CHAPTER I

How Philosophers Should Take Compliments When They Happen to Become Kings

> I read yesterday almost all your speech before breakfast, and after breakfast, before resting, I gave myself up to reading the remainder. Happy man to be able to speak so well, or rather to have such ideas! O what a discourse! What wit! What wisdom! What analysis! What arguments! What arrangement! What openings! What diction! What symmetry! What structure! (ὦ λόγος, ὦ φρένες, ὦ σύνεσις, ὦ διαίρεσις, ὦ ἐπιχειρήματα, ὦ τάξις, ὦ ἀφορμαί, ὦ λέξις, ὦ ἁρμονία, ὦ συνθήκη).[1]

Antioch, 362.[2] Julian is writing to Libanius, expressing a pupil's admiration for the writing skills of the great rhetorician. (Irony is a matter that will not concern us for now.)[3] The accumulation of compliments might read like an outburst of enthusiasm. Yet comparison with another document sent almost two hundred years before points to the possibility of reading the words somewhat differently. In this case, Rome's most famous philosopher-ruler – Marcus Aurelius – addressed his teacher, adviser, and confidant Fronto with the following words:

> Oh, happy you to be gifted with such eloquence! Oh, happy me to be in the hands of such a master! What arguments! What arrangement! What elegance! What wit! What beauty! What diction! What brilliance! What subtlety! What charm! What practised skill! What everything! (O ἐπιχειρήματα! O τάξις! O elegantia! O lepos! O venustas! O verba! O nitor! O argutiae! O kharites! O ἄσκησις! O omnia!)[4]

By evoking Marcus' phrasing, Julian summons also the intellectual and political legacy of the Antonine emperor. His seemingly spontaneous outburst appears as the calculated gesture of a man of letters who knows

[1] *Ep.* 53 Wright (= 97 Bidez–Cumont), transl. Wright.
[2] Wright (1923) xxxiii–xxxv; Caltabiano (1991) 200.
[3] For Julian's praise of Libanius' style, cf. *Mis.* 354c.
[4] *Ad M. Caesar.* 2.3.1 (Naber [1867] 28; transl. from Haines, adapted). See further Pack (1953) 173; Caltabiano (1991) 269 n. 9; Bouffartigue (1992) 515.

how to use a few words to write himself and his addressee into a story that stretches back to the golden – and most philosophical – days of the Antonines. But if Julian's words were calculated, Marcus' were no less so. In the context of the early imperial negotiation of the relationship between power and culture, epistolography, this most intimate genre, was cleverly explored as a space of delineation of the cultivated self.[5] Letters facilitated the cultivation of the self-image of emperors who, since Augustus and Claudius, had used them to experiment with their literary voice.[6] At the same time, letters provided a platform for self-projection for those who enjoyed the privilege of being imperial correspondents. In Pliny's book 10, which collects his correspondence with Trajan, the governor's ability to edit his own writings has often been appreciated. What is less frequently noted is that Trajan's own texts reveal his commitment to projecting himself as a benevolent ruler.[7] In writing letters full of pedagogical themes, Platonic models, and glimpses of eros, Marcus Aurelius and Fronto were similarly engaged in an effort to delineate their portraits within the most sophisticated framework *paideia* offered.[8]

This story did not end with the Principate, for the significance of imperial epistolography came crucially into focus when imperial power emerged from the third-century crisis. The Tetrarchs' ambition to seek a pervasive presence in the state translated into an unprecedented dissemination of imperial correspondence. The distinction between *epistula* and edict was blurred.[9] Constantine took over from his predecessors both the cultivation of the art of the rescript and the desire to use letters to communicate his cultural concerns, religious beliefs, and views on history and Rome.[10] It is against this background that Julian's borrowing of Marcus' vocabulary finds place and meaning. His letter displays an awareness not only of the tradition of the imperial epistolography preceding him

[5] On letter-writing and rhetorical self-styling in Rome, see among others Hutchinson (1998); Henderson (2002); Marchesi (2008); Lowrie (2009) 215–75; Goldhill (2009); Zeiner-Charmichael (2013) 23–42; Whitton (2015).

[6] Augustus' *Res Gestae*: Elsner (1996); Bosworth (1999); Cooley (2009) 22–43; Lowrie (2009) 279–308; Levick (2010) 202–50. On Claudius as author, see Sordi (1993); Schmidt (1994); Briquel (1995); Perl (1996).

[7] Lavan (2018). [8] Freisenbruch (2007); Taoka (2013).

[9] Corcoran (1997) 2–5, 198–203; Rees (2004) 30–33.

[10] On Constantine's clever use of the form of petition and response to advance his political and religious agenda, see Lenski (2016), esp. 87–113 (on the dossier of petitions from Orcistus) and 114–49 (the Hispellum rescript).

but also of the power letters had to define both senders and receivers. Through Julian's intercession, Libanius received permission to take on the role of a fourth-century Fronto.

In this chapter, I aim to show that Julian's engagement with literature was initially negotiated through the rules of letter-writing, which he exploited to secure an image as a leader and a man of culture. His arguably earliest piece,[11] the *Letter to Themistius*, addresses one of the most prominent intellectuals at Constantius' court. The text presents itself as a reflection on ideal leadership pivoting on selected readings from works of classical Greek philosophers, with a special focus on Plato and Aristotle. What the text offers, however, is not what it claims to offer. The *Letter* is not a confession of uncertainty at taking up the imperial role. It does not seek to celebrate, as interpreters assume, an ideal of law-abiding leadership conceived as an alternative to the quasi-divine status of the Diocletianic and post-Diocletianic ruler. My investigation into the fourth-century language of power begins with this apparently marginal piece, and deliberately lingers on it, as I attempt to show that Julian's *Letter* is a declaration of awareness of the dynamics, expectations, and assumptions regulating the political environment he had just entered. The text's efforts to locate itself within a centuries-old reflection on how power relates to wisdom, and its display of the ability to read the classics against someone (the addressee), announce the birth of a sophisticated imperial voice concerned both with establishing a hierarchy of interpreters and with claiming a place on top of it.

The Content of the *Letter to Themistius* – and What It Is Not About

The *Letter to Themistius* is a response. Julian composed it in reply to a message from Themistius, the renowned professor of philosophy who in the 340s had risen to fame in Constantinople, where he held his chair. When Themistius wrote to Julian, however, his days as a teacher had been left behind. After becoming a protégé of Constantine's son Constantius II, Themistius was appointed a senator of Constantinople in 355 – the same year Julian was elevated to the throne.[12] Themistius' now lost message to Julian conveyed his congratulations on the latter's enthronement (and was

[11] I follow Bradbury (1987). See discussion at n. 13 below.
[12] On Themistius' political career, see Vanderspoel (1995); Errington (2000); Heather-Moncur (2001).

not, as some scholarship has assumed, a celebration of Julian's emergence as sole ruler in Constantinople in 361).[13]

Julian locates his motive for writing the *Letter* in a desire to elaborate on the reasons that led him to disagree with his addressee. The text opens with a confession of the unease he felt at receiving Themistius' praise (*Them.* 253a). Two things troubled him. In the first place, Themistius had claimed – presumably in consideration of Julian's reputation as a scholar of philosophy – that God expected the young emperor to emulate Heracles and Dionysus, 'at once philosophers and kings' (φιλοσοφοῦντες ὁμοῦ καὶ βασιλεύοντες, 253c), as well as a series of lawgivers of the stature of Solon, Pittacus, and Lycurgus.[14] Second, Themistius had exhorted him to 'shake off all thought of leisure and inactivity' (254a), inviting him to trade the contemplative life for action.

Julian offers in response a profession of inadequacy. He argues that past events – no doubt being appointed emperor while still a student – had prevented him from attaining proficiency in philosophical matters and criticises the Stoic misrepresentation of human agency, which ignores the role of chance (255d–56c). With his exhortation, Themistius has forgotten that politics is ultimately in the hands of God. To support this thesis, Julian produces a long quotation from Plato's *Laws* (257d–59a) with

[13] The dating of the exchange between Themistius and Julian to 355 was already supported by early twentieth-century scholars (e.g. Seeck [1906] 470; Asmus [1914] 522; Rostagni [1920] 371–85). Nevertheless, the 361 dating of Julian's *Letter* later prevailed due to a reading of the *Vossianus Graecus* 77, the best manuscript of his orations, which calls the piece a work of Julian Augustus (Bidez [1929] 137; Athanassiadi [1981] 94; Fontaine [1987] xxxv; Pagliara [2012] 27–28; De Vita [2013] 50, [2022] clvii–cviii n. 304; García-Ruiz [2018] 217). But Bradbury (1987) convincingly illustrated the problems posed by this dating: it would have made no sense for Julian to present himself as apprehensive about leadership in 361, after years of successful military campaigns; and it would have been equally bizarre for Themistius to exhort Julian to action following the latter's re-conquest of Gaul. Julian's *Letter* alludes to no events after 355/6, but lists a series of commitments Julian clearly undertook prior to his Gallic campaign (see *Them.* 259b–60b). Julian's reference to Themistius as a philosopher uninvolved in active life (*Them.* 266a) would hardly have made sense in 361, when Themistius had been a senator for almost six years (and perhaps also Constantinople' proconsul in 358/9, although this is challenged by Vanderspoel (1995) 106–8; Heather and Moncur (2001) 44–47). Finally, Julian's cautious religious language matches the vocabulary of his early works. Barnes and Vanderspoel (1981) suggest that Julian composed the bulk of his *Letter* in 356 but edited and dispatched it sometime between February 360 and November 361. The hypothesis is followed by Smith (1995) 28; Tanaseanu-Döbler (2008) 111; and Elm (2012) 82–83 nn. 86, 106. Elm reads the *Letter* as Julian's act of public self-distancing from Constantius following the latter's death. But it is unclear why Julian would use an old text, which had long ceased to represent his public image, to negotiate his role as sole ruler. It seems more plausible that, in this specific case, the *Vossianus* might be wrong. In support of the 355 date, see also Bouffartigue (2005) 121–27; Swain (2013) 53–57; Chiaradonna (2015) 149; Nesselrath (2020) 41–42, Greenwood (2021) 21.

[14] On associations with Heracles and Dionysius in the cult of Alexander the Great, see Bosworth (1999) 2.

which he expects Themistius to be familiar (257d).[15] Plato describes how, during the Golden Age, Cronos enthroned superior beings, the 'race of daimons' (258b) to ward off the injustice intrinsic to human nature. In Plato's view, this points to a historical necessity, that every polity must imitate the time of Cronos by entrusting its management to 'the principle of immortality in us' (ὅσον ἐν ἡμῖν ἀθανασίας ἔνεστι): *nomos*, the law. Plato etymologises *nomos* by connecting it to (δια)νέμω ('to distribute, assign') and νοῦς ('intellect') and interpreting it as 'the regulation by reason' (τὴν τοῦ νοῦ διανομήν): the rule, in other words, which reason establishes.[16]

The *Letter*'s commentary on this passage emphasises that Plato's ideal sovereign is 'divine and daimonic in his disposition (τῇ προαιρέσει)', having eradicated everything mortal or bestial from his soul. Aristotle too, Julian argues, maintains that ruling is a task beyond human powers, since he proclaimed Law the only entitled ruler, being 'reason without appetite' (ἄνευ ὀρέξεως ὁ νοῦς).[17] Even when human intentions are good, they are still tainted by passions and desire.

