

## Who is the Athenian Stranger?

The *Laws* is the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates is completely absent. In the *Laws*, the chief protagonist is an anonymous Athenian Stranger (*xenos*). The identity of this Athenian Stranger remains one of the central interpretative questions of the dialogue (Strauss-1975; Morrow-1993; Laks-1990; Schofield-2006; Zuckert-2009). As Altman (2016) observes: “The single most important question facing every reader of the *Laws* is as simple to ask as it is difficult to answer: Who is the Athenian Stranger?”

The *loci classici* of this discussion are to be found in Aristotle’s *Politics* (1265a12), where Aristotle seemingly reads the *Laws* as if the Athenian Stranger were Socrates, and Cicero’s *de Legibus* (1.15)—a dialogue explicitly modeled on Plato’s *Laws*—where Cicero equates the Athenian Stranger with Plato. Most modern commentators follow Cicero in viewing the Athenian Stranger as “a stand-in for Plato himself” (Klosko-2006; Saunders-1992; Morrow-1993; Bobonich-2002), although Strauss (1975) offers a sophisticated defense of the Aristotelian position. More recent commentators have argued that neither of these solutions are wholly satisfactory (Schofield-2006; Zuckert-2009; Altman-2016). Zuckert (2009) argues that the Athenian Stranger should be seen as a kind of pre-Socratic philosopher who “points to the ‘beginning’ or central concern of Platonic political philosophy,” *viz.*, the unity of the virtues as well as the noble and the good. Schofield (2006) argues that the Athenian Stranger does not represent one historical person, but rather an ideal legislator, a composite of the legendary Spartan lawgiver, Lycurgus, and the famous Athenian legislator, Solon.

My own position builds upon Schofield (2006) insofar as I argue that the Athenian Stranger represents an ideal or philosophical legislator. Yet, I argue that unlike Lycurgus and Solon, the Athenian Stranger’s task is not to correct, or rehabilitate, an existing law code, but to

create for a new colony (conventionally referred to as Magnesia) the best possible code of laws from the beginning. In this sense, he is much closer to the mythical Cretan king and lawgiver, Minos, and his brother, Rhadamanthys, who first gave laws to humankind (*Lg.* 624b, *Min.* 318d). Furthermore, I contend that the Athenian Stranger represents not only an ideal legislator, but also a founder of a colony (*oikistēs*). This aspect of the Athenian Stranger's function in the *Laws* has not been fully appreciated. I contend that without an understanding of the Athenian Stranger's role as *oikist*, we cannot fully appreciate the pervasively religious cast of the dialogue.

Many scholars have complained that the religious institutions of the *Laws* seem disappointingly conventional (e.g., Klosko-2006). Some have even argued that Plato thought that a philosopher has no authority to introduce legislation concerning the religious life of his citizens (Van Riel- 2013). I argue that the Athenian Stranger's status as *oikist* grants him precisely such religious authority, not only the religious aspect of his authority as a leader, but also the authority to act and make religious decisions, such as instituting cults and designating precincts to the gods. Plato, therefore, is simply making use of the traditional religious authority associated with *oikists* when he has the Athenian Stranger propose an innovative, yet traditional, form of central *polis* cult—a joint cult of Apollo and the sun god, Helios. This cult of Apollo-Helios is an innovation because it is what distinguishes Magnesia from all other Greek city-states.

The Athenian Stranger's status as founder has one further implication. It will confer upon him, and his law code, a kind of mythical, or legendary status. In historical Greek colonies, it was common practice for colonists to establish a hero-cult for the founder (Malkin-1987). Plato suggests at various points in the dialogue that the Magnesians should establish such an *oikist* cult for the citizens to revere and meditate upon. His mythical status, in turn, will

contribute to the stability, and unchangeability, of the law, which is the necessary condition for the long-term success of their political project (957b- c).

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