

TYRANNY AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Tyranny is a theme that reverberates in politico-philosophical scholarship since the post-war era of the twentieth century and it has been taken up with a renewed interest in recent years. Aside from Leo Strauss, only very few scholars have focused on the link between ancient and modern tyranny, and even fewer on how the concept of tyranny might give insight into the study of political philosophy itself. In this dissertation, I argue that the concept of tyranny can make us aware of the permanent character of the problems that arise between philosophy and politics, and help us distinguish between the core and the peripheral tenets of political philosophy. On this basis, I contend that it is possible to draw a closer connection between Socratic and Machiavellian political philosophy. Through a close reading of select passages of Xenophon, Plato and Aristotle, on the one hand, and of Machiavelli, on the other, I address the main differences that separate the philosophic from the political way of life.

I first analyze the concept of tyranny from the viewpoint of the city and of “real men” (*andres*), and then contrast it with the perspective of the philosopher. I assert that the praise of *kalokagathia* is more of a concession than the real essence of the classics’ philosophic teachings. Although I show that there is a close connection between the philosopher and the tyrant, I also explain what sets them apart. The subtle distinction that the classics made between the principles of their philosophic politics as opposed to the principles of philosophy itself, I argue, helps us to understand the classics better and to read Machiavelli in a different, more benevolent and more

philosophical light. While I acknowledge that modern forms of tyranny, such as the universal and homogeneous state that Kojève proposes, originate in Machiavelli's revolution, I hold that the essence of Machiavelli's teachings, in harmony with the classics, shores up philosophy, not tyranny. The return both to the classics and to the origins of modernity that I put forward aims at keeping philosophy alive against tyranny of thought.

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Tyranny and Political Philosophy

Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves.

—Matthew 10:16

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INTRODUCTION

TYRANNY AS A POLITICO-PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT

Tyranny was, in ancient Greece, an absolute form of rule in which one individual exercised power according to his will rather than according to the rule of law. While some tyrants were relatively benevolent toward their subjects and brought stability to their cities through equitable rule, others were famously avaricious, violent, or cruel. The former received heroic honors, whereas the latter were the target of continual plots, often overthrown, and put to death. The outcome of tyranny was always uncertain because people could not know beforehand whether the tyrant, having taken power, would behave in a kingly rather than in a self-serving manner. Since there was no peaceful or legal way to depose the tyrant, if need be, or to moderate his actions once he took power, tyranny was generally considered dangerous and undesirable. Although for some time now there has been a reticence to speak of “tyranny” as such,¹ modernity too has seen tyrannical rulers. Like ancient tyranny, modern tyranny is generally² thought to be cruel, high-handed, and unjust. Modern tyranny is also conceived of as dangerous, and perhaps much more so than ancient tyranny, due especially to the technological advances of our era, which enable it to cause greater harm at a larger scale.

Despite the similarities between ancient and modern tyranny, the face of tyranny has changed substantially, to the point that modern tyranny has been considered to be at root different from ancient tyranny. Some believe that unlike ancient tyranny, which was a tool of oppression for the benefit of the tyrant, modern tyranny can be a means to further the common good in ways that the ancients could not even dream of. Others, in contrast, see in modern tyranny a formidable threat that is potentially worse than what the ancients could have imagined.

¹ See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 23.

² As we will see in chapter 5, in our discussion of the universal and homogenous state that Alexandre Kojève proposes, there are indeed champions of “beneficent tyranny.”

In either case, it would seem that from their standpoint the lessons we can draw from the ancient study of tyranny have a very limited scope when it comes to speaking of modern tyranny.

However rewarding the study of ancient tyranny may be in itself, it does not help to understand the challenges that modern tyranny poses, except perhaps by way of contrast.³ In that sense, not only the study of ancient tyranny but also of classical political philosophy appears to be, if not altogether futile or obsolete, at least poor or insufficient to address the problems of today. Since modern tyranny is thought to be fundamentally different from ancient tyranny, the philosophic insights of the ancients about tyranny are bound to be taken as little more than outmoded sermons, altogether irrelevant to the study of modern tyranny.