Julian's climactic harmonisation of Plato and Aristotle prepares the ground for his reply to Themistius' argument that the active life is preferable to the contemplative one (263c). He criticises Themistius' commentary on a passage from Aristotle's *Politics* defining happiness as virtuous action (τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν ἐν τῷ πράττειν εὖ τιθέμενον, 263c), celebrating the 'architects' of noble deeds.[18] Themistius' position, according to Julian, relies on a faulty interpretation of Aristotle, who clearly identified the architects of noble deeds (τοὺς τῶν καλῶν πράξεων ἀρχιτέκτονας, 263d) with people who aspire to do good. This, Julian states, includes 'lawgivers and political philosophers and, to put it simply, all those operating with intelligence and reason (πάντας . . . τοὺς νῷ τε καὶ λόγῳ πράττοντας, 263d)'. The example of Socrates, who never ruled but had a larger impact on history than Alexander the Great, is brought up to illustrate the limits of Themistius' interpretation (264b–65a).

It follows that Themistius' theory not only originated in a misunderstanding of Aristotle but also undermined his public profile: he more than anyone should know the social value of his activity as teacher (266a). Julian concludes the *Letter* by invoking God and expressing his hope that, despite the present difficulties, good things might now be realised through himself, through the operation of the divine will.

[15] Pl. *Leg.* 4.709b. [16] Pl. *Leg.* 4.713c–14a, in *Them.* 258d.
[17] Arist. *Pol.* 3.1287a, in *Them.* 261c. [18] Arist. *Pol.* 7.3.1325b.

We have no means of assessing the fairness of Julian's response to Themistius' original message.[19] But Themistius' ideas on kingship can be recovered, at least in the form he chose to make public, from what survives of the imperial addresses he composed over three decades. A theory of sovereignty emerges from his orations that is generally interpreted as conflicting with the idea of leadership expressed in the *Letter*: Themistius was a committed advocate of the post-Hellenistic belief in the ruler as 'ensouled Law' (*empsychos nomos*) – in his own words, as 'he himself the Law and above the laws'.[20] The idea, which recurs in his orations to Constantius II in the 350s, is still present in his pieces for Theodosius in the 380s, an implicit demonstration of the continuing importance of this ideal throughout the fourth century.[21]

Passages from Julian's *Letter* have been singled out to suggest that it criticises Themistius' belief in the superiority of the ruler over the laws and supports against it an ideal of a sovereign who willingly subordinates himself to the power of legislation.[22] For instance, it has been noted that Julian's long quotation from Plato's *Laws* concludes with the statement that no good government is possible if 'one rules . . . having first trampled on the laws' (*Them.* 258d). Elsewhere in the text, Julian stresses that Plato and Aristotle agree that governors should do everything they can to observe the laws (262a), here defined – a point to which I return below – as rules formulated by a lawgiver who has 'purified his mind and soul' and legislates 'with regard to the whole of humankind' and 'an eye to posterity' (262b–c). Finally, the declarations of political unworthiness and intellectual modesty running through the *Letter* are usually read as further expressions of Julian's awareness of his inferiority, as a human being, to a higher principle of government. Additional support for this reading is found in a piece Julian wrote at the beginning of his reign, the *First Panegyric to Constantius II*; here Constantius II is praised for behaving

[19] Swain (2013) 41, 87–91 suggests that the *Letter to Julian* ascribed to Themistius, which survives only in an Arabic version, might be the translation of a response which Themistius composed to address Julian's remarks.

[20] Them. *Or.* 1.15b, transl. Heather and Moncur.

[21] αὐτὸς νόμος ὢν καὶ ὑπεράνω τῶν νόμων, Them. *Or.* 1.15b–c (to Constantius II). See also 5.64b (to Jovian); 9.127b (to Valentinian II); 16.212d, 19.228a, 34.10 (to Theodosius). Cf. Vanderspoel (1995) 151; Heather and Moncur (2001) 93 n. 138.

[22] Thus Dvornik (1955), (1966) 659–66; Browning (1975) 130; Athanassiadi (1981) 175; Mazza (1986) 121; Curta (1995) 206; Maisano (1995) 21, 144 n. 47; Smith (1995) 27; Vanderspoel (1995) 124–26; O'Meara (2005) 93–94; De Vita (2011) 46; Elm (2012) 105, 355–56; Urbano (2013) 186; Schramm (2014) 137; Chiaradonna (2015) 151–53; O'Meara (2017) 409; Rebenich and Wiemer (2020) 28; Nesselrath (2020) 40; Schmidt-Hofner (2020) 168; De Vita (2022) cxxxviii, clxi–iv.

'like a citizen who obeys the laws, not like a sovereign who is above the laws'.[23]

This reading of Julian's *Letter* has important political implications. If this text truly rejects the ideal of the ruler as ensouled law, its political vision represents a unique response to the transformation of the imperial image following the third-century crisis of succession. A general understanding of Julian as a ruler nostalgically looking back at a pre-Christian past certainly contributed to the theory that he still believed in an ideal of ruler as *primus inter pares* that was lost with the Principate. Already in 1955, Dvornik argued that the *Letter* showed Julian 'as reactionary in politics as he was in religion', going so far as to claim that Julian's model was not even located in the early empire but in the Roman republic.[24]

But an interpretation of Julian's *Letter* as postulating the subordination of the ruler to the laws poses significant problems. First, it forces us to confront Julian's later expressions of his theocratic understanding of imperial power. In the writings issued when he was sole Augustus (361–363 CE), Julian presents himself as a descendent and associate of the gods, the prophet of Apollo, and the leader of his priests, whose training he personally designed.[25] It might be objected that Julian's thoughts on the matter evolved over time or were adapted contextually.[26] It might also be noted that the ideals of *civilis princeps* and (quasi)divine ruler actually coexisted in the late Roman political discourse. This shows that representation of these ideals as a binary does not capture the complexity of the late antique construction of authority. (Consider, for instance, how the *Jovius* Diocletian and the *Herculius* Maximinian could be celebrated through forms of association with Augustus and the Antonines.)[27] Crucially, and in continuity with this point, the idea that Julian's self-positioning opposed the Themistian ideal of the ruler as 'ensouled law' relies on another false dichotomy, one that misrepresents the function of this ideal of sovereignty in Greco-Roman political theory.

[23] *I Pan.* 45d (καθάπερ πολίτου τοῖς νόμοις ὑπακούοντος, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ βασιλέως τῶν νόμων ἄρχοντος). Cf. *I Pan.* 14a, 16a.

[24] Dvornik (1955) 659–60.

[25] Cf., e.g., Julian's allegory of his divine task as ruler in *Her.* 227c–34c, where Julian presents Helios as his father (*Her.* 229c). Prophet of Apollo: *ep.* 18 Wright (= 88 Bidez–Cumont). Training of the priests: see *Ep. Fragm.* (= *ep.* 89b Bidez–Cumont).

[26] See, e.g., Criscuolo (1983); De Vita (2022) cclxx–cclxxiv.

[27] In architecture: cf. Marlowe (2016), on the Vicennalia Monument in the Roman Forum. In rhetoric: see Ware (2018), also illustrating the use of Augustus in managing Constantine's image as he parted ways from the older Tetrarchs. On the complex self-positioning of the late Roman emperor in regard to the divine, see Elm (2021).

Classical political philosophy promoted an interest in what could be defined with Agamben as the 'relation of exception' of the ruler to state institutions.[28] This expression indicates the paradox of the sovereign's position simultaneously within the laws, which sanctioned his existence, and beyond the laws, which he could create and abrogate and that he therefore transcended. Given this premise, the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic ideal of *empsychos nomos* did not amount to a theorisation of the sovereign's entitlement to dismiss or subvert legislation. This behaviour was also perceived as a mark of tyranny in the time of the Principate, which continued to cultivate Republican ideals. In other words, reflection on the freedom of agency of the ruler as opposed to the fixity of written laws was never oblivious to the despotic quality conveyed by an idea of a sovereign who is above all regulation. In this regard, the celebration of the sovereign as ensouled law posed, as Van Nuffelen argues, a normative demand, which reminded rulers of the need for their government to be regulated by the higher principle of the divine law residing in their intellect.[29] This principle, however, ultimately appealed to the Platonic and Aristotelian assumption that reason is the divine in us. Already formulated by Xenophon in reference to King Cyrus, and by Philo of Alexandria for the Patriarchs and Moses, the theory of the *empsychos nomos* first gained momentum in the Hellenistic cultural environment.[30] From there, it flowed into the legal debate early imperial Rome was developing regarding the emperor's unprecedented powers.[31] The theory was mediated for a Roman audience by intellectuals such as Musonius Rufus, Plutarch, and Dio of Prusa.[32] But Roman imperial

[28] Agamben (1995) 18–35.

[29] Van Nuffelen (2011) 115–18. On the notion of *nomos empsychos* in ancient political theory, see also Aalders (1969); Martens (1994); Ramelli (2006); Alvino (2019) 69–110.

[30] Xen. *Cyr.*, 8.1.22; Philo, *Abr.* 5 (on the Patriarchs), *Mos.* 1.162 (on Moses).

[31] The first known legal regulation of the relationship between sovereign and laws is the *Lex de imperio Vespasiani* (*CIL* VI 930, 31207 = *ILS* 244) issued in 70 CE, which may have aimed to give Vespasian's authority a legal basis following the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty (thus Lucrezi [1995] 166–67. Discussion in Brunt [1977] 97–102; Mantovani [2009]; Tuori [2016] 19–20, 174–7). See Ullmann (1975) 56–57 on Roman jurists (especially Ulpian) on the transferal of the powers from the Roman people to the ruler.

