

Christopher Bobonich, ed., *Plato's Laws: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. viii, 245. ISBN 978-0-521-88463-1. Hardback. \$80.00.

Christopher Bobonich's *Plato's Laws: A Critical Guide* is a welcome addition to his extensive commentary, *Plato's Utopia Recast*. The *Guide* is a collection of essays by well-known platonic scholars, covering some of the principal themes of Plato's last dialogue, almost neglected in modern times, until rather recently.

Bobonich's 'Introduction' (1–11) gives us a useful summary of some of the main philosophical points in the *Laws*. The book is organized thematically, and problems of chronology are deemed of little relevance. The question, however, is raised, whether Plato's views developed by gradual addition and clarification or were there more significant shifts (4). Bobonich does not explicitly consider the possibility that the *Laws* represents the downward path of the *Republic's* Divided Line, although the role of the philosopher returning to the cave is discussed in various articles. The problem is emphasized of reconciling the 'educational and coercive aspects' of the dialogue (3).

The first contribution, by Malcolm Schofield, 'The *Laws*' two projects' (12–28), presents the double task of the dialogue as (i) devising a form of government more capable of adoption by existing cities, and (ii) constructing a society in which freedom (democracy) is properly constrained by wisdom (monarchy) (26). In Schofield's view, the project of finding a more common form of constitution remains subsidiary to the idealizing project of describing a community of the virtuous. Yet, it is in the nature of law that it necessarily involves both education and coercion (27).

Christopher Rowe, 'The relationship of the *Laws* to other dialogues: A proposal' (29–50), admits to being 'considerably more of a unitarian than it has been fashionable for some time to be' (50 n. 60). In his interpretation, the text of the *Laws* tends to direct the philosophical reader to the arguments and conclusions of other dialogues for justification. The fundamental justification of the *Laws* may be missed by the interlocutors, but will be found by the philosophical reader familiar with the other dialogues.

Richard Kraut, 'Ordinary virtue from the *Phaedo* to the *Laws*' (51–70), maintains that, in the *Laws*, Plato does not retract his views in the *Republic*. The *Laws* asks how a political community can be formed in which some of its members have more understanding of the good and some –less. Kraut claims that, according to the dialogue, everyone has some understanding of value, even if most people have a thin understanding of what is valuable (56). The dwellers of the cave travel at least some small distance towards the ideal of full wisdom and virtue, as Glaucon does in the *Republic* (57–59). As Kraut has it, ordinary virtue allows a non-instrumental appreciation of virtue for its own sake. So, too, the first soul to choose its future life in *Republic* x 'comes to regret his decision when he has had more time to reflect on it' (619b–d) (66). But this is not what the text says. He comes to regret his choice when confronted with its consequences. Like all others, his understanding of value is instrumental and utilitarian, not normative. Yet, Kraut is right in claiming that ordinary virtue is not 'utterly spurious' (60), even if desired for its consequences. Ordinary virtue is

not pseudo-virtue. It is the materialization, in this world, of true virtue. As *political* virtue, it is rewarded accordingly, but, not being based on *philosophia*, it is always at risk and qualitatively different from true virtue centered on the philosophical *ethos*.

For Julia Annas, 'Virtue and law in Plato' (71–91), the preambles to the laws help the citizens to become genuinely virtuous, by both rational and non-rational means. But Plato's non-rational means are protreptic, as in his earlier dialogues, and one cannot by them become genuinely virtuous. Annas stresses that those persuaded will not need laws at all (79). But she fails to make clear that, persuaded by 'spells and charms', having the law interiorized by shame, praise and blame (78–79), the citizens of Magnesia will attain only political virtue derived from an instrumental, consequentialist view of value, decried by Plato throughout his work.

Terence Irwin, 'Morality as law and morality in the *Laws*' (92–108), appeals to Plato's analogy of the soul as a puppet in *Laws* 1, holding that Plato thinks of internal law, at least when correct, as moral principles based on human nature. Plato takes the provisions of rational morality to be neutral in so far as they are naturally accessible to all rational agents (105). A city should aim at freedom, wisdom and friendship within itself (107). But there can be no friendship between master and slave, or between a good person and a bad person (107). Thus, it follows both that all free persons participate in rule and political activity and that their interests are considered (provided, one should add, that their interests, guided by wisdom, differ at all from each other). This, however, is to be aimed at, but not feasible in full, given that not all can dispense with the coercive aspect of the laws.

Discussing that same analogy, Dorothea Frede, 'Puppets on strings: Moral psychology in *Laws* Books 1 and 2' (108–126), considers the role of pleasure in the *Laws* and the delicate equilibrium sketched by Plato among the psychic forces in an individual. Even the virtuous soul is not in a condition of permanent harmony. (This is to be expected, given it is embodied.) Hence, the importance of *éducation sentimentale* (115). The golden string is *logismos*, calculation only, not *nous*, and this is the law. Man is not a mere plaything of the gods (120) and concord is the ultimate aim of the laws (124–5).

Rachana Kametkar, 'Psychology and the inculcation of virtue in Plato's *Laws*' (127–148), focuses on the nature and role of non-rational motivations and their influence on the rational part of the soul. The author, however, does not explain how reason can be persuaded by non-rational emotions. The article relies too much on an agent-like conception of the parts of the soul, instead of considering Plato's more nuanced developmental view of the non-rational into the rational. And even this view, as he himself is ready to admit in *Letter* vii, is not easily explainable, if at all.

Christopher Bobonich, 'Images of irrationality' (149–171), surmises that at least some non-rational motivations have conceptual and even linguistic content, so as to be able also to have value content. Thus, non-rational motivations can play an important role in education, as building blocks for later conception of order. Non-rational motivations are not wholly distinct from reason (Bobonich says: 'at least some'). Plato is quite clear about this,

most clearly in the *Symposium*. But the stress on the linguistic, as opposed to the conceptual, aspect seems unwarranted.

Thanassis Samaras, 'Family and the question of women in the *Laws*' (172–196), identifies in the program of the *Laws* the conservative ideal of the Greek soldier-farmer. But, in his view, the tension between the private household and collective institutions is not finally resolved. Plato upholds equality of opportunity for men and women, although he does not believe in essential gender equality. Similarly, he does not reconcile the active political role to be allowed to women and their passive role as members of a traditional household. But it is to be noted that this difficulty is already inherent in the tension between the ideal project and its material implementation.

For Robert Mayhew, 'The theology of the *Laws*' (197–216), that theology is imprecise or incomplete. He notes that Plato himself is aware of this vagueness. Philosophical theology is too intellectually difficult, some questions may not be answerable by humans, and it may not even be pious to investigate them. But the last two claims conflict with the assertion that the highest god, as Mayhew recognizes, is reason. As he rightly claims, Plato's theology is devised to support ethics and it is also the case that to expose citizens to deep and obscure questions would risk leading them to doubt the better established tenets of Magnesia's theology. In discussing these points, Mayhew skirts the vexed question of the evil soul, on which one would like to hear more of his views.

The last contribution, by André Laks, 'Plato's truest tragedy: *Laws* Book 7, 817a–d' (217–231), expands Plato's *dictum* that the constitution of Magnesia is the truest tragedy (cf. *R.* x): a representation of the best and finest life. The context of the law should be an expression of reason. Rational understanding inevitably conflicts with pleasures, thus partly explaining why the Magnesian constitution is a tragedy.

This is a valuable volume, at the cutting edge of the recently rekindled scholarship on Plato's *Laws*. There is a good bibliography and the book is well produced, with very few printing errors.

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