

KILLING SOCRATES: PLATO'S LATER THOUGHTS ON DEMOCRACY*

Abstract: The paper has two main aims, one larger and one slightly narrower. The larger aim is to undermine further a tendency that has dogged the interpretation of Platonic political philosophy in modern times, despite some dissenting voices: the tendency to *begin* from the assumption that Plato's thinking changed and developed over time, as if we already had privileged access to his biography. The slightly narrower aim is to reply to two charges of intellectual parricide made against Plato. The first is explicit and well known: that he recommended political structures of a sort that would exclude the free-ranging philosophical inquiry sponsored by Socrates. The second is implicit in the standard reading of the *Politicus*, and says that Plato actually came to approve (however reluctantly) of Athens' execution of his teacher. I argue that the relevant passage (*Plt.* 297C - 302B) has been misunderstood, and that it is in fact fully consistent with the blanket criticism we find in the *Republic* of all existing forms of constitution. The Athenian democracy still got it wrong, both in general, and in making the particular decision to kill off old Socrates. I also argue that so far from proposing to abolish Socratic inquiry, Plato's political works as a whole (*Republic*, *Politicus* and *Laws* included) are actually designed to show the need for it.

THIS paper is intended as a contribution towards a proper understanding of Plato as a writer of philosophy, and of how we are to read the dialogues. I take it either as a given, or more usually as the conclusion of an argument, that there are not merely wrong ways of reading Plato, but that there is in broad terms a right way, which we can discover – or to which we can approximate – on the basis of what he wrote. However, not only has he historically been read in a variety of very different ways, but many individual dialogues and individual contexts in the dialogues appear to be fundamentally different in one or more of several aspects: their philosophical content, their method, or their mood or tone – which is one reason, of course, for the variety of interpretations available, as different readers privilege different parts or aspects of the corpus. Nor is this a merely nugatory or marginal issue. On the one hand, Plato has been viewed (as he apparently was by his immediate successors in the Academy, or by the neo-Platonists) as the author and proponent of more or less grand metaphysical systems; for others, ancients and moderns, he is a *sceptic*, who typically refuses – in an appropriately sceptical tone of voice – finally to commit himself to anything, or fails to find any grounds for doing so. My own ultimate interest is in trying to mediate in this kind of dispute, particularly in its modern form. The first step is to try to uncover the layers of assumptions and prejudices we typically bring to the reading of Plato, and the present paper forms part of this particular programme. A second starting-point is that if the history of philosophy matters, then it matters to get straight what particular figures in that history were about; and a third is that the study of the history of philosophy does matter. But if I were asked to justify this last assumption, I should certainly formulate my reply at least partly in terms of *quality*; the ease of the defence, within a philosophical (as opposed to a historical or an antiquarian) context, will increase in direct proportion with the quality of the mind, and the ideas and arguments, that the study reveals. On the present occasion, I hope to demonstrate why we should resist a particular kind of interpretation which would put – and actually does put –

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will shortly appear in French. The paper has not so far been published in English, but its conclusions are for the most part reflected in the translation and commentary referred to in n.32 below (see also John M. Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis 1997) 294-358 (a revised version of the same translation), and most recently C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Statesman* (Indianapolis 1999) – a still further revised version of the translation, with a new introduction). (Two anonymous readers for *JHS* made a number of helpful suggestions, of which I hope to have taken full advantage.)

Plato's claim to serious attention in considerable jeopardy. So far as I can see, the sort of interpretation I have in mind would involve his having thrown away, towards the end of his life, the larger part of what he had previously believed in, and used much time, effort and passion in defending. Most importantly, he would more or less openly have rejected that concern with human virtue and the pursuit of knowledge which we typically associate with him – and with his mentor Socrates.

At the same time, I am also concerned to reject the type of approach to Plato that underlies the particular interpretation I wish to replace. Most contemporary interpreters of Plato begin by assuming that his thought developed over his lifetime, which is in itself, perhaps, an innocuous assumption. But they then go on to take it for granted that this development or evolution is one of the main factors, perhaps even the most important factor, behind the apparent differences between the ideas he presents in the course of the dialogues. Thus it is normal to begin any introduction to Plato by dividing up his dialogues into 'early', 'middle' and 'late', and characterizing the thought of these three 'periods' in certain standard ways: so 'early' roughly equals 'Socratic', 'middle' is 'constructive' or 'optimistic' (or, alternatively, the period when Plato went too far), while 'late' is 'critical', or 'pessimistic', or again, when he abandoned the platonist excesses of the middle period and started doing real philosophy. Features in individual dialogues from each group are then explained according to this pattern. This is the kind of approach to which I wish to object. It would of course be absurd to resist altogether the possibility that Plato's thought evolved or changed; my proposal is simply that this kind of explanation should be used as a last resort, because it rests on assumptions about his state of mind, and his biography in general, to which we have either no independent access, or very little access. The fundamental point – of course, though it is often forgotten – is that, in interpreting philosophers, we should begin by taking their arguments seriously, and bring in other factors – that is, to explain the arguments themselves¹ – only if all else fails.

In this paper I shall be examining and criticizing one especially striking, and important, example of this 'developmentalist' reading of the Platonic corpus. The text which will be at the centre of the paper will be the *Politicus* (or '*Statesman*'), one of Plato's least read, and least loved, works. In modern accounts of Platonic political philosophy, the *Politicus* occupies a position midway between the 'middle' period *Republic* and the late *Laws*, which is also roughly where the hypotheses of the stylometrists have placed it in chronological terms. In the *Laws*, according to the standard interpretation, Plato gives up the central idea of the *Republic* (central, that is, in so far as we view the *Republic* as a work of political philosophy): in Magnesia, the city of the *Laws*, philosopher-kings no longer rule (though as a matter of fact, on the standard dating, they have in fact already ceased to rule in the *Timaeus-Critias*). They have ceded their place to an impersonal *law*, which is now the closest we can come in the real world to the rule of reason. It is the *Politicus*, on the usual account, which – lying as it does between the two master-works – provides the theoretical backing for this shift of view.