[32] In his *That Kings Also Should Study Philosophy*, Musonius Rufus argues that 'it is of the greatest importance for the good king to be faultless and perfect in word and action if, indeed, he is to be a living law' (Muson. *Lect.* 8.8, transl. Lutz). According to Plutarch, the good king is similar to animate law due to 'reason endowed with life within him' (*Mor.* 780c). Cf. also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 3.10; 76.4. The king as ensouled law is prominently theorised in the writings of the Neo-Pythagoreans (of uncertain chronology but presumably post-Hellenistic: Centrone (2000) 570–75; Garnsey (2000)). See especially Diotogenes, *On Kingship* 72.19–23 ed. Thesleff (= Stobaeus, *Anth.* 4.7.61).

rhetoric primarily conceived of this reflection as a tool to legitimise the ruler by differentiating him from negative models such as Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, who had not sought to conceal their perception of their role as beyond regulation.[33] An example of this diplomatic employment of the issue of the relationship between the emperor and the law is provided by Pliny the Younger's famous remark, in his *Panegyric* to Trajan (100 CE), that 'it is not the emperor who is above the laws, but the laws that are above the emperor'.[34] The meaning of this statement can be fully grasped only if the historical context is taken into consideration. Pliny's *Panegyric* is pervaded by the spectre of the tyrant Domitian and negotiates Trajan's imperial identity as antithetical to that of his despised predecessor. But the same Trajan could be unproblematically celebrated as 'greater than the laws' (so Dio of Prusa) when a rhetorician wanted to emphasise the ruler's capacity to mitigate legislation with enlightened regulations.[35]

This flexibility of representation survives in the rhetoric of the post-Diocletianic empire, where speakers might decide, depending on the circumstances, either to emphasise the ruler's capacity for self-restraint or to celebrate the might of his will. Themistius, as noted, could praise the Emperor Constantius II as greater than the laws; thus his *Or.* 1. It should be noted, however, that the same text simultaneously celebrates Constantius' capacity to exercise perfect self-control in his interactions with institutions: the laws that are 'inferior' to Constantius are the rigid human regulations he improves via his intellectual access to divine law.[36]

The celebration of Constantius as abiding by the laws seems also to have had a place in the emperor's own propaganda. Testimony to this comes in the aforementioned passage from Julian's *First Panegyric* in which Constantius is praised for behaving 'like a citizen who obeys the laws, not like a sovereign who is above the laws'.[37] The argument that Julian's

[33] See, e.g., the famous declaration, ascribed to Severus and Caracalla and preserved in Justinian's *Institutes*, that although free from the laws, the emperor lives by them (*Instit.* 2.17.8, cf. Ulp. 1.3.31). The statement seems to have been made originally in regard to Augustan marriage laws (Metzger [1998] 125, n. 20).

[34] Plin. *Pan.* 65.1–2 (Non est princeps super leges, sed leges super principem).

[35] Dio Chrys., *Or.* 3.10.

[36] See Chapter 2. Julian's *Second Panegyric* similarly describes the emperor as a 'good guardian of the laws' but in a context that simultaneously emphasises Constantius' active role as a legislator (*II Pan.* 88d–91d).

[37] *I Pan.* 45d (καθάπερ πολίτου τοῖς νόμοις ὑπακούοντος, ἀλλ' οὐ βασιλέως τῶν νόμων ἄρχοντος). Cf. also *I Pan.* 14a, 16a.

claim points to his fascination with a conservative political ideology obscures the fact that the panegyric was written in concert with Constantius' efforts to adjust his public image after his defeat of the usurper Magnentius in 354.[38] Magnentius' rule has not left many traces in the sources, but it is clear that he sought to construct himself in opposition to Constantine and his sons. Following the customary pattern of delegitimising imperial rivals, he presented them as despots.[39] Magnentius' defeat of Constans was narrated as a tyrannicide, with coinage and inscriptions celebrating his liberation of the state and restoration of freedom to the Romans.[40] Constantius' propaganda repaid Magnentius in kind,[41] casting him as a wild barbarian (courtesy of his Gallic origins)[42] and as a tyrant lacking self-restraint, to the extent that he tortured citizens for amusement.[43] Constantius' image was recovered within this context as a symbol of *civilitas*, moderation, and forgiveness.[44] Julian's depiction of the Augustus' deliberate self-subordination to the authority of the laws thus appears above all else as a celebration of Constantius as the nemesis of tyrants. This portrayal does not clash with the theory of the *empsychos nomos* but simply emphasises that the enlightened emperor was animated by a sense of deep respect for Roman institutions. In Julian's words, Constantius was willing to endure anything 'rather than see a barbarian ... make himself master of the laws and constitution (νόμων κύριον καὶ πολιτείας)'.[45]

An external witness to Julian's early politics – the historian Ammianus, reporting on his military campaign in Gaul – further attests that Julian did not disavow the political ideal of his times. He reports an episode in which the young emperor, while presiding over trials, voiced his belief in the 'right of an emperor of highly merciful disposition to rise above all

[38] See Chapter 2, p. 77. [39] Tantillo (1997) 41.

[40] Inscriptions dedicated to Magnentius celebrated him as *restitutor libertatis et reipublicae*, *conservator militum et provincialium*, *liberator orbis Romani* (e.g., *CIL* V 8061, 8066, IX 5937, 5940, 5951, XI 6640). Coins document Magnentius' preference for the title of *imperator* over that of *dominus* and his rejection of the imperial symbol adopted by Constantine towards the end of his rule, the diadem (featured only in his earliest coins, which were presumably issued before the mints were notified of Magnentius' abandonment of the symbol). See Tantillo (1997) 331–32 (n. 202); Omissi (2018) 165.

[41] On the consistency in Magnentius' portrait between Julian's *First* and *Second Panegyric* and Themistius' *Or.* 2, 3, and 4, and the hypothesis of official guidelines, see Omissi (2018) 163–79.

[42] Zos. 2.54.1. On Magnentius' lineage, see Maraval (2013) 85–86.

[43] Omissi (2018) 53, 169–79; (2020) 225. Cf. Jul. *I Pan.* 31b, 33c–5d, 39d–40a (torture for amusement), 42a; *II Pan.* 56c–7a, 97c–d. Them. *or.* 2.33d–4a; 3.43a–c; 4.56c–d. Similar considerations in Tantillo (1997) 27–28, 41–50.

[44] See, e.g., Julian. *I Pan.* 9b, 33b–d, 38b. [45] *I Pan.* 42b.

other laws'.[46] Julian's ideal of kingship thus seems to align with Themistius'.[47] The *Letter* is an unquestionably agonistic (and antagonistic) text, but the reasons for this lie elsewhere.

What the *Letter* Is About: Providing a Philosophical Definition of the Principle of Authority

Analysis of Julian's use of a dense passage from Aristotle's *Politics* indicates both the limits of reading the *Letter* as a celebration of constrained sovereignty and the actual aim of its argument:

> Regarding the so-called according-to-law king (περὶ τοῦ κατὰ νόμον λεγομένου βασιλέως), who (ὅς)[48] is both a servant and a guardian of the laws (ὑπηρέτης καὶ φύλαξ τῶν νόμων), he (i.e., Aristotle) does not call him a king at all, nor does he consider such a king a distinct form of government; and he goes on to say 'Now as for what is called unconstrained monarchy (περὶ δὲ τῆς παμβασιλείας καλουμένης), that is to say, when a king governs all other men according to his own will, some people think that it is not in accordance with the nature of things for one man to have absolute authority over all citizens; since those who are by nature equal must necessarily have the same rights'. Again, a little later he says (εἶτα μετ' ὀλίγον φησίν) 'it seems, therefore, that he who bids Reason rule is really preferring the rule of God and the laws, but he who bids man rule adds an element of the beast. For desire is a wild beast, and passion perverts the mind of rulers, even when they are the best of men. It follows, therefore, that law is Reason exempt from desire'. You see that the philosopher seems here clearly to distrust and condemn human nature.[49]

At the beginning of the quotation, Julian introduces the expression 'a servant and guardian of the laws' (ὑπηρέτης καὶ φύλαξ τῶν νόμων) to

[46] Amm. Marc. 16.5.12 (*imperatorem mitissimi animi legibus praestare ceteris decet*). Schmidt-Hofner (2020) shows how Julian's strategic use of his activity as legislator and judge conveyed a message of enlightened control over legislation. Julian's commitment to service as a judge was praised by his supporters (e.g., Amm. Marc. 16.5; Lib. *Or.* 18.182–90) and criticised by his detractors (Greg. Naz. *Or.* 5.20–21).

[47] See on this already Schofield's remark that the *Letter* offers a 'rationalistic version' of Themistius' ideal, which Julian substantiates through an engagement with classical philosophical texts (Schofield (2000) 664–65).

[48] I read the MSS's text with Rochefort (1963), rather than adopting Klimek's ὡς (as Wright [1913] does). The definition of the 'according-to-law king' as 'servant and guardian of the laws' is Julian's explanation. Furthermore, Aristotle's 'according-to-law king' does not describe a monarch who subordinates himself to legislation; Aristotle uses the label to describe sovereigns who exercise unconstrained power but have a legally inherited kingship and thus did not create or usurp the throne (Atack [2015] 307–8).

[49] *Them.* 261a–c, summarising Arist. *Pol.* 3.16.1287a1–32.

explain Aristotle's notion of 'according-to-law king' (ὁ κατὰ νόμον … βασιλεύς). But his attempt to clarify this notion does not aim to support its validity, just as Julian does not express any preference for Aristotle's opposite notion of 'unconstrained monarchy' (*pambasileia*), which the text brings up immediately afterwards. Julian is merely summarising Aristotle's definitions of constrained and unconstrained monarchy before moving on to quote another Aristotelian statement from the same passage in the *Politics*. This statement argues that 'he who bids Reason rule is really preferring the rule of God and the laws'. Julian, as he himself acknowledges, has skipped a section from the text, which claims that 'the rule of the law is preferable to that of any citizen'.[50]

The *Letter*'s treatment of the myth of the Golden Age, from Plato's *Laws*, lends itself to similar remarks.[51] Julian's quotation ends just before Plato's development of the idea that the rulers of the ideal city are to be understood as 'servants of the laws'. This statement is left out of the *Letter*.[52] If we move from the assumption that Julian cited the *Politics* and the *Laws* to legitimise an ideal of the superiority of legislative over imperial authority, we could only be surprised at this repeated avoidance of sentences that support such an argument. But when one considers how comparable Julian's quotations from Plato and from Aristotle are, it becomes evident that his focus is elsewhere. Both quotations culminate with a definition of 'law', which Plato explains as 'regulation by reason' (*Them.* 258d), and Aristotle as 'reason without passion' (*Them.* 261d). Julian thus appears invested in showing that Plato and Aristotle agreed that the authority of the law resides in its rationality. Julian's *Letter* seeks not a comparison between living ruler and written law but, on a more fundamental level, a reflection on what legitimises power.

