, for instance, Socrates holds that ‘the part that puts its trust in measurement [metrōi] and calculation [logismōi] is the best part of the soul’ (603a). And in the Philebus, he claims that ‘The boundless multitude … in any and every kind of subject leaves you in boundless ignorance … since you have never worked out the amount and number of anything at all’ (17e). Indeed, the Philebus even moots the notion that quantification and measurement are essential to any technē. Be that as it may, the Protagoras places measurement at the heart of its proposed virtue-technē.

What, then, is this metrētikē technē or ‘measuring expertise’ meant to measure? According to Socrates, it will measure pleasures and pains. It is, in fact, an anticipation of hedonistic utilitarianism, except that its calculus of pleasures and pains operates at an individual, rather than societal level. The assumption is that pleasure is tantamount to goodness, whereas pain is tantamount to evil; it is virtuous, therefore, to promote the former, and vicious to promote the latter. Socrates claims, furthermore, that once one knows where the balance of pleasure and pain lies, one will necessarily act to ensure that pleasure (namely, the good) wins out (or at least, that pain – the bad – does not). This is because, so he claims, ‘knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced to act otherwise than knowledge dictates’ (352c). The metrētikē technē is, in other words, a projection of Socratic rationalism, freighted with the high hopes attendant on any form of rationalism. As Socrates himself puts things, the ‘understanding’ [phronēsis] such a technē embodies ‘would be sufficient to rescue a person’ (352c) – indeed, it would ‘save’ our lives (356d–e). And given that this understanding takes a straightforwardly hedonistic (and thus empirical) form, it will be both transmissible and capable of securing agreement – thereby fulfilling the final two marks of technē outlined above.

Faced with this ambitious project, an immediate objection occurs: surely it is possible, indeed common, for felt (or merely anticipated) pleasure and pain to overcome knowledge of the good? We are eminently capable, that is, of opting for pleasures (such as sexual pleasures), even
though we know they will be outweighed by severe pains (such as disease) (see 353c–d). In this way, it is perfectly possible for knowledge to be ‘dragged around by other forces, such as desire and pleasure’ (352c). And this not only makes a nonsense of Socrates’ supposed equation between pleasure and the good, it also scuppers his much–vaunted rationalism. For it seems plain that knowledge can be undermined by desire: we are never immune, that is, to akrasia or moral ‘backsiding’, so the kind of motivating power Socrates ascribes to the metrētikē technē looks like mere hand–waving. In response to this argumentative assault, however, Socrates makes some deft moves. He denies, crucially, that the purported ‘akratic’ is overcome by pleasure or pain simpliciter. Rather, he is swayed by immediate pleasures and pains, oblivious to or ignorant of the detriment to his overall and long–term pleasure (or at least lack of pain). The good, Socrates holds, is properly equivalent to the latter (354). Hence it is only once one is apprised of such overall and long–term hedonic data that one truly knows where one’s good lies. And it is this knowledge, Socrates avers, and this knowledge alone, which is proof against akrasia. Yet again, we seem back in the rationalist camp: the hedonistic metrētikē technē will constitute ‘our salvation in life’ (356d), jettisoning the ‘power of appearance’ in favour of the power of truth. Or as Socrates more magniloquently claims, ‘What then would save our life? Surely … measurement … In fact, nothing other than arithmetic’ (357a).

What are we to make of this proposal? Prima facie it appears that Socrates’ voice is firmly behind the metrētikē technē, and that it constitutes a paradigm case of the professionalism, rationality, control, transmissibility and agreement associated with technē in general. But on closer inspection, severe doubts emerge, and on two main fronts. First, hedonism has, both inside and outside the Protagoras, only a very dubious Platonic pedigree. Inside the dialogue, Socrates almost always ascribes hedonism to hoi polloi, ‘the many’, or to Protagoras himself (see 353d, 354b–c, 356c). And outside the Protagoras, Plato mounts a concerted argument against hedonism. From the early to the late dialogues, he has Socrates deny the identity of pleasure and goodness.10 Pleasure is consistently characterised either as uniformly bad (e.g., Philebus 67a–b; Laws 633e, 636c, 714a, 840c), or as evaluatively heterogeneous (e.g., Phaedo 83c; Gorgias 494e–5a; Phaedrus 258e; Republic 505b, 509a, 582c; Philebus 12c–d, 52c; Laws 658e–9a), or as too indeterminate to measure (Gorgias 500b, 501a–b, 506d; Philebus 31a, 65d). With all this evidence from outside the Protagoras,11 it seems very unlikely – despite some significant dissenting views12 – that Socrates’ voice is genuinely behind the metrētikē technē. Its endorsement of hedonism is simply too eccentric in the context of Plato’s work as a whole, and hence must find an alternative explanation.

