Bad and Appalling Constitutions in Plato's "Statesman"  

Christopher Rowe  
University of Durham


Admirers of the Statesman, in modern times, form a rather small club; and Julia Annas and Robin Waterfield are not, evidently, fully paid-up members. The work, to them, betrays too many signs of uncertainty and perplexity. Plato is feeling his way from the Republic to the Laws, leaving behind some of the excesses of the former but not yet in possession of the solutions to be proposed in the latter. So, for example, Julia Annas writes in her Introduction 'Plato no longer thinks that political expertise requires a type of thinking which is mathematical in method and structure; as often in the later dialogues, he is rejoining common sense' (Introduction, xiii). Again, '[a]fter the Republic, Plato is now sure that he wants to reject over-idealized accounts of the expert ruler. But just how ideal is over-ideal? Plato has no clear answer to this difficult question ...' (xvi). The final assessment is that

'The Statesman is in some ways a record of complication and even confusion. But not only does it help us to see how we get from the Republic to the Laws, it is a record of the entanglements that only a very great and original thinker, defending and qualifying his boldest work at the same time, could get into' (xxii).

So: the dialogue is transitional, on the way to a greater realism ('rejoining common sense', less idealistic); it always points towards a kinder view of democracy:
'Plato can never bring himself to be really enthusiastic about democracy, not even in the Laws, where his ideal state takes over huge amounts of Athenian democratic institutions.' But in the Statesman we see him for the first time realizing the advantages of democracy from the viewpoint of a realistic assessment of how political institutions actually function' (xix).

These are standard ways of treating the Statesman. However I believe that if we begin by attempting to understand the argument of the dialogue independently of our knowledge of the Republic and the Laws, we can do better both by the Statesman itself and by its author. I claim that with one single (possible) exception, its argument, by itself, can be seen as wholly consistent, coherent and single-minded. In so far as it is about statesmanship, and not - as it also is - an exercise in, and an exemplar of, dialectic ('to make us dialektikōteroi'), it is an inquiry into something which is, an on: what it is to be a statesman or politikos, which is the same, to put it in more familiar language, as what it would be to be such ontōs. Believing in onta of this sort, whether or not they are instantiated in the actual world' (and whether or not they are classed as 'forms', in the sense in which we tend to think that Plato had a theory of such things), is what constitutes the central feature of Platonism in its original version. We should take it entirely at face value when the text of the Statesman tells us roundly, as it does twice, once at each end of its main 'political' section, that all existing 'politikoi' are impostors, charlatans, 'the greatest magicians of all sophists'. Maybe there is some genuine statesman lurking somewhere, unrecognised, in the wings (Socrates himself, for one, according to the Gorgias: and why not, since he is concerned with the one thing that politikoi ought to be concerned with, but actual, so-called politikoi, are not?). But one of the things that Plato, or Plato's main characters, are always clear about is that one cannot expect to acquire knowledge of anything, or at least of the most important things, by looking at particular