Having considered this, we can re-read on this basis all the passages of the *Letter* that have been taken to support the idea of an absolute authority of legislation over sovereignty. Julian's quotation of Aristotle's argument that 'it is not just that one man should rule over many who are his equals (*Them.* 261d)' is accompanied by the remark that a king must overcome his humanity by eliminating all irrational and bestial impulses (260c; 262a). Aristotle is thus quoted to argue against the rule of individuals insofar as Julian expects good rulers to transcend humanity through the cultivation of (divine) reason. Analogously, his allusion to Plato's criticism of governors who 'trample on the laws' (259a), and his insistence that

[50] Arist. *Pol.* 3.16.1287a18 (τὸν ἄρα νόμον ἄρχειν αἱρετώτερον μᾶλλον ἢ τῶν πολιτῶν ἕνα τινά).
[51] *Them.* 258a–9a. [52] Pl. *Leg.* 715c–d.

Aristotle agrees with such criticisms (262a), are accompanied by a crucial sidenote: the laws that should be respected are those formulated by a lawgiver who has purified his mind and soul and legislates with an eye to posterity and the entirety of humankind (262a–c). This definition clearly does not apply to ordinary laws; it defines an ideal type of legislation, which is the product of – and synonymous with – reason. Julian attacks despots who disregard legislative reason, but this is in no way tantamount to a celebration of the sovereign as *primus inter pares*. In fact, the contrary is true: Julian's ideal sovereign, who is expected to remove every 'irrational' element from himself, must eventually be closer to the divinity than to humankind. Julian's denial of having (at the moment) attained this ideal does not mean that he is challenging it. Instead, it confirms that the *empsychos nomos* model is for him the highest ideal and the pursuit of a lifetime.

It remains to be explained why Julian articulates his position as in opposition to Themistius, given that the *Letter*'s understanding of the role of the enlightened sovereign seems in fact to align with that of his addressee. We might begin to sketch an answer by considering the text's engagement with classical sources. Throughout this piece, Julian strives to put on display his ability to read critically and derive meaning from authoritative texts. The quotation from Aristotle's *Politics* mentioned above makes this especially evident: Julian touches upon both types of Aristotelian leadership (law-abiding and 'absolute' kingship), while being ultimately unconcerned with them. But I suggest that their significance lies precisely in their marginality. Julian wants to signal his thorough knowledge of the entire passage excerpted from the *Politics*: the focus of his interest, the Aristotelian equation between law and rationality, is given enough textual context to prove his expertise with the text and his ability to summarise its contents methodically and with full understanding.

Analogous considerations can be advanced in regard to Julian's treatment of Plato's myth of the Golden Age. Julian explicitly remarks that he is reporting the passage in its entirety to reassure his interlocutor of the textual basis that supports his statements. By doing so, he implicitly indicates that a copy of the *Laws*, either entire or partial, is with him as he writes.[53] Crucially, both the *Politics* and the *Laws* were scarcely read in

[53] *Them.* 257d, 259a. The verb Julian adopts to describe his operation is παραγράφειν, which has legal implications (indicating the attachment of clauses to contracts).

late antiquity. It has been suggested that the disappearance of the *Politics* from political and philosophical discussion was a consequence of its focus on the life of the *polis*, which had ceased to exist as a political reality.[54] In the case of the *Laws*, the picture is more complex. The name continued to evoke political authority: both Themistius and Julian summon it here and there in their panegyrics. But its employment in court oratory remained nominal and symbolic.[55] Perhaps precisely by virtue of its reputation as a difficult text, the *Laws* was also absent from the Iamblichean school curriculum.[56] Although late antique traces of Neoplatonic interest in Plato's posthumous work exist, they are thin on the ground and seem either to converge on Book 10 (the metaphysical core) or to be generalities.[57]

When seen in the context of his times, therefore, Julian's use of the *Politics* and the *Laws* in the *Letter* appears to be in tension with the claims of intellectual inadequacy scattered throughout the text. Julian declares that he did not have the time or opportunity to finalise his love for philosophy, but his readings reveal his piece as the work of a man with a solid training. By allowing his arguments to arise from comparison between texts, Julian simultaneously professes a scholarly devotion to Plato and Aristotle and suggests that he can find in the classics everything he needs to ground his case. His harmonisation of the *Laws* and the *Politics* (262a) can be interpreted in this light. Late antique Platonists believed in the ultimate unity of Platonic and Aristotelian thinking; Julian's synthesis, which follows this assumption, resonates fully with the philosophical expectations of his times.

[54] Pellegrin (2012) 582.

[55] Themistius explicitly summons the *Laws*, which he calls 'divine' (θεσπέσιοι), at *Or.* 2.32c. In other orations he quotes from the work, but whether he expected his audience to know the source of his quotations is an open question. They are used as aphorisms and might have been circulating as such within anthologies (Maisano [2006]). Julian's orations draw on analogously short excerpts that sound like maxims (see Bouffartigue [1992] 191–93). He refers twice to the *Laws* as 'wonderful' (θαύμασιοι *νόμοι*, *Them.* 257d and *II Pan.* 70a) and brings up the figure of the Athenian Stranger at *Mis.* 353d.

[56] Iamblichus' *curriculum studiorum* consisted of a group of ten writings followed by the two 'perfect' dialogues, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*. The curriculum had a great influence on later Neoplatonic thought, as most schools used it. It remained substantially unchanged for generations (Tarrant [2014]).

[57] The *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* exemplifies the limited interest of the Neoplatonists in the *Laws*. The text only considers the *Laws* and the *Republic* because they typify a form of constitution ἐξ ὑποθέσεως (i.e., depending on a given situation) and ἄνευ τῆς ὑποθέσεως (free of presupposition), respectively (*Anon. Prol.* 26, l. 37–45 Westerink). The *Anonymous* is presumably describing the *Laws* as contemplating the preservation of social conventions, such as family and property, which the *Republic* does not accept. Other features of the works are ignored. On the Neoplatonic reception of Plato's *Laws*, see Dillon (2001).

It thus seems that the strategies developed by Julian's *Letter* to articulate his reflection on what legitimises power converge in prioritising interpretive concerns. Julian offers a demonstration of the soundness of his exegesis: he has looked back at foundational texts of Greek philosophy, read them thoroughly, sought definitions of the normative principle (Plato's 'regulation by reason', Aristotle's 'reason without desire'), and eventually showed that these definitions express the same truth. The *Letter* subtly exploits the tension between Julian's self-effacing statements and his active performance of philosophical exegesis. Its quotations expose the performative quality of Julian's lament over the premature end of his education. Performance, as the next section argues, is the fundamental trait of the *Letter*: its constant efforts to subvert – or exploit – Julian's claims of unworthiness ultimately amount to a search for intellectual recognition.

Challenging Themistius, Constructing (Interpretive) Authority

The *Letter* also laments Julian's political incompetence. Julian's insistence on his need for hard work and improvement has often been taken in the past as a witness to his early insecurity and has been read alongside other texts voicing his dismay at being appointed emperor. In his *Speech of Praise* in honour of the empress Eusebia, composed about a year after the *Letter*,[58] Julian reminisces about the anxiety he felt at taking up power and compares himself to someone unskilled in driving a chariot who was nevertheless 'compelled to manage a car belonging to a talented, noble charioteer'.[59] His later *Letter to the Athenians* (361 CE) also returns to his imperial appointment and argues that it drove him to the brink of suicide; he only held back after considering that his enthronement was the will of the gods.[60] The *Letter to the Athenians*, which also focuses on Julian's subsequent appointment as Augustus (that is, senior emperor) in February 360, remarks that on that occasion too he accepted his elevation only after receiving an approving sign from Zeus.[61]

A passage from Ammianus' *Res Gestae* is nevertheless revealing of how Julian's expressions of inadequacy and fear of power responded to ancient expectations concerning the self-presentation of newly appointed leaders. Having recorded the celebrations for Julian's enthronement as Caesar, an event presided over by Constantius II and attended by the populace of

[58] See Chapter 2, p. 78–81. [59] *Eus.* 122a. Cf. also *ep.* 8 Wright (= 26 Bidez–Cumont).
[60] *Ath.* 275a–7a. [61] *Ath.* 284b–d.

Milan, Ammianus gives a brief description of Julian's behaviour during the parade that followed:

> Finally, taken up to sit with the emperor in his carriage and conducted to the palace, he (i.e., Julian) whispered (*sussurabat*) this verse from the Homeric song: 'by purple death I am seized and fate supreme'.[62]

Julian's gesture pretends to be private – he whispers to himself – but is in fact extraordinarily performative. (Did he say these words over and over?) The sentence is also effective in conveying at once a set of traits Julian wanted to be perceived as crucial features of his rule: his use of a Homeric line to compare imperial purple and death signals not only his lack of ambition but also profound culture and wit. Ammianus reports the anecdote with admiration. Regardless of whether he learned it directly from Julian or from someone who was equally struck by Julian's words, his awareness of the episode further confirms the volume of Julian's whisper. As recent scholarship has stressed, we should approach the *Letter*'s proclamations of inadequacy as actually engaging with the self-legitimising rite of the *recusatio imperii*, the hesitation displayed when taking up a prestigious role. In the ancient world, flight from a high position was interpreted as meritorious: those who rejected power proved they truly deserved it. This practice formed a vital line of self-legitimisation for newly appointed authorities throughout Roman history and, as I consider in Chapter 5, became especially productive in the late empire in respect not just to emperors but to bishops as well.[63]

But *recusatio* was also a gesture derived from the philosophical tradition: Plato had theorised it in the *Republic*, arguing that the real philosopher-ruler must be taken away from the contemplative life and compelled to rule for the good of the state.[64] Engagement with the practice of *recusatio* thus likewise signified the intellectual nature of the leader. When one considers Julian's oblique self-advertisement as philosopher in the *Letter*, the irony

[62] Amm. Marc. 15.8.17. Julian quotes *Iliad* 5.83 = 16.334 = 20.477 (ἔλλαβε πορφύρεος θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή). Cf. Libanius' account of Julian's lack of desire to become emperor (Lib. *Or.* 12.38; 18.22–23, 31–32) and his reluctant yielding to the acclamation of the soldiers in Paris (Lib. *or.* 12. 59–61).

[63] Tool of imperial self-legitimisation: Béranger (1948); Hahn (1989) 161–63, 192–208; Huttner (2004); Freudenburg (2014); Omissi (2018) 25–26. Constantine's flight from power: *Pan. Lat.* VI (7), 8.4 (see Potter [2013] 112). On *recusatio* in Julian, see Elm (2012) 73–75, 79; (2021) 136; Chiaradonna (2015); De Vita (2022) clv–vi, clix–x. Themistius celebrates Jovian's lack of desire for power at *Or.* 5.66d. For the *recusatio* of high officials, see Mamertinus' *Speech of Thanks* to Julian upon his appointment as consul (*Pan. Lat.* III (11) 17.1). On episcopal *recusatio*, see Chapter 5, p. 222–5, 238–40.

[64] Pl. *Resp.* 1.346e–7d, 6.489b–c.

shaping the text becomes even more evident. By making haste to distance himself from Themistius' excessive praise comparing the new Caesar to legendary lawgivers and mythical philosopher-kings, Julian is implicitly confirming that he has, at least potentially, the qualities of a philosopher-ruler. His *Letter* proves him an enlightened ruler in the making.

