

Book Reviews

Dominic J. O'Meara, *Cosmology and Politics in Plato's Later Works*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, xi + 157 pp., <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316869581>

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Dominic O'Meara's new book, *Cosmology and Politics in Plato's Later Works*, explores two main themes: the first is how Plato makes use of religious festivals and technical crafts in his late works; the second is how Plato uses cosmology – in particular, cosmological order – as an analogy for politics and what makes a city good. The book is also framed by a prologue and epilogue, which discuss questions of temporality in the dialogues. O'Meara's main focus is the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, though the *Statesman* has its own chapter in the middle of the book, the story of Atlantis from the *Critias* turns out to be important for the understanding of the *Timaeus*, and the *Philebus* is recruited to elucidate Plato's metaphysics of goodness. In addition to the Platonic texts, the book uses fascinating passages from Arabic and Neo-Platonic commentators effectively throughout.

In the preface, O'Meara stresses that he does “not attempt to make direct contributions to what have recently become mainstream topics in English-language discussions” but to “draw attention to the cultural, religious and technical contexts in which Plato's writings live” (viii). These contexts are then intended to illuminate the main philosophical topic of the book, namely the analogy between cosmology and politics (ix). The prologue starts with familiar difficulties about interpreting Platonic dialogues, then moves onto the problem of temporality in Plato. O'Meara identifies three distinct times: the dramatic date of the dialogue, the date of composition, and the time when the reader reads the text (2f.). These temporalities cause interpretative difficulties because the time at which readers approach a text will be “multiple and open, so is the text in its interpretations open” (3). While he notices that this network of temporalities applies just as much to Thucydides and Euripides, O'Meara claims that Plato is special in that he encourages the reader to philosophize as a fellow interlocutor (3f.). O'Meara speculates about the temporal implications of the settings of the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Parmenides*, then about the enigmatic figure of Socrates – perhaps curious choices given the book's focus on the *Timaeus*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*.

Chapters One through Four focus on the *Timaeus* and form Part One of the book. Chapter One, “A Feast for the Goddess”, highlights that the dramatic setting of the *Timaeus* is the Panathenaea, a festival in honor of Athena that included the weaving of a massive robe (*peplos*) for the Parthenon temple (13f.). O'Meara notes that the *Republic*–*Timaeus*–*Critias*–*Hermocrates* sequence is supposed to be a “feast of speeches” and fits in with the gift exchange tradition of the festival. He thus proposes that we understand these speeches as *encomia* at a symposium and asks how we should interpret them as praising Athena (15f.). The *Critias*, O'Meara claims, praises Athena insofar as it shows ancient Athens (her city) functioning well in juxtaposition to a corrupted Atlantis; the (unwritten) *Hermocrates* would have praised Athena insofar as it shows Athens victorious over Atlantis; because the city of the *Republic* turns out to be ancient Athens, the *Republic* similarly praises Athena. How the *Timaeus* praises Athena is harder to answer, but because the *Timaeus* praises Zeus and Athena is closely associated with Zeus, by praising Zeus *Timaeus* indirectly praises Athena (21).

Chapter Two, “The World-Maker”, focuses on the identity of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*. O’Meara argues that this figure is a reformed Zeus – a controversial claim given that an unnamed rational god also figures in the *Timaeus* story, and that the gods of the pantheon are explicitly relegated to a lower cosmological status (readers should be aware that there is a long and heated scholarly debate in the background here, which O’Meara wants to avoid). His argument for the Zeus–Demiurge identity is difficult at this point, insofar as O’Meara argues that we have enough parallels between Zeus and the Demiurge to think they are the same, but also that the dissimilarities show that Plato is reforming the traditional notions of Zeus. His reading has the interesting consequence that even a reformed Zeus is not the highest god in Plato’s theology, though O’Meara does not discuss this. O’Meara then considers the significance of Plato’s use of the word “*dēmiourgos*”, which means “craftsman” in Attic but “public official” in Doric (34 f.). In both senses, a *dēmiourgos* creates order, so Plato is encouraging the cosmological–political–craftsman parallel. O’Meara ends by defending the view that the world is “generated” in that it has a cause (38).

