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ARTICLE

Philosophy and politics in Julian's *Letter to Themistius*

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ABSTRACT

Julian's *Letter to Themistius* is one of our most valuable sources for understanding Julian's political thought. More specifically, it is perhaps our most valuable source for investigating the extent to which Julian's approach to governance was or was not influenced by his philosophical commitments. Here I focus on this question and argue that, understood in its proper intellectual context, the *Letter* provides us with good reason for thinking that Julian's political philosophy (and the programme that he implemented as emperor) was profoundly influenced by the Platonist tradition. While Julian does distance himself both from the philosopher-king of the *Republic* and the lawgiver of the *Laws*, this should not be taken as a wholesale rejection of the possibility of an applied Platonist political philosophy. A standard Platonist doctrine by Julian's time distinguished between not two but three levels of political reform: the divine ideal of the *Republic*, the second-best state of the *Laws*, and a third state, arising from reform. A careful reading of the *Letter* provides support for the idea that Julian aimed at the latter.

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1. Philosophy and power in antiquity

Marx notoriously complained that philosophers before him had sought only to describe the world, rather than to change it.[1] Whether or not this is fair to Marx's immediate predecessors, this is certainly false as a description of the ancient Greek philosophers of the classical period. For Aristotle, the aim or *telos* of practical philosophy is action (*praxis*) and not knowledge alone.[2] Aristotle's political writings – part of his practical philosophy – are meant to be useful, not merely informative. Similarly, one reason that the *Laws* is one of Plato's least read works today is that it is full of detailed policy proposals intended for possible real-world application (about which, more later).

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[1]"Thesen über Feuerbach," §11 in Marx and Engels, *Werke*, 7.

[2]See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a5–6, 1103b26–29, 1105b9–18, 1179a35–b2.

Indeed, many have held that a major focus of the early Academy was precisely to prepare philosophers for future political influence.[3]

This is all to say that political theory in the time of Plato and Aristotle had grand ambitions. Neither of these men were naive about the ugly realities of real-world politics,[4] and, hence, neither of them expected that their ideal regimes would come to fruition in the foreseeable future, but they nonetheless seem to be convinced that their philosophical works can and should provide practical guidance to a suitable statesman.[5]

Glancing over the subsequent history of the ancient Greek and Roman world, it is tempting to feel that these hopes for an applied political philosophy were far too optimistic. The young Alexander the Great may have been tutored by Aristotle, but there is no reason to believe that these studies involved philosophy (political or otherwise) nor did Alexander look to the philosopher for guidance upon becoming a man. Philosophers were not uncommon in the halls of power in Rome, but where welcome they seem to have had little effect on matters of policy,[6] and they were often not welcome.[7] Indeed, presumably because of the dangers involved in being a person of principle in Roman politics, many philosophers prudently avoided public life altogether[8] (in turn, providing more grist for the mill of anti-philosophical public figures[9]). Marcus Aurelius, himself both a philosopher and an emperor (and a widely admired one at that), would seem to be an exception. But even he appears to have been little influenced by philosophy in his actual work of governance.[10] For Marcus philosophy was largely a private matter, concerned with facing the vicissitudes of life and governance. It was not something that was meant to provide a plan for the empire.

[3]At the very least, many people trained in the Academy did go into public life (see Plutarch, *Adv. Colot*., 1126C). For the view of the Academy as a training-ground for statesmen, see, e.g. Morrow, *Cretan City*, 5–10; Guthrie, *History*, 446; Klosko, *Development*, 199–20; Barker, *Political Theory*, 342. For opposing views, see Brunt, "Plato's Academy" and Schofield, "Practical politics".

[4]See, for example, *Rep*. VI, 496C5-E2, where the philosopher who gets involved in politics gets killed--not an unrealistic expectation (see following notes). Cf. VI, 487B-D.

[5]See, e.g. Aristotle, *NE* X 9.

[6]E.g. Athenodorus Cananites was the teacher of Augustus and later his advisor, but it appears that Augustus looked to him primarily for personal ethical guidance (we are told, for example, that Athenodorus taught Augustus to recite the alphabet when he was angry; Plut. *Mor*. 207C).

[7]Vespasian and Domitian both expelled professional philosophers from Rome and Italy, including Epictetus (Dio Chrysostom, LXVI 13; LXVII 13; Suetonius, *Dom*. 13, 3; Tacitus, *Agr*. 3; Pliny, *Ep*. III 11.). In one of Seneca's letters he advises Lucilius that although the latter should study philosophy, he should be careful not to boast of it since "philosophy itself, associated with arrogance and defiance has brought many men into danger" (*Ep*. 103, 5; cf. *Ep*. 73, 1). For an example of what Seneca might have had in mind see Tacitus, *Histories*, iii. 81 on Musonius Rufus.

[8]E.g. Plotinus, *Enn*. 1.4.14.20.

[9]See, e.g. Quintilian XII 2,6.

[10]As de Blois, "Relation", 178–9 points out, it is very difficult to trace any effect of Marcus' philosophical convictions on his practical politics (with the exception, of course, of the establishment of four philosophical chairs in Athens), and although he was praised by contemporaries for his virtue and good governance, "literary sources that discuss his reign do not make mention of any political effect of the emperor's philosophical convictions".

If one stops one's survey here, it would appear that ancient political philosophy had little impact on ancient political practice – that it never produced a political leader who attempted to use their ideas to shape an ambitious political programme. But Marcus was not the only philosopher to occupy the imperial throne, and it would be a mistake to end our survey with him. Philosophers continued to maintain ties with imperial politics well into late antiquity, and it was in this connection that Rome received its first genuine philosopher-emperor: Julian, who ruled from 361 to his untimely death in 363.

