In 2010, as part of its ‘critical studies’ series, Cambridge University Press brought out a collection of essays on Plato’s *Laws* under the editorship of Christopher Bobonich. In his introduction to that volume, Bobonich observed that modern scholarship is still ‘at the early stages of reflecting philosophically on the *Laws*’ and enthused that the essays he had collected might ‘serve to stimulate work that will bring new illumination to standing debates and that will open up fresh avenues of inquiry that are not currently available’. While the contributors to Recco and Sanday’s new volume on the *Laws* seldom respond directly to the scholarship brought together in Bobonich’s collection, they do manage, nevertheless, to recast the *Laws* as philosophically exciting in novel ways.

In this, Recco and Sanday’s contributors demonstrate the virtues of the sort of reading often lauded but rarely practised by students of Plato, at least with skill. We are reminded that Plato does not speak in his own voice, that we must consequently be wary of reading the utterances of any of his characters as reflective of his own settled views, and that the insight he hopes the reader to reach must be gleaned from the drama amongst these characters, as well as the speech between them. While one might find these reminders tiresome, it is instructive to compare the resulting essays in Recco and Sanday with those in Bobonich’s edited volume. The *Laws* appears on a first reading as one of the most monological of Plato’s works, tempting the reader to simply identify the views expressed by its philosophic protagonist, an Athenian stranger, with those the author intends to be considered his own. Indeed, it has been suggested to the reviewer by one prominent student of the *Laws* that it should not be described as a dialogue at all. But as the dramatic readings in Recco and Sanday amply demonstrate, this neglect of the *Laws*’ dialogical aspects overlooks much of what is philosophically fascinating about the text.

The volume’s subtitle nicely captures what seems to be the focus of philosophic interest for its contributors: the relationship between the aspirations to political order, on the one hand, and to open-mindedness, on the other. Rather than read the *Laws* as a political blueprint, these essays tend to approach the text as a demonstration of the art of the lawgiver and its fraught relationship to law and education. The *Laws* often puzzles readers of Plato more familiar with the immediacy of philosophic investigation in his other dialogues. Although Bobonich and others have done much to show the respectability of the Athenian’s arguments in the *Laws*, it is clear that, in this work, lines of inquiry that are pushed back to first principles elsewhere in the corpus receive a relatively superficial treatment. But the greater attention paid in the essays

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of this volume to the dialogue’s drama helps make sense of this studied superficiality. In their hands, Plato in the *Laws* is offering a demonstration of the art of lawgiving, the art of establishing those social norms that are most psychologically formative, and especially of how the highest possibilities and myriad limitations of human beings ought to shape the objectives of these norms and the manner in which they are created and reinforced. Instead of offering a familiar political theory, marshalling arguments to defend the desirability of some political order, in these essays Plato appears to be inviting the reader to think through the problems faced in founding a new polity, from the perspective of potential participants in such an event.

As Recco and Sanday point out in their introduction, these problems revolve around the tension between stability and enlightenment. The *Laws*, they observe, can and has been read *both* as a radical defence of political order grounded in rational persuasion *and* as a deeply pessimistic assessment of human motivations, necessitating deceptive rhetoric and plain coercion. But the readings they and their contributors usually adopt attempt to make sense of the dialogue without falling into either of these interpretations. If we read the *Laws* as an invitation not only to assess the arguments of a philosopher, but to inhabit the perspective of a lawgiver being counselled by a philosopher, both stability and enlightenment emerge as aspirations worth pursuing, but also, to varying degrees, as mutually exclusive. The ensuing question of how they should be reconciled is plumbed less by straightforward philosophical investigation than by following a political expert in his attempt to lead a putative founder in realizing the best political order habitable by human beings. The philosophic problems associated with the art of lawgiving are thus, to some extent, demonstrated rather than overtly pronounced and discussed.

But what, more precisely, are these philosophic problems and how can they be illuminated through demonstration? Most of the volume’s essays seem to identify two such problems. First, the contributors tend to find that the *Laws* presents the lawgiver as needing a kind of knowledge that is impossible for a human being to possess, in order to fully live up to his task of founding a genuinely excellent city. Furthermore, it seems this kind of knowledge would demand forms of behaviour, both of the lawgiver and of citizens inhabiting the order he would found, that are beyond the motivational capabilities of humans. How, then, given these limitations, can the art of lawgiving be well-executed?

Second, these readings construe the problem of the unity of virtue, raised most explicitly by the Athenian at the very conclusion of the dialogue, in a manner that challenges its comfortable situation within the received Platonic doctrine. The puzzle concerns not only the ontological status of virtue as a composite whole, but also the status of its ‘images’ or lower-grade forms apparently envisaged in the *Laws*. Can virtue, for example, be based on a vice? If so, what is the relationship of such a quasi-virtue to virtue properly so-called?