

Malcolm Schofield, ed., and Tom Griffith, trans., (2016) *Plato Laws*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press. vii + 491 pp. \$84.99. ISBN 9780521859653 (hbk).

Although the last thirty years have seen an enormous growth of scholarly interest in the *Laws*, this is, I believe, the first entirely new edition of the dialogue in English since 1980. As well as a brand new translation by Griffith, it includes an introductory essay and very extensive footnotes by Schofield. These draw heavily on recent scholarship and make a significant contribution to the interpretation of the dialogue.

In the introduction Schofield argues both that the *Laws* is 'the first work of genuine political philosophy in the Western tradition' and that it is 'a multi-dimensional exercise in reflection on how such philosophising should be conducted' (p. 1). Here I can mention only two of the themes he pursues in developing these points. The first concerns the character of the dialogue. Schofield notes that *xenos*, the term by which the participants address one another and which is usually translated 'stranger', can refer to 'individuals from different cities or countries who are bound by a tie of mutual hospitality' (p. 2). He thus sees the dialogue as representing a 'long and leisured' conversation between three old men, bound by ties of friendship. The different points of view which are voiced and debated represent, not so much the stances of individuals, but mindsets characteristic of Athens, Crete, and Sparta. The Athenian both admires and criticises the conservative societies of Crete and Sparta. He is also highly critical of Athenian democracy. In making his points he 'deploys formidable intellectual resources derived from many spheres of Greek culture and political organisation, but above all from Socratic ethics' (p. 3). So, while Schofield shows that we can discern an overall plan, he also shows that this cannot do justice to the digressive character of the discussion. The *Laws* is 'a deliberately and emphatically unhurried work, which takes its reader on a winding journey through very different intellectual terrains, constantly digressing from the first-order business of 'political arrangements and laws' (p. 2).

Another key theme of the introduction concerns the nature and role of *nomos*. Here Schofield contrasts Plato with Isocrates who also held that Athenian democracy had lost its way but looked for a solution, not in written laws but in 'the habits of everyday life'. Plato would see this opposition as over-simplistic. Throughout the *Laws* he argues that the legislator should be concerned with every aspect of the citizens' lives. In particular, he devotes a great deal of space to the formation of their characters through music and dance. But he also gives a central role to laws. Schofield emphasises that these

are seen, not as a means of coercion, but rather as embodying the recommendations or advice of the legislator. In this context he discusses the ideas that there should be unwritten laws, which rely on social pressures rather than formal penalties, and that laws should be accompanied by persuasive preambles. These suggestions are linked to the fundamental idea that the order of the city must rest on consent and co-operation rather than on the threat of punishment.

Schofield is right to emphasise the importance of persuasion and its connection with Plato's view of the relation between the citizen and the city. He is also right to point out that the preambles use different modes of persuasion depending on the topic and the characters of those to whom they are addressed. For example some invoke the threat of divine punishment while others engage in serious philosophical discussion. But the suggestion that the legislator's instructions should be seen as 'advice' or 'recommendations' could be misleading. The aim is to ensure that citizens obey willingly but there is no suggestion that they should be free to make up their own minds or adopt views contrary to those of the legislator. Laws are ultimately backed by the threat of punishment, even though that is seen as a last resort. The penalties imposed on honest atheists are particularly significant in this context.

Griffith's translation is evidently based on principles that differ from those of his most recent predecessors, Saunders and Pangle.¹ It is explicitly aimed at scholars and students of Greek philosophy and the history of political thought. In this it differs from Saunders' version which was aimed at a more general readership. Saunders saw it as the primary task of the translator to ensure that the dialogue was actually read and acknowledged that his emphasis on readability sometimes involved an element of what he called 'over-translation'. One effect of this was that his version was written in a particularly lively style and often used a heightened vocabulary. Griffith is more cautious in these respects, so his version is less exciting to read but often gives a truer impression of the original.

Griffith's approach also differs from Pangle's. He evidently sees no virtue in word for word translation and does not attempt to preserve consistency in translating key terms. I think he is right on both these points. The differences between the sentence structures and vocabulary of English and Greek mean that very literal translations can be difficult to read and can also fail to catch

1 T. Saunders, *Plato: The Laws*, translated with Introduction and notes (London Penguin Books, 1970); T. Pangle, *The Laws of Plato*, translated with notes and an interpretive essay (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). There have also been translations, in the Clarendon Plato series, of Books I and II, by Susan Sauvé Meyer and of Book x, by Robert Mayhew.