In this dissertation, I offer arguments that contest that view. Part of what motivates my investigation is the conviction that modern hopes in the prospect of beneficent tyranny bespeak a dangerous lack of awareness of the nature of political things. Modern overconfidence in human mastery and the belief that the problems that ancient tyranny posed have been overcome prevent us from seeing the inescapable nature of the problems that arise in the relation between philosophy and politics. As an antidote against this modern view, I propose a return to the classics because, I argue, the ancients' approach to tyranny shows the inevitable character of the problems that afflict humankind and raises awareness about the limits that the nature of political things entails for the perfection of human nature.

My research is also motivated by the awareness that among those who forcefully reject tyranny today, there is an undeserved disparagement of the classics, which prevents them from reading the ancients as they intended. It is not that the ancients are in need of defense but rather

³ Insightful as it may be to draw this contrast, I believe that focusing on the differences rather than on the common root of ancient and modern forms of tyranny may prevent us from fully understanding the political problem as it was posed by the ancients.

that the failure to understand the problems the classics so carefully delineated, makes some modern analysts favor a worse kind of tyranny than the one they reject, if unwittingly. Their warped view of the classics as wanting to, so to speak, immanentize the eschaton, makes them see the abandonment of reason as the only possible solution to the problems facing modernity. Believing to escape tyranny, they deliver themselves to the worst kind of tyranny, which is a life that renounces reason.⁴ In defense of the philosophic way of life as I hold the ancients understood it, I try to show that, properly understood, classical political philosophy can help us face the challenges that modern tyranny poses. I contend that notwithstanding the new forms that tyranny has indisputably taken, the questions we should raise in the face of tyranny remain the same.

A thorough comprehension of tyranny as a politico-philosophical concept is crucial for the study of political philosophy today, as it was for the classics. Tyranny is the most useful starting point to understand the complex relationship between philosophy and politics because it prompts the most important political questions, which point beyond political things themselves, namely, toward philosophy. While I argue that philosophy helps to raise questions that are primordial to maintain the health of political regimes, I also hold that the study of philosophy, in turn, is enhanced by the ancient understanding of tyranny to the extent that it reveals the nature of political things.

⁴ See, for example, Waller Newell's interpretation of Heidegger: "Whereas the classics believed that the tyrannical impulse was the ultimate departure from the life of reason, whose only therapy lay in redirecting it toward the guidance of reason, Heidegger argues that reason itself, originating with Plato and actualized as global technology, is the worst and most complete tyranny ever experienced, and that the only escape from it is to return headlong into the primordial origins of chance, chaos, accident, motion, and impulse," *Tyranny. A New Interpretation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 508.

LITERATURE ON TYRANNY

Tyranny, as a political phenomenon in ancient Greece, has been widely studied and discussed. James McGlew's remarkable study of tyranny⁵ is indispensable to comprehend how actual tyrants ruled, the nature of their power, and the relationship between tyrants and their subjects, who both supported and resisted them. More recently, Lynette Mitchell⁶ has explored rule by a single man deeply in archaic and classical Greece to show how and why, despite its instability, tyranny was often considered legitimate. While she touches upon the relationship between ruling and law, her account of tyranny, like McGlew's, puts considerably more weight on the historical phenomena than on their politico-philosophical significance or implications. Essays with a similar approach to tyranny can be found in Mitchell's and Charles Melville's *Every Inch a King*, as well as in Kathryn Morgan's *Popular Tyranny*. Further examples are John Salmon's "Lopping off Heads?," an essay in which he explores the importance of tyranny in the political development of a number of ancient Greek poleis, and Arlene Saxonhouse's "The Tyranny of Reason in the World of the Polis," which interestingly ties tyranny not to oppression but to liberty. Although all these sources make important contributions to the study of tyranny and some of them even mention the specific philosophic role that the concept of tyranny plays, none of them addresses this role directly.