The shift may be described in a variety of different ways, positive and negative. It is the prime exhibit for those who charge the late Plato with pessimism: after all, he himself, in the *Laws*, describes the sovereignty of law as a 'second-best', or to be 'chosen as second' (διὸ τὸ δεύτερον αἰρετέον, τάξις τε καὶ νόμος, 875D). He would have preferred the glorious vision of the direct rule of reason, but acknowledges that he has to settle for something less. Others describe this as *realism*: a realism brought on by old age and experience. Another move, often combined with the previous one, is to say that it is a matter of Plato's growing realization of the

¹ The *premisses* of the arguments will naturally be a different matter.

importance of constitutionalism:² in the real world, what we need is the solid basis provided by *law*, for all its imperfections. And finally, the shift has been taken as one towards a greater appreciation – however reluctant – of the value of democracy; for the stranger from Athens who leads the conversation in the *Laws* lays it down that any constitution worthy of the name must combine features of monarchy, on the one hand, and features of *democracy* on the other.³ How far we seem to have come from the *Republic*, with its scathing treatment of democracy as only one stage away from the terminal disease of the city, tyranny. It is this view of things – that the *Politicus* is signalling a reassessment by Plato of the merits of democracy – that I shall focus on in this paper.

I

The little dialogue *Menexenus* shows Socrates rehearsing to his younger friend (Menexenus) a speech in praise of those Athenians who have died for their city. This speech is one which he has learned by heart; Aspasia, Pericles' partner, and mother of his children, made it up, partly impromptu, and partly out of bits and pieces of the more famous funeral speech which Pericles himself delivered, and which Aspasia – so Socrates tells us – actually wrote. Aspasia's new production consists, as funeral speeches did, not only of praise of the dead, but of praise of their city: among other things that Plato has Socrates say is that democratic Athens is really an 'aristocracy which has the good opinion of the mass of the people' (μετ' εὐδοξίας πλήθους ἀριστοκρατία, 238D), insofar as the sovereign people choose the best to rule over them. Most readers – most, that is, of those who take the dialogue as authentic – have taken the *Menexenus* as a Platonic parody. But some of the ancients thought it a serious work, and Cicero even records (extraordinarily) that in his day, at least, it was actually recited annually as part of the city's way of doing honour to their dead:⁴ if the report is true (and we have no reason to doubt it except its strangeness), the tradition of the funeral speech has become frozen in a paradoxical way. Pamela Huby⁵ treats the dialogue as part satirical, part contribution to a debate on a hot issue of practical politics in the 380s, which has something in common with present welfare debates: whether the city could afford to go on looking after the children of those killed in defending it. Charles Kahn is also inclined to take the *Menexenus* seriously, but in a different way.⁶

That it is *wholly* serious is surely out of the question. In particular, Plato surely cannot be serious in suggesting that Athenian democracy is really an aristocracy, on the grounds that the *people* choose the best men to rule them, or indeed that they *choose* their rulers. What do they know (Plato would ask)? According to the *Republic*, they are simply unqualified to make any political judgement, except perhaps that they are better off ruled by someone other than themselves; and the *Politicus* clearly agrees that the people at large are incapable of acquiring expertise at anything, let alone at the most important thing of all, ruling or governing the city. And yet, as we shall see, on the standard interpretation of the *Politicus*, Plato goes on to accept – however reluctantly – that government based on a lesser or greater degree of ignorance, combined with experience, is the best we can hope for. If we could work it chronologically, we might think of trying to treat the *Menexenus* itself as a signal of Plato's new-found *rapprochement* to a system of government which he had spent the early and middle years of his life despising – in which case the dialogue would no longer be a parody, or would be no more than gently ironic. Plato

² See e.g. C. Gill, 'Rethinking constitutionalism in *Statesman* 291-303', in C.J. Rowe (ed.), *Reading the Statesman (Proceedings of the III Symposium Platonicum, Sankt Augustin 1995)* 292-305.

³ *Laws* 693Dff. This last view, to judge e.g. from the participants in the Symposium on the *Politicus* (see n.2),

is probably close to being standard (see also below); it may be combined with one or more of the previous three.

⁴ *Orator* 151.

⁵ *Phronesis* 2 (1957) 104-14.

⁶ *CPh* 57 (1963) 220-34.

certainly had good reason to despise democratic Athens, which had condemned and executed Socrates. But again, according to a very familiar view, he himself in the end betrayed him. I am thinking here of Popper's attack on Plato in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (so e.g. 'Plato tried to implicate Socrates in his grandiose attempt to construct the theory of the arrested society; and he had no difficulty in succeeding, for Socrates was dead').⁷ In any case – whatever our feelings about the specific terms of Popper's attack – it is certainly tempting to see the later Plato as deliberately setting out to exclude just that kind of commitment to the discovery, or at least the search for, truth for which Socrates is typically (and justifiably) held to stand. It would just be that, paradoxically (paradoxically, that is, according to Popper's lights), that would be combined with a new readiness to cohabit with democracy.

II

It is this characterization of Plato's later political thinking, as being at least more accommodating to democracy, on which – as my title suggests – I shall focus (but the question of his alleged 'betrayal' of Socrates will keep coming back into the picture). The kind of position which I mean to confront is admirably summed up in the following passage from G.H. Sabine, describing the *Politicus*:

[F]or the first time Plato recognizes two types of democracy, a moderate and an extreme form. More striking still, he now makes democracy the best of the lawless states, though the worst of the law-abiding states.⁸ Both forms of democracy are therefore better than oligarchy. Evidently Plato has moved towards the position later taken in the *Laws*, in which the second-best⁹ is described as an attempt to combine monarchy with democracy. It is a tacit admission that in the actual state the factors of popular assent and participation cannot be overlooked.

Plato's new theory, then, is to be frankly second-best, involving the unsatisfactory contrast of the heavenly with the earthly city. The available stock of human intelligence is not great enough to make the philosopher-king a possibility. The humanly best solution, therefore, is to rely upon such wisdom as can be embodied in the law and upon the natural piety of men toward the wisdom of use and wont. The bitterness with which Plato accepts this compromise is apparent in the irony with which he remarks that now the execution of Socrates must be justified. The state, with its inherited law, must be conceived as somehow an imitation of the heavenly city ...¹⁰

This passage from Sabine also provides an explanation of the main title of the present paper: 'Killing Socrates'. If the *Politicus* does indeed tell us, or suggest, that the ideal rule of a single knowledgeable individual (roughly, Sabine's 'philosopher-king') is an impossibility, or even unlikely, we will presumably have to settle for the second-best; and the second-best, on the usual, modern view of the *Politicus*, which Sabine reflects, is some form of government – by one person, few, or many – which demands absolute adherence to the law,¹¹ and *would actually involve making investigation into the truth a capital offence*, on the grounds that 'nothing must be wiser

⁷ *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 1: *The Spell of Plato* (2nd edn, London 1952) 194. Popper's critique of Plato would not now be widely accepted in its details; however, in its general terms it remains extraordinarily influential (not many, I think, would put up resistance for long against attributing totalitarian tendencies to Plato – though I myself believe the case for doing so rather weak).