That, anyway, is the overall picture that I wish to promote. I think that Julian was a genuine and serious philosopher, his self-effacing comments to the contrary notwithstanding. And I think that his political programme, to the extent that he had one, was deeply rooted in the Platonist tradition. In other words, I think that he was a Platonic-Aristotelian 'true-believer' who earnestly looked to Plato and Aristotle in constructing his own ideas of kingship and his ideas of what the Roman society that he wished to reimagine should look like. It is in the interest of promoting this picture that this article is written.

Here I must make a predictable disclaimer, having to do with the scope of the project. A thorough account of Julian as philosopher-emperor would, presumably, need to delve into his actual record as emperor. And this is a large topic, with an extensive literature, rife with controversy. Very briefly: while it is undeniable that Julian's most notable policy – his religious policy, which sought to revive the pagan cults and correlatively suppress the rapid metastasis of Christianity – was rooted in his pagan Neoplatonic worldview, it is not obvious that, aside from this, Julian had much interest in ruling philosophically. While the traditional view,[11] dating back to Julian's own time,[12] regards him as a tireless reformer who introduced landmark reforms, not only to religion, but also to fight corruption and revitalize the cities, a recent body of literature has emerged to challenge this consensus.[13] Schmidt-Hofner, for example, concludes that, "contrary to the prevalent view, Julian was an active reformer only in very few areas of government; most of his innovative measures emerged out of reactions to specific cases, and the majority of his legislation routinely repeated existing legal rules and practice" ("Reform", 128). If this is right, it rather suggests that Julian is

[11]For which, see Geffcken, *Kaiser Julianus*, ch. IV; Bidez, *La vie*, pt. III; Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian*, 96–120; Renucci, "Idées", 507–10; Tantillo, *Giuliano*, 78–90; Bringmann, *Kaiser Julian*, ch. 4.

[12]See, for example, Mamertinus, *Panegyrici Latini* III 10.1, 12.1–3, 14.2–4 and Libanius, *Or.* 18.131–48, 174–5, 193.

[13]See, for example, Schmidt-Hofner, "Reform"; Brendel, *Gesetzgebungswerk*, 421–2; Harries, "Lawgiver"; Tougher, *Julian*, ch. 4; Rosen, *Julian*, 260; and Kolb, "Innenpolitik". It is beyond the scope of this article to address these arguments here, but fortunately it is also unnecessary. While the present work is not completely neutral on this dispute (it provides some evidence for the traditional view), I am not committed to any specific claims about the way in which Julian crafted particular decisions.

better regarded as a more or less typical emperor (albeit one with an unusual personality and an unusual interest in philosophy) whose approach to governance was more or less in line with that of his predecessors.

I mention this question mainly to set it aside. I shall leave the question of how to interpret Julian's actual legislation untouched. This question is crucial, but it is not the only means we have of trying to understand Julian's political thought. In addition, we have a number of writings by Julian's own hand in which he, more or less directly, discusses kingship. The most direct and hence most valuable is the *Letter to Themistius*, which will be my focus here. This text is a response to a letter from Themistius, a rhetorician, teacher of philosophy, and court mandarin under Constantius, who had written Julian praising his character and, appealing to his philosophical interests, urging him to seize the mantle of philosopher-king, either as emperor or governor.[14] In his response, Julian demures: not only does he feel that he is not personally gifted enough to take up that task, but he doubts whether anyone is, and citing Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Laws*, proposes instead that the law will be supreme under his administration.

Julian's letter is, to be sure, not a political manifesto, nor is it really a work of political philosophy narrowly construed, and hence it would be a mistake to read into it anything like a complete political programme. Nonetheless, I think it provides a glimpse into Julian's thinking about governing, which reveals someone deeply engaged with the Platonic tradition, even on the question of real-world politics, or so I will argue. The question of what we ought to conclude from the letter about Julian's approach to governance has elicited a broad range of responses. On the one hand, Julian's reluctance to embrace Themistius' call to philosophical regency has sometimes been taken to suggest that Julian did not think philosophy especially relevant for his own administration. Perhaps philosophy was simply a side-interest, a hobby. On the other end of the interpretative spectrum, some see his invocations of Plato's *Laws* as an indication that he intended a quite ambitious programme to transform the empire on the model of the *Laws*. Here I shall argue for something of a middle path between these two views. The latter overstates Julian's ambitions, the former understates them. Against the latter, I point out, among other considerations, that in the letter Julian contrasts his own ideal not only to the philosopher-king of the *Republic*, but also to the legislator of the *Laws*. This reluctance to adopt even the more modest goal of the *Laws*, however, does not imply that Julian set philosophy aside altogether. The Platonist tradition during Julian's lifetime distinguishes between three stages of reform: that aiming at the perfectly ideal state of the *Republic*, that aiming at the second-best constitution of the *Laws*, and a more modest form, thought to be epitomized by the (pseudo-)Platonic

[14]As I discuss in more detail below, there is a controversy over the date of the letter.

Letters. If we read Julian in light of this tradition, we find excellent evidence for thinking that his use of the *Laws* was intended to aim at the third, most modest level of reform. If this picture is right, it not only sheds light on Julian's political thought, but also calls attention to an important area of late Platonist thought that has received little scholarly attention: the idea of a third level of political reform and the way that this idea relates to a number of texts, mainly the Platonic *Letters* and certain fragments of Iamblichus' letters.

2. Julian and Hellenistic political philosophy

The *Letter to Themistius* was probably composed in November 361, shortly after Julian became the undisputed emperor upon the death of Constantius.[15] It is also possible that it was written earlier, when control of the throne was still in dispute.[16] In either case, it clearly addresses the question of what a ruler ought to aim for, whether he should aspire to the role of Platonic philosopher-king, as Themistius had apparently urged, or whether he should aspire to some lesser goal. Hence, even if it was written while Julian was still Caesar, it provides a glimpse of Julian's thought at a time, which may or may not have changed later.[17] This is, to be sure, only one piece of the puzzle of trying to understand the philosophical underpinnings that his actual political programme may have had, but it is an important piece.

