

Dominic J. O'Meara,
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This is a brilliantly written book on how, in late Platonic dialogues, knowledge of the structure and workings of the cosmos is an essential part of political science. But the book is much more than that; it offers a carefully and well-written text, elegantly argued. Its most remarkable contribution is that it offers a series of fresh readings of crucial passages in *Timaeus*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*. Its main proposal is to read Plato's dialogues through its close relationship with the religious festivals in which they are imbued and with their cultural context more widely. The result sheds new light into how Plato relates to Greek traditional religion, the connection between cosmogony and the foundation of human communities, and Plato's possible distinction between the good and the beautiful. The book is divided into a prologue, two main parts, and an epilogue with the author's concluding remarks.

The prologue is a short methodological essay on some of the main interpretative difficulties and tensions concerning Plato's works, like chronological and dramatic dating, Socrates as a character, and Plato's open philosophy. I find the author's understanding of the latter a bit problematic. Some of O'Meara's claims about openness apply to any text, whereas the ones that can be backed on textual evidence simply show that Plato is aware of the perfectibility of his methods and the possibility of not having the last word on every topic. However, O'Meara seems to jump from here to the more contentious idea that Plato uses vagueness as a method to leave his philosophy open to the future (see p. 8-9). However, he offers no evidence to back this claim beyond outsourcing the discussion to Ferber's *Warum hat Platon die 'ungeschriebene Lehre' nicht geschrieben?* (Sankt Augustin 2007). Since the author's interpretation of key passages depends on

this understanding of openness, I think the topic deserved a fuller discussion.

The first part of the book is then dedicated to Timaeus' cosmology and is composed of four chapters. The highlights are a discussion of the types of *paradeigmata* (models) in ancient architecture and politics that is helpful to understand Plato's use of the term, the *Timaeus*' relation with the festivals in honour of Athena, and an argument to understand beauty as the realization of the good in the cosmos.

O'Meara's main suggestion in chapters 1 and 2 is that we should take seriously the dramatic setting of the *Timaeus*. He makes two interesting observations in this regard. First, that the religious context of the dialogue is the Panathenaic festival, and second, that the speeches in *Timaeus* are part of a two-day 'feast of discourse,' similar to the one in *Symposium*, from which we only have the middle section. From this, O'Meara argues that the overall purpose of the speeches is to praise Athena and that the cosmological speech of Timaeus, more specifically, is a speech in honour of Athena's father, Zeus. But the Zeus of *Timaeus*, he argues, does not follow the traditional account of the Olympic deity, but is a reformed Zeus that creates the world and is identified with the demiurge. All this makes Plato the proponent of a bold religious reformation: 'Timaeus' demiurge is a reformed divinity, not the Zeus of the poets denounced by Socrates in the *Republic*; but a Zeus morally and metaphysically perfect' (p. 34).

O'Meara's argument is fascinating and raises an interesting puzzle, but its conclusion is difficult to grant. The obvious objection to his identification of Zeus with the demiurge is 40d6-41a2, where Timaeus explains the secondary role and origin of the traditional gods, including Zeus. Although the author acknowledges the problem and briefly comments it,

he brushes it off by referring to Heraclitus fr. 32 and claiming that 'Timaeus' demiurge "does not wish and wishes to be called by the name of Zeus"' and that 'for Plato, the maker of the world both is and is not Zeus' (p. 28). This might be an interesting idea but its treatment in the book is at best underdeveloped and leaves the impression that O'Meara pays insufficient attention to textual evidence that contradicts his interpretation. As I will show below, a similar problem arises later in the book when he discusses the cosmological myth in *Statesman*. To be fair, however, even if the demiurge and Zeus cannot be identified, O'Meara's comparison and discussion of its similarities help us to see the demiurge's role more clearly.

Chapter 3 offers an extremely helpful survey of the uses of the term *paradeigma* (model) in ancient Greek politics and architecture. This is later used to argue that in *Timaeus* we can distinguish the demiurge's goal (to create the best world), the model he uses to achieve it, and the actual production of the cosmos (p. 50). But according to O'Meara, the demiurge's model is a general, preliminary sketch similar to the *paradeigma* used by architects to have an overall view and general indications of proportions and styles. The model, then, gives the demiurge only general specifications from which he has to draw up more detailed plans (p. 57). These plans are identified with the passages where Timaeus deals with the mathematical structure of the soul and the elements. The chapter includes an elegant argument to explain the difference between the pre-cosmic traces of elements and the proper elements that imitate the model.