⁸ The *Politicus* identifies three broad types (those ruled by one person, those ruled by few, and those ruled by many) split two ways (into law-abiding, or law-bound, and lawless).

⁹ I.e. (in Sabine's view) the best practicable state.

¹⁰ G.H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (3rd edn, New York 1961) 75. Cf. also J. Annas and R. Waterfield (eds.), *Plato: Statesman* (*Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, Cambridge 1995) xviii–xx.

¹¹ See esp. 300C1–3 (in Waterfield's translation): 'And that is why, when laws and statutes *have* been established ... the second-best course is to prevent any individual or body of people from ever infringing them in the slightest.'

than the law'.¹² Most other interpreters have preferred not to recognize this consequence, but it seems to me to be real enough: on their reading, the implication of Plato's text is that sticking to *any* set of laws, including democratic ones, will be the best practicable course; but sticking to them must apparently include the need to outlaw all research which might lead to a demonstration that the laws could be bettered.¹³ But in that case, it was right in principle¹⁴ for the democracy to get rid of Socrates; and in fact it is quite clear that the relevant passage is meant to recall his execution.¹⁵ If we have any doubt about it, we need only think of that famous passage in the *Gorgias* (521D) where Socrates is made to claim to be the only true statesman, or expert in the 'art of statesmanship', on the grounds that he alone was concerned about telling people the truth, rather than what they wanted to hear. If anyone was to appear 'wiser than the law', it had to be Socrates, even despite his continual claim that he knew nothing – and in this *Gorgias* passage, in effect, he says it himself. But then – and this is my central point – if Plato really is willing even to contemplate the idea that the democracy was justified in killing Socrates, he will surely have abandoned everything he ever seemed to stand for – not only the idea of free inquiry, but the main thing that that inquiry always seemed to be *for*, namely the goal of a better and more virtuous life. This must be so, because on any account the laws to which strict adherence would be required would be imperfect, and would be framed with ends that are not only different from those of the virtuous city, but actually inconsistent with them (because they would be framed by people without expert knowledge).¹⁶ In short, if we are being asked to settle for absolute adherence to law, under the terms given, we are also being asked to approve of the killing of Socrates. So my question is: can we really suppose Plato to have been quite so prodigal with his principles (and if so, what would the consequences be for our assessment of him?).

¹² 'And ... it will be necessary to establish a law against all the following things: if anyone is found looking into steersmanship and seafaring, or health and truth in the doctor's art, in relation to winds and heat and cold, above and beyond the written rules, and making clever speculations of any kind in relation to such things, in the first place the law will be that one must not call him an expert doctor or an expert steersman but a star-gazer, some babbling sophist; and then that anyone who wishes of those permitted to do so should indict him, and bring him before some court or other, as corrupting other people younger than himself and inducing them to engage in the arts of the steersman and the doctor not in accordance with the laws, but rather to take autonomous control of ships and patients; and if he is found guilty of persuading anyone, whether young or old, contrary to the laws and the written rules, that the most extreme penalties must be imposed on him. For it will be laid down that there must be nothing wiser than the laws' (299B2-C6). This is of course caricature, and the extreme case, but the implicit reference in the whole context to Athens' treatment of Socrates gives it a special edge (*cf.* Sabine's 'irony').

¹³ 299B-E forms the climax of a passage which describes the consequences of a form of government which adhered with absolute strictness to the established laws; 300A, however, declares that to have officers of state infringing the laws without a second thought, because they had been bribed or because they owed some personal favour, would be far worse; we then have the passage at 300C1-3 quoted above (n.11). It is reasonable,

then, given the 'And that is why' (διὰ ταῦτα) in 300C1, to suppose that the Visitor from Elea is advocating absolute adherence to the laws *despite* the appalling consequences, including those described in 299B-C (cited in n.12). 'Preventing any individual ... from ever infringing [the laws] in the slightest' will evidently include, if necessary, 'imposing the most extreme penalties' on those who look into the truth about things, on the ground that it might turn out that the law is in some respect or other less good than it could be.

¹⁴ I emphasize 'in principle': what the Visitor from Elea is suggesting is that if it is true, as Young Socrates suggests, that keeping to one's existing legal traditions is the best thing to do, then it will also be true that one may have to kill off people like Socrates. Since Athens in 399 BC *did* kill Socrates, the implication perhaps is that she was herself operating on Young Socrates' principle; and no doubt that principle would have been widely accepted. If the motives behind Socrates' execution were in fact different, then so much the worse for Athens and its judges. See further below.

¹⁵ Any researcher must be called a 'star-gazer, some babbling sophist (μετεωρολόγον, ἀδολέσχην τινὰ σοφιστήν)', and be indicted 'as corrupting other people younger than himself ...' (299B7-8).

¹⁶ Of course it might turn out that a city got things wholly right by accident, or divine good fortune; but if Plato ever recognizes this possibility, he does so only to treat it ironically (I refer here to the case of the 'good' politicians discussed at the end of the *Meno*).

I believe, however, that this reading of the *Politicus* is radically mistaken, and that Plato's condemnation of populist democracy¹⁷ is as vigorous and complete as ever. *A fortiori*, there is no forgiveness of the Athenian democracy for killing Socrates. To establish my case, I need first to supply more of the context in the *Politicus*.