Now, since it is a response to a letter from Themistius that has been lost, some work is required to reconstruct the dialectic.[18] Let's begin by considering Julian's own summary of Themistius' main points. Near the beginning of his letter, after expressing anxiety about his new responsibilities, Julian writes:

> You, however, have now made my fear greater on account of your recent letter, and have offered an altogether more difficult challenge. For you say that I have been placed by God in the same position that Heracles and Dionysus previously occupied when they were both practicing philosophy and acting as kings and cleansed practically the whole earth and sea of the evils infesting them. You

[15]Here I follow the most common view about the date of the letter. See, e.g. Geffcken, *Kaiser Julianus*, 77–78; Bidez, *Tradition manuscrite*, 133–141; Dagron, *L'Empire*, 220; Browning, *Julian*; Criscuolo, "Sull' epistola", 91; Bowersock, *Julian*, 31 n.23; Daly, "Borderland", 2; Bouffartigue, *Julien*, 198 n.283.

[16]This view places the date around the time that Julian was appointed Caesar in 355; see, e.g. Bradbury, "Date"; Errington, "Themistius", 868 n. 29; Swain, *Themistius*, 54–57; Chiaradonna, "Lettera", 149 n. 1; Nesselrath, "Philosophical writings", 42.

[17]Again, if someone wishes to know to what extent the content of the letter agrees with Julian's actions in office, that would require a survey of Julian's actual political acts, an undertaking far beyond the scope of this essay, constrained as it is by a word limit.

[18]Since it is merely a response to a letter from Themistius, its scope is somewhat limited. I do not claim that this letter is a manifesto or even a work of political philosophy. I merely claim that what Julian does say provides some insight into how he thought about governance (either as he was becoming emperor or some time before). As I have already said, it is another question whether he changed his mind later or how well this coheres with his actual behaviour as emperor.

> urge me to shake off all thoughts of leisure and ease so I may embark on a struggle worthy of the cause. Then in addition to them you mention all those lawgivers, Solon, Pittacus, Lycurgus, and say that people should now by rights expect more from us than from any of them.[19]
>
> (253B10–254A8)

So we can distinguish at least the following ideas that Themistius' letter must have contained:

1. A conception of Julian's kingship as divinely ordained.
2. The presentation of Heracles, Dionysus, Solon, Pittacus, and Lycurgus as models of philosopher-kings, whom Julian can and should emulate.
3. The suggestion that the philosopher-king is in a unique position to cure the ills that face society.
4. The elevation of political life over the life of philosophical leisure.

Of these, (1) is pretty standard flattery for Themistius[20] (and similar court orators) and Julian does not have much to say in response. (2) is mainly subsidiary to (3) – supposedly historical examples of philosopher-kings who achieved great things, thereby proving the broader point about the effects of a union of philosophy and power. So, the main challenge in understanding the letter concerns (3) and (4). Of these I shall focus here on (3), because it is the most important for understanding Julian's conception of kingship. I think (4) is important as well, and, properly understood, I think that it supports the picture that I am arguing for here. But, due to constraints of length, I will set that discussion to one side.[21]

Against Themistius' call to philosopher-kingship, Julian not only points out the rather obvious flattery that this involves, but seems to suggest that this is not a reasonable goal in general. Using Plato and Aristotle, Julian suggests, first, not only that he (Julian) lacks the relevant expertise to be a philosopher-king, but goes a step further and suggests that no one has it. Rather, in human affairs, chance (*tuchê*) rains supreme. The best that we can hope for in light of these depressing facts is a state under the rule of law, rather than of an individual. This might be taken to suggest a kind of philosophical quietism: perhaps Julian simply thinks that philosophy has little role to play in real-world governance. But I do not think this is right. I think that, instead, what Julian is doing is simply pointing out on Platonic-Aristotelian grounds, that the ideal of the philosopher-king is much higher than even Plato or Aristotle would hope to achieve, given actual circumstances.

[19]All translations from the *Letter* are my own, in occasional consultation with Wright, *Julian* and Swain, *Themistius*.
[20]For the king as divine, see, e.g. *Or*. 1, 3b, 9c, 15b–c, 34b; *Or*. 5, 65d–66c. For discussion, see Stertz, "Themistius", 349–350.
[21]I intend to discuss this elsewhere.

I want to begin by considering two views of the dispute about kingship between Julian and Themistius. The first comes from a classic paper by Francis Dvornik ("Reactionary Ideas").[22] Dvornik finds in the dispute between Themistius and Julian a deeper dispute between what we might call classical Roman political philosophy and the Hellenic political philosophy that by the fourth century had become the norm. A hallmark of Roman political thought, at least during the Republic and Principate, was the supremacy of law: the idea that the law is binding on everyone, including the emperor or *princeps*.[23] This stands in stark contrast to the conception of the emperor as the *nomos empsuchos*, the living law, which was dominant in the Hellenistic world.[24] Over the course of the empire the former conception had come gradually to supplant the latter, and at least by the mid-fourth century was the established norm in philosophical circles close to power. With this background, Dvornik reads the dispute between Themistius and Julian as a part of this clash of philosophical views. Themistius was, after all, "one of the most prominent propagators of political Hellenism" ("Reactionary Ideas", 75) as Dvornik puts it. Moreover, as we might observe in support of Dvornik's point, Themistius' political Hellenism is prominent in the letter: the emphasis on the divine ordination of Julian's rule, for example, and the implication that as a philosopher Julian is in a good position to exercise skilled autocratic rule. Dvornik reads Julian's response as a "polite and slightly ironical criticism of Themistius' notions of kingship": "Julian dislikes the very idea of an absolute and theocratic monarch, quotes Plato and Aristotle, and skillfully turns their arguments against the very theory which Hellenists had built on them" (75). Politically, Julian is a reactionary, whose view of kingship is rooted in the Republican tradition. This is not only seen in Julian's remarks about the law that we find in the *Letter to Themistius*, but also in his behaviour as emperor: Julian rejected much of the pomp-and-circumstance that had become a part of the imperial court in the Dominate,[25] attempted to enhance the prestige and power of the Senate, and often advocated the return to laws and practices of the Republican era. Significantly, Dvornik views Julian's reactionary commitments as leading to a rejection of the role of the philosopher in power: despite his Platonism, "[Julian] is too practical and balanced to appreciate the association between [philosophy and power]" (76).

