

Book Review

Catherine Craig: *Memory and the Political Art in Plato's "Statesman."* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. Pp. x, 165.)

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Catherine Craig's book is a reading of Plato's *Statesman* that will be of interest both to Plato scholars and uninitiated political theorists curious about this important but exceedingly challenging ancient Greek text. Along with the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the *Statesman* is one of Plato's most overtly political dialogues. It depicts an attempt among Platonic interlocutors to account for the nature of the statesman (*politikos*), or that citizen who works to organize the polis into a healthy configuration by weaving together its parts into a high-functioning whole. The discussion is led by the anonymous Eleatic Stranger and the young mathematician Socrates the Younger, who bears the same name as the famous elder philosopher who is present in the dialogue despite remaining mostly silent. While its subject is of great importance, scholars tend to treat the *Statesman* cautiously owing to its difficulty. Any account of it must allow us to make sense of its disparate parts, separated among esoteric applications of Platonic methods of division and collection (258b–267c and 287c–311c), an extended myth of the cycles of the cosmos (267c–277a), and reflections on central philosophical principles (277a–287b) that Plato uses to situate the account of political rule. Plato has his characters gesture at what seem to us to be radically progressive and conservative views of law and governance, but his ultimate endorsements in the dialogue are far from clear.

Craig's innovation is to draw together the dialogue's themes and parts by focusing on the notion of *memory* and its function in establishing and shaping political structure. Rather than claiming to have uncovered the "secret meaning" of the dialogue as some scholars are inclined to do, Craig uses these themes as an interpretive framework to account for how the text as a whole reveals truth about the shared nature of our collective situation as it is preserved through discourse concerning past experience. This approach to reading Plato's dialogue is quite effective, showing how remembrance characterizes social and political organization through commonly shared notions that shape self-conception and hence identity alongside the ways in which Plato uses these themes to frame the discussion. The interpretation yields valuable insight into both Plato's text and the nature of political life.

Craig finds the notion of memory implicit in all major aspects of the dialogue. She notes that the invocation of dramatically adjacent dialogues like the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Apology*, as well as the conceptually adjacent *Parmenides*, calls upon us to remember key moments therein (summarized at 2–4). She speaks to the function of memory in the Stranger’s challenge to Socrates the Younger to think critically through his uninterrogated suppositions about political rule on the model of shepherding sheep from outside the flock, and to replace such thinking with an understanding of the statesman as the person who cares for the community from within (15–33). Craig furthermore offers an original interpretation of the myth of cosmic cycles, split between the benign and coddling rule of Cronus and the hands-off rule of Zeus: she points out that there is no need for remembrance of things past when Cronus nurses humanity on the model of a pampering god (45–52), and only when Zeus forces us to fend for ourselves must we remember lessons from our past for the sake of care for the future (53–59). Craig’s reading also offers some insights into the relationship between the better-known notion of recollection (*anamnēsis*) in other Platonic dialogues and the lesser-discussed theme in the *Statesman* of philosophical paradigms as models for helping us to recall past experiences, understand issues at present, and hence move from true opinion to knowledge (68–79).

Craig furthermore uses the theme of memory to sort through two centrally important conceptions of desirable governance late in the dialogue (111–33). Plato has the interlocutors develop two possible accounts of just rule (293e–301a): on the first, a leader possessed of wisdom rules in accord with what is fitting and in the absence of law, given that laws are inert and cannot respond to the dynamics of particular situations; on the second, and given the difficulty of finding such a wise ruler, we might take it better to practice unyielding obedience to immemorial law. This contrast indicates the tension between particularity and universality in determining the source of just law, as well as many other similar issues. In short, Craig submits that we might understand this important moment in the text with respect to memory: the wise ruler draws upon an understanding of the past to adjudicate in the present, but of course such profound depth of memory does not seem to be available to any mortal. Conversely, the unyielding deference to law leads people to “become reliant on memory of the letter of the laws, rather than seeking to comprehend the purpose or animating principle of the laws themselves” (125). The theme of memory thus proves to be a valuable interpretive framework for thinking through this provocative tension to which Plato calls our attention.

Craig’s argumentation throughout draws on work by previous commentators like Mitchell Miller, Melissa Lane, Catherine Zuckert, Cristina Ionescu, Seth Benardete, and others; indeed, some passages seem to be interweavings of points from these previous discussions. But although it leans on earlier work, the commentary is original in several regards. Most of all, Craig demonstrates the value of looking to the function of individual and collective

memory in our understanding of political life, both when thinking through Plato's dialogue and the greater reality to which it points, to account for the unity of this seemingly disparate text. In this way, Craig's commentary executes the difficult task that she describes when characterizing the structure of the *Statesman*: "no one part of the conversation can be seen as completing the whole, but rather, at the end of the dialogue, one must look back and reflect on the parts as they exist together" (72). This active process of critical remembrance will cause us to turn from passive to philosophical rememberers, and doing so in dialogue with one another will help us take up political life as the process of remembering together and thereby caring for our community collectively as *politikoi* ourselves.

Interestingly, Craig also weaves in some brief reflections on the value of the *Statesman* for thinking through political divisions in the contemporary United States (8–10, 146–49). She suggests ways that the account of the sameness and difference in the polis might help us work through our own factionalization and find our way through narratives about historical atrocities and accomplishments, the remembrance of which composes American national identity. This aspect of Craig's discussion is indeed very promising, although it is here offered only programmatically. I would very much like to read more, and this would make for a great subject of conversation for a future day.

Last, I must also note that while Craig writes clearly and persuasively, the book contains numerous typos and formatting inconsistencies that should be addressed in a future edition.

–Colin C. Smith

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