WHY IS THE IDEAL ATHENS OF THE TIMAEUS-CRITIAS NOT RULED BY PHILOSOPHERS?¹

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At the beginning of the *Timaeus-Critias*, Socrates recapitulates a conversation which he had had ‘yesterday’ with those now present. The main theme of that conversation was the best constitution of a city, ‘of what sort and out of what sort of men it seemed to me it would come about’ (*Tim.* 17C). The city he had described turns out to bear a remarkable resemblance to the ideal city of the *Republic*: a city in which the functions of different elements - especially those of the ‘guards’ or ‘guardians’ (φύλακες), and those of the farmers and other producers - would be sharply separated, women and children would be held in common, and so on. Now it is clearly impossible for Plato to refer directly from one dialogue to another, that is, in the form ‘as I said in the *Republic*,’ since of course Plato himself said nothing in the *Republic* - he was not there to say anything. The closest he can come to an unambiguous cross-reference from one dialogue to another is by having the characters refer back to things they said ‘yesterday’, or on another occasion; the *Timaeus* and *Critias* themselves are linked in this way, as are the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*. As it happens, the *Timaeus* and *Critias* have a different cast-list from the *Republic*, with Socrates the only one common to both. However the overlaps are sufficient (at least for most interpreters) to make it look highly probable that Plato means us, in reading the *Timaeus-Critias*, to have the *Republic* in mind; and in particular, that we are meant either to identify, or at least to associate, the best city of the *Timaeus-Critias* - which is immediately identified by Critias (*Tim.* 26C-D) with the Athens that once defeated the great power of Atlantis - with Callipolis, the ‘beautiful city’ of the *Republic*.

So far so good, but there is at least one apparently serious problem, even apart from the fact that the cast-list, and also the time, are wrong. Socrates’ summary here in the *Timaeus-Critias* makes no mention of what is on most interpretations the central feature of the city of the *Republic*, namely that power is given over to philosophers. The ‘guards’ of the *Timaeus* seem to be soldiers rather than philosophers; if Socrates suggests that they were ‘philosophical’ as well as spirited, this

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Conrado Eggers Lan, τῶν πρῶτον ἀρίστω καὶ φιλονικωτᾶτω. It should be stressed that the paper is intended to provoke discussion, rather than to establish firm conclusions; it arises out of larger reflections on the nature of Plato’s political thinking in *Republic*, *Politicalus* and *Laws* (see e.g. C. J. Rowe, Plato: *Statesman*, Warminster 1995). If, as I believe, provocation is in the spirit of Platonism in its original form, that will make the offering an appropriate dedication to someone who was himself a convinced Platonist, even if his understanding of Plato was often rather different. (A first draft of the paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Classical Association in Nottingham in 1996; I am grateful for suggestions made by members of the audience on that occasion.)
is apparently more like the ‘love of wisdom’ attributed to well-bred guard-dogs in Republic II (375A-376C), which enables them to distinguish friends from enemies, than the soaring intellectualism of the philosopher-rulers: ‘I think we said that the nature of the guards must be of a certain sort, at once exceptionally spirited and philosophical, in order that they might be appropriately gentle and fierce to friends and enemies’ (Tim. 18A 3-7). The idea of philosophical rule which in Republic V is made the condition of any approximation to the ideal city (471C-473E) is apparently nowhere to be found in the Timaeus-Critias; according to the Critias (109C-D), the excellence of the political organisation of ancient Athens stemmed directly from Hephaestus and Athena (119C-D).

In that case, the apparent reference back to the Republic, if we accept it as such, becomes problematical. However much the ideal city of the Timaeus-Critias may resemble Callipolis, it is also apparently not Callipolis. Maybe, with M. M. McCabe, we may suppose that Plato is deliberately teasing us, and that the reference back to the Republic is only half-serious. That would explain the differences, though at the cost of leaving us with something even more difficult to explain, namely why Plato should want to tease us, and for what purpose.

Some version of this approach would, nevertheless, be consistent with what is currently the standard interpretation of the development of Plato’s political ideas. According to this interpretation, he began - in the Republic - by optimistically believing in the possibility of philosophical rule, but later - in the Laws, and probably in the Politicus - abandoned it. Anyone who holds this view would no doubt take the absence of philosopher-rulers from the Timaeus-Critias just as a further piece of evidence in its favour. This pair of dialogues is after all to be dated late, if we take it that Owen’s attempt to redate the Timaeus did not succeed, which is perhaps also now part of the standard view. Here, then, is concrete evidence of the later Plato’s U-turn, away from idealism. Everything now fits: what Socrates summarises at the beginning of the Timaeus is what he might have put in the Republic if he had written it later. He makes it just enough like the city of the Republic to ensure that we make the connection, but changes the cast-list and time in order to signal that after all what Socrates is reporting is not the conversation ‘recorded’ in the Republic, and - perhaps - draw our attention, in much the way suggested by McCabe, to the absence of its central idea.

However there are reasons for feeling a certain uneasiness about this sort of solution to the puzzle of the missing philosopher-rulers. The first is that it de-

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3 For McCabe, the purpose is to provoke us into thinking about the metaphysical issues common to both dialogues: she describes the opening of the Timaeus as ‘a recapitulation of the Republic that is wildly off the mark’, explaining in a footnote: ‘Off the mark in the sense that it omits the cornerstone of the arguments of the Republic - the metaphysics and epistemology of the central books’.
4 For which see e.g. George Klosko, The Development of Plato’s Political Theory, New York 1986.