Much less literature can be found on modern tyranny, partly because, as Catherine Zuckert—following Leo Strauss—suggests, "Twentieth-century political scientists [have] been reluctant to talk about 'tyrannical' as opposed to 'totalitarian' and 'authoritarian' forms of government."⁷ The book from which this quote is taken has the aim to fill precisely this gap.

Edited by Toivo Koivukoski and David Tabachnik, *Confronting Tyranny* is a collection of essays

⁵ James McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece*.

⁶ Lynette Mitchell, *The Heroic Rulers of Archaic and Classical Greece*.

⁷ Catherine Zuckert, "Why Talk about Tyranny Today?," 1.

that reflect on modern forms of tyranny or compare them to ancient tyranny. Yet, very much like the books cited above, they focus more on the historical than on the philosophical aspect of tyranny. There are two notable exceptions: one is Nathan Tarcov's excellent "Tyranny from Plato to Locke," which is a discerning survey of tyranny based on primary sources. As can be guessed from the title of the chapter, his scope is ambitious. Unfortunately, space does not allow him to elaborate on his observations. The other exception to the historical approach to tyranny in this book is Waller Newell's "Is there an Ontology of Tyranny?," an essay which was later used in his book *Tyranny*. Newell also authored an essay in Mitchell's and Melville's book (*Every Inch a King*). Although I agree with several of the conclusions he arrives at, he starts with a premise opposite to mine, namely, that ancient and modern tyranny are fundamentally different. In any case, more than other authors in that book, Tarcov and Newell have made efforts to systematically study tyranny from a politico-philosophical perspective.

The topic of tyranny has also been treated from a politico-philosophical perspective in works that comment on Leo Strauss's *On Tyranny*. A particularly useful volume is *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny*, recently edited by Timothy Burns and Bryan-Paul Frost. In the introductory chapter, Burns has eloquently encapsulated the core of Leo Strauss's *On Tyranny*. Other chapters shed light on the topic of tyranny as well; nevertheless, as with most articles and book chapters inspired by this work of Leo Strauss, greater emphasis is understandably placed on the famous Strauss-Kojève debate than on the concept of tyranny per se. (We will also take up this debate in the last chapter of this dissertation but only after having explored the topic of tyranny in classical political thought as well as in Machiavelli.) One can also find illuminating insights in texts that deal obliquely with tyranny, such as Eric Buzzetti's "A Guide to the Study of Leo Strauss' *On Tyranny*" and his book *Xenophon the Socratic Prince*, or that treat topics akin

to the concept of tyranny, like moderation, ambition, or *kalokagathia*.⁸ Finally, because it was published only very recently, I was unable to include in my study the book *Liberty, Democracy, and the Temptations to Tyranny in the Dialogues of Plato*, a collection of essays edited by Charlotte C. S. Thomas.⁹

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS DISSERTATION

Although my dissertation builds on current efforts, it does not seek to reproduce them. In studying tyranny and its relation to political philosophy, I mean to join the endeavors of others who also aim for the necessary renewal of political philosophy as the ancients understood it. My purpose is to bring clarity to a topic often obscured or neglected by contemporary authors, whose reflections are ultimately rooted in historicism or whose interpretations adhere to strict “literary” readings. Especially the latter explicitly reject the allegedly Straussian “ironic” way of reading texts.¹⁰ I share Leo Strauss’s conviction that “there exists an unchanging framework which persists in all changes of human knowledge of both facts and principles,” and that “the fundamental problems persist in all historical change,”¹¹ which is why I believe that the study of tyranny, both ancient and modern, can help rehabilitate the wisdom that the ancients cultivated. And while I consider to be true what Strauss also asserts, that “tyranny is a danger coeval with political life,”¹² it is no less true that the analysis of tyranny is the most appropriate gateway to philosophy, because, I argue, tyranny is the closest link between philosophy and politics or

⁸ See, for example, Benjamin Lorch, “Moderation and Socratic Education in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*” and “Xenophon’s Socrates on Political Ambition and Political Philosophy”; Philip Davies, “‘Kalos Kagathos’ and Scholarly Perceptions of Spartan Society”; Fabio Roscalla, “Kalokagathia E Kaloikagathoi in Senofonte”; Joseph Reiser, “Xenophon on Gentlemanliness and Friendship”; Adam Schulman, “What is a Gentleman? An Introduction to Xenophon.”