Second, the Protagoras’ argument against akrasia looks not only weak per se, but is also superseded, arguably, in the Republic. At Protagoras 357d–e, Socrates maintains that

those who make mistakes with regard to the choice of pleasure and pain, in other words, with regard to good and bad, do so because of a lack of knowledge … a lack of knowledge you [namely, Protagoras] agreed was measurement.

Now this position, that knowledge of the good is sufficient for right action, is baseless – unless one also accepts a key tenet of Socratic moral psychology, namely, that all desire is for the good. This tenet is found, for example, at Meno 78a and Gorgias 468c, and is also enunciated in the Protagoras: no one, Socrates asserts, ‘willingly makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad’ (345e). This tenet clearly saves a key plank of the metrētikē technē, namely, that a correct use of the craft is not only necessary for right action, but also sufficient. The trouble is, however, that we have been given no independent argument for the view that all desire is for the good. Furthermore, this very view may well be abandoned by Plato in the Republic. It is here, in book IV, that Socrates’ denial of akrasia is famously thrown into doubt. For Leontius’ perverse desire
Technē in the Platonic dialogues

to look at corpses is presented as forcing him to act ‘contrary to rational calculation [para ton logismon]’ (439e–40b), that is, contrary to what he takes to be right. And this directly impugns Socrates’ claim in the Protagoras – a claim essential to the success of the metētikē technē – that ‘no one who knows or believes that there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing [it]’ (358b–c).

So on grounds both of its hedonism, and of its vulnerable stance on akakia, the Protagoras’ metētikē technē does not appear to be the virtue-technē for which Socrates ‘longed after … from [his] youth up’ (Laches 186c). There is, nonetheless, another candidate for this title, one found in the Republic. This is the knowledge-cum-praxis Socrates ascribes to the ‘guardian’ class, which he refers to explicitly as a technē. He speaks, for instance, of ‘the technē we call justice’ (332d), and judges that ‘to the degree that the ergon of the guardians is most important, it requires … the greatest technē’ (374e). Sometimes he characterises this expertise simply as ‘philosophy’, i.e. love of wisdom, but this too is construed as a technē: ‘Despite her present poor state’, he holds, ‘philosophy is still more high-minded than these other technai’ (495d); ‘A very few might be drawn to philosophy from other technai’ (496b). But what, in fine, is this supposed skill? As Rosamund Kent Sprague puts it, it is a ‘second-order’ skill (Sprague 1976: 68–70, 76), or architectonic technē, which takes other technai as its object. These latter are the skills practised in Plato’s ideal republic, by both the lower orders (the ‘provisioners’ and ‘money-makers’), and the soldier-class of ‘auxiliaries’. The virtue of the guardians – namely, justice or dikaiosune/dikē – will consist in arranging the skills of the subordinate classes to achieve a ‘kind of consonance and harmony’ (430e; cf. 431e–2a). And this harmony will consist, in turn, in each citizen being ‘directed to what he is naturally suited for’: for it is only given such specialisation – or ‘doing the one job [ergon] that is his own’ – that ‘he will become not many but one, and the whole city will itself be naturally one and not many’ (423d).