[22]'Classic': see, e.g. Kaldellis, "Politics", 131 n.24.

[23]See, e.g. Marcian, *Institutes* ap. *Justinian Dig*. I.3.2. Even in the Dominate and the Byzantine era, the idea that the emperor must submit to the law continues to receive significant lip service. For discussion see Brunt, "Lex"; Pazdernik, "Ideology"; and Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*.

[24]See Aalders, "ΝΟΜΟΣ ΕΜΨΥΧΟΣ" and Squilloni, "Regno", 107–36. For this idea in Themistius see, e.g. *Or*. 1, 15b., *Or*. 16, 212d, *Or*. 34, x.

[25]E.g. Julian rejected the imperial purple and intended to discard the use of the diadem (Libanius *Or*. 18, 189).

Dvornik's point that the dispute between Julian and Themistius is emblematic of the contrast between the old Republican views of governance and the Hellenistic mainstream of the day is both incontestable and important. However, there is no good reason to identify Julian's rejection of Themistius' model of the philosopher-king, with a rejection of philosophical rule altogether, as Dvornik apparently does. It is true that Julian downplays his own philosophical talent,[26] but this, again, is merely in the service of arguing that he is not suited to take the place alongside legendary figures like Solon and Pittacus. What is more this self-deprecatory remark seems to follow the pattern of gentle reproach highlighted above: Julian, I suspect, is tactfully highlighting Themistius' flattery by pointing out what an absurdly high standard Themistius has put forward. This does not provide any good reason for thinking that Julian thinks that philosophy should play no important role in his administration. Quite the contrary, Julian's use of Plato and Aristotle, far from being a mere rhetorical technique, suggests precisely that Julian's allegiance to the old Republican model is rooted in thinking about Plato.

The explicitly Platonic dimension of Julian's dispute with Themistius has been rightly emphasized recently by Michael Schramm ("Platonic Ethics"). Schramm notices the same contrast that concerned Dvornik – the ideal of the king as *nomos empsuchos* versus the ideal of law as supreme – but explains this contrast by reference to Themistius' and Julian's relationship to Platonic theory: Themistius, throughout his oeuvre consistently treats the philosopher-kings of the *Republic* as the ideal; by contrast, Julian treats the city of Plato's *Laws* as the practical ideal, in which law is supreme. This explains the difference between the two men with regard to the question of law. Law plays little role in the governance of the Kallipolis of the *Republic*,[27] but in the Magnesia of the *Laws*, law reigns supreme.

In his praise of law, Julian is being true to the Iamblichean school.[28] From what we can gather, Iamblichus seems to have held that the *Republic* was an ideal in the very strong sense of something that can never be realized on earth.[29] The practical ideal, it is claimed by Schramm, is the *Laws*. This coheres both with the content of the *Letter* – where the *Laws* is quoted extensively, and used as the basis for Julian's view of law – as well as Julian's religious programme while in power.

[26] E.g. 266D2–6.

[27] See *Rep*. IV, 425C–427C. It is true that the *Republic* itself is largely an exercise in ideal lawmaking and that in the course of founding the city Plato's Socrates frequently speaks about establishing laws (as, e.g. Annas, "Virtue", 72 points out), but Socrates also explicitly suggests that once the laws are properly established, there will be no further need for law in regulating and managing the city. This is a marked departure from the view that we find in the *Laws*.

[28] Iamblichus' influence on the *Letter* is also noted by Marcos, "Iamblichus' Epistles", 285.

[29] An idea with a solid foundation in Plato (see *Laws* V, 739A, discussed shortly) and some distinguished later supporters (e.g. Kant, *KrV* A 316/B 372f.).

However, casting the dispute between Julian and Themistius as a debate between the ideal of the *Republic* versus the ideal of the *Laws* cannot be completely right. This is most obvious from the fact that Julian explicitly distances himself from the legislator of the *Laws*. This is seen from the following passage in which Julian contrasts himself unfavourably with the legislator of the *Laws*, not the philosopher-king of the *Republic*. Julian describes the legislator of Plato's *Laws*:

> [The person who governs] ought by every means in his power to adhere to the laws, not those that were framed to meet some sudden emergency, or established, as now appears, by men who did not entirely live on the basis of reason; but he must observe them only in case the lawgiver, having purified his mind and soul, in enacting those laws keeps in view not only the present injustices or immediate contingencies, but rather recognises the nature of the constitution and the just as it is by nature, and has carefully observed also the injustice as it is by nature, and then transferring as much as possible from there to here, he frames laws for the citizens in general, without regard to friend or foe, neighbor or kinsman.
>
> (262A5-C)

Notice, first, the contrast between Plato's ideal lawgiver and the ordinary lawgivers of the sort adverted to in the second sentence. Already Julian is emphasizing the distance between the Platonic ideal, in this case from the *Laws*, and actual rulers. He immediately goes on unfavourably to compare Solon with Plato's legislator. The ideal legislator ought to formulate laws in an impartial way, not only for his contemporaries but for posterity as well; not only for people with whom he has private dealings, but for strangers.[30] In this regard, even Solon failed when he alerted certain of his friends of his plans to cancel debts, thereby allowing them to make money first.[31] Now, recall that Solon was among the philosopher-rulers to whom Themistius had compared Julian, provoking Julian's rebuke (254A5–6, cited above). Hence, we should understand Julian here to be distancing himself not only from the philosopher-kings of the *Republic*, but even from the legislator of Plato's *Laws*: if even Solon could not realize this role, what hope has Julian? If there were any doubt that this is what Julian had in mind, he goes on to make it crystal clear. He returns to the point at which his letter began, complaining how anxiety-provoking Themistius' injunctions to rule according to the Platonic ideal must be, when no less a statesman than Solon had failed. This is like telling someone who has just begun to take moderate exercise at home for the sake of health to prepare for the Olympic games (263A1-B1).

