

The Politics of Law: Autonomy and Citizen participation in Plato's *Laws*.

In the *Laws*, Plato is generally held to express a more nuanced and also, a more positive view on democracy than he does in e.g. the *Republic*. While it is clear that not every aspect of the democratic form of government is dispensed with in the *Laws* it a subject of scholarly controversy whether the *Laws* should be seen as a break with the idealism from the *Republic*, turning to a more pragmatic approach or as a development of arguments consistent with what he can be said to argue in the *Republic*. One of the arguments in favor of reading the *Laws* as a break with his previous thinking is that Plato seems to be less damning of democracy in his last work, the *Laws*. While the constitution of the fictional city of Magnesia that the participants of this dialogue draws up, in some detail, are far from democratic, yet certain features of the democratic form of government seems to be incorporated. Most notably is perhaps the value that is placed on citizen participation. Furthermore, while the inhabitants of the ideal state in the *Republic* often are seen as unthinking subjects to the virtuous rulers, the dwellers of Magnesia are portrayed as not only completely subjected to the city's laws, but also as to be actively engaged in understanding the reasoning behind them, thus taking a more active stance toward their rule.

This gives rise to a potential tension within the *Laws*. As Julia Annas (2018) points out, on the one hand Plato's portrayal of the citizens as *slaves* to the laws would have been a sharp provocation for his contemporaries whose identities for a large part rested upon the distinction between freemen and slaves. On the other hand, the fact that Plato in the *Laws* puts much emphasis on that the citizens should understand their laws, and the reasoning behind them, seem to be introduced as a way of involving and engaging the citizen in their ruling laws in a way that goes beyond mere obedience. This tension might prompt us to ask: Why, seeing as teaching obedience and loyalty to the laws holds such a prominent place in the education and training of the people of Magnesia, does Plato think they need to understand the laws? Second, if the laws are to be absolute and not subject to political decision making, why would Plato want the citizens to engage in rational conversation about them?

Plato seem to want the citizens of Magnesia to be both completely obedient and autonomous at the same time. This seem be a contradiction in terms, not to mention an impossible goal. One simply cannot have it both ways. The question is then why Plato still seem to think that this is possible? This paper will tentatively suggest that the answer might be understood by introducing a distinction, coined by Amber Carpenter, between being

autonomous and being *autologos*. While being *autonomous*, or self-governing, or to follow only the laws one sets for one self, would indeed be incompatible with Plato's portrayal of citizen-life in Magnesia and also reveal an inconsistency in Plato's reasoning, to be *autologos* on the other hand, that is; self- reasoning, would maybe not be. This paper will investigate the conception of citizen participation with this distinction in mind, and suggest a reading of the *Laws* that might help to solve this tension, and to give us a clearer impression of what Plato's "more positive" outlook on certain features of the democratic system might entail. In turn, this might also go some way towards a clearer understanding of the relationship between the *Laws* and Plato's political masterpiece; the *Republic*.