On first reading, the Politicus appears a dismal dialogue (compared, for example, to the immediacy of both the philosophy and the drama of the Theaetetus). This conversation between the Eleatic Stranger and the hopelessly complaisant Young Socrates seems unlikely to capture our imagination; the lengthy discussion of collection and division may do little for our understanding of dialectic; and even the joke (at 266c, a pun on being a pig and coming last which is marginally more amusing in Greek) will leave us cold. It may be hardly surprising that “this weary dialogue,” as Gilbert Ryle called it, has been left alone by scholars.

However a recent Symposium Platonicum has revived interest in the Politicus; this generated two volumes of papers given at the Symposium and, more importantly, a new translation with commentary by Christopher Rowe. The new OCT, moreover, gives a freshly edited text. This material makes it immediately clear that the Politicus should not be dismissed out of hand – even although it stands revealed as an extremely complex composition, both from the literary and from the philosophical point of view.

1 Christopher Rowe, Bob Sharples and Tad Brennan were kind enough to read and criticise a draft of these comments; I am very grateful to them.
2 Old habits die hard; I prefer Politicus (Plt.) to Statesman, not least to avoid the dangers of archaism (and the impossibility of capturing an extinct species) in the English expression. In deference to Plato, however, I use the expression “the statesman” (rather than “the politician”) to describe the person with political understanding.
4 In RS Nicoll comments on the manuscript tradition, and the OCT editor, Robinson,
The rich disputes which arise in these three volumes are – inevitably – of a rather mixed character. Rowe’s commentary is, as we should expect, complex and extremely scrupulous; it is also, in several respects, thoroughly provocative (notably in his heterodox reading of the myth and in his challenge to a straightforward reading of the political theory of the dialogue). The papers collected in the two volumes are, in some cases, new readings of individual passages, and in other cases synoptic views of the dialogue as a whole (PSSP claims to be primarily interested in political matters; although that brief is read with a generous eye). That, of course, is what we might expect to issue from a huge International Congress; and many of the individual papers are both valuable and exciting, notably where they invite us to reconsider our dusty old views about the Politicus. Huge International Congresses produce a multiplicity of opinions and interpretations; they are not always, however, easy to digest – and the wealth of detail to be found in these volumes is not always such as to produce the synoptic view of the dialogue we need for thorough reappraisal. In considering some of the more important contributions of these volumes to our understanding of the Politicus, I shall ask two questions of a synoptic sort: what is the Politicus about? And how does the dialogue hang together?\(^5\)

You might think that the answer to the first question is obvious – this dialogue, the second in the trilogy which began with the Sophist and should end with the Philosopher (an unwritten dialogue),\(^6\) is about the statesman (is the answer to the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{discusses} the changes made to the Burnet edition, in particular two changes which affect the myth (at 269e4 and 271d4); see further below.
  \item There is a further question of just how this dialogue is to be aligned with the other dialogues of the late period; and how it fits with the Republic and the Laws. Against Owen’s radical view of the Politicus (e.g. in “The Place of the Timaeus in Plato’s Dialogues,” in Logic, Science and Dialectic, 65-84) see here Kahn’s largely unitarian account of the place of the Plt. in the Platonic corpus as a whole, RS, and Gill’s moderate view of Plato’s development, RS (discussed further below). On the place of the dialogue in the rest of the corpus, Palumbo considers the relation between the Sophist and Plt., RS, while several other contributors discuss the relation between this and other political dialogues. In PSSP there are several papers on the relation between this dialogue and the dialogues about Socrates’ execution: these papers too tend to be unitarian (or else to ignore the possibility that in composing late dialogues about Socrates Plato is engaging on something more complex and reflective than merely giving us another chapter in the Socrates story).
  \item The importance or otherwise of the Philosopher, and the significance of the frame narrative to our understanding of the Plt. as a whole is little considered by the contributors to these volumes; even by Rowe. E.g. Arends, PSSP, takes it as simply obvious that the philosopher is not discussed here. An exception is Ferber, RS, who considers the question of the Philosopher in the light of the unwritten doctrines and the views of the Tubingen School; hence the cryptic reference to “the precise truth itself” 284d2. I shall argue that Plt. is not so much a coded allusion to doctrines but rather an invitation to speculate on the activity of philosophising itself.
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