Second, and relatedly, if Julian really had been directly inspired by the ideal of the *Laws*, he ought to have vigorously welcomed Themistius' call to philosophical kingship. After all, although in the *Laws* Plato acknowledges

[30]Cf. *Laws* IV, 715B-C.
[31]See Plutarch, *Solon* 15.2.

that the constitution being described is more modest than that of the *Republic*, he nonetheless also emphasizes that it would be very difficult to realize and hence would most easily be realized by means of a single highly-empowered political leader. In Book IV Plato considers what conditions would be most conducive to realizing the constitution that he has imagined. He repeatedly states that the easiest way for a state to be transformed is for a philosophically-minded single absolute ruler (*turannos*)[32] to attain power:

> Give me a state under the absolute control of a monarch (*turannos*), and let the monarch be young, with a good memory, quick to learn, courageous, and with a character of natural elevation. And if his other abilities are going to be of any use, his monarchical soul (*turannoumenê(i) psuchê(i)*) should also possess the quality which was earlier agreed to be an essential adjunct to all the parts of virtue [viz. temperance (*sôphrosunê*)].[33]
>
> 709E–710A

Hence while it is obviously true that the political visions of the *Laws* and the *Republic* are very different in terms of the kinds of state that they ultimately represent, if Julian were really receptive to the idea of remodeling the Empire on the model of the *Laws*, we would expect him to be favourably inclined to Themistius' implications of wielding absolute power philosophically. This is not what we find.

I do not think, however, that this means that we must conclude that Julian did not intend to rule philosophically. Nor do I think that Dvornik's correct observation of the reactionary character of Julian's political ideas ought to imply that his thought was not substantially influenced by Platonic political philosophy. In fact, I think that if one considers political Platonism from Julian's own time, to the extent that we can reconstruct it, we are able to accommodate both these insights. I turn to that topic now.

3. Julian and the third best constitution

One obstacle to understanding Julian's political thought is the paucity of our sources for understanding his intellectual milieu. Most obviously, little has survived of Iamblichus' oeuvre, and even less of his writings pertaining to politics. Thus it is difficult to know what philosophical writings on politics may have influenced Julian aside from the ones he explicitly cites. I will

[32]There is a question about how to understand Plato's usage of *turannos* here. While it is widely agreed that in early Greek *turannos* was a neutral descriptor, without pejorative connotation, in later Greek it came to have a strongly pejorative force, not unlike its English derivative today or the term 'dictator' with which Saunders translates it. There is a question, however, about when exactly this evolution took place, and it seems to have occurred around Plato's own lifetime, possibly as a result of his own use of the term. This leaves it unclear how we ought to interpret the term in a text like this. For discussion see O'Neil, "Tyrranos".

[33]All translations from the *Laws* are from Saunders' translation in Cooper, *Complete Works*, with minor modifications unless otherwise noted.

argue, however, that there is evidence of a long-standing Platonist tradition that finds not two, but three ideal constitutions in Plato: that of the *Republic*, the *Laws*, and another in the *Letters*. In light of this bit of context, I argue that it makes much more sense to think of Julian as basing his reforms on the third of these constitutions. This accounts for what he says in the *Letter* as well as his reactionary affinities.

Let us take as our starting point the distinction between the project of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Given, as Schramm points out, that this distinction seems to be relevant to the dispute between Julian and Themistius, it makes sense to consider how an ancient Platonist might have thought about the difference between these two projects and their potential applicability to the real world. And here one finds a stark contrast to the way that scholars commonly do today. Today, scholars sometimes imagine that the two texts represent two competing ideals: whereas the *Republic*, it is supposed, represents a highly ambitious and idealistic view, the *Laws* represents the more modest view of an older, more realistic Plato.[34] Whatever there might be to recommend this way of understanding the texts,[35] it is not the way the ancient Platonists thought of them. They had on their side Plato himself, who unambiguously addresses the distinction between these two projects in an important passage from *Laws* V. There the Athenian cautions that "reflection and experience will soon show that the organization of a state is almost bound to fall short of the ideal" (739A3–5). Hence, "the right procedure is to describe not only the ideal society but the second and third best too, and then leave it to anyone in charge of founding a community to make a choice between them" (739A-B). The ideal state is one in which the communal possession of property is practiced "as widely as possible throughout the entire state" (C1–3), and which in general achieves the highest degree of unity possible (739D3–4). However, it is doubtful whether such a system could even exist or, if so, perhaps it is only possible for the gods (D6-E1).[36] Hence, when engaging in political speculation we need not only consider the ideal state, but also "the one that most closely resembles it" (E). The Athenian goes on to say: "This is what we've put our hand to, and if in some way it could be realized, it would come very near to immortality and be second only

[34]See, e.g. Zeller, *Plato*, 522; Jaeger, *Paideia*, 244; Cairns, *Legal Philosophy*, 39–40; Sabine, *History*, 64–68; Sinclair, *History*, 187; Luccioni, *Pensée politique*, 255; Piérart, *Platon*, 475; Vlastos, "Theory", 36–37; Guthrie, *History*, 382; Klosko, *Development*, 185–188; Cohen, "Law", 301–317. It is sometimes suggested that this change was eventuated by Plato's attempt and failure to institute the system of the *Republic* in Syracuse (see, e.g. Grote, *Plato*, 302–4; Barker, *Political Theory*, 340; Crossman, *Plato Today*, 272; Grene, *Political Theory*, 176). There are, however, a number of scholars who have resisted the idea that the two works represent competing ideals, e.g. Shorey, "Plato's Laws"; Morrow, *Cretan City*, ch. 12; Laks, "Legislation".

[35]There is very little.

