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Changing from within: Plato's later political thinking

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Republic and *Laws* both aim to sketch the good, happy society. Three notable points of contrast:

- *Republic* makes extreme demands on us for change; *Laws* is explicitly less extreme
- *Republic*'s demands are the products of philosophical reasoning; in *Laws* they emerge from a mostly unphilosophical conversation between three old men.
- *Republic* gives an answer to a challenge: show that the just life is happier than the unjust. *Laws* does not give a clear answer to a challenge; the speakers turn to produce a law-code for a new city after three books of apparently rambling discussion.

Examining the third point turns out to give us insight into the other two contrasts.

The conversation in the first three books of *Laws* covers apparently unlinked topics: courage and the whole of virtue as aims for states; education; pleasure; the prehistory of Greece; Greek states in the Persian War period; the educational value of drinking parties (*symposia*). Is this just a rambling collection of unrelated topics? Plato claims that there are links between the parts and says at the end of the introductory conversation that all this material has a single aim, that of discerning 'how a city might best be run, and individually how a person might best live his own life' (702a7-b1). But does it?

The introductory conversation

a) introduces informally several themes which are developed at length in the rest of the work, as the law-code for the new city of Magnesia is developed by the companions.
    - the priority of virtue
    - the source of law
    - the force of law
    - education
    - moral psychology

and also

b) introduces a new methodology, which Plato will employ throughout the work in developing the Magnesian law-code.

At a general level it's clear that Magnesia represents a compromise between Cretan/Spartan culture and Athenian culture (see especially Morrow's *Plato's Cretan City*). The introductory conversation in *Laws* makes it clear that this is presented in a way that is quite deferential to Cretan/Spartan culture.

- The setting is Cretan; it is the Athenian who is the visitor. The proposed city is to be a Cretan one.

- The Athenian three times presents the aim of the ideally good city, that all the citizens be virtuous and so happy, as the *real* aim of actual Cretan laws. He carries on doing this over the doubts of his companions, insisting that they are all really in agreement about what matters for an ideally good and so happy state. (628e2-632d7, 659c9-663d5, 705d3-e1—see the handout for extracts from these passages).

Why does the Athenian do this? Cretan/Spartan laws get something basic right: the city should have as an overall aim the good characters of the citizens, to be achieved through their obedience to the laws. However, their conception of the aim, as military courage, is too narrow. The Athenian persuades his companions to improve their kind of society by enlarging and rethinking its aim from within, rather than see change as coming from principles reforming society from the outside.

This softens up the Cretan and Spartan for the way the law-code for Magnesia is developed after book 3. Magnesia is to be a state of the Cretan/Spartan type, but what will make it good is its enlarged aim that the citizens be virtuous in all respects. This is achieved by the Athenian introducing a large amount of (modified) Athenian law and practice into the law-code.

A striking illustration: the Athenian lengthily persuades his companions that the Athenian institution of the drinking-party or *symposium*, which they simply reject, should actually be part of the education and culture of a state which aims at virtue. This shows how people brought up rigidly under Cretan/Spartan laws are capable of expanding their conceptions of courage, and of education, enough to accept a foreign practice as useful in their own culture.

Problem: we can see why *Plato* would think that Cretan/Spartan culture could be enlarged and improved so as to aim at virtue, and that it could be thus recommended to Cretans and Spartans – but is *the Athenian* portrayed as being less than honest with his companions? Does *he* really think that Cretan laws aim at the whole of virtue, and that Tyrtaeus in praising warriors is really praising the virtuous person?

Conclusion: We can see that an account like the above of the third striking difference between *Republic* and *Laws* illuminates the other two. Now that Plato is trying to change society from within, we can see why the results are less extreme than those resulting from abstract philosphical argument. We can also see why philosophical argument is not the appropriate means to present his new project for the good and happy city. Interestingly, it is a point about the literary structure of the *Laws* which illuminates the other two, though the work is often dismissed as having no literary structure.

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Passages from Laws books 1,2 and 4

1) Extracts from 628e2-632d7.

Cleinias: I would be surprised if our institutions, and Spartan ones too, were not wholly focussed on war.

Athenian: Perhaps. But we should not now attack them harshly, but ask them gently, since this is what we and they are most intent on. Follow the argument along with me. Let's take as example Tyrtaeus, who of all people was intent upon this matter. He said, 'I wouldn't mention a man or take account of him at all..' not even if he were the richest person – he goes on – nor if he had many good things (mentioning nearly all of them) unless he were at all times best in war……
But we think that this man [the loyal citizen], who is in a more difficult war [hostility between citizens], is far better than the other [the warrior] – nearly as much better as justice, temperance and practical wisdom unified together with courage, are better than courage alone…..Where does our present argument conclude, and what is the point it is trying to make clear in this? Clearly the following: that the Cretan lawgiver here, taught by Zeus, and any other lawgiver worth anything, will always establish laws looking to nothing other than the greatest virtue…which one might call 'complete justice'. The virtue that Tyrtaeus especially praises, though fine and appropriately celebrated by the poet, nonetheless would rightly be said to be fourth in order and in power.