The part of the dialogue that immediately concerns me runs from 297C to 302B. The Eleatic 'Stranger' or Visitor is in the process of trying to establish the proposition that all existing politicians are mere impostors, invading the space that properly belongs to the true statesman or king; if he can show this, then he will be justified in distinguishing what they do from real statesmanship, just as he has previously divided off all sorts of other activities (pig-breeding, defence-manufacturing, and so on). Young Socrates, at 293E, resisted the suggestion, made by the Stranger, that the ideal king will not subject himself to the constraint of law; my passage forms part of the Stranger's response to this objection. The objection is obviously a crucial one. If the *law* is to be sovereign, that would allow other forms of constitution, and other kinds of politician, to come back into the reckoning alongside the best, since knowledge would no longer be an absolute requirement of good government, as the Stranger has maintained. In the course of his response, he has proposed that the non-ideal constitutions are mere 'imitations' of the best constitution, some 'for the better', others 'for the worse';¹⁸ it is this that he is now explaining to Young Socrates. (Of course, if constitutions are themselves mere 'imitations', then those who run them will be 'imitators' – and so the impostors he claimed that they are.)

His basic strategy is, first, to suggest that the principle which people generally recommend, that of sticking precisely to established law, is intelligible, but in itself absurd as a way of running a state. Just think, he says, what medicine or seamanship would be like, if they operated according to the same principles: with rules for them set up in an assembly, on advice from any and every source; with officers to oversee them who were chosen from the mass of the citizens; with annual audits of the officers, to make sure they had kept strictly to the laws during their period of office; and with research and investigation into health or the weather treated as a capital offence.¹⁹ On the other hand, to have officers – whether in this imagined situation, or in the city – acting without regard for the laws, and for their own personal motives, would be far, far worse.

This last suggestion, at 300A, together with its sequel, is – as we have seen – what forms the basis of the usual modern interpretation of the *Politicus*, as announcing a reconciliation with democracy and with 'reality'. I now want to introduce a rather larger slice of the text from 300A, first in the translation by J.B.Skemp, as modified by Martin Ostwald:²⁰

STR. Yes, but there is a further possible degradation to consider. Suppose we compel each of these arts to function according to a written code and place a magistrate in charge of this code either by election or by the fall of the lot. Suppose then that he has no regard for the written code and, from motives of personal profit and favoritism, embarks on a course contrary to law, without any knowledge. Evil as the former state was, will not this latter one be still worse?

Y.S. It will indeed.

STR. *The laws which have been laid down represent the fruit of long experience - one must admit that. Each of them incorporates the clever advice of some counselor who has persuaded the public assembly to enact it. Any man who dares by his action to infringe these laws is guilty of a wrong many times greater than the wrong done by strict laws, for such transgression, if tolerated, would do even more than a written code to pervert all ordered activity.*

¹⁷ I add 'populist' to exclude whatever aspect of the city of the *Laws* might be considered as democratic; whatever else it is, Magnesia is not governed on 'populist' principles. For the role of the assembly in law-bound states (in fact oligarchic as well as democratic), see *Politicus* 298Cff.

¹⁸ 293E, 297C (cf. n.41 below).

¹⁹ 299C, with 297E.

²⁰ *Plato's Statesman*, tr. J.B.Skemp, ed., with an introduction, by M. Ostwald (Indianapolis 1992). I use this translation because it and/or Skemp's original version has certainly been the most widely used since its first publication in 1952. If it has not helped form the consensus, it has at any rate been a part of it.

Y.S. Yes, of course it would.

STR. Then so long as men enact laws and written codes governing any department of life, our second-best method of government is to forbid any individual or any group to perform any act in contravention of these laws.

Y.S. True.

STR. *Then laws would seem to be written copies of scientific truth in the various departments of life they cover, copies based as far as possible on the instructions received from those who really possess the scientific truth on these matters.*

Y.S. Yes, of course.

STR. And yet we must never lose sight of the truth we stated before. The man with the real knowledge, the true statesman, will in many instances allow his activities to be dictated by his art and pay no regard to written prescriptions. He will do this whenever he is convinced that there are other measures which are better than the instructions he previously wrote and sent to people at a time when he could not be there to control them personally.²¹

Y.S. Yes, that was what we said.

STR. So any individual or any group who possess a code of laws but try to introduce some change in them because they consider it an improvement are doing the same thing according to their lights as the true statesman.

Y.S. Yes.

STR. *But if they acted like this with minds unenlightened by knowledge, they would indeed try to copy the true original, but would copy it very badly.*²² If on the other hand they possessed scientific knowledge, it would no longer be a case of copying at all; it would be the real and original truth we are talking about.

Y.S. Certainly.

STR. Now it has been argued already and we have agreed that no large group of men is capable of acquiring any art, be it what you will.

Y.S. That stands as our agreed conclusion.

STR. Granted then, that an art of kingly rule exists, the wealthy group or the whole citizen body would never be able to acquire this science of statesmanship.

Y.S. How could they?

STR. *It seems to follow that there is an invariable rule which these imitative constitutions must obey if they mean to reproduce as far as they can that one true constitution,²³ which is government by the one real statesman using real statecraft. They must all keep strictly to the laws once they have been laid down and never transgress written enactments and established, ancestral customs ... (Politicus 300A-301A).*

The crucial lines are the ones italicized. Any reader of this version of Plato's text would reasonably suppose (a) that 'STR.' was validating existing law, on the basis (b) that it is the result of experience, clever advice, and the test of public opinion; (c) that existing laws are 'copies of scientific truth' (a point somehow derived from what has preceded: '*Then laws would seem to be written copies ...*'); (d) (possibly) that people or cities who try to change the law in the absence of 'scientific knowledge' will end up with bad laws ('bad imitations'); and (e) that cities will imitate the best constitution well if they only stick to their existing laws (just in so far – apparently – as these are 'copies' of those which would obtain under the best constitution). Give or take a detail or two, this is pretty much what one would get from any of the translations of the dialogue I have been able to consult; and it is also faithfully reflected in most of the secondary literature on the *Politicus* as well as in histories of political philosophy. I have quoted Sabine's reading of the passage; that of George Klosko²⁴ is very similar. Other examples (in chronological order):

²¹ See 294Cff.

²² This is what I shall call a 'bad imitation' of the best constitution.

²³ So producing a 'good imitation'.

²⁴ *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (New York 1986).

