

POLITICS AND METHOD IN PLATO'S POLITICAL THEORY

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Abstract: For much of the past century, Barker and other scholars took Plato seriously as a political actor, and so considered his political activities and those of the school he founded in interpreting his political works. As a result, these scholars viewed the *Republic* and *Laws* as bearing on practical politics, perhaps as blueprints for intended political reform. Although I do not argue for the strong thesis that the works should be accepted as blueprints, I believe they should be read against the backdrop of Plato's political activities. Doing so allows us to recognize strong connections between Plato's political aspirations and the views advanced by his main characters in the *Republic* and *Laws*. Consistency of views represented by Plato's political activities and the overt content of his political works support non-ironic, essentially non-literary, readings of these works.

One hundred years after its publication, Ernest Barker's *The Political Theory of Plato and Aristotle* is still valuable reading, while its successor, *Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors* is one of the most widely quoted works on Plato's political theory.² There are obvious reasons for the continuing importance of Barker's books. They are characterized by high intelligence and sound judgment, he was thoroughly in command of primary texts and the scholarly literature, and wrote clearly, often eloquently. There is an additional reason, on which I will focus in this paper. Barker took Plato seriously as a political thinker and approached the dialogues in a straightforward manner. One might assume that these last points would go without saying. However, because of peculiar difficulties in studying Plato, this is not always the case.

In the study of Plato, for much of the past century, there was widespread agreement on basic points, which constituted something of a paradigm, in Thomas Kuhn's sense.³ Influenced by the findings of stylometric studies, scholars accepted division of Plato's works into three rough chronological groups — early, middle, and late — and relatively straightforward reading of the dialogues. By this I mean that scholars generally identified the statements of a dialogue's main character as Plato's own views, paying relatively little

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² E. Barker, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (New York, 1906; reprinted, Dover, 1959); *Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors* (London, 1918). Plato is quoted from the edition of J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1900–7); vol. IV which includes the *Republic*, has been revised by S.R. Slings (*Platonis Respublica* [Oxford, 2003]). Translations are from Loeb Classics Library editions, occasionally modified slightly.

³ T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, 1996).

attention to the dialogue form. This approach may be contrasted with what I will call 'ironic' readings of different dialogues. A large variety of interpretations are encompassed by this designation. What they have in common are views that dramatic elements of a work are intended to subvert the opinions advanced by the main character.⁴ For ease of reference, we can call any reading of a dialogue in which the views expressed by the main character are more or less identified with what Plato wishes to communicate 'straightforward' or 'non-ironic', and one in which the dramatic action significantly intervenes 'ironic'. In discussing these different approaches, I do not include the early, Socratic dialogues, in many of which Plato's use of the dialogue form is obviously important and must be taken into account.⁵ But for many years, scholars have generally held that things evolve in the middle dialogues, in which Socrates changes from the elenctic examiner of many early works and as described in the *Apology* to the expounder of what appears to be a philosophical system. Such a view of the middle and late dialogues is epitomized by F.M. Cornford's decision to edit out the responses of the interlocutors in Books II–X of his edition of the *Republic*.⁶ On a view such as Cornford's, what the main character of a dialogue says should be identified as 'what Plato said', to give the title of another important commentator's work.⁷

In recent years, accepted assumptions about both the development of Plato's thought and how his works should be read have been widely challenged. A proliferation of books have appeared, including several collections of essays. Two important collections are *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient*, edited by Julia Annas and Christopher Rowe, and *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, edited by Christopher Gill and Mary McCabe.⁸ In the Annas and Rowe collection, distinguished scholars revisit both assumptions. The subject of the Gill and McCabe collection is the role of the dialogue form

⁴ On irony in Plato, see P. Friedlander, *Plato*, 3 vols., trans. H. Meyerhoff (Princeton, 1958–69), vol. I, ch. 7.

⁵ For discussion of Plato's use of dramatic irony in several early dialogues, see G. Klosko, 'The Insufficiency of Reason in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Western Political Quarterly*, 36 (1983), pp. 579–95; 'Rational Persuasion in Plato's Political Theory', *History of Political Thought*, 7 (1986), pp. 15–31.

⁶ F.M. Cornford, ed. and trans., *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford, 1941), p. vii.

⁷ P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1933).

⁸ J. Annas and C. Rowe, ed., *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient* (Cambridge, 2003); C. Gill and M. McCabe, *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford, 1996). See also C. Griswold, ed., *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (New York, 1988); G. Press, *Who Speaks for Plato?* (Lanham, Md., 2000). For a good presentation of reasons to read the dialogues literally, see T. Irwin, 'Reply to David L. Roochnik', in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, pp. 194–200. For an excellent overall discussion of Plato's use of dramatic elements, see R.B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). Notable literary interpretations of the *Republic* include M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), ch. 5; and P. Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (Princeton, 1990), ch. 8.

in even the late dialogues. Although I will not devote much attention to developmental views in this paper, I will defend non-ironic readings of Plato's political works.⁹ But I approach this indirectly, by examining other assumptions that were long common in Plato scholarship, although opinion has since largely turned away from them. Briefly, for much of the past century, because Plato was taken seriously as a political actor, his political activities and those of the school he founded were taken into account in considering his political works, while scholars viewed the *Republic* and *Laws* as bearing on practical politics, perhaps as blueprints for intended political reform. I will not argue for the strong thesis that the works should be accepted as blueprints, although I do not rule this out. I believe it is imperative to interpret these works against the backdrop of Plato's political activities. Doing so allows us to recognize strong connections between his political aspirations and what his main characters say in the *Republic* and *Laws*. In other words, the historical evidence supports non-ironic readings of these works. For reasons of space and because the evidence is clearer, I will focus mainly on the *Republic*, commenting on the *Laws* only in passing.

To return to Barker, because of the time that has passed since he wrote and the nature of twentieth-century politics, in certain respects his works have become outdated. Obviously, writing before the rise and fall of fascist and communist totalitarianism, Barker does not address these phenomena. It could also be shown that his account of aspects of Plato's philosophy, e.g., of the philosophical content of the early dialogues, have been left behind by recent scholarship. However, his treatments of other matters are permanently valuable. One reason for this is that he recognized the importance of the historical evidence and worked it into an overall, political interpretation of the dialogues. Although it is beyond the concerns of this paper to demonstrate that Barker's specific interpretations are correct, in defending his approach, I attempt to establish a significant burden of justification for scholars who pursue different approaches.

