

Interpretation

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Plato's *Laws* "is likely the most important book on politics ever written." So begins a new interpretation by Eli Friedland. Although this claim will raise eyebrows, it will seem less amazing to the growing number who give the *Laws* the serious study it deserves and has long commanded. Only in its pages does Plato turn his singular powers to the envisioning of a practical utopia—not in the service of an ulterior task, nor with a political dilettante, but in the founding of an actual city by a duly commissioned lawgiver. The dramatic frame of the *Laws* might remain fictional; the dialogue hardly presents itself as a blueprint for or record of some historical event. But therein lies its significance. For the circumstance in which the best possible regime could come into being is so vanishingly rare that only in fiction can it be realistically brought to light. Indeed, that is why the fictional setting of the *Laws* is so curious. The one work in which the greatest philosophical writer takes up directly and comprehensively the greatest political task is also the only dialogue set outside of Attica and in which Socrates is (apparently) absent altogether. The curtain rises on a scene in the countryside of Crete, its dramatis personae three old men on their way to the sacred cave of Zeus on Mount Ida. Athens is present in the form of the nameless stranger who takes the lead, but the man commissioned to found the Cretan city is a native son of Knossos, his companion a Spartan named Megillus, and the would-be citizens colonists of other Dorian cities. What does Plato mean to suggest by thus framing such a dialogue?

One answer that has found favor with certain readers is that the Cretan and Spartan regimes are best suited to the reforms that the Athenian Stranger

conceives. Athens may be more hospitable to philosophy, but it also earned the ignominy of putting its best man to death and in any case politics at its best requires sundry ingredients besides philosophy. Perhaps Plato considers these to be found in greatest abundance among the Dorians. The Platonic Socrates might seem to suggest as much. In the *Crito* (52e–53a), Socrates points to Crete and Sparta as cities with exceptionally good laws and leaves open the possibility of fleeing to them were he inclined to escape his sentence. The good laws of nearby cities and the bad laws of distant ones rule out these places as refuges (53b–e). Crete and Sparta, however, are neither nearby nor badly governed. But nor are they given to the permissiveness that allowed a Socrates to flourish. It is a—if not *the*—task of the Stranger in the *Laws* to carve out a place for philosophy in the Dorian city without compromising its soul-shaping rectitude. Politics at its best might presuppose such rectitude; philosophy does not.

The special interest of Friedland's study is in how it alters this familiar picture. The drama of Plato's *Laws*, he argues, consists not in the Athenian philosopher playing two old Dorians like puppets, pulling as so many strings the grasping ambition of the one and the stodgy moralism of the other. Friedland maintains rather that the Spartan Megillus "colludes" with the Athenian Stranger in taming the Cretan lawgiver. With a quiet subtlety lost on all previous interpreters, Megillus himself proves "a potential philosopher" (154), his greatness of soul belied by his laconic manner. Reading his terse contributions exceptionally closely, Friedland detects in Megillus not only a critical distance from the laws of Lycurgus, but remarkable capacities for multilevel rhetoric and for transcending the moral indignation that stands in the way of wisdom. On this reading, Megillus becomes the Athenian's partner in his experiment with Kleinias, silently indicating his understanding of the Athenian's purpose while lending it an authority with the Cretan that it otherwise could not have. As a venerable representative of a kindred regime, he puts Kleinias at ease by endorsing the Stranger's leadership. The Dorian city turns out to be more accommodating of philosophy than one had been inclined to suppose, even without the Athenian's reforms. The social pressure with which it shapes its young is not so comprehensive that it requires those reforms to avoid smothering the philosophic nature. Sparta can beget a Megillus; Athens, a Socrates.

To readers well acquainted with the *Laws*, Friedland's idea is bracing and worth taking seriously, if only because it so challenges the usual understanding of the dialogue's characters. Megillus in particular is taken by nearly

all interpreters to be deeply conservative and more or less unreflective, the embodiment of successful Spartan habituation. What evidence can Friedland adduce for overturning this view so completely? What difference does doing so really make to our understanding of the *Laws* as a whole?

Initially, Friedland builds his case by showing just how flimsy the reasons are for taking Megillus to be some turgid traditionalist. Friedland supposes that the primary reason for this impression is the dearth of Megillus's speech, but he rightly insists that this fact alone cannot be accepted as a sign of thoughtlessness. He reminds us that "Laconic wit" was proverbial in antiquity and that other dialogues seem to associate silence with careful listening or even wisdom, at least in the works where Socrates himself is present but hardly says a word. Why not think the same of Megillus in the *Laws*? Nor can the claims of Kleinias to speak on Megillus's behalf be taken to imply an equivalency in the two characters, for Megillus never personally endorses these claims, or so Friedland insists. The tendency to lump together these two characters as "the Dorians," as though they were cut from the same cloth, is at best misleading.