Chapter Three, “The Model of the World”, seeks to explicate the notion of the “model” and draw analogies between divine and mundane *dēmiourgoi*. The *Laws* is introduced abruptly (45) to distinguish between the aim (*skopos*) of the model and the way in which the aim is achieved (*tropos*). This results in an insightful analysis of how the goals of the model are separate from its “organizational means” and actual implementation in the world, and how the city of the *Laws* is an organizational model and not an implemented model (47 f.). O’Meara then discusses models in Greek architectural practices, which amounts to building proposals being sketched or prototypes being made for the patrons. After noting the difficulties in saying much about the model in the *Timaeus* (51), O’Meara provides a discussion of how the demiurge constructs the world out of proportionate elements. O’Meara ends by noting the problems in determining what the pre-cosmic “traces” are (58–61), and by pointing out the (imperfect) analogy between architecture, world-creation, and city-founding in that all creations have to have a place (61–63).

Chapter Four, “The Beauty of the World”, explores the way in which beauty is manifest in the goodness of the world’s functionality and in its mathematical properties. After a brief discussion of the *Philebus*, O’Meara does well in explicating difficult passages on proportionality in the *Timaeus* and connects them with the ends of the Demiurge. He then provides an excellent discussion of the ways in which beauty could be understood in Plato and how the mathematical structures are created and interrelated (75–79). The analysis in the previous chapter of how proportionality, justice, all-inclusiveness, self-sufficiency, and perpetuity feature in the implementation of the Demiurge’s plan in conjunction with this discussion of the beauty of the world is the highlight of the book.

Chapters Five through Seven form Part II and O’Meara turns to the political application of the cosmological ideas. Chapter Five, “The *Statesman*: A New Robe for the Goddess?”, suggests that the *Statesman* itself is a kind of weaved artifact, and thus acts as a robe (*peplos*) for Athena, in accordance with the festival context introduced earlier – though about a different dialogue sequence. The argument here is speculative (and has appeared in print elsewhere), and the sense in which models or paradigms are used in the *Statesman* is different from that of the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, thus disrupting the flow of the book somewhat. Ultimately, O’Meara uses the *Statesman* to present a puzzle: what is the knowledge that the Statesman has that allows him to do his job? What is the model he uses? Because Plato’s text doesn’t answer this question, the *Statesman* acts as a transition to the *Laws*.

Chapter Six, “The Legislators of the *Laws*”, argues that the lawcode is divinely inspired and acts as a model for actual legislators to use in founding a city. O’Meara claims that the Athenian is knowledgeable and possesses political science, in addition to knowledge of astronomy, cos-

mology, theology, and the good (109). Through the Nocturnal Council, the Guardians of the Laws will learn these sciences that will allow them to grasp the goal of legislation, such that they can adjust, correct, and improve the law over time (110 f.). O'Meara claims that legislation is "not something that is absolute in itself and unchangeable, but a means, a political instrument, to be constantly modulated and improved" (111 f.). After a brief speculation about the connection between the *Laws* and the festival Dionysia, Chapter Seven, "The Order of the City of the *Laws* and Its Model", explains how the order of the city mirrors the order of the cosmos, emphasizing especially the proportionate elements and integration of religion. O'Meara makes much of the use of dance during the festivals as a part of the moral education of the citizens, drawing parallels between their movements and the movements of the heavenly bodies.

