

Lycurgus' Extreme Wisdom: Competing Views of the Lawgiver in Plato and Xenophon

Plato and Xenophon were both born between 430 and 424 BC, making them close contemporaries. Both men were students of Socrates, and they each wrote Socratic dialogues that present a contrasting portrait of their teacher. Because of their competing portrayals of Socrates, and their occasional comments about one another's works, Plato and Xenophon have been considered rivals since antiquity (Gellius, *Noct. Att.* 14.3; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 11.504e-505b; Diogenes Laërtius, 2.57 and 3.34). And contemporary scholars agree; there has been a recent surge of interest in Xenophon's and Plato's references to one another's works (E.g., Danzig [2003], Danzig [2005], Danzig, Johnson and Morrison [2018], and Johnson [2018]). Not all of their intertextual comments are critical, but they are all allusive (rather than direct) and witty (rather than blunt), as befits two men who shared a teacher and mentor.

In this paper I will suggest that an unusual comment in Xenophon's *Lacedaimonion Politeia* is also a criticism of a passage in Plato's *Symposium*. In the introduction to his *Lacedaimonion Politeia*, Xenophon makes the unusual claim that Lycurgus had "extreme wisdom." This statement is unusual because the Greeks associated wisdom with moderation and self-restraint, while they associated anything extreme with foolishness and folly (North [1966]). Xenophon's paradoxical statement that Lycurgus was "wise to the extreme," seems to be an oblique but critical reference to a statement in Plato's *Symposium* that refers to Lycurgus' wisdom as being only partially complete.

Although scholars today consider the stories about Lycurgus to be mostly legend, the ancient Greeks believed that Lycurgus was a historical figure who was primarily responsible for

establishing the Spartan constitution (which was widely admired). Thus, Lycurgus figures prominently in ancient discussions about just laws and good social practices.

I will argue that in the *Lacedaimonion Politeia* (1.1-2), when Xenophon states that Lycurgus was "wise to the extreme" (εἰς τὰ ἔσχατα σοφὸν), he is signaling his disagreement with Plato's disparagement of Lycurgus' wisdom in the *Symposium*, and also with the theory of Forms itself.

After a discussion of Xenophon's presentation of Lycurgus' wisdom in the *Lacedaimonion Politeia*, I will consider two passages in Plato's *Symposium* that also concern Lycurgus' wisdom (209d4-e5 and 210c3-6). In the first passage, Socrates praises Lycurgus as the paradigm of the wise lawgiver, but in the second passage he disparages the wisdom inherent in laws and institutions as being only halfway up the ascent to complete wisdom (contemplation of the Forms). I will argue that, while Xenophon agrees with Plato about what Lycurgus achieved, he disagrees with Plato on the degree of wisdom that this achievement represents. Finally, I will discuss the dates of composition for Xenophon's *Lacedaimonion Politeia* and Plato's *Symposium*. Although the dates of these two works cannot be precisely determined, it is likely that Plato wrote his *Symposium* first (around 380 BC; Dover [1965], Kahn [2002: 109n17]) and that Xenophon wrote his *Lacedaimonion Politeia* during the 360s, at around the same time as he was writing his own *Symposium* (Huss [1999: 16-17], Gray [2007: 42], Dillery [2017: 2000]). Thus Xenophon could easily have included a comment in his *Lacedaimonion Politeia* criticizing a passage in Plato's *Symposium*.

While the argument of this presentation may be complex, the idea behind it is simple: Xenophon shares Plato's understanding of what Lycurgus accomplished, but he disagrees with Plato about what that achievement represents. While Plato sees the creation of just laws and

institutions as the halfway point on the way to a higher type of wisdom, Xenophon sees it as the highest type of wisdom there is.

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