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**“What Do We Know about Philosophy and Philosophers
at the End of *Republic* Book V?”**

Abstract

The answer is: Much less than we think. This is an unapologetically deflationary reading of the end of *Republic* Book V. The passage, which is of undisputed significance, has been taken to offer a definition of philosophy, an account of its cognitive accomplishments, the final distinction between the philosopher’s *epistēmē* and the *doxa* of “the sightlovers,” which many have taken to correspond to our own distinction between knowledge and belief, and a defense of the claim of philosophers to be the proper rulers of the ideal city the work is in the process of describing. My argument is that, as readers of Plato, we have lost our sense of the astonishing nature of his proposal, which would have seemed ludicrous or worse to his original audience. We have therefore ignored the rhetorical circumspection with which he gradually introduces the various ideas that comprise his proposal and have tried to find all the details of the proposal in these few pages. But the idea that philosophers are the best rulers is much more complex than the (nevertheless) important principles introduced in Book V, which I discuss in some detail. And it takes much, much longer to develop than the few pages we have been focusing on—it is in fact not completed until the end of Book VII. It is only then that the line of thought that merely begins at the end of Book V finally culminates. It is only then, having been exposed to the ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical views Plato appeals to in the intervening two books, that we come to know what philosophers are and why they are qualified to rule. The end of Book V remains crucial to Plato but represents only the first step in the long and controversial discussion that occupies the central portion of the *Republic*.