These short chapters and chapter-sections make the book easy to navigate. O'Meara is also admirable in his integration of Continental and Anglophone literature, though there are some curious omissions of more recent publications – most notably Xavier Marquez's excellent *A Stranger's Knowledge*, but also, for example, Rachana Kamtekar's work on choral dancing in the *Laws*, of which O'Meara could have benefitted by making more precise the connections between order, psychology, and Plato's dance prescriptions.¹ Given his focus on choruses and festivals as manifestations of order and ways to preserve virtue, O'Meara here has overlooked a helpful scholarly ally. Others will feel similarly about O'Meara's treatment of, for example, Broadie, Sedley, and Carone on the *Timaeus*, and classicists in particular may feel that they have been shortchanged given the extensive work done on Greek popular religion and actual practices of *technê*.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty with the book is that the themes O'Meara traces are not especially well integrated. The discussion of temporalities in Plato is distracting, especially given the problem of establishing the dramatic dates of many of the dialogues and of discerning what the point of such settings are supposed to be. The references to festivals and to Plato's transformation of Greek traditional religion also complicate the most important contribution of the book, namely showing how the cosmological order applies to the political order. Plato's use of the gods of traditional Greek religion is often by allusion or cultural association, so we as modern readers have to speculate through a glass darkly. But we don't need to accept, for example, that the *Timaeus* might be a speech indirectly in honor of Athena to appreciate O'Meara's analysis of the Demiurge's use of cosmic models. Moreover, it was not clear to me how the former claims ultimately illuminate the latter. Thus, readers should be careful to separate the relative merits of O'Meara's speculative discussions of religion and the more closely argued cosmological-political parallels.

Because O'Meara is trying to do several things simultaneously, one is often left wanting further details on each front. For example, how is using a model or paradigm in creation different from other methods? Is there a kind of architecture or couch-building or legislation that *doesn't* use models? If not, what is distinctive about Plato's use of models? Is *every* Platonic dialogue an instance of weaving with words, or is there something special about the *Statesman* that makes this analogy particularly apt? In particular, if goodness (and thus beauty) in the *Timaeus* is fundamentally a matter of expressing mathematical proportion, *which* proportions are the best ones and why? Any two numbers can express a proportion, so what's special about, for example, 256:243 (71)? Further discussion of what constitutes a good mixture in the *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws* would have helped to make O'Meara's reading more perspicuous and would have filled out the best part of the book.

¹ "Psychology and the Inculcation of Virtue in Plato's *Laws*", in Bobonich, C. (ed.) *Plato's Laws: A Critical Guide*, 2010, a collection which O'Meara cites.

Details can also have consequences for more general interpretations. Consider O'Meara's discussion of legislation in the *Laws*, which relies heavily on the idea that the Guardians of the Laws are knowledgeable legislators who are constantly engaged in improving, adjusting, and creating the laws (110–112). But unlike in the *Republic* and *Statesman*, the office-holders of the *Laws* are never said to have political knowledge (they're lucky if they have true beliefs, 653a) and there is no guarantee that the elected officials will have had training at the Nocturnal Council;² more importantly, there is very little textual evidence that laws in Magnesia are to be changed at all – let alone frequently. The painter analogy (769a–770a) is about completing *gaps* in legislation, and the only passage that suggests a mechanism for changing a law concerns a very minor piece of religious legislation from Book 6 (772a–d) and suggests that *every* citizen must unanimously agree that the law should be changed (surely not every citizen has political knowledge).³ Thus it is misleading to describe the political vision in the *Laws* as one where those few people who have political knowledge dynamically alter the lawcode to fit new circumstances. Moreover, had O'Meara noticed that the lawcode of Magnesia was meant to be *stable* and *fixed*, he would have had further resources to draw parallels with the *Timaeus*; for on this reading, the legislator's function has closer analogies with the Demiurge – both engage in a *one-off* act of creation that imposes order on their materials (compare Solon and Lycurgus). Once the order has been established, the task is then to preserve the order; this, however, is not the job of the demiurge or legislator, but of political subordinates and the World-Soul.

In conclusion, O'Meara is at his best when doing close textual readings, but the more speculative work needs further argumentation to be compelling. Nonetheless, this book makes a substantial contribution to a complex Platonic topic: how goodness, beauty, and order are understood and applied across a number of difficult Platonic dialogues. O'Meara's judgment that the cosmic orders of the *Timaeus* are relevant for understanding the political order of the *Laws* is surely right and his book will be helpful for further scholarship on this important topic.⁴

² Even the Athenian Visitor, who is acting as legislator, is said only to have “much experience” (968b).

³ O'Meara relies on Bobonich for this reading (112n17), but Bobonich overstates the importance of this passage in determining Plato's overall attitude towards changing the law in the *Laws*.

⁴ Thanks to Julia Annas, Emily Hulme Kozey, and John Proios for helpful comments on this review.