- (1) 'But things would fall into still greater confusion, if the men appointed under such enactments disregarded them, not in the interests of science, but of their own private wishes. For the laws have at least some basis of experience and plausible counsel. Hence if laws are made, it is best, though only second best, that they should be enforced' (Campbell, 1867).²⁵
- (2) 'The Stranger expounds: The accepted written laws, whatever their insufficiency, are based on a great deal of experience and on advice given with good intent; the attempt to violate them leads to faultiness many times greater ... These laws, written by men who know as much as they are able to know, contain in every case nothing but imitations of the truth ...' (Klein, 1977).²⁶
- (3) 'To be sure, "experience" is a basis inferior to *epistēmē*, and the need to "please" and "persuade" the multitude is just what the stranger exposed as "ridiculous" earlier. His adverb *hekasta*, moreover, suggests the piecemeal character of genuine reform. On the other hand, the negative look of these features turns to positive when the law-state is compared to the abuse of law. "Much experience" is much superior to the little experience of one group or individual; and however outnumbered, the few competent counselors do give the multitude access to *some* insight ... The negative sense of [the Visitor's] notion "imitation" is already clear: rulers who lack political *epistēmē* are facsimiles, as it were, and not the genuine thing they pretend to be. The comparison between the law-state and the abuse of the laws, however, reveals a positive sense as well. Just insofar as its laws are based on or reflect the insight and counsel of "knowing men" (*para tōn eidotōn*, 300c), the law-state will be *like* the polity of the true statesman, resembling it as a sort of copy ...' (Miller, 1980).²⁷
- (4) 'The regime which is said to have good laws is a better imitation of the true regime than are those which are relatively deficient imitations and imitate the best regime "for the worse" (293d8-e5)' (Scodel, 1987).²⁸
- (5) 'Administrators who lack [true] knowledge ... must alter not a word of the lawcodes they inherit, must hold rigidly to the customs of their ancestors – at least, if they are to achieve the second-best goal, the closest imitation of the true political art ...' (Ferrari, 1995).²⁹

The one dissenting voice I have encountered from the last century is that of G.R. Morrow;³⁰ from the nineteenth century that of Grote³¹ (if there are others, as there may well be, at any rate what I have described is certainly the predominant view in the modern period).

Now it had long bothered me that Plato should have spent so much space and energy – in the long section immediately preceding 300A (as Miller, for example, points out) – in *attacking* current methods of legislation as absurd, and as likely to produce nothing but absurdities, only then to turn round and say 'Well, at least the established laws are based on experience, and on the basis of advice and persuasion; so they are acceptable/tolerable – better them, in any case, than allowing individuals a free hand.' It bothered me in particular that having identified existing laws as deriving from some sort of show of hands, he should then pass straight to saying that they were somehow 'copies of original truth': *how?* How did the advisers to the assemblies, or the assemblies themselves, ever get access to the 'original truth'? We should note particularly the shift from 'some counselor<s>' in 300A to 'the instructions received from those who really possess the scientific truth on these matters' only a few lines later: where did the 'counselors' get their instructions? But presumably everyone else sensed the same difficulty. The only explana-

²⁵ L. Campbell, *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato* (Oxford 1867), summary attached to text of 300A-B.

²⁶ J. Klein, *Plato's Trilogy. Theaetetus, the Sophist and the Statesman* (Chicago 1977) 189-90.

²⁷ M.H. Miller, Jr., *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman* (The Hague 1980) 100.

²⁸ H.R. Scodel, *Diaeresis and Myth in Plato's Statesman (Hypomnemata 85, Göttingen 1987)* 154. See also C. Griswold, 'Politikē epistēmē in Plato's Statesman', in J. Anton and G. Preus (eds.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Albany, NY 1989) 3.141-67, and Annas and Waterfield (n.10 above).

²⁹ G.R.F. Ferrari, 'Myth and conservatism in Plato's Statesman', in *Reading the Statesman* (n.2) 395; cited without a footnote which strongly asserts the connection of 300A with 298A-300C ('[t]he assembly is to lay down *once and for all* the laws by which medicine and helmsmanship will be governed ... (298E2-3)').

³⁰ G.R. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City* (Princeton 1960), e.g. 585.

³¹ G. Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates* (2nd edn, London 1888) 267 ff.

tion could be well-meaning confusion on Plato's part, either about the substance of what he wanted to say, or in the way he chose to express it.

However, when I came to do my own translation,³² I realized that the Greek does not compel us to take the passage like this at all. The result was as follows:

VISITOR. But what about the following consideration? If we were to compel each of the things we have mentioned to be done according to written rules, and the person who has been elected or has been appointed to office by lot, on the basis of chance, to oversee these written rules of ours, but this person were to take no notice of what is written down, for the sake either of profiting in some way or of doing some personal favour, and were to undertake to do different things, contrary to these, when he possesses no knowledge, would this not be an evil still greater than the previous one?

YOUNG SOCRATES. Yes, very true.

V. *Yes, for if, I imagine, contrary to the laws that have been established on the basis of much experiment, with some advisers or other having given advice on each subject in an attractive way, and having persuaded the majority to pass them – if someone dared to act contrary to these, he would be committing a mistake many times greater than the other, and would overturn all expert activity to a still greater degree than the written rules.*

Y.S. Yes – how would he not?

V. For these reasons, then, the second-best method of proceeding, for those who establish laws and written rules about anything whatever, is to allow neither individual nor mass ever to do anything contrary to these, anything whatsoever.

Y.S. Correct.

V. *Well,*³³ *imitations of the truth of each and every thing would be these, wouldn't they - those things issuing from those who know which have been written down so far as they can be?*

Y.S. Of course.

V. Now we said – if we remember – that the knowledgeable person, the one who really possesses the art of statesmanship, will do many things with his expertise in relation to his own activity without taking any notice of the written laws, when other things appear to him better, contrary to the things that have been written down by him and given as orders to some people who are not currently with him.

Y.S. Yes, that's what we said.

V. *Well,*³⁴ *any individual whatever or any large collection of people whatever, for whom there are actually written laws established, whatever they undertake to do which is different, contrary to these, on the grounds that it is better, do, don't they, the same thing, so far as they can, as that true expert?*

Y.S. Absolutely.

V. *Well then, if they were to do such a thing without having expert knowledge, they would be undertaking to imitate what is true, but would imitate it altogether badly;* but if they did it on the basis of expertise, this is no imitation but that very thing that is most truly what it sets out to be?

Y.S. I agree completely - I think.

V. But it is established as agreed between us – we agreed it before, at any rate – that no large collection of people is capable of acquiring any kind of expertise whatever.