⁹ I have nevertheless included below one reference from the first chapter, “Connection between Liberty and Tyranny,” by Catherine Zuckert.

¹⁰ See Vivienne Gray, ed., *Xenophon*, 5-6; and Michael Flower, *The Cambridge Companion to Xenophon*, 7.

¹¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 23-24.

¹² Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 22.

between the wise and the ruler. By studying tyranny through the lens of the classics I seek to shed light on modern tyranny as well. Since the broad extent of the subject matter as well as space constraints force me to focus on select passages and to leave out several works and authors, I hope to show above all an adequate approach to analyze the concept of tyranny and its importance for the study of political philosophy.

METHODOLOGY

The perspective from which I will be analyzing the concept of tyranny is one that seeks to highlight the relation between the city and man, placing the problem of law and legitimacy at the center of the discussion. The politico-philosophical approach to tyranny prompts us to explore related topics (for example, wisdom, virtue, honor), the treatment of which will help us to see tyranny in the proper light. As a first step, I will examine each of these topics and their connection to tyranny through a careful reading of relevant passages, especially in Xenophon's *Hiero*, *Memorabilia*, and *Cyropaedia*; in Plato's *Republic*; and in Aristotle's *Politics*. A second step is to track the changes that the concept of tyranny undergoes in Machiavelli's *Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*, and in Alexandre Kojève's "Tyranny and Wisdom."

It is important to emphasize that each work treated here is conceived of as only one piece of a larger whole. In other words, I start from the premise that each author's corpus constitutes a coherent whole. In consequence, when expounding specific topics or concepts, I will often compare passages from different works with an eye to understanding those concepts as I believe the authors intended them to be understood. Moreover, my dissertation attempts to find a precise way to coherently assemble the thoughts of the classics and contrast them to those of the moderns. To do this, I try to show the common substratum that I believe the former share, rather

than focusing on those traits that distinguish them. This implies that I refute readings which make efforts to classify works in early, middle, and late periods, and which use chronological arguments to interpret the authors' oeuvres. Likewise, I treat each author with the seriousness I believe they all merit, that is, I do not let myself get carried away with commonly accepted views that, for example, still today tend to dismiss Xenophon as a jocular or inaccurate writer or that reprove Machiavelli for being unscrupulous or "Machiavellian."¹³ In this regard, I wish to contribute to the efforts of several scholars who have also taken this stand.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This dissertation consists of five chapters, each of which examines tyranny from a different angle, but always bearing on the connection between tyranny and political philosophy. The first chapter, "The Beginning of Philosophy," introduces the main concepts that will be treated throughout. Tyranny is briefly looked at as a historical phenomenon but I soon turn to the definition of tyranny as a philosophico-political concept. I then define political philosophy and propose a reexamination of classical texts to address the problematic relation between philosophy and politics. I argue that the core of political philosophy is not an array of straightforward claims¹⁴ but rather a set of complex questions to which there is no easy answer. Since such questions can be best posed by studying tyranny, I suggest that tyranny is a good place to start the study of political philosophy. Likewise, I contend that while politics can for the most part do without philosophy by cultivating common sense, philosophy becomes necessary at

¹³ Some of these views are summarized in Vivienne Gray, ed., *Xenophon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 4-6 (although she there also includes Leo Strauss's exegesis of Xenophon and the "ironical readings" that stem from it).

¹⁴ By which I mean that political philosophy is not a list of political principles based on philosophic assertions, but a series of questions that raise awareness about the permanent problems that arise from the confrontation of the philosophic and the political way of life.

the founding moment of political regimes or when facing turbulent times.