Discussion is in four sections. The evidence for Plato's political activities and Barker's views are reviewed in Section I. The view of particular scholars who neglect the evidence are discussed in Section II, and the implications for studying Plato in Section III. Section IV presents brief conclusions. As we will see, two considerations fix the burden of justification in favour of a political reading of Plato's political works. First, because of the likelihood that at least some historical evidence is genuine, the burden of justification falls on scholars who contest it. Second, because of the ostensible political content of many dialogues, proponents of ironic interpretations must explain this away as not sincerely intended. Most important is the clear impetus of the text of the *Republic*, which espouses both the philosopher-king and the possibility of the

⁹ For the development of Plato's political theory, see my book *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (New York, 1986).

just city. Scholars who argue against these features of the *Republic*, must justify disregarding the clear sense of the text. I should note that, unless supporters of such views satisfy the first burden, concerning evidence, they will find this second burden much more difficult to meet.

I

There are three main sources of evidence concerning Plato's political activities: his own account of his experiences in his *Seventh Epistle*, along with some points in the *Eighth*; the political activities of the Academy; and the nature of the mission of the historical Socrates, which may be presumed to have influenced Plato's views. Most important is *Epistle 7*. Scholars have long been divided over the authorship of this piece. So important is the epistle for understanding Plato that in a real sense, scholars who accept and reject it interpret two different thinkers, two different Platos. The epistle influences interpretation of Plato's political theory in at least three separate areas. First, it calls attention to the importance Plato placed on political reform throughout his life. Second, it leaves no doubt about the seriousness of his commitment to the idea of the philosopher-king, and so to the central feature of the just city in the *Republic*. Third, it provides a detailed account of Plato's commitment to political reform, in deed as well as words, in his successive voyages to Syracuse and involvement in political affairs there. These points are mutually supporting and decisively shape one's view of Plato's political theory.

Although the epistle's validity has long been debated by scholars, this question will probably never be resolved. As Karl Boeckh notes, only forgery but not authenticity can be proved decisively.¹⁰ One thing more than two centuries of controversy has made clear is that there is no decisive evidence of forgery. At the present time, the majority of scholars accept the work as Plato's. 'Purely for amusement', W.K.C. Guthrie collected the views of scholars. He found thirty-six viewing it as genuine and fourteen as not.¹¹ In this paper, I accept *Epistle 7* (and 8) as authentic, which is the most prevalent view in the scholarly community. Some reasons for this position are that authenticity is supported by the most important recent stylometric studies,¹² while the grounds presented against authenticity are generally subjective. For

¹⁰ Cited by Friedlander, *Plato*, vol. I, p. 236.

¹¹ Guthrie has twenty-two in favour of *Epistle 8* and three against (*A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols. [Cambridge, 1962–81, vol. V, p. 401]. But see the argument of P.A. Brunt, *Studies in Greek History and Culture* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 319, 339–41. I should note that Guthrie says that his figures do not include the twenty-four scholars who doubt all the epistles and the eight who accept all.

¹² G. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato* (Oxford, 1989), p. 149; see pp. 124–7, 148–53; L. Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 249–52; 'Stylometry and Chronology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 111–3.

instance, in a book-length study, Ludwig Edelstein presents a variety of arguments against authenticity, focusing mainly on apparent discrepancies between the epistle and the dialogues.¹³ But the significance of this evidence depends on prior assumptions about the nature of Plato's philosophy. Is it a closed system, never changing and consistent from dialogue to dialogue, or is variance widely found and to be expected? If there is considerable divergence between different dialogues that are undoubtedly authentic, why should we be surprised at differences between *Epistle 7* and other works? ¹⁴ While arguments such as Edelstein's are not decisive, those of other scholars are openly subjective. For example, Malcolm Schofield notes that there is no strong evidence against authenticity. But he is 'hesitantly' sceptical, for two reasons: the epistle's lack of humour, and the fact that Plato discloses so much about himself.¹⁵

In an influential study, P.A. Brunt defends an intermediate position. Holding that the evidence is not sufficient to settle the question of authenticity, he leaves this open. However, Brunt claims that, even if the letter were not written by Plato, it was written by a close associate or disciple and so still provides credible evidence of Plato's views and recollections.¹⁶ Brunt accepts the epistle's accuracy in regard to Plato's early political experiences as well as his voyages to Syracuse.¹⁷ Other influential scholars adopt similar views, accepting the evidence of the letter, though with reservations about its authenticity.¹⁸ According to Guthrie: 'No sceptic [...] would go farther than this today'.¹⁹ Thus, in spite of some reservations, Guthrie frequently refers to and quotes from the letter, in effect treating it as Plato's. As Guthrie notes, if the work is attributed to a close associate of Plato, who knew the facts about Syracuse and was so familiar with Plato's writings as to be able to imitate his style, 'it would hardly seem worth while to invent this shadowy figure'.²⁰ I should note, however, that accepting the evidence of the letter though not the letter itself leaves significant grey areas about exactly what evidence is included. I have noted

¹³ L. Edelstein, *Plato's Seventh Letter* (Leiden, 1966).

¹⁴ F. Solmsen, Review of Edelstein, *Gnomon*, 41 (1969), pp. 29–34. For strong arguments for the authenticity of Epistles 7 and 8, see G. Morrow, ed., *Plato's Epistles*, revised ed. (Indianapolis, 1962), pp. 3–17; G.C. Field, *Plato and His Contemporaries*, 3rd ed. (London, 1967), pp. 197–201.

¹⁵ M. Schofield, 'Plato and Practical Politics', in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. M. Schofield and C. Rowe (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 299–300.

¹⁶ Brunt, *Studies*, pp. 320–5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

¹⁸ E.g., M. Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity* (New York, 1977), p. 80; Shorey, *What Plato Said*, p. 41. This is essentially the position of A. Riginos, in her generally sceptical analysis of anecdotal material about Plato's life (*Platonica* [Leiden, 1976], p. 70 n.1).

¹⁹ *History*, vol. IV, p. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. V, p. 399.

that Brunt accepts the letter's account of Plato's early political experiences. Guthrie does also, though other scholars are not clear about the status of this evidence, as opposed to that concerning Plato's activities in Syracuse, which is almost universally accepted. For our purposes, it is especially necessary to note the remarks with which Plato concludes his narrative about his early political experiences and the disillusion they engendered:

I was forced to say, in praise of true philosophy, that from her heights alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual, and that the ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy.

Such was the conviction I had when I arrived in Italy and Sicily for the first time (326a–b; Morrow trans.).

Plato's first voyage to Sicily is generally dated around 387 BC, while scholars generally place the *Republic* some time in the period 375–370.²¹ If these dates are correct, then, Plato subscribed to the idea of the philosopher-king for some 12–17 years before using it as the basis for the political theory of the *Republic*.