[36]Cf. IX 875C-D, where we are told that the ideal situation would be to have reason in charge, not being under the control of anything, but since "such a character is nowhere to be found, except a hint of it here and there", the second best alternative is to have law in charge.

to the ideal" (739E). Hence, far from representing the *Laws* and the *Republic* as two competing visions of the ideal city, Plato represents them as representing two complimentary levels of reform. The *Republic* is a theoretical ideal, which, although it is meant to orient our thinking as we engage in political philosophy, is not intended as an aim of political action (at least in current circumstances). The *Laws*, by contrast, also represents an ideal, but one that is both further removed from the absolute best and, conversely, closer to being realizable in action.

What is important for us, however, is that immediately after commenting that the city of the *Laws* is second only to the ideal, the Athenian goes on to say "later, God willing, we will describe a third best" (739E5), about which he does not elaborate. This third best state has not been the topic of much discussion by modern scholars, mainly, I assume, because it appears that Plato never made good on his plans to describe it (indeed, his 'God willing' comment seems to be an acknowledgment that at his advanced age at the time of composing the *Laws* there was a good possibility that he would not be able to do so). But it was the topic of considerable interest in the later Platonist tradition.

The idea of a third best constitution features prominently in Platonist political philosophy, starting at least with Alcinous' *Handbook*, a defining text of Middle Platonism. There, in his very brief summary of Platonic political philosophy, Alcinous distinguishes between two types of constitutions found in Plato, each consisting of two exemplars. Non-hypothetical (*anupothetai*) constitutions include the kallipolis of the *Republic* and the 'city of pigs' described in *Republic* II.[37] These are 'unhypothetical' in the sense that they are not constructed with an eye to any particular restraints provided by circumstances.[38] By contrast, there are also two hypothetical constitution types, which are constructed by reference to their circumstances.[39] Alcinous describes them as follows:

> [Plato] describes other constitutions which are based on the presence of certain conditions, such as that in the *Laws* and the one that arises from reform in the *Letters*. This kind he employs for the diseased states in the *Laws*, which already have a definite territory set apart for them and a picked selection of men of all ages, so that they require education, organization, and armament in accordance with the particular characteristics of their natures and territories.[40]
>
> (34, 2)

We find here, again, not only the same idea, that there are two 'ideal' constitutions beneath that of the *Republic*, but we also find some elaboration as to

[37] See 372D.
[38] Alcinous does not, of course, elaborate about the relationship between these two constitutions, or how there can be two very different best constitutions.
[39] For the hypothetical versus unhypothetical distinction here, cf. Apuleius, *De dog. Plat.*, II 26, 259.
[40] Dillon's (*Handbook*) translation with one significant modification, for which see next note.

what the third type is. The third form of constitution is (a) found in the *Letters*, and (b) differs from the constitution of the *Laws* by being ἐκ διορθώσεως.[41] In treating the *Letters* (now generally regarded as spurious[42]) as genuine, Alcinous is in agreement with the whole later Platonist tradition in antiquity.[43] Moreover, if one considers the content of the *Letters*, it makes sense that ancient Platonists, accepting the authenticity of these writings and eager to find the third constitution alluded to in *Laws* V, would locate it there. While the *Letters* do not contain a detailed political programme, they do contain a number of suggestions plausibly thought of as having general applicability to flawed, existing regimes. To the extent that the *Letters* do offer an image of a city, then, it differs from the *Republic* and the *Laws* not only in being less ambitious, but also in that it is not about creating a new constitution whole cloth, but reforming an existing constitution. I take it that this is what Alcinous means when he describes the constitution of the *Letters* as "arising from reform".

Alcinous, of course, predates Julian by some two hundred years, but there is also evidence from the later Platonist period that this threefold division of levels of reform remained standard doctrine well after Julian's death. Proclus refers to the three levels of reform at least three times[44] and it is also discussed in the Anonymous *Prolegomenon to Platonic Philosophy* from the sixth century (*Proleg*. 26.35–45).

The most important bit of background for Julian, of course, is Iamblichus, who does not ever explicitly refer to the three levels of reform in the scant writings of his that have survived. However, we do have fragments of some letters written by him to prominent people which give political advice and which very plausibly aim at the third level of reform. Although these letters clearly seek to eventuate reform and are inspired by ideas in the *Laws*, it is equally obvious that they aim at a more modest goal than that of the *Laws*

[41] Dillon somewhat confusingly translates this as "the emended one in the *Letters*". This might seem to suggest that the constitution of the *Letters* is supposed to be an emendation (i.e. correction) of the constitution of the *Laws* (Dillon's commentary, of course, makes clear that this is not what he intended). Louis' translation in the Budé edition is similarly ambiguous: "celle qu'il a réformée dans ses *Lettres*" (*Enseignement*, 70). Cf. Summerell and Zimmer's "die reformierte in den *Briefen*" (*Didaskalikos*, 73). Using a cognate of 'reform' rather than Dillon's 'emend' is an improvement, but still leaves somewhat unclear what I take to be the point, namely that the constitution of the *Letters* is a constitution that arises from reforming an existing state.

[42] There are, of course, some who continue to maintain that *Letter* VII is genuine, but given the (in my view) overwhelming evidence against this, this strikes me as a bit of wishful thinking (see, e.g. the authoritative treatment provided to this question in Burnyeat and Frede, *Seventh Letter*). At any rate this question is not important for us here.

[43] Indeed, at least certain of the *Letters* were regarded as genuine as far back as Cicero (see TD V, 100). Cf. Thrasyllus in the first century (apud DL III 61, and Frede in Burnyeat and Frede, *Seventh Letter*, 4–5 for discussion). For uncritical uses of the *Letters* in Middle Platonist and Neoplatonist writings see, e.g. Albinus, *Prologos* 4, Numenius, Frag. 1, Plotinus, *Enn*. 1.8.2, 3.1.7, 5.1.8, 2.1–4., Proclus *In Tim*. I 356,10ff., Julian, *Ep*. 50, 444D.