³² For C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Statesman*, with translation and commentary (Warminster 1995).

³³ For this – 'looser progressive' rather than, as on Skemp's reading, inferential – use of οὐκοῦν, see Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (2nd edn, Oxford 1954) 434. On the reading proposed, οὐκοῦν here belongs to the third of the four types of non-inferential οὐκοῦν recognized by Denniston, '... proceeding to a new point, or a new step in the argument: "Now", "Again"' (the clearest of Denniston's examples are probably in *Protagoras* 330C-D). The 'great variety' (Denniston) of Platonic usage in relation to οὐκοῦν means that there is no presumption in favour of the 'strictly inferential' use: in the immediate neighbourhood in the *Politicus* the word is

once used like this (300E7), once not (299A8), while on two occasions any inferential sense is surely less than 'strict' (300D4, 301B5). In that case the choice between my 'well' (= Denniston's 'now' or 'again') and Skemp's 'then' depends on the requirements of the context – which seem to me to speak unequivocally for 'well' ('now', 'again'). (I have little useful to say on the following μέν: I take it to look forward to a contrast which is not, in the event, marked by the expected δέ – but no doubt the interpretation which I am opposing will have its own way of handling it. The contrast in question is, of course, with other – and less successful – sorts of 'imitations'.)

³⁴ οὐκοῦν again (see n.33).

Y.S. Yes, it remains agreed.

V. Then³⁵ if some kind of kingly expertise exists, the collection of people consisting of the rich, and all the people together, could never acquire the expert knowledge of statesmanship.

Y.S. How could they?

V. *The requirement, then, as it seems, for all constitutions of this sort, if they are going to imitate well that true constitution of one man ruling with expertise, so far as they can, is that they must never – given that they have their laws – do anything contrary to what is written and ancestral customs ...*

The Stranger starts by giving the best possible reading of existing legislation and legislative processes, but a reading which criticizes as much as it praises: *experience*, according at least to the *Gorgias*, is to be distinguished from expert knowledge; and it is above all the *quality* of the ‘counselors’ that matters (on the other hand, as we have been told earlier, the consent or otherwise of the citizens is irrelevant).³⁶ The only thing that is clear so far is that having established laws and sticking to them is better than allowing officers of state to act as they individually think best, contrary to the laws; but, given the origin of existing laws, it is still a parlous situation. (When Socrates calls it ‘second-best’, he means just that it’s not the *first*-best, as people normally suppose; it is only *second*-best, of the three alternatives in play – better than the third, but that is all.³⁷) Then, in (300)C5-6 (‘Well, imitations of the truth ...’), the reference is not to existing laws, as on the standard interpretation; rather, the Visitor is enunciating a *general principle*, which will apply only the laws/rules that the knowledgeable statesman (or his counterpart in other fields) would set up.³⁸ *These* are the ‘imitations of the truth’ (because these are the only laws/rules that will have had people with knowledge, εἰδότες, involved in framing them).³⁹ Because the ideal, knowing king–legislator has knowledge, we must not insist that he sticks to them; he can change them when he thinks of something better (C8-D2). But (D9-E2) if anyone *else* tries to do the same thing, not on the basis of knowledge, the results must be (except perhaps by accident) bad, so this is a bad imitation of the best – i.e. when those without knowledge imitate the best statesman’s practice of changing laws when he thinks of something better (because in lacking knowledge they cannot reliably think of anything better, as he can).

The question then is what *good* imitation of the best amounts to. The Visitor says merely ‘... if [such inferior constitutions] are going to imitate well that true constitution ..., they must never – given that they have their laws – do anything contrary to [them]’ (300E11-301A3). This is no doubt consistent with the usual answer given by interpreters, that ‘good imitation’ means mirroring the laws of the best state as far as possible; but that interpretation seems to rely almost wholly on the support of 300B1-C7, and especially of 300C5-7,⁴⁰ which is no longer available – and in any case, it would still be appropriate to ask exactly *how* these inferior constitutions could

³⁵ οὐκοῦν again (see n.33).

³⁶ E.g. 292A-C.

³⁷ The *first*-best is, of course, the state ruled by the expert king on the basis of his expertise.

³⁸ Thus the οὐκοῦν in 300C4 marks, not an inference, but the introduction of a new stage in the argument: see n.33 above. (But once again, what kind of inference would it be? What, in all that the Visitor and Socrates have agreed together so far, would allow them to *infer* that all (?) ‘laws and written rules [which is how, in this context, I translate συγγράμματα] about anything whatever’ (300B8-C1) are ‘written copies of scientific truth ... copies based ... on instructions received from those who really possess the scientific truth ...’ (Skemp’s version of 300C3-6)? It is, surely, a fairly bizarre proposition in itself, even apart from the question of how it might be arrived at in this particular context.)

³⁹ David Sedley, in discussion, raised the question whether οὗτος (C4 ταῦτα) could properly be seen as looking forward (‘these, namely ...’); but in principle οὗτος *can* look forward (LSJ s.v. C.I.2; see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.12, 1144a13 for one apparently unambiguous example), the position of ταῦτα in the sentence is at least not against it, and the impossibility – in light of the preceding caricature of ordinary legislative processes – of identifying ‘those who establish laws and written rules about anything whatever’ (B8-C1) with ‘those who know’ (C5) seems to show that it cannot look back (*cf.* also CR 47 (1997) 278).

⁴⁰ I.e. of 300C5-7, understood as proposing that *existing laws* are ‘imitations of the truth’. I say that the interpretation in question relies ‘almost wholly’ on 300B1-C7; it might also (as one reader pointed out) appeal to 297D3-8, where the Visitor suggests that constitutions other than

have got access, or even approximated, to the laws of the best. Rather, I propose, imitating the best constitution well means simply sticking to established laws, which is just what the best city itself will do under the situation which always obtains in the inferior ones – namely when there is no knowledgeable person present to show what changes should be made. The distance that may separate these inferior constitutions from the best is presumably considerable, in so far as their laws will almost certainly be bad ones; and indeed the Stranger goes on to express his surprise at how long cities actually survive, not only those which turn their backs on their legal tradition, but those which do not (301E-302B).⁴¹

On this reading, existing laws will have no connection, except accidentally, with those of the ideal state; and therefore the main difficulty of the traditional interpretation – how inferior constitutions could ever have had access to the knowledge their lack of which actually makes them what they are – falls away. It is not so much a question of whether the traditional way of translating the passage is viable, as a translation of the Greek, but rather of what makes best sense of the passage, on the assumption that we should observe the principle of charity and do the best by Plato, holding back from attributing inconsistency or any other acknowledged vices to him unless absolutely necessary.

