REVIEW ARTICLE — PLATO AND DEMOCRACY

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Although its title may suggest a narrowly focused study of Plato’s attitude to democracy this book is, in fact, a comprehensive examination of his political philosophy with substantial sections devoted to the Republic, to the Politicus and Timaeus-Critias and to the Laws. In these Samaras develops a distinctive interpretation not just of Plato’s views on democracy but of his political philosophy as whole.

One major theme concerns questions of unity and development with reference particularly to the relationship between the Republic and the Laws. Samaras rejects unitarian interpretations, which, he thinks, treat the Laws as a mere appendix to the Republic. However he sees a fundamental continuity in Plato’s thought, which he calls ‘a dynamic unity’, that is, ‘a unity within which development stands in a discernible relation to the philosopher’s previous position’ (p. 1). Fundamental to this interpretation is a fairly conservative reading of the metaphysics and epistemology of the Republic. Plato distinguishes between forms and sensible particulars in terms of the degree to which they really exist. Only knowledge of the forms can legitimise political power. The ‘ontological transcendence of the forms’ thus supports the ‘unchallengeable rule of the Guardians’ (p. 105), who have perfect knowledge and (as a consequence) perfect virtue. According to Samaras, Plato never abandoned his belief in transcendent forms, but from the Politicus onwards he revised his views in important respects. Because he now doubted the possibility of finding anyone with the knowledge required of an ideal ruler, he became an advocate of strict obedience to written laws. These do not replace the wisdom of the philosopher but are imitations of the truth which enable the common people to govern themselves in the best way that is practically possible. At the same time Plato abandoned his view that an understanding of the forms is essential for virtue and, with it, his Socratic belief that virtue is one. He came to hold that true opinion could be an acceptable substitute for knowledge and could form the basis for a certain...
kind of virtue. This is characteristic of the ordinary citizens in the *Laws* and qualifies them to take part in politics. Plato can thus maintain his view of the importance of knowledge while moving away from the unchallengeable rule of philosophers towards the rule of law.

A second range of issues concerns Plato’s attitude to democracy and the idea that he is an authoritarian thinker. Samaras argues very strongly that the *Republic* is an anti-democratic work and accepts that it is, in a sense, authoritarian. But he distances himself from those like Popper who see Plato as an enemy of the Open Society. Modern liberals associate democracy with ‘negative liberty’ and with individual rights. But since these are modern ideas, hardly envisaged by the Greeks, to attack Plato for opposing them is anachronistic. For the Greeks the key issue between democrats and their opponents was whether the mass of the citizens, including those engaged in ‘banausic’ occupations should take part in government. Plato’s insistence in the *Republic* that political power be confined to the few who have knowledge of the forms is sufficient to mark that work out as extremely anti-democratic. But Samaras also emphasises features of the dialogue which he thinks align the position and lifestyle of the guardians with that of traditional aristocrats. Most controversially he argues at some length that, given the *Republic*’s account of the virtues, only the philosopher rulers can be said to be virtuous. The dialogue thus embodies an extremely low view of the capacities of ordinary people, denying most of them any intellectual or moral capacities. In the *Laws*, on the other hand, all citizens can participate in government and have the capacity for a kind of virtue. In these respects the *Laws* may be seen as more democratic and less authoritarian than the *Republic*.

A third major theme of the book concerns Plato’s attitude to history. According to the *Republic*, genuine knowledge must be concerned with the forms which are timeless unchanging realities. It follows that history, which is essentially concerned with the changing world of the senses, cannot be a source of knowledge. However Samaras sees an important change in Plato’s views beginning with the *Politicus*. He takes that dialogue to argue that important political lessons can be drawn from history, a point which is confirmed by the Atlantis myth of the *Timaeus-Critias*. Historical argument plays an important part in the *Laws*. Indeed Samaras argues that we should read it in the light of contemporary appeals for a return to the ‘ancestral constitution’. Plato sees Solon as the model legislator. The constitution proposed in the *Laws* is thus squarely based on historical experience.

Samaras discusses each of the main dialogues in considerable detail. His conclusions are always vigorously argued with close attention to the secondary literature. On many points he presents original and provocative ideas. It is perhaps unfortunate that he was unable to take account of some of the most recent work on Plato’s political philosophy, including Christopher Bobonich’s *Utopia Recast* and the Plato sections of the *Cambridge History of*