What we *can* say of Megillus, Friedland writes, can be gleaned from the studied ambiguity of the Spartan's parsimonious remarks, especially in the opening passages of the dialogue. The first two times he speaks, Megillus addresses only what the Lacedaemonians believe or say; unlike Kleinias, he does not necessarily speak in his own name. He thus leaves room to doubt whether he himself believes in the divine origin of the Spartan laws or in the notion that a well-governed city "must be ordered in such a way as to defeat the other cities in war" (627c), propositions that he affirms on behalf of his countrymen. The first time that Megillus does speak on his own behalf, he agrees only that what has just been said by the Athenian—about it being unseemly to detain themselves with the precise, literal meaning of the speech of the many—"was said finely, at any rate" (627d6–7). Friedland makes heavy weather of the ambiguity of this response; what is fine or noble, he stresses, is not necessarily what is true. And what is true is that "neither superior lawgiving nor understanding permits of careless imprecision" (23), though the authority of law itself sometimes presupposes just such carelessness in its believers. He takes Megillus to be pointing to both these truths by responding to the Athenian's remarks so ambiguously.

If Friedland finds in Megillus a surprising insight and tact from the first, he also sees the Spartan learning from the Athenian Stranger a lesson of tremendous importance. Friedland argues that it is Megillus who especially

wants to broach the topic of sexual immoderation, apparently introduced by the Athenian at 636b, and that it is the Spartan's particular interest in curbing this vice that finds expression in the later proposals to regulate sexual desire so vigorously. The suggestion here is that these proposals are never meant in earnest and that in the course of introducing them the Athenian actually convinces Megillus of the need to temporize with eros, accommodate himself to human weakness, and even to transcend the desire for retributive justice. These qualities Friedland associates with a philosophic moderation that accepts the limits beyond which human nature cannot go, especially in the direction of self-control. "True moderation," he writes, citing Strauss,¹ consists in accepting the degree to which immoderation is insuperable (51). Or, as Friedland puts it in the later chapters, the philosophic temperament that calmly accepts, as part of nature, the frustration of human purposes finds expression in the sense of responsibility of the consummate lawgiver. The latter's virtue is knowing not only what to command and how to command it. It is above all knowing the pitfalls of wishful thinking. However much we might wish for things to be otherwise, nature imposes on our actions certain limits and tradeoffs. The lawgiver who knows his business does not blame the unlawfulness into which his successors will inevitably descend. He "wills" the good with the bad; he takes responsibility for both.

One difficulty with this reading, though, is that Plato casts Kleinias—not Megillus—as the Athenian's pupil in the *Laws*. Within its drama, it is Kleinias who has been commissioned as one of ten to draft the laws of Magnesia; Megillus is at most his advisor in that enterprise. It is thus the relationship between Kleinias and the Athenian that Plato invites the reader to especially ponder: Why might a man such as Kleinias be particularly open to or otherwise suited for the tutelage that the Stranger has in mind? If it were Megillus whom Plato had wanted us to consider the more promising partner, why not set the *Laws* in Phocis, on the road to Delphi? Why not cast the Lacedaemonians as the new city's founders and Megillus the character on whom the task of lawgiving falls? This is not to say that Megillus does not have an important role to play in the Athenian's complex rhetorical and pedagogical efforts. Nor to deny that Kleinias is far indeed from the philosophical equanimity that the Stranger seems to embody, further perhaps than his laconic peer. But it does seem necessary to ask why, despite or because of his particular flaws,

¹ Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's "Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 33.

it is Kleinias who plays the part of lawgiver, even if he becomes merely the instrument through whom the Athenian does the real legislating.

Friedland is certainly right to read Kleinias as less troubled than Megillus by immoderation; Kleinias himself is a paradigm of immoderation. Despite agreeing that love of money and power is shameful, he thinks of wealth and tyranny as belonging to the happy life (661d–662a) and rebukes the Athenian for blaming too harshly the disposition connected to pursuing them insatiably (832b). The very impression of excessive “hatred” in the Athenian’s censures on this score may reflect less on the Athenian than on Kleinias, as Friedland insightfully observes.² “The Stranger is not indignant at all here [832b7],” he writes, “though the Stranger is deliberately letting Kleinias experience his judgment as such” (99). It is the Cretan’s shame at recognizing himself in the ugly picture that the Athenian blames that moves him to hear in that blame an anger that is not there.