III

The consequences of the reading I propose are considerable. Plato is now not, in this passage, signalling any revalidation of existing forms of government; rather the reverse. Athenian democracy remains firmly out in the cold. What is more, there is nothing whatever that it can do to redeem itself; it faces only two alternatives, of which one is simply less bleak than the other: it must either set itself in stone, or allow (go on allowing?) disregard of the laws. Plato's attitude seems to be exactly the one that he represents (at least most of the time?) through the Socrates of the *Republic*, that the only *real* way forward, the only route which would give us a city really to be proud of, according to the most ascetic view, would be to wipe the slate clean and start again – and this should not surprise us, since as far as Plato is concerned, the purpose of statesmanship or the art of politics, and therefore of the city or the state which it governs, is the betterment of the souls of the citizens. None of the recognized forms of constitution in fact has that purpose; if any of them, *per impossibile*, acquired it, and the means to pursue it effectively (i.e. knowledge), it would in fact have become identical with the best constitution.

The next consequence is that the 'second-best' of the *Politicus* is not the same as the 'second-best' of the *Laws*. In the *Politicus*, the Stranger is arguing against the view that sticking to the established laws is the first and best option for city-states; no, he says – what is best is a city

the 'correct' one should preserve themselves by 'using the written prescriptions [συγγράμματα again: cf. n.38 above] of this one' (see also following note, on 'good imitation'). But again, it is hard to see how they could *literally* 'use' the prescriptions of the correct constitution, especially since it does not (yet?) exist; perhaps the Visitor means just that if they *were* to be saved, they would have to employ those ideal prescriptions (without which they are doomed: 301E-302D). See Rowe, *Plato: Statesman* (n.32), on 297D5-8.

⁴¹ 'Good imitation', then (as the same reader pointed out [see n.40]), will generally still turn out to be something pretty bad. But (a) it will be good insofar as it is a genuine imitation (as it were) – using a principle that is also used by the best constitution ('don't change the laws in the absence of knowledge': see text above); (b) this requirement that constitutes 'good imitation' appears to

be derived (300E11 δέ) from the claim that large numbers of people cannot possess the requisite knowledge (300E4-10), something that the *Politicus* assumes will inevitably lead to trouble (301E-302B is again here the star exhibit); (c) and when the contrast between the two kinds of imitation was originally set up, it was put only in comparative terms: one kind of imitation was to be 'for the better/finer' (ἐπὶ τὰ καλλίω/καλλίονα), the other 'for the worse/more shameful' (ἐπὶ τὰ αἰσχίονα/αἰσχίω: 293E, 297C). Sticking to the laws is simply the best that the ignorant can do – but it is certainly better than the 'bad' kind of imitation, which is (one might say) mere mimicry. 293E even allows that it will give rise to ('what we call') εὐνομία; but even being 'well-lawed' like this, according to the same passage, will not make constitutions other than the best one into *real* constitutions.

founded on *knowledge*. Setting the laws of a city – such as they are – in concrete is only second-best, and a pretty poor second at that. The ‘second-best’ of the *Laws*, by contrast, is a city which, while lacking the ideal ruler, has a set of laws deriving at least in part from philosophical reflection, which is much more like what the *Politicus* surely means by an ‘imitation of the truth’ (and in fact provision is made in the imaginary constitution of the *Laws* for changing the laws, when some possibility of improvement turns up: evidently, in that case, in the terms of the argument of the *Politicus*, there really is knowledge about in Magnesia). We can then reasonably ask how much will actually have changed since the *Republic*, and my own answer is – precious little. Nor is there much evidence of any reconciliation in the *Laws* to what Athenians of the day would have called democracy. The Athenian there starts by *selecting* the citizen body, so that being a citizen of Magnesia is not a matter of birth but of one’s being a person, as one might put it, of quality; whereas in Athenian democracy quality, so far from being a condition of citizenship, actually derived from it. ‘Democracy’ in the *Laws* merely means the involvement in and control, under the law, of day-to-day government by the 5,040 male citizens.

It is not difficult to see the appeal to the modern mind of a newly democratized Plato, finally beginning to see sense after the excesses of the *Republic*. Plato is after all one of the great minds of antiquity, if not the greatest; if he turned even into a reluctant quasi-democrat, that might make him just a little easier to *like*. Similarly with the other versions of the developmentalist reading: all allow us to give some sort of satisfying *shape* to a body of difficult material. Yet it is not at all clear that the Plato of the *Republic* is in fact any less ‘pessimistic’, or less of a realist or a constitutionalist, than the Plato of the *Laws*. It all depends on what sort of a work we think the *Republic* is, and in particular whether we think it contains a set of actual political proposals – that is, a blueprint for implementation (surely not) – or whether, for example, we think of it primarily as a work of critical reflection, or as a kind of thought-experiment; either sort of view, or both together, seem to me to be eminently defensible.

And then, we can reject Sabine’s suggestion that in the *Politicus* Plato ‘remarks that now the execution of Socrates must be justified’ (in fact nothing as explicit as a ‘remark’ was ever in question). The point is that it *would* be justified if the rule of absolute fixity in the laws could be justified, but in fact, as the Stranger makes clear, that rule cannot be right. What he is saying to his audience is: if you think that the best thing is to stick to your existing laws (which is a rational course of action, at least to the extent that changing the laws would require a knowledge you do not have), the consequence is a situation that will require you to do absurd things, including killing people like Socrates. But that is what you actually did, kill Socrates; so you *are* in an absurd position, with your democracies, and your oligarchies.

There are many questions that begin to arise at this point, not least about the whole nature and aim of Platonic political philosophy, and about whether Plato has any viable sort of prescription to offer along with his chilling diagnosis of contemporary political reality.⁴² But my main concern in this paper has been more limited: to describe a striking case of a familiar phenomenon, of our ability to find in a text just what we expect to find, despite all the evidence that it is not actually there. My immediate conclusion is that developmentalism (or, more broadly, the biographical approach) is a dangerous instrument, and that there are other instruments that ought to be deployed first – for example, a sense for the argument, in its full context, combined with a degree of charity (if required).