In view of the significance of the *Seventh Epistle* and the uncertainty of the evidence, one could be tempted to agree with Annas that 'the only reasonable course is to suspend judgment', and so to conclude that we do not have biographical information that should shape our interpretation of the dialogues.²² However, Annas is incorrect in her apparent belief in the neutrality of suspending judgment. Not to employ the biographical information of the *Seventh Epistle* is functionally equivalent to rejecting the epistle. Entirely disregarding the evidence is a much stronger position than the intermediate position of Brunt and other scholars and seems rash in view of general scholarly opinion in favour of the letter itself or, surely, its evidence concerning Plato's political involvement. In discussing Plato's political theory, below, we will see the radical implications of Annas' distinctive approach to Plato.²³

Accepting the evidence of the *Seventh Epistle* gives us a Plato who was deeply concerned with the realities of Greek politics. As Plato describes his political aspirations, he makes clear his dissatisfaction with the world he knew and his desire for reform. More than this, successive disillusionment with democratic, oligarchic, and restored democratic regimes led Plato to believe that reform must come from outside the political system. As he argues in the *Republic* and later in *Epistle 7*, corrupt political bodies cannot reform themselves. The factors that require reform also prevent them from being able to take the necessary action. Thus the epistle explains how Plato's desire for reform led him to the idea of the philosopher-king.

²¹ Guthrie, *History*, vol. IV, pp. 17, 437.

²² J. Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca, 1999), pp. 77, 28.

²³ Annas' view is discussed in Section II.

Finally, in the epistle, Plato provides a detailed account of his experiences in Sicily. Having made the acquaintance of Dion on a previous visit, he responded to Dion's entreaty that he come to Sicily, since the new tyrant, Dionysius II, showed the possibility of being receptive to philosophic instruction. The details of what transpired are readily available in the epistle and need not be reviewed here. The epistles — 7 and 8 — do not say exactly what Plato hoped to accomplish in Syracuse. While it is unlikely that he hoped to convert Dionysius into a full-fledged philosopher-king, he says that success at his endeavour 'would mean an incalculably blessed life for the tyrant himself and the other Syracusans' (*Ep.* 7 327c). The epistles suggest that Plato hoped to bring about reforms in Syracuse along the lines of the 'second best' city described in the *Laws*. Evidence for this assessment includes the fact that institutions described in the *Laws*, especially the earlier books, seem to be devised with Sicily in mind. There are also close resemblances between the institutions described in the *Laws* and those Plato recommends for Syracuse in *Epistle* 8.²⁴ In addition, although Magnesia, the city described in the *Laws*, is a new colony that is to be set up by the Cnossians, Plato inexplicably presents another means of implementing it. If a lawgiver could join forces with a willing monarch, that would be the easiest way to bring the second best state into existence (709c–12b). Plato's appeal to a monarch who is young, intelligent, and virtuous (709e–10a) cannot but recall the hopes he had harboured for Dionysius II. The fact that Plato segues into this topic while the city in the *Laws* is to be a Cnossian colony makes little sense on any other explanation.

Reading Plato's political works against the backdrop of the epistles yields an interpretation in many ways far removed from currently dominant scholarly views. Awareness of this side of Plato's politics impels the scholar to explore the interactions between Plato and his political context and to take his works seriously as intended political interventions. This is of course not to say that everything Plato says about politics is intended to be put into practice or that reading Plato in this context somehow makes his political views more correct, or even more palatable from our point of view. But as we will see, one thing it does do is to give the lie to particular interpretations of the dialogues.

The evidence of the epistles is not alone in driving towards a political interpretation of Plato. Not only did Plato voyage to Sicily two times with the intention of combining political power and philosophic wisdom in the person of Dionysius II, but he established the Academy as, at least in part, a training school for lawgivers and advisers of rulers.²⁵ Glenn Morrow connects up the Academy's political environment with Plato's observation in the *Epistle* that

²⁴ Klosko, *Development*, pp. 238–9.

²⁵ P.M. Schuhl, 'Platon et l'activité politique de l'académie', *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, 59 (1946), pp. 46–53; T. Saunders, "'The Rand Corporation of Antiquity': Plato's Academy and Greek Politics", in *Studies in Honour of T.B.L. Webster*, ed. J.H. Betts, J.T. Hooker, and J. R. Green (Bristol, 1986), vol. I, pp. 200–10.

it is impossible to effect political improvements 'without friends and loyal followers' (325c–d). He notes that it would have been unusual for the Academy not to have had political purposes, as all other similar associations that had been founded prior to the Academy were 'more or less political in character'.²⁶

As with the epistles, there are problems with the evidence concerning the political activities of the Academy. In this case also, scholarly opinion is divided. While major scholars such as Guthrie and Morrow accepted this a generation ago,²⁷ recent opinion has been more sceptical, especially in view of the detailed study of Brunt.²⁸

The most important evidence is from Plutarch, who reports on many of Plato's students. According to Plutarch, Phormio drew up legislation for Elis, Eudoxus for Cnidus, and Aristotle for the Stagirites. Aristonymus was sent to Arcadia and Menedemus to the Pyrrhaens, while Alexander the Great is reported to have requested advice concerning kingship from Xenocrates, who was third head of the Academy (Plutarch, *Adv. Colot.* xxxii). According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato himself was asked by the Thebans to draw up laws for the city of Megalopolis, which they founded (DL, III, 23). Other sources report that two additional members of the Academy, Erastus and Corsicus, were sent to advise Hermeias, tyrant of Atarneus. The *Sixth Epistle*, probably spurious, concerns their mission. In addition, Aristotle was of course tutor to Alexander the Great, while Dion was a close associate of Plato. Several members or former members of the Academy accompanied Dion on his expedition, including Callipus, who later assassinated him.²⁹ This evidence indicates that the Academy was involved in political activities of two kinds: drawing up the laws for new cities, and attempting to advise rulers how to rule more wisely and justly. The extent to which any of these episodes was intended to realize the full-blown political theory of the *Republic* cannot be determined. As with Plato's aspirations in Syracuse, it is unlikely that Plato or his associates attempted anything so grandiose.

As with the *Seventh* and *Eighth Epistles*, questions concerning the reliability of the evidence of the Academy's activities will probably never be resolved. Once again, the positions scholars take tend to follow from their overall assumptions about Plato. But I think it is wrong to be too sceptical.³⁰ Even disregarding all sources noted in the preceding paragraph, one would

²⁶ Morrow, *Epistles*, p. 143.

²⁷ Guthrie, *History*, vol. IV, pp. 22–4; Morrow, *Epistles*; Field, *Plato and His Contemporaries*, pp. 43–5. For a more recent, essentially positive assessment, see Saunders, 'Rand Corporation'.

²⁸ Brunt, *Studies*, ch. 10.

²⁹ Morrow, *Epistles*, pp. 173–80.