At the same time, Julian's oblique confirmation of Themistius' praise is pursued in a way that denies Themistius any authority over the establishment of Julian's imperial profile. Julian's self-assertion as a (potential) philosopher-ruler unfolds by deflecting Themistius' compliments: he denies Themistius' prescriptive authority by questioning his models of ideal sovereignty and criticising his philosophical reading. This brings us back to the issue that opened this chapter, that is, Julian's understanding of how correspondence defined not only the sender's profile but also that of his addressees – especially imperial addressees who sought to project themselves as holding a confidential relationship with rulers. It could be argued in this regard that Themistius was interested in claiming a Fronto-like role, of the kind Julian would later offer to Libanius, or at least that Julian assumed that Themistius was interested in claiming such a role.

The year 355, as anticipated above, did not see the rise of Julian alone on the political scene. Themistius too was appointed a member of the Constantinopolitan senate. His *Speech of Thanks* (*Or.* 2) to Constantius II for the *adlectio* eloquently closes with a celebration of Constantius' elevation to the throne of a younger ruler versed in philosophy: Julian himself.[65] Two implications are evident. The first is that Themistius' *Speech* seeks an implicit juxtaposition between the two appointees in order to project Constantius as an enlightened patron of intellectuals – a point to which I return in Chapter 2.[66] At the same time, however, Themistius' public celebration of Constantius' appointment of Julian seeks to establish an intellectual – and political – hierarchy: the sanctioning of Constantius' patronage of Julian seals Themistius' primacy as interpreter (of the policy) of the ruler. Implicit in this is a further assertion of Themistius' philosophical seniority, in that he holds the authority to confirm that the young ruler who has just appeared on the political scene deserves to be celebrated as an intellectual. Themistius' lost message of congratulations to Julian, which Julian's summary allows us to reconstruct as distributing philosophical and political advice, arguably sought to consolidate his reputation. By claiming a role as the correspondent of the emperor, Themistius presented

[65] Themistius, *Or.* 2.40a. See also *Or.* 4.58d–9b. [66] See Chapter 2, p. 81–9.

himself as the philosophical adviser of a ruler who had already come to the throne with a reputation for being a philosopher.

The question of how public Themistius' pursuit was, given that we know nothing about the early distribution of Julian's *Letter*, let alone of the message to which it replied, remains open. But there is a clue from Themistius himself that suggests that the *Letter* might have enjoyed significant circulation. In his *Or.* 31, a speech given approximately thirty years later (Lent 384), an aged Themistius defends his activity as the prefect of Constantinople, which had been criticised as an unphilosophical commitment. He argues that the appointment, offered to him by the Emperor Theodosius in person, represented the culmination of a history of imperial appreciation of his philosophy: already in the 350s, Constantius had regarded it as an 'adornment of his power', and Julian himself had 'acknowledged in writing' (ἐν γράμμασιν ὁμολογήσας) that he had learned the very 'foundations of philosophy' (τὰ πρῶτα ... φιλοσοφίας) from Themistius.[67] No surviving text of Julian makes such a statement. One might conclude that either Themistius invented the homage (but also expected the senators to believe him) or Julian's compliment was contained in a lost text. There is a third option. In the *Letter*, Julian does in a way acknowledge in writing his debt to Themistius' teaching, although in a spirit that could hardly be called deferential. These are the words with which he introduces the Golden Age quotation from Plato's *Laws*:

> And to show that I am not the only one who thinks that Fortune has the upper hand in practical affairs, I would quote to you now the passage of Plato, from his marvellous *Laws*, which you know well and taught to me (λέγοιμ' ἂν ἤδη σοι τὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἐκ τῶν θαυμασίων Νόμων, εἰδότι μὲν καὶ διδάξαντί με). (*Them.* 257d)

This recognition prepares the ground for Julian's polemical self-assertion at Themistius' expense. It is nevertheless a recognition that Julian had in a sense learned the 'foundations of philosophy', that is, (a passage from) Plato, from Themistius. We might hypothesise that, thirty years later, Themistius was still making selective use of these words, capitalising on the literal meaning of Julian's statement. If so, the fact that Themistius could still allude to the *Letter* in the 380s and expect his audience of senators to know what he was referring to indicates that Julian's text had lasting resonance.

[67] Them. *Or.* 31.354d.

This is of course a hypothesis. But a reading of Julian's *Letter* as a public response infuses its subtle assertiveness with significance. The text betrays an ambition not only to draw on diplomatic language but also to suggest control of oblique speech. An eloquent example is provided by the opening section, which hastens to dismiss suspicions that Themistius' excessive compliments might be an attempt to 'flatter or deceive' (κολακεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι, 254b–c) Julian. Flattery was a critical category in Greek literature, from Attic rhetoric to the Second Sophistic, and would be routinely activated to disqualify adversaries.[68] Julian quickly declares that what is false in Themistius' statements does not aim to deceive but rather seeks to provide encouragement. But this reads as an *excusatio non petita*, an unrequested apology: if Julian truly did not want to raise the suspicion that Themistius was flattering him, why mention the possibility in the first place? The reader is obliquely invited to suspect that Themistius might fall in some way into the category of sophist, as a social climber seeking to secure his position through Julian's endorsement.

Julian may have sensed an element of challenge in Themistius' text. Many inferences could in fact be drawn from his reply to the comparison of his rule with the legacy of Dionysus, Heracles, Solon, Pittacus, and Lycurgus. The *Letter* cuts such speculation short. By doing so, however, it transforms Themistius' attempt to cast himself as Julian's adviser into an opportunity for the latter to assert himself at the expense of a famous professor of philosophy. Julian implies that Themistius' message betrays a lack of understanding of the role of fate and God in politics, pointing out that Themistius' faulty arguments inadvertently challenged his own role in society. If one considers that Themistius' fame as a philosopher and teacher of philosophy rested primarily on his paraphrases of Aristotle,[69] the accusation that he failed to understand a passage by that author appears especially severe:

> But I should like to make clear to you the points in your letter by which I am puzzled (ὑπὲρ δὲ ὧν ἀπορῆσαί μοι πρὸς τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τὴν σὴν), my dearest friend to whom I am especially bound to pay every honour; for I am eager to be more precisely informed about them. You said (ἔφησθα) that you approve a life of action rather than the philosophic life, and you called to witness (μάρτυρα) the wise Aristotle, who defines happiness as virtuous activity . . . in this place, you say he approves the architects of noble actions.

[68] See, among others, Konstan (1996); Whitmarsh (2001) 194–97; Pownell (2020) 260. Themistius himself celebrated in writing the free speech and bold advice coming from friends, see Vanderspoel (1995) 13, 22.

[69] Heather (1998) 127.

> But it is you who assert that these are kings, whereas Aristotle does not speak in the sense of the words that you have introduced (Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ εἴρηκεν οὐδαμοῦ κατὰ τὴν ὑπὸ σοῦ προστεθεῖσαν λέξιν): and from what you have quoted, one would rather infer the contrary.[70]

The gap Julian's *Letter* seeks to open between his position and Themistius' correlates to Julian's (oblique) celebration of his own lucid political analysis. His ideal sovereign might be as much 'ensouled Law' as Themistius' model ruler, but the crucial difference between their political visions is that Themistius' is not grounded in a solid understanding of the classics and thus falls prey to political misconceptions. This line of argument emerges in the second part of the *Letter*, where Julian attacks Themistius' claim that a life of action is superior to a life of contemplation.[71] Here, contrary to what we tend to assume,[72] Julian is supremely uninterested in taking sides. His response to Themistius has the much subtler aim of underscoring that, by stating that a sovereign should rank the active life over contemplation, Themistius misses the fact that, without constant philosophical self-perfectioning, no ruler can achieve the level of rationality that is a condition for enlightened action. Only those who fail to understand this fundamental connection can claim that one of the two activities should be prioritised over the other. Themistius has proven himself an interpreter without a method.

Julian is arguably trying to claim for himself what imperial rhetoric mobilised as a somewhat differential label, that of 'philosopher', by challenging his interlocutor's security in the same status.[73] The political repercussions are undeniable: if the fundamental quality of good leadership, as it emerges from the *Letter*, is a well-trained reason, the emperor who proves himself a better interpreter than a famous philosopher is on his way to ideal sovereignty. Julian reminds his addressee (through what is presented as a compliment but clearly a double-edged one) that Themistius advocated for the superiority of action over contemplation without ever having engaged with the former: his activity is teaching philosophy.[74] The force of this remark becomes apparent when one considers that its author, having been appointed emperor, had just become the second most powerful man in the empire. Themistius celebrates power

[70] *Them.* 263c–d, referring to Arist. *Pol.* 7.3.1325b. [71] *Them.* 263c–6b.

[72] See, e.g., Tanaseanu-Döbler (2008) 112; Stenger (2009) 136–37; Elm (2012) 84–86. For a discussion of Julian's position in the light of Iamblichean political theory, see De Vita (2022) clxii–clxviii.

[73] On the competitive mobilisation of the label 'philosopher', see the Introduction, p. 2–3, 12–15.

[74] *Them.* 266a.

without having had it; Julian celebrates contemplation, which he has practised, from a position of (quasi)absolute agency. Themistius' own weapon, the rhetoric of the self-conscious engagement of the professional philosopher with political rhetoric, ultimately becomes the instrument with which Julian seals his victory in his first rhetorical *agon*.

Handling the *Laws*: Authoritative Knowledge, and Knowledge as a Source of Authority

My analysis of the *Letter* has so far focused on the value of its performative display of philosophical competence and on how Julian perceived this as key to undermining the authority of his interlocutor in what was ultimately a political debate. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to put Julian's operation in context, by asking whether the *Letter*'s method of enquiry and interest in classical philosophical sources can point to meaningful trends in the cultural and political debate of his times. Let us approach this issue by considering first Julian's engagement with his main author of reference, Plato, and in particular the *Laws*. The *Letter* is not the only text by Julian that displays an interest in Plato's posthumous treatise. The extant writings refer to it about a dozen times; on occasion, the work is called 'wonderful' (οἱ θαυμάσιοι Νόμοι).[75] The *Misopogon*, Julian's final piece and a work much concerned with issues of philosophical self-projection, evokes the *Laws* twice. In one case, the quotation is so long and precise that it appears that Julian had either an entire or a partial copy of the text before him as he wrote.[76] In the *Letter to Themistius* as well, as noted, Julian transcribes a long passage from the *Laws*. It thus seems that Julian, who in one letter declares his habit of carrying Plato's works with him, regardless of whether he had the time to read them,[77] considered the *Laws* essential travel equipment: excerpts from it literally feature from his first composition (the *Letter*) to his last (*Misopogon*).