⁴² That he has a prescription is not in doubt (see the *Laws*); whether it is ‘viable’ or not is of course another matter. But if once again we ask ourselves what Plato’s utopias are really *for*, then the position is considerably

less bleak. (See below, and especially my claim that Plato remains fundamentally committed – despite all appearances – to the Socratic model of philosophy.)

IV

A last question, which will take me back to the other part of the ground on which I began. If Plato did not after all come to approve of the democracy for killing Socrates, we still have to deal with Popper's charge, that he nevertheless betrayed him; or, alternatively, that he preferred to finish him off quietly himself, in an act of intellectual parricide. On the count of being anti-democratic, Plato is unmistakably guilty, and proud of it (as I have said, the sense in which the city of Magnesia is a 'democracy' is minimal). But then on my view Socrates' own democratic credentials are pretty shaky. He might be a kind of 'equalitarian', and he might suppose that he and every citizen has a kind of contract to obey the city's (democratic) laws, but from the little evidence we have he disbelieved in the correctness of the fundamental principle of Athenian democracy, that 'he who wishes may speak'.⁴³ On the other hand, and this is where my defence of Plato begins, the Socratic model of philosophy, as something like (but not quite) free inquiry, remains at the centre of his thinking to the end. This model is encapsulated in the character Socrates who appears in the dialogues, and who always represents the ideal philosopher, and especially through his aspect as *know-nothing*.

This 'always' will be controversial. It is a standard view that after the 'Socratic' dialogues Socrates becomes increasingly knowledgeable, and that his protestations of ignorance often ring hollow; here, the *Republic* is the prime exhibit. Even more obviously, there is Popper's point, that Plato's 'ideal states', whether in the *Republic* or the *Laws*, appear to leave no space for the fearless, private pursuit of knowledge by the individual. I have no space to rebut these points properly and fully. However, I am convinced that the standard view is wrong, for several reasons. First, Socrates keeps on coming back – the familiar, ignorant Socrates: he is there in the *Republic* itself,⁴⁴ in the *Theaetetus*, and then in the *Philebus*, which is usually dated just before the *Laws*, Plato's last work. Secondly, the dialogues more often represent philosophy in terms of *searching, looking for*, knowledge about difficult subjects, and the *partial* acquisition of such knowledge, than in terms of the achievement of full knowledge. The predominant view is the one Socrates describes at the end of the *Phaedrus*, that wisdom, *sophia*, is a matter for gods, and that the most that human beings can aspire to is *love of wisdom*, i.e. *philo-sophia*. Thirdly, the view of philosophers as knowers rather than searchers appears – so far as I can see at present – (almost)⁴⁵ only in the context of political utopias: that is, in the *Republic*, the *Politicus*, and (more doubtfully) the *Laws*. The significance of this last fact, if it is one, is that in none of these three cases are we dealing with the world as it actually is; all presuppose conditions which in fact do not obtain. The question in each case is 'what would the world look like if ...?' *If*, among other things, philosophy had come up with the answers to questions about the good, the fine and the just, then we should have what we are supposed to believe would be the best possible kind of state or city – which is no doubt intended both to suggest to us what is wrong with our present arrangements and, at least roughly, how we might put things right (i.e., in general, by taking a more rational approach). The projection in this case includes a projection of how *philosophy itself* would look in the best of all imaginable – but not necessarily possible – worlds. In general, we may say, there are two images of the philosopher in the dialogues: one of the philosopher

⁴³ Admittedly Plato and Xenophon, from whom the evidence comes, are themselves scarcely friendly to democracy; and there is no indication that Socrates thought any other system would be better in practice. But insofar as government has to do with the conduct of life, and insofar as he (evidently) thought that a matter for the expert, if only one could be found, his thinking is *in principle*, from the point of view of Athenian democracy, anti-democratic.

⁴⁴ See especially 506B-E.

⁴⁵ According to *Symposium* 204A, the wise do not philosophize. The same dialogue appears to envisage the possibility of the acquisition of wisdom; yet it is dominated by the figure of Socrates, who like Eros seems permanently suspended between wisdom and ignorance.

as he is (and *Republic* 5 apart, it is always a he), blundering about in the real world and falling down wells⁴⁶ because he has his head in the clouds, and one of the philosopher as he might be in a different world, which he has organized after his own image, as he – ideally, but impossibly – would be.

One objection remains (though I am sure there will be others): it is still true that it is hard to see where *private*, non-state-sponsored philosophizing would go on in any of Plato's 'best states'. There is a government Academy, producing future rulers, in the city of the *Republic*, and there is a nocturnal government think-tank in the city of the *Laws*, and these institutions would evidently provide for all the cities' philosophical needs. Since they would evidently have all (or in the case of the *Laws*, perhaps just enough of) the answers, one might think there would be no point in anyone else's doing any thinking. In the *Republic*, there would actually be no one else *capable* of it in any case, since all potential philosophers would have been swallowed up by the state machine. But my instinct is to refuse to play games like this at all: if these cities are *imaginary*, I see no point in arguing about the details that Plato has omitted to put in.⁴⁷ (He might have added: if happiness depends on virtue, and full virtue on knowledge, then *of course* philosophy is still a first requirement for everybody – or, since *he* is certainly no egalitarian, everybody who is capable of it.)

This is where the point about Plato's conception of philosophy again becomes important. Of course, any city or individual who became wise would cease to be philosophical, if philosophy is seeking for wisdom. But if no city or individual *can* become wise, which is what I believe to be Plato's position, that is hardly a matter of great importance, except in so far as it indicates what we will already have guessed – that he is a platonist, who thinks that there are truths out there to be known. The independently minded intellectual excursions of a Socrates will still be what, in a real world, we shall all need; paradoxically, it is this point which I think Plato's fictions of arrested, frozen societies are meant, in a roundabout way, to promote.

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⁴⁶ Cf. *Theaetetus* 174A (Thales).

⁴⁷ More precisely: if Plato's cities are (primarily) imaginary constructs, designed (primarily), as I believe they are, to make his contemporaries think about the

institutions they presently have, then there is little point in trying to fill in the gaps in the accounts he has given us – in the way that we might, if they were intended as blueprints of some sort.