

Title: Founding as legislating: the figure of the lawgiver in Plato's Republic

Category: longer

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Abstract: Socrates invites Glaucon and Adeimantus to join him not simply in imagining a fine city, but specifically in legislating for one. Thus the three constitute themselves as lawgivers (albeit, though importantly, in speech) framing the city from the outside, distinct from the philosopher-rulers who will rule it from within once it has been established. This image of the lawgiver resonates, of course, with figures such as Solon and Lycurgus in Greek politics. Yet as Plato revises many other roles and beliefs of existing regimes in both the Republic and in other dialogues, we must ask whether and how he is rethinking – as opposed to merely invoking – the figure of the legislator.

Drawing on a larger project about how the image of the lawgiver shapes, and is shaped by, its appropriation into Platonic political thought, this paper focuses on its role in the Republic. The paper will progress by discussing the following points:

(1) The nature of legislating 'in speech', and how it relates to legislation in deeds, with reference to the existence or absence of the pressure of time: this will be discussed by comparison to Laws IX, 858a;

(2) the gulf between legislators and rulers revealed in Socrates' claim that it would be best if the rulers themselves believe the 'noble lie', and its implications for the nature of politics.

(3) an example of legislation in the case of education, including the need to form both the rulers but also the wider culture, tracing the way in which the educational program of Books II-III begins with a focus on the rulers alone (376c-d) but is then broadened to an account of the shaping of popular culture as a whole (368a, 390d-e).

The paper will conclude by assessing the significance of the Republic's retention of the figure of the legislator while abandoning the infra-constitutional offices of the Athenian and other polities. In this respect, a comparison will be drawn both with the Statesman, which concludes by elevating the politikos above the established roles of rhetor, general and juror, and with the later reception of Platonic legislators, notably in the work of Nietzsche (see his Basel lectures on Plato, §II.11).

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