[44] *In Rem*. I 9, II 8, 15–23, *In Tim*. I 446.5.

itself, and some parts of them more closely resemble the pseudo-Platonic *Letters*, especially *Letter* VII, than the *Laws*.

Consider first, a fragment from a letter to a certain Agrippa, in which Iamblichus eloquently praises the rule of law:

> Law is said to be the "king of all." It is this that is held to prescribe good actions and forbid their opposites. Well then, with what beauty in our view does a lawfulness that is coordinated with this exceed, and with what sort of greatness does it overmatch, all other things? For surely, in respect of however many and whatever kinds of types and classes of moral excellence there are, so many and various are the beauties that the prescriptions of the laws extend to, and their benefit permeates all the administrations of cities and all the lives of individuals. So law is a good for all in common, and without it none of the other goods could come about. Consequently, the ruler who is placed in responsibility for the laws must have a completely pure insight into the absolute correctness of the laws and should neither be led astray, through ignorance, by deceptions or frauds, nor should he yield to any show of force, nor be deceived by any unjust excuse. For the preserver and guardian of the laws should be as immune from corruption as is humanly possible[45].

Iamblichus' praise of the law, clearly resembles both Plato's in the *Laws* and Julian's in the *Letter*, quoted above.[46] Not only does Iamblichus praise the absolute supremacy of law, but, in doing so, he stresses the universality and impartiality, which, as we saw above, feature prominently in Julian's letter.[47] It also clearly echoes the pseudo-Platonic *Letter* VII:

> Do not subject Sicily nor any other state to the despotism of men, but to the rule of laws; this at least is my doctrine. For despotic power benefits neither rulers nor subjects, but is an altogether deadly experience for themselves, their children, and their children's children; and no one grasps at the prizes it offers except petty and illiberal souls who know nothing of the divine and human goods that are now and for all time good and just.[48]
>
> 334C-D

Later the author goes on to stress the importance of ruling impartially: "If [the party that wins a civil war] controls itself and enacts laws for the common good, considering its own interest no more than those of the vanquished, the defeated party will be doubly constrained, by respect and by fear" (337A).

In another fragment from the *Letter to Agrippa*, Iamblichus counsels modesty on the part of the rulers and warns against the "absolute superiority

[45]Translation with minor modifications from Dillon, *Handbook*.
[46]The relevance to Julian's *Letter* of this passage is also perceived by Schramm, "Platonic Ethics", 137–8, who, however, although he observes the clear influence of the Laws and the resonance with the content of Julian's *Letter* does not note that Iamblichus is not here urging Agrippa to take up the mantle of the Athenian's Lawgiver, but rather the much more modest task of "preserver and guardian of the laws".
[47]262B-C, quoted above.
[48]Morrow's translation in Cooper, *Complete Works*.

associated with rule" (*huperochê*[49]) and "pomp and circumstance" which is "hateful" and "offensive to the multitude". It is sometimes claimed that this is an allusion to the *Laws* V, where Plato warns that the possession of money and goods "in excess, produce enmity and feuds in private and public life" (729A).[50] But this seems clearly to be a stretch. In the *Laws* text, Plato is making a point about inequality in general (a familiar point from the *Republic*[51]), not about the rulers in particular. Nowhere in the *Laws* does Plato make this point specifically about the lifestyle of the rulers. By contrast in *Letter* VI, the author exhorts his readers to imitate the "sober way of living" of Dion and decries those "incapable of living in the Dorian fashion like your fathers" (336C). Hence, we can say not only that the pseudo-Platonic *Letters* cohere with Iamblichus' *Letter to Agrippa*, but that, at least in some respects they more closely resemble Iamblichus' letter than does the *Laws*.

The resonance between Iamblichus' letter and the pseudo-Platonic letters is some reason to believe that Iamblichus intended merely to aim at the third level of reform in giving his advice. Moreover, as we saw, Plato himself in *Laws* V describes the third level as aimed at improving existing polities rather than founding new ones, and this is clearly the political objective of the letter to Agrippa. Whoever Agrippa may have been, he was certainly not someone in a position to found a city or completely reform a constitution. He was, rather, probably a member of the imperial administration or a local aristocracy (Dillon, *Handbook,* 65). When we put this together with the evidence from Alcinous, Proclus, and the Anonymous Prolegomenon, it seems most likely that Iamblichus viewed himself as pursuing precisely the third level of reform alluded to in the Laws.

This is important context for how we understand Julian. When we consider Julian's use of the *Laws*, we have two competing hypotheses to explain this. The first hypothesis (Schramm's) takes Julian as treating the *Laws* itself as his practical ideal. This is unattractive for the reasons given in the previous section. Considering the context as I have done, however, yields a second hypothesis: Julian in the *Letter to Themistius* is engaged in precisely the same kind of endeavour that Iamblichus is when he gives advice in his letters, and, indeed, the author of the Platonic *Letters* is; he is mining the *Laws* for clues for what the third constitution might look like, while realizing that the *Laws* itself represents an impossible ideal for the circumstances. Which hypothesis better fits the evidence? I think the answer is clear. Not only does Julian seem to distance himself even from the project of the *Laws*, as I argued in the preceding section, but the mere fact that the third level of reform is more modest, would have made it more attractive to

[49]As Dillon, *Handbook*, *ad loc*. points out Iamblichus seems to be echoing Aristotle here (see *Politics*, 1295b14).
[50]This is cited by Dillon, *Handbook*, *ad loc*.
[51]See IV, 421D–422A.

someone like Julian who was quite pessimistic about the state of the empire.[52] A standard component of ancient political theory is the view that the well-functioning polity requires some level of civic virtue among the citizens. In the *Laws* and much of the Platonist tradition that followed, piety takes pride of place.[53] Hence Julian's frequent laments about the rise of Christianity, are at the same time laments about the decline of civic virtue, and surely this must have coloured his opinion about what was possible for the emperor to achieve. I take it that this is precisely what is happening in the *Letter to Themistius*: realistic about his limitations, Julian is using texts by Plato and Aristotle not to argue for a separation of philosophy and power, as some have supposed, but to argue for a more modest ideal to guide his governance. This ideal is identified as third best by Plato.