³⁰ As Saunders argues, the different sources, 'though very diverse, do seem to offer patches of evidence which, when put together, make the outlines of a more or less plausi-

still be left with strong evidence of the Academy's political involvement, given Plato's activities in Syracuse and those of Dion, whose invasion of Syracuse was strongly supported by the Academy. In addition, there can be no doubt about Aristotle's activities tutoring Alexander, while his later travels to the court of Hermeias of Atarneus could perhaps be interpreted in a similar light.³¹ Moreover, as I have noted, there was a long tradition in Greece of political involvement by philosophic schools. Most notable were the Pythagoreans,³² a school with which Plato had close philosophical affinities.³³ In the *Seventh Epistle*, Plato notes his friendship with Archytas of Tarentum (338c), who is the addressee of the probably spurious *Ninth* and *Twelfth Epistles*. Archytas was a Pythagorean philosopher-politician, seven times general of his city, and said never to have been defeated in battle.³⁴ Even more interesting was Epaminondas, the leading figure in Thebes and probably the most prominent person in the Greek world in the twenty or so years before his death, in 361, a period during which Plato was most likely writing the *Republic*. Epaminondas was a student of the Pythagorean philosopher, Lysis, and lived in accordance with Pythagorean precepts. Although he was not a philosopher-king in Plato's sense, Aristotle remarks in the *Rhetoric*: 'At Thebes, as soon as those who had the conduct of affairs became philosophers, the city flourished' (*Rhet.* 1398b18).³⁵

We have little evidence about either Archytas or Epaminondas — or perhaps other figures who may have attracted Plato's attention — although there is little reason to believe that either attempted fundamental moral reform, let alone anything like what is described in the *Republic*. But in spite of these limitations, the overall accumulation of evidence presented here should render less implausible the claim that Plato was interested in combining philosophy and political power through the activities of the Academy. In the face of this accumulation of evidence, complete scepticism seems unwarranted.

The final evidence I will review concerns the activities of Socrates. The main point to note here is that Socrates made moral improvement of his fellow Athenians the centrepiece of his life's work. To the extent that the *Apology* can be believed, Socrates spent his time examining his fellow citizens. He too worked outside the political system; as he tells us in the *Apology*, he viewed Athenian politics as so corrupt that an honest person who took part could not

ble story; and it is moreover a story which [...] has certain echoes and parallels' in Plato's dialogues — especially the *Laws* ('Rand Corporation', p. 204).

³¹ Morrow, *Epistles*, pp. 143–4.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 144; K. von Fritz, *Pythagorean Politics in Southern Italy* (New York, 1940; reprinted 1977).

³³ See Klosko, *Development*, pp. 59–63.

³⁴ D.L. VIII, 79; see Guthrie, *History*, vol. I, pp. 333–6.

³⁵ J.H. Freese, trans., *Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge, Mass., 1926).

long survive (31c–32a). Socrates' mission of moral reform is depicted in many early dialogues.

It is not necessary to give a full account of Socrates' activities here. It should suffice to note that these were *political* activities. In the *Gorgias*, he describes himself as the only Athenian who practised 'the true art of politics' (*tê ... alêthos politikê technê*) (*Grg.* 521d). We should also note Plato's preoccupation with Socrates' activities and his death, which are of course a major feature of many dialogues, while the dramatic action of many works is constructed around the failure of Socrates' mission.³⁶ Finally, the force Socrates' example exerted can be inferred from the *Republic*. In the parable of the cave, Plato notes the imperative that the prisoner freed from the cave return to help those still in chains, even if his would-be beneficiaries would kill him if they had the chance (*Rep.* 517a).

As I have noted, one of the great strengths of Barker's account of Plato's political theory is the connections he makes between Plato's political interests and his political theory. Barker discusses all three sources of evidence. In *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, he is emphatic about the nature of Socrates' mission. He describes Socrates as 'a reformer of man's moral nature', 'the prophet and missionary of his time'. 'Socrates lived the life not of a philosopher, but of a prophet, in the old Hebrew sense of the word.'³⁷ In this work, Barker views Plato as following in Socrates' footsteps: 'Plato always remained entirely true to the mind of his master. He never lost that bent toward a practical reform of man, and of human society, which is the distinguishing mark of Socrates.'³⁸ He describes Socrates and Plato as 'prophets and preachers, rather than philosophers—trumpets to summon a wayward people to righteousness'.³⁹ Barker moves on to Plato's attempt 'to carry his philosophy into active life', referring to his adventures in Syracuse, which he bases on the account of Plutarch 'and the (so-called) letters of Plato'. He notes that disillusionment in Syracuse may have led Plato to retreat from the ideals of the *Republic* to the more practical *Laws*.⁴⁰ In spite of the emphasis on the practical side of Plato's activities, in this work, Barker makes little use of *Epistle 7*'s contents. He does not relate Plato's account of his early disillusionment with politics. Although he mentions Plato's family connections with Critias, he does not discuss this. Although Critias is mentioned a few times, Charmides' name does not appear in the book's index. Barker apparently came to his conclusions about the practical political side of Plato from reading the latter's works, and connecting them up with Socrates' political activities and Plato's voyages to Sicily.

³⁶ See Klosko, *Development*, pp. 49–54; and the articles cited above, in note 5.

³⁷ Barker, *Political Thought*, pp. 46, 48, 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.

In the more extensive space given to Plato in *Greek Political Theory* (some two and a half times as much), Barker goes into more detail. He discusses Plato's early experiences in politics, as related in *Epistle 7*, as well as his voyages to Syracuse.⁴¹ He provides a lengthy account of the latter, relying on Plato's discussion in *Epistle 7*.⁴² He notes his assumption that the epistle is genuine, along with *Epistles 8* and *3*, and possibly *4* and *13*.⁴³ He also discusses the evidence concerning the political activities of the Academy, which he accepts at face value and interprets in strong terms: 'The aim of Plato was to train the philosophic ruler, who should rule by trained intelligence and not by the letter of the law, or if that aim were unattainable, to train the philosophic legislator who should imbue even the letter of the law with the spirit of wisdom and understanding.'⁴⁴ In spite of all these elaborations on his earlier book, in *Greek Political Theory*, Barker focuses less on Socrates' moral mission; the strong language of *The Political Theory of Plato and Aristotle* is not in evidence.⁴⁵

What distinguishes Barker's interpretation of Plato's political theory is that the background material is brought to bear. Barker provides an overall, consistent interpretation of the political dialogues, which encompasses the contents of the works and the political backdrop. Central to his account is emphasis on the practical side of Plato's theorizing and so its location in an actual political and social context: 'the *Republic* is not a city of nowhere. It is based on actual conditions; it is meant to mould, or at any rate to influence, actual life'.⁴⁶ Running through both the dialogues and letters is Plato's concern with political reform: 'It is impossible to read the *Republic* (or the *Laws*) side by side with the genuine *Epistles*, more especially the seventh, without believing that political reform was the preoccupation of Plato's mind.'⁴⁷ This theme is carried through Barker's interpretations of the different works.