Cleinias: My dear guest! We are ranking our lawgiver very low!

Athenian: No we're not – it is us ourselves that we are ranking low, for thinking that Lycurgus and Minos established Spartan and Cretan law with a view to war especially.

Cleinias: So what should we have said?

Athenian: What I think is true and right when talking of a divine hero: he established laws looking not to a part of virtue, and that the least, but to virtue as a whole……I greatly admire your approach to explaining the laws, Starting from virtue and saying that he establish the laws with this as their aim, is correct; but saying that he legislated everything with reference to part of virtue, the smallest at that, no longer seemed correct to me, which is why I made my later remarks. So how would I have liked you to describe the matter to me? Shall I tell you?

Cleinias: Yes, do.

Athenian: 'My dear guest,' you ought to have said, 'it is no accident that Cretan laws have a high

reputation among Greeks. They work correctly, rendering those that live by them happy, for they provide all good things. Goods are twofold, some human and some divine. The human ones are dependent on the divine ones; if a city gets the greater it gets the lesser too, but if not it is deprived of both sorts. The lesser ones are headed by health, and beauty is second; third is strength for running and all other bodily exercises, and fourth is wealth – wealth not blind but sharp-eyed, following practical wisdom. Practical wisdom itself is the first of the goods considered divine; second is an intelligently temperate state of the soul; when these are integrated along with courage justice is third, and fourth is courage. All these are naturally ranked above the previous ones, and should be so ranked by the lawgiver. Then the citizens must be told that their other instructions all look to these, and that the human look to the divine, and the divine to reason, which is supreme.. [A brief account of how the citizens' lives will be so ordered, from birth to death.]'. That, my hosts, is the account I would have wished you to give (and still do wish) of how all this is present in the laws said to be from Zeus and Pythian Apollo, which Minos and Lycurgus laid down – and also how the structure they have is quite clear to the person skilled in the expertise of law, though not at all obvious to the rest of us.

2) Extract from 659c9 -663d5

[Cleinias and the Athenian agree that it would be an improvement if other cities adopted the practice found now only in Sparta and Crete, of having the laws forbid innovation in poetry and the arts.]

Athenian: Well, let's agree about this. Is anything other than this the message in your cities in all education and music? You compel the poets to to say that the good man who is temperate and just, is happy and blessed, whether he is tall and strong or small and weak, and whether he is rich or not; even if he is richer than Cinyras and Midas, but is unjust, he is wretched and lives miserably. 'I wouldn't mention a man,' your poet says (if he's correct), 'or take account of him at all,' if he had no justice as he did and got everything that is thought fine. And he describes how such a man 'stands and drives at the enemy at close quarters,'whereas the unjust man dares not 'look at bloodstained death', and does not outrun 'the Thracian north wind,'nor achieve any of the other things thought good. The things that are called good by most people are wrongly so called. They say that the best thing is to be healthy, beauty is second, third wealth, and thousands of other things are called good, including good sight and hearing and having your senses in excellent condition, and being a tyrant and doing whatever you desire, and the culmination of all happiness is to possess all these things and become immortal right away. But you two and I say that all these things are excellent possessions for people who are good and pious, but to the unjust they are all bad, starting from health. Even seeing and hearing and perceiving and being alive in general are the greatest evil for all time, if he is immortal, for the person who has all the so-called goods except justice and virtue as a whole; the evil is less if he lives the shortest time he may. These are the things which I think you will persuade and compel your poets to say, as I would, and to educate our young people by supplying suitable

rythmns and harmonies. Isn't that right? Look – what I say is clear: things that are said to be bad are good for the unjust, though bad for the just, while goods are good for those who are really good, but bad for the bad. So: are you two in agreement with me, or not – this is my question?

[Cleinias at first disagrees that virtue is sufficient for happiness, and vice for unhappiness, but the Athenian convinces him that this actually is what he thinks.]

3) 705d3-e1

Athenian: Watch me, then, looking back to what was said at the beginning, namely that Cretan laws had a single aim. You two said that this was matters of war, but I took you up on this, and said that it was right that such established laws had virtue as an aim, but completely disagreed that this was a part of virtue, rather than virtue as a whole.