The question remains, however: is this a technē specifically of virtue? On this score, I submit, there is much room for doubt – and for two main reasons. First, the guardians or ‘philosopher-kings’ amount to a tiny minority, since not only is their professional training highly demanding, ‘they have to have the nature we described, and its parts mostly grow in separation and are rarely found in the same person’ (503b; cf. 428e–9a). This goes against the early dialogues’ presentation of virtue as universally attainable, or at least as not subject to principled and very severe restrictions. Furthermore, because the Republic restricts virtue proper to a small elite, it follows that the vast majority of citizens are effectively the passive objects of the guardians’ technē. And this too is counter-intuitive: does virtue really consist in treating others de haut en bas, as agents most of whom have such limited rational powers that they must be commandeered, and deprived of substantial autonomy? Second and related, the Republic does not elaborate virtue simpliciter, but rather justice, suggesting that its purpose is not broadly ethical, but instead political. True, Julia Annas argues that we should approach the Republic as an ethical work – as many of the ancient commentators did – and bracket the political form of the dialogue.13 After all, Socrates makes an analogy between the State and the soul, and maintains that the former illustrates the latter (see 368e–9a). But not only does this ignore the points made above, it also fails to acknowledge that the Republic never develops the idea of an everyday ‘soul-craft’ in any detail. Furthermore, it downplays the strong continuities between the Republic’s technē of justice and the Statesman’s ‘kingly expertise’ [basilikē technē], which is clearly political in form.

Even if, however, one thinks the guardians’ expertise is genuinely one in virtue, there is reason to think that their education, which includes manifold affective and practical elements – such as listening to the right music, and undergoing the appropriate gymnastic training – cannot properly be understood as a technē ‘all the way down’. The latter would consist in a cognitive achievement, which, when implemented correctly, would be tantamount to right action (the
kind of model of expertise we have seen in the Protagoras). But in point of fact, the guardians’ technē succeeds only on condition that various non-cognitive abilities have already been imparted by early training. Given, furthermore, that the details of how the philosopher-kings grasp the Forms remain notoriously obscure – with Socrates’ having to resort to the ‘images’ of Sun, Line and Cave (see 505–521) – the actual content of their skill seems extremely hard to ascertain. Perhaps that content exists, but so far as the Republic is concerned, Socrates never gives it the perspicuous treatment he gives the metretikē technē. At best, and as David Roochnik suggests,14 the guardians’ technē appears protreptic, and we will have to look beyond the Republic if we want to discover what, exactly, knowledge of virtue consists in.

In the final analysis, therefore, the tantalising prospect of a virtue-technē is realised neither in the Republic, nor in the Protagoras. Despite Socrates’ hopes for one in the early dialogues, and the heuristic value he sets on technē even as late as the Statesman, both the metretikē technē and the guardians’ technē of justice face too many difficulties to qualify as virtue-technē. In the remainder of this chapter, I will argue that this waning of the idea of a technē in aretē is owing not, however, to peculiarities of either the Protagoras or Republic. Rather, Socrates’ relinquishing of that idea has more to do with structural features of the technai per se, features that make them fundamentally inhospitable to virtue. And I will finish by suggesting an avenue for further investigation: namely, that Plato’s dialogues do contain material for a systematic knowledge of virtue, but that the latter cannot be construed as a technē.

Why, then, might technē be essentially the wrong model on which to understand virtue? Three reasons immediately suggest themselves. First, the technai are typically narrow in scope, that is, they govern a strictly delimited area of enquiry or practice, and thus have what John Gould calls a ‘clearly marked horizon’ (Gould 1955: 32). Navigation, for instance, covers sailing ships at sea, while generalship directs armies to victory on land. By contrast, virtue is maximal in scope, since it covers all human activities. This is borne out in early dialogues like the Laches, where Socrates concludes that courage involves knowledge of good and evil as a whole – not merely knowledge of some specialism. It is thus difficult to fit virtue into a ‘professional’ mould, given the latter’s narrowness of focus. And this explains, furthermore, why it is hard for virtue to live up to the value of control. For that value presupposes precisely the kind of narrow focus that virtue must forgo. Whereas the well-trained professional can exert a high degree of control over a relatively limited set of variables, the virtuous person must cope with a far more extensive and variegated domain, into which the forces of tuchē or chance seem ever likely to insert new variables.15

Second, professionals are relatively few in number. We do not expect or need our society to contain numerous cobblers, carpenters, mathematicians, or, for that matter, politicians. They can achieve the goods internal to their respective practices while remaining comparatively rare. By contrast, virtue is a quality both expected and needed in every individual – at least according to Socrates, who, as we have seen, believes that a technē of virtue would ‘save our lives’ (Protagoras 356d–e), and that ‘it is [not] permitted that a better man be harmed by a worse’ (Apology 30d). Ideally, then, virtue should be universal, and not restricted to a small pool of experts. But this brings out another and related contrast with technē, namely, that the ways virtue and skill are transmitted look markedly different. The typical technē chooses his profession in early adulthood, dependent on his particular interests and talents, which have developed over time. By contrast, virtue is inculcated from early childhood, whether the individual likes it or not, and is not dependent on his contingent interests or talents.16 Indeed, if someone thought that virtue were so dependent, they would be guilty of vice.