As I have noted, it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that Barker's interpretation is correct — beyond some remarks below, in Section III. But I should note my belief that a political interpretation of Plato's political theory such as Barker's is more interesting than one that discounts this side of Plato's works. Plato has a great deal to say about politics, and though we may not agree with all his points or accept his assumptions concerning human nature and how it can be adjusted to the requirements of a just polity, his account bears careful study. One cost of discounting the seriousness of Plato's discussions is that the reader is likely to take them less seriously and so to learn less

⁴¹ Barker, *Greek Political Theory*, pp. 127–36.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 130–6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 130 n.1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 99–114.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 277–8.

from them. While I do not claim that this is always or necessarily the case, I believe it is a natural tendency.

In the following section, I turn to the views of scholars who have more severe difficulties accommodating the historical evidence.

II

Reading Plato against the backdrop of this historical information tells strongly against particular interpretations of his political works. In this section, I discuss two different contemporary views: the ironic interpretation of the *Republic* advanced by Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom; and the sceptical view of Annas. Additional interpretations are discussed in the following section.

Strauss and Bloom argue that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the *Republic* is intended as an anti-utopian tract. Although, for reasons of space, I confine discussion of ironic interpretations of Plato to Strauss and Bloom, other commentators present similar arguments and so, with little modification, many of my points could be applied to them as well.

Strauss and Bloom argue that, rather than describing an ideal city that he viewed as a realistic possibility, Plato's construction of the just city is actually intended to demonstrate the dangers of political ideals. In his 'Interpretive Essay' on the *Republic*, Bloom writes:

Socrates [i.e., the Socrates of the *Republic*] constructs his utopia to point up the dangers of what we would call utopianism; as such it is the greatest critique of political idealism ever written . . . The striving for the perfectly just city puts unreasonable and despotic demands on ordinary men, and it abuses and misuses the best men. There is gentleness in Socrates' treatment of men, and his vision is never clouded by the blackness of moral indignation, for he knows what to expect of men. Political idealism is the most destructive of human passions.⁴⁸ Similarly, according to Strauss: 'Certain it is that the *Republic* supplies the most magnificent cure ever devised for every form of political ambition.'⁴⁹

Full discussion of the interpretation of Bloom and Strauss would require that we examine their distinctive esoteric interpretations of Plato.⁵⁰ But this subject cannot be discussed here. Let it suffice to note that they hold that Plato hid his meanings, making them available only to those readers who are able to understand the full significance of minor details in the dialogues and such

⁴⁸ A. Bloom, 'Interpretive Essay', *The Republic of Plato* (New York, 1968), p. 410.

⁴⁹ L. Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, 1963), p. 65.

⁵⁰ For discussion of additional problems with their method, see Klosko, "'The Straussian' Interpretation of Plato's *Republic*", *History of Political Thought*, 7 (1986), pp. 278–9.

things as apparent inconsistencies.⁵¹ Strauss and Bloom have never produced good evidence for these claims, and few scholars who were not students of either Strauss or Bloom themselves or their students take their position seriously.

The overall arguments Strauss and Bloom present are in the form of discursive commentaries on the *Republic* or whatever other works they are interpreting. In regard to the *Republic*, their main tactic is to indicate the apparent ridiculousness of different matters, to suggest that Plato is being ironic, that he presents things in this way in order to show up the absurdity of the just city. In his discussion, which is more expansive than Strauss's, Bloom provides detailed discussion of several features of the city, e.g., the treatment of women and community of families, in order to highlight their inherent difficulties. He pays special attention to the impossibility of the philosopher-king. Not only does the philosopher-king's path to power require rustication of the population, but because of his unwillingness to rule, the philosopher must be forced to do so. Putting all these elements together, Bloom concludes: 'The perfect city is revealed to be a perfect impossibility.'⁵² Asking himself what is 'the use of spending so much time and effort on a city that is impossible', he concludes, once again, that the message of the work is the impossibility of the union of philosophy and the city and so the dangers of political idealism.⁵³

There is a great deal to criticize in the works of Strauss and Bloom—and their followers. I will confine attention to three points.⁵⁴ First, as I have noted, their entire theory of esoteric writing is not properly defended. It is improbable on its face. Without detailed defence, there is little reason to accept it. Second, their refusal to take the just city seriously leads to enervated interpretation. The richness of Plato's theorizing, both for good and for ill, is lost; in its place is a pat message of political conservatism. To my mind, what Strauss and Bloom leave us with in regard to Plato's political theory is analogous to what they do with Plato's theory of Forms. They simply refuse to examine one of the great metaphysical theories in the history of philosophy. Strauss devotes less than two pages to the Forms; Bloom provides something

⁵¹ See Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 50–53, 59–60; Bloom, 'Interpretive Essay', p. xviii. I should note that their esoteric theory differs from that of the so-called 'Tübingen School', for which there is evidence, though this evidence does not provide much help in regard to how we should reconstruct the relevant views. For brief discussion of these issues, see I. Müller, 'The Esoteric Plato and the Analytic Tradition', *Methexis*, 6 (1993), pp. 115–34.

⁵² Bloom, 'Interpretive Essay', p. 409. Similarly Strauss, *City and Man*: 'We arrive at the conclusion that the just city is not possible because of the philosopher's unwillingness to rule' (p. 124). 'The just city is then impossible. It is impossible because it is against nature' (p. 126).

⁵³ Bloom, 'Interpretive Essay', pp. 409–10.

⁵⁴ For more in depth discussion, see Klosko, 'Straussian Interpretation'.

on the order of four pages.⁵⁵ This problem, I believe, is common in ironic interpretations of Plato.

Third, our main concern, Strauss' and Bloom's ironic interpretations are significantly weakened by their failure to deal with evidence against it. As we have seen, an interpretation according to which the *Republic* is an anti-utopian tract is contradicted by the evidence of Plato's commitment to political reform. If the *Seventh Epistle* is by Plato (or the evidence of the epistle is otherwise reliable), then Strauss's and Bloom's dismissal of the philosopher-king is difficult to explain. Why would Plato base the *Republic* on an idea that he was committed to for many years before he wrote the work, if his purpose was ironically to show that the city was unworkable? Perhaps Strauss and Bloom could claim that the *Seventh Epistle*, like the *Republic*, should be read esoterically. But this would commit them to the view that Plato wrote a letter to specific persons with the intent that they not be able to understand it — unless we are to assume that the friends and followers of Dion were versed in esoteric interpretation.