I then turn to the problem of law and legitimacy. Central to the discussion is to show that the idea of justice that each regime defends is inevitably biased or partial. Likewise, I argue that legitimate government is not equal to good government, to the extent that the wise do not rule.¹⁵ By addressing this problem, based both on Xenophon's and Plato's allusions to it as well as on Aristotle's discussions of it, I argue that all regimes are in a sense and to a certain extent inevitably tyrannical—an insight that, I assert, escapes many modern thinkers due to their tendency to focus on means rather than on ends. In other words, I try to make apparent that tyranny can sometimes be understood more as a mode of governing in all regimes than as a political order in itself.

Finally, I close the chapter by examining the role of tyranny in the tension between philosophy and politics. I argue that, within the framework of classical political philosophy, tyranny can be addressed from two different perspectives: the political perspective or the perspective of the city, and the philosophical perspective or the perspective of the wise. These two ways of addressing tyranny call for different manners of argumentation that seem incompatible with each other. My aim in the following two chapters is to develop these perspectives, discuss their implications, and ultimately show that they share the same philosophical horizon.

The main aim of chapter 2, "The Real Man and the City," is to discuss tyranny from a political perspective. I begin by setting up the problem by looking at Callicles's posture in Plato's *Gorgias*. I explain why the point of departure for discussing tyranny is necessarily the vulgar misconception that although tyranny is the worst scenario for the city, it is deemed best for the tyrant. I then define the different characters that make up the city, starting with the real man

¹⁵ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 99.

(*aner*), for which I also use Simonides's account in Xenophon's *Hiero*. I argue that whereas the tyrannical man takes his bearings by the most pleasurable life, the real man finds the greatest pleasure in the honorable life.

To complement the view of the real man and how he relates to the city, I further define the character of private men (*idiotes*), lovers of gain (*philokerdeis*), and the tyrant. The collection of characters in the city will help to put together the elements that come into play when thinking about the nature of political things. By looking at the workings of the city we will be able to see the tension between the real man's way of life and the way of life sought by those who are either not guided by honor or are not public spirited. Finally, I link the view of the tyrant with that of the real man by offering a rhetorical reading of Xenophon's *Hiero*. I argue that this superficial reading of the *Hiero* has a politically salutary purpose, namely, to persuade readers that private life is compatible with political life (even in a tyranny) and that honorableness is best.

Chapter three, "The Philosopher and the Tyrant," constitutes the central part of the dissertation and is the fulcrum between my interpretations of classical and modern political philosophy. I there discuss tyranny from a philosophical perspective or from the viewpoint of wisdom, which Aristotle called "the most precise of the sciences."¹⁶ It should first be noted that this discussion is complex and needs to be somehow justified. While one might consider discussing political ideas from a philosophical perspective, why should philosophy be concerned with the discussion of unjust regimes in general, and of tyranny in particular? Doesn't the inquiry into the best regime obviate the need for the inquiry into the unjust regimes?¹⁷ Concerned with the best regime, why would the wise man, who is known for belittling humankind,¹⁸ stoop to discussing faulty regimes? As we will see in this chapter, the answer to this question is twofold.

¹⁶ *Eth. Nic.* 6.6, 1141a16; for the sense of "precise" in Aristotle, see *Metaph.* 1.2, 982a25-28.

¹⁷ See *Pl. Rep.* 4.445a4-b5.

¹⁸ See *Pl. Leges* 7.804b1.

On the one hand, I argue, the wise man needs to discuss faulty regimes in order to question common opinion and to introduce a more refined view with philosophical insights. The first part of this chapter will therefore be devoted to showing that from a philosophical perspective, the status of political life even at its best is inferior to philosophic life. Accordingly, I argue that the classical teaching of *kalokagathia*, though part and parcel of philosophy, in strictly philosophical terms is a concession to political life, a concession philosophers are willing to make for politically salutary purposes. On the other hand, I will contend that the philosopher is interested in studying tyranny to the extent that the tyrannical and the philosophic nature are in some degree kindred. Consequently, in the second part of the chapter, I explain what brings the tyrant and the philosopher together as well as what sets them apart.

