THE UNITY OF THE STATE: PLATO, ARISTOTLE AND PROCLUS

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The Commentary on the Republic by the neo-platonist philosopher Proclus (412-485) includes an 'Examination of objections made by Aristotle in the second book of the Politics against Plato's Republic'. Although this piece is very short and has survived only in a mutilated form, it is of interest to students of Greek political thought both because it includes the only substantial discussion of any part of the Politics to have come down to us from later antiquity and because it raises some serious philosophical issues about the nature of the state and the relationship between the state and the individual. Its primary aim is to defend Plato against Aristotle's charge that he goes astray in regarding unity as the goal of politics. Proclus believes that, providing we understand properly what is meant by 'unity' in this context, we should indeed seek to make the state as much of a unity as possible. He thus provides a short but vigorous defence of a philosophy in which the ideal of unity has pride of place. In doing so he commits himself to an unashamedly organic view of the state. The individual should ideally see himself as part of the state in much the same way that an eye or an arm is part of a body.

Although the Examination has been referred to from time to time by commentators on the Politics it has not, so far as I am aware, been previously translated into English. In the pages that follow I shall present a translation, with some brief notes. The main aim of these will be to show the relevance of the Examination to issues of political philosophy raised in the Republic and the Politics. Among these the most important are whether unity should be regarded as the goal of the state and, if so, what sense of unity is in question.
The Text

Unlike the Commentaries on the Parmenides and the Timaeus the Commentary on the Republic is not a continuous discussion of Plato’s text but rather a series of essays on different aspects of the Republic. It has been argued by Carlo Gallavotti that these were not planned as part of a single work but were written at different points in Proclus’ career and reflect his changing interests. Certainly the Examination has no very obvious connection with any other part of the Commentary on the Republic and is to all intents and purposes a separate work.

Only one manuscript of the Commentary on the Republic survives. It was written towards the end of the ninth century and is known to have come into the possession of Giano Lascari in the late fifteenth century. Thereafter it was divided into parts. The first part, which remained in Florence, has survived in good condition. The second part, which was transferred to Rome, was badly damaged. This means that the Examination, as we have it, is incomplete, and the last part of the surviving section is in a fragmentary state.

We know from Porphyry’s life of Plotinus that one Euboulos a contemporary of Plotinus had written ‘On the objections urged by Aristotle to Plato’s Republic’. This led Mai, the nineteenth century editor of Proclus’ Commentary on the Republic, to suggest that the Examination is in fact by Euboulos. He was followed in this view by Susemihl and by R. D. Hicks in the commentary which he based on Susemihl’s. However other scholars, such as Dreizehnner, have taken the view that it is clearly the work of Proclus. In this they seem to be correct. The Examination as we have it is stylistically consistent with Proclus’ authorship and its metaphysical conception of unity is very close to that adopted by Proclus in, for example, the Elements of Theology. The relationship between Plato and Aristotle was a matter of close concern to Proclus as it was to all neo-platonists. There is thus no reason, apart from the similarity of title, to attribute the piece to Euboulos. On the other hand