Julian's commitment as a ruler to advertising his acquaintance with the *Laws* is meaningful insofar as Plato's final treatise engaged in great depth with legislative and governmental issues. Regardless of whether specific aspects of this work, such as its emphasis on piety as the fundamental civic virtue, later influenced Julian's religious reforms,[78] the display of engagement with it projected competence in political philosophy. An oblique

[75] See n. 55 above. [76] *Mis.* 353d–4a, cf. Bouffartigue (1992) 192.
[77] *Ep.* 29 Wright (= 80 Bidez–Cumont). [78] O'Meara (2005) 120–23.

confirmation of how Julian thought audiences would read his references accordingly comes from the way that Themistius as well, in his speeches to the emperor and senators, occasionally refers to the *Laws*.[79]

A closer look at Themistius' orations shows differences between his appeals to the *Laws*, and to Platonic works in general, and those of Julian. Quotations from Plato in Themistius' orations do not develop into exegetical commentaries on the texts employed. His references to classical authors of philosophy in his panegyrics and other speeches tend to be functional and nominal.[80] An example is the way five of his orations invoke as a Platonic pronouncement the – extremely simple – statement that 'life will achieve its best and happiest condition when the king is young, self-controlled, mindful, brave, majestic, and a ready learner' (a quote, incidentally, from the *Laws*).[81] The sentence is little more than an aphorism, and one might understand Julian' presentation of Themistius in the *Letter* as a superficial reader as targeting this feature of his public work, conveying an implicit accusation as to how it tainted his philosophical integrity.

There might seem to be some irony in Themistius' oratorical handling of his sources. As a professor of philosophy, he had become famous precisely thanks to his paraphrases, a type of work that relied on close engagement with original texts.[82] His reputation as an exegete, which Julian's *Letter* tries to challenge, was foundational to his public profile. Themistius' shift in textual approaches is therefore revealing of his sense of the audience. When operating in a political context, Themistius appears aware that what truly matters to his addressees is to be given clues confirming his identity as a philosopher. His orations engage in a performative display of intellectual authority. This also means that they alert us to something essential: philosophical language had political currency at court. Although Themistius' audience of senators might not have been inclined to dive into philological minutiae – or so Themistius seems to have assumed – they could still be expected to be alive to references to their own cultural capital.

In Chapter 2, I return to Themistius' symbolic role as mouthpiece of *paideia* at Constantius' court. Here, I want to consider instead how his display of engagement with Plato's oeuvre, and Julian's challenge

[79] See Maisano (1994).
[80] Cf. Maisano (1994), (2006); Vanderspoel (1995) 22; De Vita (2006); Penella (2014); Vossing (2020) 176.
[81] Them. *Or.* 3.46a; 4.62a; 8.119d; 17.215c; 34.16 (cf. Pl. *Leg.* 4.709e).
[82] See above, p. 57.

targeting Themistius' interpretive control of it, point to the importance of claiming intellectual primacy in negotiating public and political authority. It is generally assumed that Themistius introduced Julian to the *Laws* – perhaps in the context of the classroom, perhaps elsewhere – at the time when the latter briefly lived and studied in Constantinople, around 348–349.[83] This might be the case. It should be stressed, however, that the assumption relies exclusively on the passage from the *Letter* where Julian states that Themistius taught him Plato's account of the Golden Age. Although Julian maintains that Themistius taught him this passage, the statement is more ambiguous than is usually acknowledged. Julian does not say whether Themistius introduced him only to this specific passage or to the entire work. Nor does he say to what extent his understanding of the work relied on Themistius' teaching and – most important – whether he regarded Themistius as having any authority in interpreting it. In fact, the entire *Letter* seems constructed to deny this final point.

In the previous section, I argued that Julian's disavowal of Themistius as an interpreter is part of an attempt to prevent Themistius from asserting himself as his adviser. At the same time, we should consider that Julian's and Themistius' allegiance to different schools of thought might have triggered intellectual disagreement between them: Julian admired the Neoplatonic mysticism of Iamblichus, whereas Themistius could be better classified as an eclectic Aristotelian.[84] But Julian's disagreement with Themistius also appears driven by another factor, and one that in my view should not be ascribed to philosophical factionalism: Julian's *Letter* voices a straightforward desire to come across as an independent reader of Plato. The connection made between the Golden Age passage and Aristotle's *Politics* is presented as something Themistius neglected and to which Julian is now drawing attention. In challenging a famous interpreter, Julian is equally concerned to signpost the proficiency with which he handles authoritative sources.

[83] Prato and Fornaro (1984) 47–49; Vanderspoel (1995) 118; Dillon (2001) 245 n. 6; Henck (2001) 175; Elm (2012) 83. Bouffartigue's remark that, although Julian read Themistius, they likely belonged to different philosophical circles (cf. note below), seems to imply an objection against the hypothesis that Themistius exercised a substantial influence on Julian's thinking and education (Bouffartigue (1992) 296–97).

[84] Julian on Iamblichus: *Hel.* 146a, 150d; *Cyn.* 188b; *C. Her.* 222b, 235a–b. The traditional view of Themistius' Aristotelianism as free from Platonism has been profitably challenged; see Ballériaux (1994); O'Meara (2005) 206–8; Quiroga (2013b) 612. He was distant, however, from the theurgical and mystical developments of Iamblichean Neoplatonism (Penella [2000] 13; Chiaradonna [2015] 157 n. 31; Zucker [2016] 360).

For a philosopher to lay claims to control over the meaning of a text in competition with another intellectual is not unique to Julian's *Letter*. As seen in the Introduction, the growing investment in exegesis shaping the intellectual developments of the post-Hellenistic schools of philosophy had mobilised an array of competitive dynamics. What seems meaningful, however, is that Julian's letter betrays an interest – an anxiety, even – to ground his political legitimacy on an act of competitive exegesis.

Recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that the strong metaphysical drive of Neoplatonism implied its practitioners' indifference towards society and its institutions. How its representatives positioned themselves regarding the outspokenness and open participation of the philosopher in politics is another complex matter, to which I return in a later chapter.[85] What is relevant here is that third- and fourth-century Platonism cultivated an interest in reflection on the relationship between philosophy and power. O'Meara's *Platonopolis* was pioneering in drawing attention to the Neoplatonic concern for fostering the virtues that facilitate the good civic life. As he shows, this belief was not in contradiction with but in fact depended on the Neoplatonists' self-understanding as mediators between divinity and humankind.[86] This argument is complemented by another point considered in the Introduction, the political currency of Neoplatonic vocabulary in the late Roman Empire.[87] A rhetorical adaptation of Neoplatonic ideas provided ideological scaffolding for the Tetrarchic propaganda.[88] This too points to the activation of a positive feedback loop between cultural expectations and (diluted) philosophical imagery. The very notion of 'ensouled law' resonated with the Platonist belief in the connection through reason between human and divine minds.

It would thus seem both that Neoplatonic philosophers were committed to political ideals and that their language resonated with the upper class. The resulting question is how their literature engaged with the themes of the relationship between power and wisdom and with the agency of philosophical literature in constructing authority. Interestingly, no surviving third- or fourth-century Neoplatonic writing provides a template that precisely matches the *Letter*'s mobilisation of a close reading of classical texts with an attempt to navigate contemporary political dynamics. One could certainly argue that the uniqueness of Julian's social position at the moment must speak to the uniqueness of his strategies of self-negotiation.

[85] See Chapter 6. [86] O'Meara (2005). See also O'Meara (2014). [87] See Introduction, p. 30. [88] Burgersdijk (2020).

But comparison of his *Letter* with select contemporary works leads to further insights. Some scholars have singled out Iamblichus' fragmentary *Letter to Agrippa* as anticipating the ideas advanced in Julian's *Letter*, since it lays special emphasis on the centrality of the Law and argues that 'the ruler . . . must have a completely pure (εἰλικρινῶς ἀποκεκαθαρμένον) insight into the absolute correctness from the laws' and 'must be immune from corruption (ἀδιάφθορον) as is humanly possible'.[89] Julian's admiration for Iamblichus makes it possible, even plausible, that he was acquainted with the text. It should nevertheless be noted that neither the theme of the authority of the Law nor the understanding of rationality as the political *summum bonum* are exclusive to Iamblichus. In fact, both are essential components of the theory of the ruler as *empsychos nomos*, which, as noted earlier, thrived in Platonising environments. At the same time, Iamblichus is unconcerned with textual definitions and does not look back to earlier philosophical authorities to ground the principle of legislation on their statements.

While theories of direct inspiration thus do not seem to bring us far, the *Letter to Agrippa* nevertheless confirms a Neoplatonic interest in the question of the origins of authority, here found in the intellect and in rational law. A similar interest seems to drive another genre visited by the two canonical figures of post-Plotinian Platonism, Porphyry and Iamblichus: (philosophical) biography. This genre might at first seem at the margins of my discussion. It is in fact profoundly connected to it, especially when one considers that both Porphyry and Iamblichus devoted attention to the archetypical philosopher-leader Pythagoras of Samos.[90] They looked at Pythagoras from different angles and with significant differences in their perspectives and approaches.[91] But their interest in Pythagoras intersects in two respects. First, both Porphyry and Iamblichus record Pythagoras' activity as a unity of intellectual and social engagement. The community-shaping role of the great philosopher is twofold: he is the founder of a close group of disciples who regulate their life according to his

[89] Iambl. *ep. fr.* 2 (= Stob. *Ecl.* 4.5.77), transl. Dillon and Polleichtner. Hypothesis of Iamblichean influence on Julian: Schramm (2014) 137; De Vita (2022) clxiv–v. Swain (2013) 37–38 notes the affinity but does not postulate any dependence.

[90] Porphyry's life of his teacher Plotinus will not be discussed here, as this chapter is primarily concerned with what could be defined as a late antique 'archaeology' of philosophy. But see Clark (2000a) for an analysis of Porphyry's and Iamblichus' biographies that also includes the *Life of Plotinus*.

[91] Porphyry's life is the first of four books of a (now lost) *Philosophical History*. It mostly presents itself as an erudite compilation of anecdotes. Iamblichus' *On the Pythagorean Life*, which explicitly presents (the 'divine', *Pyth.* 1 [1]) Pythagoras as an example of the perfect philosophical life, shares material with Porphyry's work and may be directed against it: Clark (2000a) 31–37; Urbano (2013) 91–95.

precepts[92] but also the legislator and teacher of virtue to Samian society at large and to the cities of Southern Italy. (Iamblichus calls him the 'inventor of the whole system of political erudition'.)[93] His listeners get ordinances from him as if they were 'divine commands' (θεῖαι ὑποθήκαι).[94] He teaches his closest pupils how to become guardians of the laws, as well as excellent legislators.[95] Pythagoras thus provides a historical exemplification of the idea that the enlightened legislator must coincide with the perfect philosopher, implying that the political life must find fulfilment under the guidance of an individual with access to divine reason.