These considerations are reinforced by Plato's activities in regard to Syracuse and those of the Academy. Although I do not contend that these points are necessarily decisive, to contest them, Strauss and Bloom must address the evidence. Most plausibly, they could attempt to debunk it, as many scholars do. However, they simply ignore it. I should note that the position of Strauss especially is fraught with problems. He would have a difficult time impugning the authenticity of *Epistle 7*, because, in others of his works he quotes from the *Second Epistle*, which is far more suspect.⁵⁶ It would be extremely difficult to defend the authenticity of the former but not the latter, while Strauss appears to be unaware of how severely accepting the genuineness of the *Epistles* undermines his position. The failure of Strauss and Bloom to deal with the historical evidence is potentially devastating to their position, while I believe similar points hold not only for Strauss and Bloom but for other proponents of ironic interpretation. The close relationship between what the *Republic* ostensibly says and the historical evidence creates a strong *prima facie* case for straightforward reading. In other words, the political theory of the *Republic* is in essence what Socrates puts forth — at least in Books II–X, in which significant dramatic action has been all but eliminated. Unless proponents of ironic interpretation are able to explain the historical evidence, their overall enterprise will be jeopardized.

⁵⁵ Strauss, *City and Man*, pp. 119–20; Bloom, 'Interpretive Essay', pp. 393–4, 401–3.

⁵⁶ Strauss quotes from the *Second Epistle* on, e.g., *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago, 1966), p. 3. For discussion of the authenticity of this epistle, see Morrow, *Epistles*, pp. 109–18. Strauss also quotes from Platonic dialogues that are almost universally believed not to be genuine. For instance, he cites the *Minos* on *City and Man*, pp. 56, 77 and the *Rivals* on p. 51. For references concerning the authenticity of these works, see Shorey, *What Plato Said*, pp. 659, 663.

The importance of the historical background to the *Republic* is confirmed by examining the recent work of Annas, who argues against a political interpretation of the dialogue. Although Annas does not present an ironic reading of the *Republic*, her interpretation of the work depends upon a similar dismissal of the evidence, although she advances far beyond Strauss and Bloom in grappling with the evidence against her view, rather than ignoring it. Annas' innovative work draws on the insights of successors of Plato in the Academy in order to counter contemporary assumptions about interpreting his work. Appealing to the so-called Middle Platonists, including Alcinous, Apuleius, Albinus, and Plutarch, as well as Arius Didymus, she argues against the contention that Plato's thought develops between groups of dialogues. While conventional views place the *Republic* at the centre of Plato's thought and bound together the ethical and political theories of this work, Annas follows the Middle Platonists — to whose view she refers as the 'ancient perspective' — in viewing the *Republic* as simply one work among others and, especially important for our purposes, holding that the ethical and political theories of the work can be separated and that its main themes are not primarily political.⁵⁷ Annas follows the ancients in dismissing the idea of development. Rather than interpreting conflicting aspects of different dialogues in this light, she argues that the dialogues are primarily pedagogical in nature, and so differences between them can be explained by varying pedagogical purposes. Although her arguments raise many important issues that merit discussion, reasons of space preclude this here. What I will focus on are claims about Plato's political theory. Annas believes the attention traditionally accorded to Plato's political theory in the *Republic* is misplaced. She traces this back to nineteenth-century attempts to involve Plato in then contemporary political debates.⁵⁸ One reason the *Republic* has stayed on political theory syllabuses since that time is that it provides so convenient a target: 'even the dumbest student in the class can see what is wrong with the idea that philosophers should be kings.'⁵⁹ Two of Annas' contentions should be examined: that the subject of the *Republic* is ethical rather than political; and her claims concerning the biographical evidence and the relationship between this evidence and the *Republic*.

The first point can be dispensed with quickly. Annas contests what she calls the traditional view that the 'most important' theme of the *Republic* is politics rather than ethics, that it is 'primarily' a work of political theory.⁶⁰ She does not contend that the work 'has nothing to do with politics, or makes no contri-

⁵⁷ Annas, *Platonic Ethics*; 'Politics in Plato's *Republic*: His and Ours', *Apeiron*, 33 (2000), pp. 295–318.

⁵⁸ Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, pp. 78–9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 82 n.25; similarly, 'Politics', p. 304.

⁶⁰ 'Politics', pp. 304, 305, 321; *Platonic Ethics*, p. 72

bution to political theory',⁶¹ but believes the traditional view is misguided. The response here is obvious. The *Republic* is *both* a moral and a political work; it makes significant contributions to both areas. Depending on their interests, readers may disagree about which of these is more significant. But it is silly to argue that a given Platonic dialogue must have *one* theme, and so that if no other theme is *the* theme of the work, that these other themes should be taken less seriously. Many dialogues touch on different themes. For instance, the *Gorgias* presents in depth explorations of both the moral life and rhetoric. The work is not about one or the other, but of course about both.⁶² In the *Gorgias*, as often in the dialogues, Plato's discussion of one of his themes serves to broaden and deepen his treatment of others. Such reciprocal enhancement is basic to Plato's technique.

To support her position, Annas argues that the political argument is subordinate, because 'the ideal state does not form part of the main argument', which is Socrates' attempt to define justice and explain how it pays.⁶³ Once again, this is unconvincing. Even if the *Republic* is ostensibly an examination of the nature of justice, to which discussion of the just city is subordinate, Plato finds it necessary to depart from this structure. The discussion of justice is carried on only in Books I, II–IV, and VIII–IX. Books V–VII, in which, not incidentally, Plato touches on his deepest philosophical truths, are formally an interlude, a digression prompted by the interruption of the interlocutors, who raise three great 'waves' of criticism, including 'the biggest and most difficult one', whether it is possible for the just city to exist and how this can be accomplished (472c ff.) The fact that Plato departs from discussing justice directly in these crucial books does considerable damage to the contention that the city is discussed *only* for this purpose. Nor do I agree with Annas' claim that Plato's account of the just city is 'skimpy'.⁶⁴ The discussions of the treatment of women and community of the family, in addition to the exhaustive discussions of poetry and other educational matters, are far too detailed to be required solely for the argument that justice pays.⁶⁵ Annas is perhaps on stronger ground arguing that the idea of the philosopher-king is 'simple-minded',⁶⁶ and other details of the just city absurd. But as I have argued elsewhere, it is not enough to question these institutions from our perspective; one

⁶¹ 'Politics', p. 304.

⁶² See E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 1–5.

⁶³ Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, p. 88.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁵ This point made by R. Demos, 'Paradoxes in Plato's Doctrine of the Idea State', *Classical Quarterly*, N.S. 7 (1957), p. 169.