Still, as corrupt as Kleinias may be, might his vices somehow commend him to the Stranger’s task? Some readers have thought as much, recognizing in his immoderate temper an audacity without which the Athenian’s novel reforms would not be possible. Given how Friedland emphasizes this quality, it is surprising to find him interpreting Kleinias as insuperably conventional and even pious, reversing the contrast usually drawn between the Dorian characters. Doing so not only depends on minimizing the link between immoderation and transgressive boldness; it also requires obscuring the sense of the dialogue’s opening scene, which Friedland otherwise reads with exceptional care and thoughtfulness. Kleinias responds to the Athenian’s initial query about the origins of the Cretan laws by calling attention to how giving the traditional, pious answer is “to say what is at any rate the most just thing” (624a). In the same way that speaking nobly is not necessarily to speak truly, saying the just thing is not necessarily to tell the truth. Kleinias may well be implying that he does not believe in the traditional, pious view that the Cretan laws were handed down by Zeus. Why else would he qualify his answer in this conspicuous way? It is a possibility that Friedland neither puts to rest nor seriously entertains.

Nor does Friedland’s account of Megillus make much sense of the moments in the *Laws* when it is the Spartan who is admonished. Notwithstanding Friedland’s clever reading of Megillus’s initial agreement with the

² On the other hand, there is a long-standing dispute as to whether these lines are to be ascribed to Kleinias at all. See Trevor Saunders, *Notes on the “Laws” of Plato* (London: University of London, Institute of Classical Studies, 1976), ad loc.

bellicose interpretation of the Lycurgan laws, as merely what his countrymen say, Megillus seems genuinely to think of military strength as the appropriate, overarching political goal. To demonstrate the superiority of total abstinence from wine drinking and drunkenness, for example, Megillus adduces how “we” put to flight all peoples who permit the practice, a comment that elicits a telling rebuke from the Athenian. “We should always set down victory or defeat in battle,” he says, “not as a clear but as a controversial criterion for whether practices are noble or not” (638a). Victory is often a consequence merely of superiority in numbers; it cannot be looked to as a proxy for virtue or good governance, as Megillus had apparently supposed. At any rate, Megillus does not raise a finger at this construal of the point that he had had in mind. Indeed, that he takes precisely this view and that it very much counts against him would seem confirmed in a later passage treating of the archaic Peloponnesian confederacy and its dissolution (685b–688d). There, Megillus is at a loss as to how to account for the confederacy’s failure, seeing as it enjoyed unrivaled military strength. It takes the Athenian to point out how Megillus has fallen into a grave if all-too-human “error” on this score. He has assumed that the one needful thing is “a lot of power and strength” (686e). He has thus neglected the greater need of prudence, without which power and strength are not only useless but harmful. As the Athenian goes on to conclude, “it is dangerous for one who lacks intelligence to pray” (688c). His point is that the archaic Peloponnesians failed through the same fault that Megillus here betrays. Supposing they knew already what is good (as that which needs power to be got), they wished or “prayed” merely for the means of getting it. But power and that which power can get are beneficial only to the man who knows how to use them well. The perplexity of Megillus at the insufficiency of power in this regard jumps out as a blight on his character, the shame of which the Athenian does not shy away from driving home. Seeing as these passages sit in such stark tension with Friedland’s reading, one is disappointed to find them hardly discussed in his book.

Be that as it may, *The Spartan Drama of Plato’s “Laws”* is a provocative, erudite study that rewards careful attention. Many of its pages are brimming with original interpretations. Friedland breathes life into many passages as few if any have done before, bringing to his task an impressive grasp of political psychology and philosophical responsibility. Although he seldom cites the important francophone literature on the *Laws*, his reading of the German scholarship and the most relevant premodern sources is exceptionally wide and deep, and fruitfully put to work. Ultimately, if readers remain unpersuaded of the book’s central claim, they profit nonetheless from considering

and reflecting on the case that it makes. The project on which Friedland embarks—of tenaciously and comprehensively working through, with an open mind, the extent to which Kleinias and Megillus reflect different human types—has never before been accomplished and yet is surely necessary for a complete understanding of the *Laws*. Even if we cannot follow Friedland to the radical conclusion at which he arrives, our understanding of this singularly important dialogue is much the richer for learning from his efforts.