Second, both Porphyry and Iamblichus are invested in reflecting on intellectual authority through the questions of origins and of exemplarity. But the points raised by their biographies do not overlap precisely with Julian's questions. Julian's *Letter* approaches philosophical origins in terms of classical philosophical sources, which he interrogates through exegesis to the twofold end of political theorisation and hierarchical self-positioning. Porphyry and Iamblichus, by contrast, are driven by a desire to root their intellectual lineage in ancient history. Despite their differences, both utilise Pythagoras to pursue what might be called a philosophical archaeology of political theory. In the market of the post-Hellenistic philosophical schools, access to original truth through myth and history was perceived as essential to bestowing authority on a philosophical system.[96] The passage in which Porphyry quotes from Pythagoras' prescription 'not to pluck [the leaves] from a crown' (στέφανόν τε μὴ τίλλειν) is meaningful in this regard.[97] Porphyry explains this as an esoteric exhortation to respect the laws (τοῦτ' ἔστι τοὺς νόμους μὴ λυμαίνεσθαι), 'for they are crowns of cities (στέφανοι γὰρ πόλεων οὗτοι)'. Political and legal theory are here

[92] Iamblichus is especially interested in the process of selection and training of Pythagoras' philosophical community: see Iambl. *Pyth.* 17 (70–74), on the examination of followers; 18 (80); on the organisation of the disciples; and 20–22 (94–102), on examining the nature of his pupils, establishing a daily regime, and passing down precepts.

[93] Iambl. *Pyth.* 27 (129). See Clark (2000a); Schott (2003) 503–10; Urbano (2013) 83; Key Fowden (2008) 22–25. According to Iamblichus, the Samians expected Pythagoras to participate in every embassy and civic obligation, see *Pyth.* 6 (28). After his arrival in Kroton, he first advised the population on matters such as piety, self-control, the importance of education, religion, and justice (Porph. *Pyth.* 18; Iambl. *Pyth.* 8 [37]–11 [57]).

[94] Porph. *Pyth.* 20; Iambl. *Pyth.* 6 (30).

[95] Guardians of the laws: Iambl. *Pyth.* 27 (129); legislators: Iambl. *Pyth.*, 27 (130); 39 (172). Porphyry adds that the legislation of Pythagoras' pupils Carondas of Catania and Zaleucos of Locris attracted the envy of neighbouring cities (Porph. *Pyth.* 21). On Porphyry and the *empsychos nomos*, see *Phil. Orac.* fr. 344 Smith. It reports an oracle delivered in response to the question of whether reason or law is better. The mention of the oracle might have served to introduce a (lost) discussion on the rational basis of law.

[96] See the Introduction, p. 14–17.

[97] Porph. *Pyth.* 42; cf. also *Pyth.* 38.

grounded on the interpretation of an obscure archaic maxim, which communicates a superior truth to intelligent readers. Iamblichus identifies in 'symbols (σύμβολα) . . . handed down as education only to those who know' the crucial feature of Pythagoras' teaching.[98]

There are important resonances in the ways Porphyry, Iamblichus, Themistius, and Julian think of the relationship between knowledge and power. They share an interest in postulating philosophy as a source of legitimate authority and in considering sources and origins as fundamental to political thinking. But it is essential to note that, by expanding the picture, we can see that their engagement with the motifs of authority and interpretation was simultaneously cultivated by another category of intellectuals; and that it was this category that approached the issues of exegesis and intellectual lineage with a competitiveness comparable only, of all the sources considered so far, to Julian's *Letter*. But its competitiveness was driven by different factors.

Textual Interpretation and Political Self-legitimation in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* and Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel*

My enquiry so far has been restricted to members of the philosophical schools acknowledged by the system of *paideia*, be they of Aristotelian leanings (Themistius) or operating in the legacy of Plotinus (Porphyry and Iamblichus). Christian theologians would have been surprised to find themselves excluded from this survey. They too thought of themselves as philosophers (or, when they rejected the label, still conceived of their wisdom as competing with the teachings of the traditional philosophical schools).[99] Most important, they were increasingly committed to asserting their philosophical identity in the eyes of contemporary society.

The remainder of my analysis considers how two critical figures operating in the early fourth century, the Latin rhetorician Lactantius and the slightly – but crucially – younger Eusebius Pamphili (ca. 260–340 CE), bishop of Caesarea, thematised the relationship between (Christian) knowledge and Roman society.[100] Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*, composed between 305 and 310, represents an unprecedented turn in Latin apologetics.[101] Dating in its first redaction to a time when Christians were still

[98] Iambl. *Pyth.* 23 (102–5), transl. Clark (1989).
[99] On Lactantius' self-definition as a rhetorician, rather than a philosopher, see Chapter 3, p. 141–2.
[100] See the Introduction, p. 16–17.
[101] Discussion of the date and place of authorship in Barnes (1981) 291; Garnsey (2003) 1–3; Heck (2009); Gassmann (2020) 19–20.

experiencing persecution, the work takes a deliberately original route to reply to the detractors of Christianity (including a Greek philosopher of uncertain identity, who is identified by part of scholarship with Porphyry himself).[102] Lactantius is concerned with what he perceives to be the inability of Christians to advocate eloquently for their religion in a way that would make it acceptable to the educated Roman upper class with its set of cultural expectations. He therefore sets out to produce an exposition of Christianity that relies on a targeted use of what his non-Christian interlocutors would perceive as authoritative sources. In other words, Lactantius argues that the sources upon which he grounds his apologetic claims must be different from the Bible; otherwise, the scepticism of the adherents of Greco-Roman religion towards a text they perceive as 'fiction and lies' would continue to invalidate any Christian argument a priori.[103] In doing so, Lactantius gives pride of place to Cicero, with whom he has an ambivalent relationship. For Lactantius, Cicero stands as the culmination of Rome's aspiration to ethical thinking but also simultaneously as proof of the limits of any search of knowledge that excludes Christianity.[104] Two points are remarkable. First, Lactantius' assessment of Cicero is substantiated by a close engagement with the texts he produced, as he negotiates his interpretive authority by putting his knowledge of Ciceronian writings on display.[105] Second, Lactantius' interest falls remarkably on Cicero's ethical and political works, *On the Commonwealth* (*De re publica*) and *On the Laws* (*De legibus*).[106]

Lactantius' thorough engagement with this portion of the production of his author of reference stands in stark contrast to the way Eusebius of Caesarea handles his own reference author in *paideia*, Plato. Eusebius' work matches Lactantius' ambition to advocate for Christianity by demonstrating its control of sources its detractors regard as authoritative. Since he comes from the Greek side of the debate, however, he is especially concerned with Christianity's relationship with Platonic thinking. This must be one of primacy and simultaneously dominance. Eusebius' attempts to mobilise exegesis in the construction of the so-called

[102] Porphyry: DePalma Digeser (2000) 93–107; Schott (2008) 179–85; Simmons (2015) 42–43, 64. See, however, Gassman (2020) 19 n. 3.
[103] Lactant. *Div. inst.* 5.4.4 (*uanam fictam commenticiam*). See DePalma Digeser (2000) 7–12; Garnsey (2003) 14–21.
[104] Cf. Lactant. *Div. inst.* 3.15.1. DePalma Digeser (2000) 56–63; Garnsey (2003) 14–15, 20–22, 26–36; Lettieri (2013); Gassman (2020) 26.
[105] Garnsey (2004) 13–16, 20–23. [106] Garnsey (2004) 26, 31–35.

dependency theme (i.e., the dependence of Greek philosophy on Christianity) are illustrated by his *Preparation for the Gospel*.[107] This treatise in fifteen Books makes the argument that Greek philosophy was derived from an original wisdom also documented in the writings of other peoples (especially the 'Hebrews', intended in the Eusebian sense of proto-Christians).[108] The *Preparation* is strikingly constructed on the assertions of others: more than two-thirds of the work consists of direct quotations.[109] This impressive display of mastery of the philosophical tradition from various cultures, be they Phoenician, Egyptian, Chaldean, Jewish, or above all Greek, seeks to demonstrate Christianity's complete hermeneutical control over the intellectual history of the world and consequently the limited authority of Greek philosophy.

As anticipated, Plato plays a crucial role in the picture. Eusebius acknowledges him as the best classical philosopher, who overcame Greek superstition through access to the same truth that inspired Moses.[110] The model is less conciliatory, however, than it is competitive. As Johnson shows, Eusebius gradually transitions from a thesis of shared inspiration to one of Platonic appropriation of Moses' doctrine.[111] The approach culminates in Book 13, where Plato's discrepancies with Christian metaphysics and ethics are presented as demonstrating the failure of Greek philosophy even in its highest form.[112] And, crucially, Plato's political thinking is at the heart of the process. Eusebius' final dismissal of Plato is preceded by a long examination of the latter's political theory, which stands as the protagonist of *Preparation* Book 12. The book opens with a quotation from the *Laws* in which Plato argues that the best law is one whose divine exactitude is self-evident to everyone.[113] In a programmatic gesture, Eusebius seizes the opportunity to show that the passage in Plato is in harmony with lines from Isaiah and the Psalms.[114] This simultaneously signals Eusebius' interpretive control of Plato's most political works and his ability to find meaning in it via his control of the Bible. Throughout Book 12, Eusebius returns over and over to the *Republic* and the *Laws* – although the number of quotations reveals the latter as Eusebius' real

[107] Discussion in Boys-Stones (2001) 176–202.
[108] See, e.g., Euseb. *PE* 10.4.1; 14.3.1. Kofsky (2000) 103–6; Johnson (2006) 20–23, 100–24; Urbano (2013) 107–9.
[109] 71 per cent of the *PE* (Johnson [2014] 26).
[110] See already *PE* 2.6.23–4; 2.7.
[111] Johnson (2006) 21, 137–40; Johnson (2014) 34. On how Plato appropriated Mosaic doctrine, see, e.g., *PE* 11.9.4; 12.11.1; 12.13.1.
[112] See Euseb. *PE* 13.14–21.
[113] Pl. *Leg.* 1.634d–e in Euseb. *PE* 12.1. See Schott (2003) 517–18.
[114] *Is.* 7.9, *Ps.* 116.10 in Euseb. *PE* 12.1.

focus.[115] The book itself, as Schott observes, seems to be structured according to the agenda outlined in Plato's work.[116] Eusebius progresses from a reflection on the appointment of political chiefs and the management of education to elaborating communal regulations (with attention to cultural and religious practices) and concludes with the question of how to structure the ideal city, which according to the *Preparation* must be inspired by Jerusalem and provide to its citizens a training that leads to the knowledge of God.[117] Eusebius evidently shares with Plato (and the Platonists) a belief that the practice of politics, if inspired by philosophy, prepares for the contemplation of the divine. Eusebius and the Platonists also both believe that access to the truth is the precondition for creating a polity where citizenship can foster virtue.