⁶⁶ *Platonic Ethics*, p. 81.

must show that they are obviously absurd from Plato's perspective, which is a far more difficult endeavor.⁶⁷

More important for our purposes are the connections Annas draws between Plato's life and how the *Republic* should be interpreted. She believes that our view of the work has been decisively influenced by mythology about Plato's life, what she calls 'the historicized political interpretation' of the work.⁶⁸ Her main claim is that we simply do not have reliable information about Plato's life. The letters are suspect; she cites longstanding disagreements about authenticity. In view of such problems with the evidence, she claims that 'clearly much the most reasonable policy is to suspend judgment'. She contends that the evidence for the political interests of the Academy is no better, and so here too we should suspend judgment.⁶⁹

As I have noted above, this will not do. While Annas seems to believe that suspending judgment is a reasonable, moderate position, in actuality, this amounts to treating all the evidence as false. Considerations for and against the historical evidence should not be assumed to be equally weighty. The standard is likelihood rather than certainty, and as I argue above, likelihood is on the side of accepting at least some of the evidence, perhaps a good deal of it. There are obvious lapses in Annas' arguments. As noted above, most scholars claim that, even if *Epistle 7* is not by Plato, it still provides accurate evidence concerning his political activities and opinions. I have noted that there is room for disagreement about how far we may take this, but Annas simply dismisses the epistle as a source of evidence. This is surprising because, in rejecting evidence concerning the political activities of the Academy, she says she is 'simply relying' on the essay by Brunt, mentioned above.⁷⁰ But as I have noted, Brunt believes the evidence concerning Plato's early political experiences in Athens as well as his experiences in Syracuse is reliable. Agreeing with Brunt on these points while still regarding the epistle as spurious would be sufficient to overthrow Annas' position.

Others of Annas' claims are more extreme. As I have noted, one reason the epistle is so important is that it provides reasons to view the political theory of the *Republic* against the backdrop of Plato's disillusionment with Athenian politics. Annas moves beyond dismissing the epistle to dismissing all evidence concerning the latter as well. According to her: 'we have no evidence of Plato's disillusionment with Athenian politics.'⁷¹ This is clearly wrong. For instance, the *Gorgias* provides a ringing denunciation of Athenian politics. In its castigation of political rhetoric and the Athenian politicians who employed

⁶⁷ G. Klosko, *Jacobins and Utopians: The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reform* (Notre Dame, IN, 2003), pp. 63–4.

⁶⁸ *Platonic Ethics*, p. 73.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74 n.8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

it, this work is probably as critical of democracy as any in Western political theory. Similarly, in the *Apology*, Socrates notes the short life expectancy of a just man who takes part in Athenian politics (31c–32a), to say nothing of the *Republic*'s comparison of the Athenian demos to a great beast tamed by Sophists (493a–c) and the vivid account of democracy and its fall in Book VIII. In other words, even if *Epistle 7* is not genuine, it still provides important evidence for the interpretation of Plato's political theory. Even if we go so far as to dismiss its evidence out of hand, we still find significant additional evidence in Plato's *corpus* to counter Annas' claims of complete scepticism concerning Plato's political attitudes and how they bear on the *Republic*.

III

Having criticized what I view as indefensible interpretations advanced by Strauss and Bloom and Annas, we turn to scholars who deal more successfully with the historical evidence and discuss what they make of it.

A I have noted, the *Republic* has traditionally been viewed as intended to be a contribution to Greek politics. This is what Plato appears to say in Book VI of the work. As I have noted, the third and greatest wave of criticism concerns demonstrating that the just city is possible. Through the paradox of the philosopher-king, Plato argues that it is difficult but not impossible: 'Then, do you agree that the things we've said about the city and its constitution aren't altogether wishful thinking, that it's hard for them to come about, but not impossible?' (540d) ⁷² Simply recounting the text leaves one with this position. For example, R.L. Nettleship provides a straightforward reading of the *Republic*, in his *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*. Nettleship does not discuss biographical information, and so neither *Epistle 7* nor the activities of the Academy. Taking the argument of Book VI at face value, he claims that, should a philosopher-king arise, the ideal state could be established. It is not easy, but it is possible: 'However difficult this may be, it is not impossible, for it is not impossible that a genuine philosopher may be found, possessed of great power, who will escape deterioration, and it is not impossible that mankind may listen to him.' ⁷³

Scholars who are influenced by the biographical evidence generally make stronger claims Cornford is a clear example. In both the Introduction to his edition of the *Republic* and his essay, 'Plato's Commonwealth', he moves back and forth between Plato's works and his life, arguing that Plato's political works had political intent. He reviews Plato's account of his experiences in *Epistle 7*, and says that, having arrived at the idea of the philosopher-king, Plato discovered how society 'might conceivably be reformed from above' —

⁷² Also 499d, 502c; for discussion see Klosko, *Development*, pp. 177–80.

⁷³ R.L. Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed. (London, 1901), p. 211.

and then quotes *Republic* 502a as confirmation. He also notes that the Academy was 'primarily a school of philosophic statesmen'. Like the school of Pythagoras, Plato intended, through his students, 'to animate with his ideal the future rulers of other states'.⁷⁴ Discussion in 'Plato's Commonwealth' is similar. Cornford recounts the same biographical information, though the discussion here is even more explicit about Plato's political aims:

Plato's commonwealth is not the City of Zeus or the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a reformed Greek city-state, surrounded by other city-states and by the outer world of barbarians, against which it may have to hold its own . . . The problem he proposes for solution is: What are the least changes to be made in the highest existing form of society — the Greek city-state — which will put an end to intestine [*sic*] strife and faction and harmonize the competing desires of human nature in a stable order.⁷⁵

The connections between Plato's life and political theory Cornford makes are not only reasonable but provide the most reasonable way to read the texts, as long as one makes two assumptions. First, one accepts the validity of *Epistle* 7; as noted above, evidence concerning the Academy is less important, but still significant as a supplement to that of the epistle. Second, the text of the *Republic* is taken at face value, with what Socrates says, especially from Book II onwards, interpreted as what Plato says. Once again, the parallels between the *Republic* and Plato's statement concerning the discovery of the idea of the philosopher-king in the epistle supports such a reading of the former.

In perhaps the most widely discussed account of Plato's political theory, Karl Popper draws conclusions even stronger than Cornford's. Popper gives a brutal interpretation of the *Republic*, reading the work as not only providing a blueprint for an ideal state but as Plato's own bid for political power, as the philosopher-king.⁷⁶ Interestingly, Popper relies relatively little on the biographical information. Although he accepts *Epistle* 7, he has some reservations and so does not place any independent reliance on it. He bases his interpretation directly on the dialogues, but sees these as in accord with what the letter says.⁷⁷ Popper has no qualms about evidence concerning political activities of the Academy. On this he puts a sinister spin. While Plato's students and associates are traditionally viewed as potential lawgivers and

⁷⁴ Cornford, *Republic*, pp. xxv, xxvi–xxvii.

⁷⁵ Cornford, 'Plato's Commonwealth', in *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. W.K.C. Guthrie (Cambridge, 1950; reprinted 1967), p. 61.