In chapter 4, the last one of the first part, O'Meara advances another daring thesis. According to him, in *Timaeus*, Plato (1) distinguishes between beauty and the good, and

(2) understands the former as the residence of the good, which (3) he understands as the realization of the good in the world. However, the evidence for (1) seems insufficient. Moreover, (2) is true in the *Philebus* but it is unclear if it applies more widely. And finally, (3) depends on some problematic assumptions about Platonic causation.

The two main passages offered as evidence for a distinction between beauty and the good are *Tim.* 28c5-29a6, and 30a2-7. However, these passages do not prove the point. They only claim that the goodness of the demiurge causes the beauty of the cosmos. But if Plato is committed to a like-causes-like principle in the *Timaeus* (and I see no reason to doubt this), then it seems to follow that the beauty of the cosmos would be nothing else than its goodness. Now, I agree with O'Meara that in the *Philebus*, Plato does seem to distinguish more clearly between beauty and the good. But why should we import this distinction into *Timaeus*? The book offers little help to answer this question. Moreover, even if one grants the distinction, the relation between beauty and the good does not have to be as O'Meara proposes. According to him, 'beauty realizes the good;' it is the expression or manifestation of the good (p. 76). But this seems to depend on an unorthodox understanding of Platonic causation of which we do not get much explanation and that raises some difficult questions. For example, if beauty is the manifestation of the good, does that mean there is only the good itself but not a beautiful itself? If beauty is an effect of the good, what is its ontological status then? If beauty and good are not only distinct but one is causally dependant on the other, does the like-causes-like principle still stand? Why couldn't the relation be understood in epistemic terms instead of causal ones?

In the second part, O'Meara dedicates three chapters to discuss the foundation of cities and the definition of political science in *Laws* and *Statesman* with relation to the structure of the cosmos as discussed in detail in the *Timaeus*. According to O'Meara, these three texts complement and presuppose each other. One important consequence from this, the author argues, is that the definition of political science in the *Statesman* is incomplete. From *Timaeus* and *Laws*, we can see that a detailed knowledge of cosmology and the forms is an essential part of political science. The general argument seems correct. However, O'Meara might have gone too far into unifying the philosophical message of these three dialogues. This can be seen, for example, in his treatment of the cosmological myth of the *Statesman*. O'Meara seems too keen on dismissing this myth in favour of the Timaeian cosmology. He emphasises that it is 'almost a child's story' and argues that:

The cosmological myth of the *Statesman*, I propose, is not equivalent, on its level of discourse, to the cosmological myth of the *Timaeus*: one is told by a master to his young apprentice; the other by a philosopher and statesman to his festive companions. And the myth told by the guest from Elea does not provide much help with seeing how the order of the world could provide a pattern for political science in its goal of producing a good city (p. 98).

O'Meara's textual evidence to argue that the myth in *Statesman* is a 'child's story' is 268d-e. There, the Eleatic Stranger says he needs to introduce an element of play, namely the introduction of a long story, and that Young Socrates should pay attention to it as

children do. But this seems insufficient to claim that the story is childish or is not to be taken seriously. The element of play and the reference to childhood seem more related to the length of the story and the attention required from Young Socrates. In addition, the Eleatic Stranger treats the cosmological account in the myth –which explains the myth of Atreus and the era of Cronus– as factual (268b-c, 270b-c). And even if it were just a thought experiment, it offers insight into the structure and nature of the cosmos in which we are currently living and the place of humans in it. In fact, one of the morals of the myth is to understand that we live in an ordered world that, nevertheless, tends to disorder and destruction and is far from perfect. Moreover, it shows that human rulers are unlike gods, and as a consequence, their relation to their subjects and the political knowledge they require is not the same. In order to defend a strong unity between *Timaeus* and *Statesman*, O'Meara fails to realize that the *Statesman* myth is evidence in favour of his thesis that for Plato political science includes cosmology. Moreover, a detailed discussion of the religious context of this myth was expected and is a significant absence in a book about cosmology and politics.

In the second half, there is also a helpful comparison between the cosmos in *Timaeus* and the structure of the city in *Laws*. The highlight in this second part, however, is O'Meara's analysis of the *Statesman* text by comparing it with the presentation of a new robe to Athena during the Panathenaic festival, and concluding that the carefully written dialogue can be seen as a reformed robe to honour the goddess. In this case, the claim that Plato could be understood as a religious reformer seems more plausible. Still, at points, some of the argument's premises seem too speculative.

In conclusion, O'Meara advances bold, provocative and well-articulated theses. The monograph should not be ignored by scholars working on late Plato and the Platonic tradition and will surely spark interesting discussions among specialists. It also promises to be useful for students and non-specialist scholars and is, overall, a welcomed addition to the literature.