Third, there is an internal connection between knowledge and action in the case of virtue which seems absent in the case of technē. As Laches puts it, the virtuous man has ‘render[ed] his own life harmonious by fitting his deeds [erga] to his words [logoi]’ (Laches 188d). But this ‘fitting’
flows from the virtuous man’s character; it is not a contingent performance resting on a decision
to deploy one’s technical know-how. For example, it is perfectly conceivable that an individual
both know how to play the flute, and not be motivated to play it most of the time. By contrast, it
is untoward, and moreover blameworthy, for a virtuous individual not to instantiate virtue in his
actions. Admittedly, Socrates presents those who have mastered the mētrētikē technē as necessarily
motivated to act on it. But this goes against its status as a technē, and, as we have seen, such ration-
alism finds no definitive argumentative support in the Protagoras. Similarly, Socrates attributes a
technē to the guardians in the Republic, but what seems to ensure their motivational integrity is
precisely the non-cognitive abilities they develop in childhood. Once again, therefore, technē is
shown to fall short of the knowledge/action holism that is a key mark of virtue.

There are two final, and in my view decisive grounds for the technai’s pervasive inhospitability
to virtue. First, because the technai are narrow or local in scope, they are perforce also narrow in
their evaluative purview. As Gould writes, ‘the whole horizon of a craftsman is bounded by the
limits of his professional occupation: it is not his business to be capable of directing what should
be done with the product of his skill’ (Gould 1955: 32). Indeed, in virtue of this evaluatively
limited perspective, an individual technitēs may well have to cease practising – at least for a
time – in order to ensure the overall or common good. By contrast, it does not make sense for
a virtuous individual to put his virtue ‘on hold’, as it were. Virtue is, as I have outlined, global
in scope, and has regard – always and necessarily – for the good in toto. Second, whereas technē
exhibits a subject/object structure – with an individual producing a set of results distinct from
himself – virtue exhibits an essentially reflexive structure, where the subject’s own soul is at
stake. And this shows, perhaps definitively, the inadequacy of the technē model: that whereas the
technai are fundamentally directed outward, virtue is a condition of the subject’s own soul, and
hence cannot be reified as an object to be ‘produced’.

In conclusion, then, I have argued that – despite Socrates’ hopes for a technē in virtue – nei-
ther the Protagoras nor the Republic manages to supply one. There are at least five substantive
reasons for this. The technai are too narrow in scope, their practitioners too rare, and their cog-
nition improperly conjoined with their practice. In addition, their evaluative horizon is too
limited, and their structure too object-orientated or irreflexive to capture the nature of virtue.
Does it follow that the Platonic dialogues simply abandon the project of a knowledge-cum-
praxis of virtue? Not so, I would argue. If we leave the technē model behind, there are promising
vistas ahead. In particular, we should attend to one of Socrates’ few claims to knowledge, namely
his claim to know ‘the erotic things’ (ta erotika, mistranslated as ‘the art of love’). For given
Socrates’ ideal of virtue as kalok’agathia – literally, ‘beauty/nobility and goodness’ – and given
that Plato devotes his great erotic dialogue, the Symposium, to the nature of the kalon (beauty/
nobility), I suggest that eros or love is the best place to start for a true grasp of virtue. It will turn
out, indeed, that only to kalon – namely, the Form of Beauty/Nobility – has the erotic power
to transform the soul, and to convert it to genuine goodness. True, this total transformation
excludes the values of professionalism and control, along with the value of transmissibility – for
only a direct encounter with to kalon can convert the heart. But reason, crucially, has not been
jettisoned, since the heart (as Socrates affirms) has its reasons. And mutual acknowledgement of
these reasons promises harmony with others.