⁷⁶ 'The philosopher king is Plato himself, and the *Republic* is Plato's own claim for kingly power — to the power which he thought his due, uniting in himself, as he did, both the claims of the philosopher and of the descendant and legitimate heir of [...] the last of Athens' kings [...]', K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, The Spell of Plato*, 5th ed. (Princeton, 1966), vol. I, p. 153. For critique of Popper's interpretation of Plato, see Klosko, 'Popper's Plato: An Assessment', *Philosophy of Social Science*, 26 (1996), pp. 509–27.

⁷⁷ Popper, *Open Society*, vol. I, p. 208 n.5.

advisers of rulers, Popper sees them as potential tyrants. Including both Dion and Callipus, Dion's assassin, on his list, he claims 'at least nine tyrants' among this group.⁷⁸

Other scholars accept the biographical information but are not strongly influenced by it. For example, Werner Jaeger accepts both the evidence of the epistles and that concerning the Academy. However, he is somewhat ambivalent about Plato's political aspirations. He views the *Republic* as expressing greater interest in analysis of Greek culture than in putting Plato's ideas into practice.⁷⁹

Jaeger takes into account the evidence concerning Plato's involvement in Dion's invasion of Sicily, and notes how disillusioned Plato must have been by the way things turned out. But he also believes Plato and Dion had fundamentally different attitudes. Unlike Dion, who wanted to construct a philosophical autocracy, Plato was more interested in the philosophical content of his ideals than in possibilities of putting them into practice.⁸⁰

Other scholars accept the biographical information but still argue that the just city was not intended as a serious political possibility. For example, I have noted Guthrie's acceptance of the evidence of *Epistle 7*. He also accepts the ancient evidence concerning the activities of the Academy.⁸¹ But he does not believe the just city is advanced as a serious political proposal. Guthrie provides two basic arguments. One concerns the ostensible subject of the *Republic*. On this view, because the topic of the just city is introduced to elucidate the nature of justice, Plato is not serious about his political proposals. *The* theme of the work is justice, not political reform. In Guthrie's words:

. . . the truth is that Plato is not devising a society with a view to its ever coming into being. He is telling us what it would be like *if* philosophers came to power, not because he seriously believes that they will, but in order to reveal his conception of human nature at its best, or in his phraseology, 'justice in the individual'.⁸²

I have noted strong reason against such an interpretation. Several dialogues have multiple themes, and there is no reason the *Republic* should not be included on this list. A second argument concerns the nature of Plato's proposals. Especially in regard to the passage at 541a in which Plato argues that the quickest and easiest way to establish the just city is by rustivating everyone over the age of ten, Guthrie believes such proposals are not to be taken

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 136–7.

⁷⁹ W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, trans. G. Highet, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1939–45), vol. II, pp. 84–5, 278.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. III, pp. 210–1.

⁸¹ Guthrie, *History*, vol. IV, pp. 19–23: 'To produce political experts was undoubtedly his aim ...' (vol. IV, p. 23).

⁸² *Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 470 (his emphasis); see also p. 434 and n.2.

seriously.⁸³ Other scholars who basically accept the biographical evidence and have similar reservations about this particular proposal include I.M. Crombie and Gerald Levinson.⁸⁴

IV

Determining Plato's precise position on questions of reform in the *Republic* is difficult and, as I have noted, beyond my purposes in this paper. This brief review of the opinions of important scholars indicates the variety of views defended in the literature, while consensus is unlikely ever to be achieved. Still, a few points can be made. Our survey of the historical evidence indicates two burdens of proof scholars sceptical of the political content of the *Republic* (and *Laws*) must meet. The first concerns acceptance or rejection of the evidence. Although there are problems with the sources, the most reasonable position is that at least some evidence is genuine. Given the preponderance of scholarly opinion in favour of *Epistle 7*, in particular — and clearly, if not supporting the epistle itself, then supporting evidence it provides — the burden of justification falls on scholars who dispute this. This burden falls especially heavily on a scholar such as Annas who wishes to dismiss it entirely. There is room for variance here. Different scholars are likely to accept different evidence. But as we have seen, much of this will push interpretation of Plato's political works in definite directions. The second burden concerns direct connection between Plato's espousal of the philosopher-king in *Epistle 7* and the *Republic*. Scholars who present ironic interpretations of the *Republic* should squarely confront their need to dismiss the historical evidence. We have seen that scholars such as Guthrie, Crombie, and Levinson — and Jaeger — cannot be faulted for ignoring the evidence. But they can be criticized for not adequately recognizing its implications. While Plato argues that the just city is a political possibility — difficult but still possible — proceeding from his assumptions, this is a plausible conclusion. Like it or not, rusticating the population is 'the quickest and the easiest' way to establish the state. However unpleasant in the short run, these means would perhaps achieve their end, while Plato is fully aware how difficult it would be to be able to employ them in practice. Several impediments are clearly addressed.⁸⁵ Thus I believe that while Guthrie et al. may be correct, more must be done to establish this. Since they accept the historical evidence, they must address what amounts to a *prima facie* case that Plato is serious about reform in the *Republic*. While this position can be overturned, this requires more sustained argument than

⁸³ *Ibid.*, vol. IV, pp. 483–6.

⁸⁴ I.M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, 2 vols. (London, 1962–3), vol. I, p. 131; R.D. Levinson, *In Defense of Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 348. For their treatment of the evidence, see Crombie, pp. 14, 160; Levinson, pp. 15, 41, 369–70.

⁸⁵ *Rep.* 501a–02c; for discussion, see Klosko, *Development*, pp. 177–80.

Guthrie and other scholars present. While the considerations they advance are suggestive, more is required for them to meet their burden of justification.

In closing, I should make clear that I do not claim that the just city in the *Republic* is a realistic political possibility or that Plato ever thought it was. But it is not impossible, and that is apparently enough for Plato. In all likelihood, he never hoped to establish this in Syracuse, and his proposals in the *Laws*, which appear to bear some relationship to his interest in Syracuse, are more practical. As he says in Book VI of the *Laws*, they are second-best, designed for men rather than gods, as were the institutions of the *Republic*, or so it appears.⁸⁶

Accordingly, if we interpret Plato's political theory against the backdrop of the historical evidence, questions along these lines cannot be avoided. To dismiss questions of political possibility out of hand by claiming that the works should be read ironically will not do, unless one can also make a strong case against the historical evidence. To be defensible, ironic readings must be supported by historical arguments, while claims against the political seriousness of the *Republic* require more sustained argument than many scholars have put forth.

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⁸⁶ For alternative interpretations of this passage, see C. Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 10–3; A. Laks, 'Legislation and Demiurgy: On the Relationship between Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*', *Classical Antiquity*, 9 (1990), pp. 209–29.