While it is not my object to analyse how these ideas might have played out (or not) during Julian's reign, it is worth noting that this interpretation of the *Letter* coheres well with certain features of his style of governing, in addition to the clear Platonic influence of his religious policy.[54] First, as Dvornik noted, Julian's preference for government under the rule of law and a revival of Republican traditions coheres well with my picture: Julian is not trying to build the city of the *Laws*, but he is trying to find a way of improving the empire on the model of Platonic political ideas. Instituting the rule of law, instead of the personal rule of the king is one part of this. Returning to a style of governance of a better time for Rome is another, especially given the affinities long observed between the governance structure of the Roman Republic and Sparta,[55] which, of course, Plato frequently praises.[56] Finally, the rejection of much of the pomp and ceremony associated with the Dominate now has a philosophical foundation. Plato, the pseudo-Plato of *Letter* VII, and Iamblichus all reject what Iamblichus call the "absolute superiority of rule" in favour of a more modest style. With his dislike of the *adoratio*, the diadem, and the like, Julian was not merely expressing a personal preference, or a reactionary traditionalism; he was trying to approach the office of emperor in a manner true to Platonist principles as he understood them.

4. Conclusion

I draw two conclusions from the above. The first is that the *Letter to Themistius* provides some support for the view that Julian was a genuine philosopher-

[52]Indeed, pessimism about politics is a pretty stable theme in pagan Neoplatonist writers, for obvious reasons (see, e.g. Damascius, *In Philebum* 171, 3–7).
[53]See, e.g. *Laws* IV, 716D–717A. Cf. Julian, *Or*. 3, 78b–93d.
[54]Which has been widely discussed. See, e.g. O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 120–3.
[55]E.g. Polybius, VI.
[56]See, for example, *Laws* IV, 712B–713A.

emperor. At least if he continued to hold the views expressed in the *Letter* at the time he became emperor, then that suggests that he was not merely an emperor with an interest in philosophy, but someone who sought, to the greatest extent possible, to realize a genuinely Platonic political programme. His use of Plato and Aristotle are not merely an exercise in dilettantism by a well-educated royal. They are the expression of a sincere and carefully thought out political philosophy. He never wrote a work comparable to Marcus' *Meditations*, and his political reforms (such as they were) were prematurely cut short, but this should not stop us from according him his rightful place as antiquity's (somewhat anticlimactic) culmination of Plato's hopes to change political reality.

The second, more original conclusion[57] is that we should view Julian as part of a broader tradition in late Platonist thought that, while respecting the unfortunate political realities of the day, and consequently, realizing that wholesale reimagination of the constitution along Platonic lines was impossible, nonetheless sought to derive from the *Laws* a 'third best' constitution, which might be approximated through piecemeal reforms. This makes sense of a number of different aspects of the *Letter* that different scholars have emphasized. First, it makes sense of Julian's reluctance, not only to embrace the ideal of the philosopher-king, but even to embrace the ideal of the Magnesian legislator. Julian was modest and sensible enough to recognize both these ideals as inapplicable to his situation: he was aware of himself that he was not endowed with the preternatural gifts of the philosopher-emperor/legislator, and, like all pagan Neoplatonists of the Christian era, he recognized the sorry state the empire was in. Hence, he views Themistius' unctuous injunctions as not only absurd flattery, but also insulting, in that they presuppose ignorance of Platonic-Aristotelian political philosophy (this is also why so much of the *Letter* is devoted to seemingly pedantic points of interpretation: Julian is demonstrating that he knows that Themistius is condescending to him and wilfully misrepresenting Plato and Aristotle). Second, it makes sense of the use to which Julian puts Plato's *Laws*. Julian regards the *Laws* as an unrealizable ideal as well, at least given his actual circumstances, yet this does not imply that the *Laws* is not useful for the purposes of reform. Indeed, there is a documented tradition, starting with the pseudo-Platonic *Letters* and stretching at least through Iamblichus, of taking the *Laws* as a source for reforms for existing regimes.

[57] I say 'more original' because although many have observed the fairly obvious fact that Julian relies heavily on the *Laws*, I am not aware of anyone who has sought to relate Julian's programme to the more modest goals represented by the third best constitution. (The closest that I have seen in the literature is O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 121–2 who points out that "Julian's ambition is not that of the philosopher-king of the *Republic*, corresponding more to the second-best political project of the *Laws* or to a project of yet lesser scope". He does not, however, discuss this disjunction in much detail. Schramm considers the possibility that Julian aimed at the third best, but explicitly rejects it ("Platonic Ethics", 138, n. 27).

Finally, this hypothesis makes sense of the reactionary tendency in Julian's thought that Dvornik called attention to. It would be quite strange for Julian to try to empower the Senate, for example, if his goal was to thoroughly recreate the empire. But, since that was not his goal, and since he considered the empire to be in a state of decadence, it makes sense that he would look for his model to the Rome of times past. This, moreover, has a basis in both the *Laws*, Iamblichus, and the pseudo-Platonic *Letters*.[58]

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[58]One of the reasons these conclusions are important is that they suggest a number of areas for future research which, somewhat surprisingly, seem to have been neglected: (1) there is very little that has been written about the pseudo-Platonic *Letters* as works of/sources for political philosophy; (2) there has been very little written about the intriguing fragments of Iamblichus' letters and how they might fit into Iamblichus' philosophy more generally; it would be fascinating if we could reconstruct to a greater degree Iamblichean political philosophy; (3) finally, there has been very little written about the idea in *Laws* V and the Platonist tradition of a third level of political reform. In all these cases, there are, of course, few sources to work with, but this does not generally stop scholars of antiquity.

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