Notes
1 Socrates was Plato’s teacher, and is the principal character in his dialogues.
2 Cf. Alcibiades, Socrates’ lover: ‘He is always going on about pack asses, or blacksmiths, or cobbler’s, or
   tanners’ (Symposium 221e).
3 David Roochnik dubs the more precise and thus more reliable form of *technē* (*technē*), in contrast to *technē*2, which covers subject-matter that is less fixed and determinate (see Roochnik 1996: ch. 1). Unlike Aristotle, who refers to the former as *epistēmē* (*science*), and only the latter as *technē*, Plato uses *epistēmē* and *technē* almost interchangeably (see Gould 1955: 31; Nussbaum 1986: 94; Roochnik 1996: 90, 113 n. 23, 277; Woodruff 1990: 66). Plato tends to use *dēmiourgia* (*craft*, ‘handicraft’, ‘artisanry’) to mark out *technai* at the less precise, and typically more manual (or workman-like) end of the spectrum.

4 Julia Annas argues that virtue should be understood as a form of skill (see Annas 2011). But the very fact that her argument is book-length points up their usual estrangement in the modern literature.

5 Plato does speak of the ‘craftsman’ [*dēmiourgos*] of the universe in the *Timaeus*, thereby deploying *technē* in a grander, metaphysical context. And there is much to be said about why particular practices – especially rhetoric, poetry, prophecy and rhapsody – are suspected of not being *technai* at all. But I cannot address these subsidiary themes in this chapter. On the *Timaeus*, see Carone (2005); on rhetoric as a pseudo-*technē*, see Roochnik (1996: ch. 3). I will touch on the practices of poetry, prophecy and rhapsody (namely, poetry-recitation) below.

6 The English term ‘science’ is perhaps misleading, since it is often assimilated to the ‘hard’ sciences (such as physics and chemistry). I intend ‘science’ in the sense of the German *Wissenschaft*, namely any organised and determinate body of knowledge and practice.

7 It is worth noting that the lower classes in Plato’s *Republic* are assigned the menial task of ‘provisioning’ the *polis* or city-state. For passages that denigrate the relatively unskilled (especially manual) crafts, see *Protagoras* 312b, 318e–f; *Republic* 522b; *Symposium* 203a–f; *Seventh Letter* 341b.

8 The *locus classicus* of sophistic argument in the dialogues is the *Euthydemus*. See the *Gorgias* for an extended argument against rhetoric, to the effect that it aims not at truth or goodness, but rather at pleasure and gratification. See also *Phaedrus* 257c–f, where the tension between rhetoric and truth-seeking is further explored.

9 See, for example, *Phaedrus* 16c, 55e, 284a–b, 285a. Cf. *Republic* 522c, 526b and *Laws* 645a, 747a–b, 819c. For the connection between measurement and the *technai*, see Roochnik (1996: 195–7, 279); Burnyeat (2000: 20–22, 27); Roochnik (2003: ch. 1). Myles Burnyeat argues that Socrates is drawn to exact measurement because it yields knowledge of ‘context-invariant’ or ‘unqualified’ being, rather than belief grounded in individual perspectives.

10 See, for example, *Phaedo* 69a–b; *Gorgias* 499a–b, 500a; *Philebus* 60b; *Laws* 783a.


12 See, notably, Irwin (1977: ch. 4) and Irwin (1995: ch. 6).


15 This variability is analogous to that plaguing the *politiķē technē*, though the latter’s domain is comparatively limited. Both this variability and consequent lack of control undermine Socrates’ precisionist ideal, since the shifting terrain of virtue and vice simply cannot be brought under the kind of determinate and rigid schemas characteristic of mathematics. Hence Aristotle’s observation that noble and just actions … exhibit much variety and fluctuation … it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs.

Nicomachean Ethics 1094b: 14–27

16 Granted, these three features – namely, early inculcation, involuntariness and non-relativity to individual interests and talents – do characterise the education of the *Republīc*’s guardians. But this is exactly what makes it odd to describe their resultant abilities as a ‘*technē*’.

17 Even the dancer, who does not have an external *ergon*, aims to produce various movements in his *body* – not effects in his soul. One can, of course, ‘go to work’ on one’s own soul, using various self-directed techniques: but a portion of the soul will always have to remain as agent, in order for it to work on the rest. The soul as such, therefore, can never be a pure object to itself. This suggests that virtue can be developed properly and fully only by submitting the whole soul to *external* influence – something that dovetails with my conclusion below.

18 See *Symposium* 177e. Cf. *Symposium* 193e, 198d, 201d, 207a/c, 209e, 211c.
References