A *fil rouge* links Lactantius' and Eusebius' works. Both rely on the 'classics' to advocate for the superiority of their religion, which they argue is precisely demonstrated by texts that are – apparently – external to it. Both are competing with *paideia* while simultaneously seeking to derive authority and legitimacy from their control over it. Furthermore – and most important – both betray a special interest in the political output of the authors they envisage as their *maîtres à penser* within the classical tradition (Cicero for Lactantius, Plato for Eusebius). This too points to a shared concern: how to draw on traditional culture to demonstrate, in the eyes of a ruling class invested in the cultural capital of *paideia*, that Christianity is a valid – indeed, the most valid – tool for government.

After this, considerations begin to diverge. As recent scholarship has stressed, Lactantius' primary ambition was to lead his readers to an understanding of God, and his concern with Roman politics mostly originated with the fact that he saw it as an expression of what he envisaged as the moral and social limits of polytheism.[118] Throughout his work, Lactantius seeks to show that the Christian life overcomes such socio-political systems – including its highest expression, which he found in

[115] The *Laws* already feature in book 11 (*Leg.* 4.715e–16b at *PE* 11.13.5; *Leg.* 10.896d–e and 10.906a at *PE* 11.26). In Book 12 alone, Eusebius quotes from the following passages (which I list according to their order of appearance in the text of the *PE*): *Leg.* 1.634d–e, 629e–30c; 11.926e–78a; 3.689b–e, 677a–c, 677e; 1.631a–2a, 632c–d, 643b–d, 643d–4b; 2.653b–c, 659c–60a, 660e–61d, 657a, 658e–9b, 671a–d, 673e–4c; 1.626d–e, 644c–d, 644e–5c; 10.896c–d; 2.663d–e, 665b–c; 1.639a; 7.801e–2a; 11.931e; 8.842e–43a, 843c–d; 9.856c–d, 857a, 874b–c, 873d; 6.760b, 755d–e; 4.704b–5b; 10.888e–90b, 891b–d, 892a–c, 893b–c; 895a–99a. The passages taken from the *Republic* are (in their order of appearance): 2.376e–77a, 377a–c; 1.346e–47a; 2.361b–d, 361d–62a; 6.500c–501c, 499c–d; 5.455c–56b; 4.421e–22a; 5.469c; 3.415a–c; 1.345b–e; 9.588b–89b; 10.595b–c.

[116] Schott (2003) 523. [117] Euseb. *PE* 12.48 (Jerusalem); 12.49–51 (Plato's educational project).

[118] See Gassman (2020) 23–27.

Ciceronian ethics.[119] But Eusebius had a different agenda, rooted in an understanding of something Lactantius does not seem to have brought entirely into focus: the intuition that the course of history might now be on his party's side. The *Preparation* was composed a few years after the first edition of Lactantius' *Institutes*, between 313 and 324, at the time when Constantine was sharing power with his co-Augustus in the East, Licinius. The 'Edict of Milan' and the well-timed association of the Church with the ruler implied that the moment for pervasive political action had come.[120] Eusebius' close engagement with and actualisation of the *Laws* points, I believe, to his general sense that Christian political thought had acquired a context of application. What Plotinus had once envisaged as Platonopolis could now find concrete realisation in its final form, Christopolis. 'The polity of the Church of Christ', Eusebius writes, 'has replaced (ἐπανίστατο) the polities of the heathen nations (τοῖς τῶν ἀπίστων ἐθνῶν)'.[121]

But such a city and polity needed to be administered. Eusebius' entire literary activity is a testament to that. His invention of a new historiographical genre with his *Ecclesiastical History* (of uncertain date but largely complete by 315/316)[122] aimed to re-cast the relationship between State and Church in a way that would support the presence and voice of Christianity in the public sphere. Christians, Eusebius argues, had always been committed citizens, embodying Roman virtues. As Corke-Webster shows, the *Ecclesiastical History* in this regard turns the traditional narrative on its head, by arguing that the Roman rulers opposing or persecuting Christians had proven, by so doing, their tyrannical and thus anti-Roman nature.[123] At the same time, Eusebius casts his fellow Christians not only as good citizens but – crucially – as members of what he saw as the best philosophical school.[124] From this, he deduced that they were those best equipped to wield spiritual and political authority. It is against this

[119] Garnsey (2003) 25–36.

[120] Licinius' relationship with Christianity remains an open historiographical issue, as his image as an enemy and persecutor of the new religion may have been created and was certainly exploited by Constantinian propaganda (Barbero (2016) 88–92).

[121] Euseb. *DE* 6.20.16. Cf. Schott (2003) 528.

[122] Discussion in Corke-Webster (2019) 42, 57–65.

[123] Corke-Webster (2019) 249–79. See also Johnson (2006) 156, 186–87 and Schott (2008) 157 on Eusebius' perception of the joint end of polytheism and polyarchy.

[124] Cf. Euseb. *PE* 14.3.1. See also *GEI* (= *Eclog. Prophet.*) p. 141 Gaisford ('among us there is a crowd of those who entirely lack a formal education, exhibiting a virtuous, philosophic way of life (ἐμφιλόσοφον πολιτείαν) such as one cannot easily find even among those trained in philology and boasting in their care of books', transl. Johnson [2014] 58). Momigliano (1963) already suggested that Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* reflects the histories of the philosophical schools. On

background that his treatment of Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* is significant. The *Preparation* might conclude that Plato the philosopher is passé, since he does not entirely share in the truth of God's message. But Eusebius the political theorist must still reckon with his legacy if he wants to carve out a space for his political design in imperial discourse, demonstrating that Roman history is Christian history. Control of the sources is his tool for competition and draws on mastery of the philosophical literature to substantiate a project of Christian re-negotiation of socio-political hierarchies.

We are back to Julian, the freshly appointed emperor testing his political voice through a philosophical *agon*. We have seen that the intellectual agenda driving the *Letter to Themistius* finds its place in a larger context, visited both by pagan and Christian thinkers, involving how knowledge legitimises authority and how sources and origins, when authoritatively handled, substantiate claims to political and intellectual primacy. Julian's competitiveness, I noted above, is greater than that of the other 'pagan' Neoplatonists considered in this chapter. In fact, we might even want to – provocatively – compare Julian's voice to Lactantius' and Eusebius' aggressive self-positioning with regard to ancient sources. It could be objected that very different agendas drove their efforts. At the same time, one might respond to this that both Julian, on the one hand, and Lactantius and Eusebius, on the other, envisaged the outlining of interpretive credentials as essential to their entrance into the political field, be it qua having recently been appointed emperor or because they represented a new political voice. Like Eusebius, Julian does not merely resort to name-dropping Plato or to a brief use of quotations from anthologised maxims drawn from the most famous dialogues – as Themistius, relying safely on his public reputation, would do. Julian's need to assert himself finds expression, as noted, through engagement with long excerpts, which invite the audience to see that his control of literature is metonymic with his control of politics.

Julian, who is unlikely to have ever read Lactantius, knew Eusebius. In the polemical treatise *Against the Galileans* (his name for the Christians),[125] written towards the end of his rule, the 'knavish' (μοχθηρός) Eusebius is the only theologian named and targeted explicitly, at least from what we can reconstruct from the fragments. The way Julian attacks him is

Eusebius' patterning of the relationship between Church and empire as that between traditional philosophers and the Roman elites, see Corke-Webster (2019) 89–120.

[125] An analysis of the treatise in Chapter 3, p. 148–52.

significant: the text addresses Eusebius' argument for the priority of the Hebrews over the Greeks in various disciplines, including logic ('something whose name he learnt among the Greeks', Julian comments).[126] *Against the Galileans* displays a concern for Eusebius' celebration of Christianity's intellectual priority and for the way this came at the expense of Greek thinking.

Almost seven years – if one accepts, as I do, the dating of the *Letter to Themistius* to 355 – separate Julian's response from *Against the Galileans*. By stressing an affinity in the method and agenda of the *Letter* with Eusebius' *Preparation*, I do not seek to argue that Julian's earliest piece interacts with Eusebius' use of Platonic philosophy or that it voices an anti-Christian position; for Julian's allegiance to the traditional gods to find expression in his writings, a few more years were needed. But the identification of a largely comparable agenda shaping Julian's and Eusebius' use of philosophical sources, and the way they both drew on such sources to gain access to imperial politics, points to something important. It outlines the contours of a political environment still invested in the 'classical' question of what philosophy is and what it does to power. This relatively generic remark can serve as a springboard for further reflection. Having dismissed the hypothesis of Julian's engagement with Eusebius in the *Letter*, I will argue in Chapter 2 that the vocabulary Julian deployed upon his entrance into politics nevertheless interacted with the discourse cultivated by a *Christian* court that had internalised Eusebius' (or a Eusebius-like) cultural vision. Within this picture, Julian's precociously aggressive self-image as exegete appears as the product of expectations fostered by Constantius II – the last living son of Constantine.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that the primary aim of Julian's *Letter to Themistius* is not, as usually assumed, a critique of the late antique theory of the ruler as 'ensouled law' but an advertisement of Julian's philosophical expertise via a discussion of the relationship between state authority and (divine) reason. At the heart of the text is a challenge to its addressee, the famous philosopher and senator Themistius, to whom Julian's *Letter* denies the possibility of portraying himself as the correspondent and

[126] *C. Gal.* fr. 53 Masaracchia (222a). Bouffartigue (1992) 386, suggests that other arguments in the treatise might also be constructed in reply to Eusebius' commentary on the *Timaeus* (*PE* 11.29). The hypothesis is intriguing but unprovable.

adviser of the young philosopher-ruler. Julian downgrades Themistius to a superficial interpreter and thus implicitly sanctions his own status as philosopher-ruler in the making.

Interpretation is the great protagonist of Julian's *Letter*. His quarrel with Themistius involves exegetical control over the great philosophical authorities preserved as reference points in the contemporary political scene. The third- and fourth-century engagement with philosophical sources and origins displays a shared interest in prescribing a virtuous symbiosis between knowledge and power and in ascribing such prescriptions to an authoritative past (Porphyry, Iamblichus). It is the early fourth-century apologists, however, who appear most invested in the exercise of performing, in literature, their dominance of classical texts. Their intent was to argue that Christianity was key to the interpretive control of *paideia* and consequently of Roman politics. Eusebius in particular shows that domination of classical political philosophy marks Christianity as equipped for the task of ruling – in fact, as better equipped for it than its non-Christian counterpart. Eusebius' and Julian's competitive efforts to legitimise their political voice were driven by different exigencies. The sense of urgency both displayed in entering politics through interpretation, however, serves as an initial indication of the importance of philosophical exegesis in the fourth-century debate about political leadership.