In Chapter 4, “Modern Tyranny or Machiavelli’s Restoration of Philosophy,” I propose a reading of Machiavelli that depicts him as a philosopher who belongs to the Socratic tradition. I suggest that by looking at Machiavelli as a philosopher we can both sound the depth of his thought and show some viable directions in which future research might go. The first step to approach Machiavelli’s thought, I argue, is to analyze tyranny in the modern setting, that is, tyranny as it came to be understood after Machiavelli’s revolution of political thought. More importantly, I study the place tyranny occupies in Machiavelli’s political philosophy. Machiavelli is known for rejecting classical political philosophy, but, as I try to show summarily, his efforts were directed less at attacking the ancient paradigm than at dismantling the hegemony of Christian thought over philosophy and politics. Admittedly, he rejects the solution proposed by the ancients as useless, and his enterprise is to offer a new political solution—which, I argue, remains “Socratic”—to restore human freedom or the power of human endeavors in a world thought to be governed by God and Fortuna. But his solution, I contend, is based to no small

degree on the premises of the classics.

Machiavelli's thought regarding tyranny, I argue, requires careful assessment. Indeed, Machiavelli has been charged by many with being a teacher of tyranny, while others consider that one of his main aims is to preclude precisely the possibility of the worst kind of tyranny, tyranny bound to ecclesiastical power. I, therefore, redefine tyranny according to Machiavelli and I also explain how and why for Machiavelli it was necessary, if not to embrace tyranny, at least to disclose its deepest secrets to rehabilitate human freedom.

Next, I show in what measure Machiavelli broke with the ancients by abandoning, for political purposes, the teleological understanding of nature and by assigning a new role to honor. Here I point to his differences with Plato and Aristotle, and to his interpretation and use of Xenophon's works. I claim that he was compelled to outwardly distance himself from the ancients in order to inject politics with a necessary dose of realism. Finally, this chapter focuses on Machiavelli's renewal of political philosophy. I argue that Machiavelli's political revolution was not his only or even his primary aim. Notwithstanding his rupture with the ancients, in the final analysis, one can recognize a certain kinship as regards their philosophical views. The steps he took in the direction of tyranny, I conclude, were, in the end, a contribution to the restoration of philosophy.

In the final chapter, "Tyranny as Utopia," I discuss the famous debate on tyranny between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève. I begin by studying Kojève's arguments in favor of the universal and homogeneous state or of beneficent tyranny as the best political solution. I argue that Kojève makes a case for tyranny because he believes in the possibility of an eventual perfect coincidence between philosophy and politics. Kojève, I argue, underestimates politico-philosophical problems as they were conceived by the ancients because he was convinced both

that those problems belong to the past and that they have been or can be wholly overcome. To explain Kojève's position I briefly address the premises on which his defense of the universal and homogeneous state is based. I place particular emphasis on Kojève's "Slave view" and the role of labor for the realization of man as a human being. By confronting his Hegelian-Marxist view with Strauss's reading of the classics, I argue that the universal and homogeneous state that Kojève upholds makes sense only if the classical horizon of philosophy is narrowed-down.

In the second part of the chapter, I argue it is Kojève's historicism that prevents him from reading the classics as they meant to be read. I also expound Kojève's "philosophical pedagogy" and its double purpose, which is to provide a philosophical education to the masses and to help the philosopher avoid sectarian prejudices. Because Kojève's philosophical pedagogy assumes that the discrepancies between philosophy and politics can be overcome, I contend that it is directly opposite to what Strauss calls "philosophic politics." The manifest opposition between these two views of political philosophy, I argue, also reveals their disagreement regarding the hierarchy of goods or the highest aim of man. The contrast between the two approaches will serve to explain the different roles that tyranny plays in their thought, respectively. Based on Leo Strauss's critique, I close the analysis of Kojève's utopian tyranny by showing that, "at best" (that is, if we can find anything good in it), it is no more than a dystopia.

Since the root of Kojève's universal and homogeneous state can be allegedly traced back to Machiavelli's revolution, and especially to his view of human nature, I conclude the chapter with a reassessment of Machiavelli's enterprise. Having established that Machiavelli's political philosophy is at bottom not that different from the classics' and that he was compelled to abandon the classical solution but not their awareness of the problems, I hold that Machiavelli's oeuvre is meant to complement, not to replace the ancient teachings.

Chapter One

The Beginning of Philosophy

Hence, as it seems, they are all the same—king, tyrant, statesman, household-manager, master, and the moderate man and the just man; and it is all one art—the kingly, the tyrannical, the statesman’s, the master’s, the household-manager’s, and justice and moderation.

Plato, *Lovers*

However, let us avail ourselves of the evidence of those who have before us approached the investigation of reality and philosophized about truth.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

On 30 January 1649, King Charles I of England walked out of the St. James Palace onto the scaffold outside the Banqueting House at Whitehall. He had been accused of being “a Tyrant, Traitor, Murderer, and a public and implacable enemy to the Commonwealth of England” by the Parliamentarians.¹⁹ Fifty-nine out of the eighty judges who sat in the trial against the King had voted for the charge of high treason and signed the death warrant. Before his decapitation, King Charles gave a brief speech to the people of England, in which he called himself “the martyr of the people.”²⁰ Charles I’s trial and execution gave rise to lively discussions between Parliamentarians and Royalists. The Parliamentarians—led by Oliver Cromwell, who soon after imposed a military regime—favored the supremacy of the common law over the divine right of kings upheld by ancient tradition. They advocated the right to resist tyrants and were convinced that tyrannicide was legitimate. Their claims in the trial were largely based on the Petition of Right, drafted in 1628 by Edward Coke, by which they sought to revive the commitment made

¹⁹ See Mario Turchetti, “Regicide or Tyrannicide,” n. 6.

²⁰ See Clive Holmes, *Why Was Charles I Executed?*, 93.

by kings since the Magna Carta of 1215 to observe the rule of law. The Royalists, in turn, defended the absolute authority of the king of England. Based on a tradition of authority originating in Roman law, they refused to accept the diminishment of the sovereignty of the king by other institutions or by the people.

Three years after the execution of the king, Claude Saumaise (also known by the Latin name Claudius Salmasius), who then adhered to the cause of the Royalists, argued in his *Defensio Regia pro Carolo I* that the enemies of the crown had called King Charles a “tyrant” merely as an excuse to justify the capital sentence. For if King Charles had been a tyrant all along, why was he not accused of tyranny until the beginning of the trial? When exactly, he wondered, did Charles I stop being a king to become a tyrant? Moreover, Saumaise belittled the accusation, since he maintained that the word “tyrant” meant nothing other than king, and that every king is a tyrant.²¹ But that the matter was far from being settled with the establishment of the Commonwealth is manifest in the instability of governments during that period as well as in its relatively short duration. Following the proclamation of Charles II as king of England in May 1660, Oliver Cromwell’s body was exhumed, hanged, and decapitated. In October, the surviving regicides faced trial and were convicted. Now looked upon as the true tyrants, they were drawn on a sledge, hanged by the neck looking toward the Banqueting House at Whitehall, eviscerated while alive, decapitated and dismembered.

Looking at these sanguinary events in retrospect, can it be affirmed that either Royalists or Parliamentarians acted more justly than their counterpart? From the point of view of justice,

²¹ See Claude Saumaise, *Defensio Regia Pro Carolo I*, 259-62. See also John Milton’s famous response, “Defence of the People of England.” Although a theory of popular sovereignty as would be presented around those years by Thomas Hobbes had not yet been developed, an inchoate sense of it was already in the air, as can be appreciated by Milton’s remarks that the king owed his “sovereignty to the people only,” and that all kings were “consequently accountable to them for the management of it” (chapter 2.30); and by his citation of Titus Livius saying that “the sovereign power resided in the people” (chapter 5.76).

which side deserved to prevail? Mario Turchetti, who studies the debate between John Milton and Claude Saumaise and compares the trials of 1649 and 1660, raises a germane question: “As such, do these two points of view have the same standing? Or is one right, and the other wrong?” But instead of dwelling on these questions, he offers a precipitate answer: “It is up to the historian to decide.”²² Turchetti, who otherwise approaches this heated debate very rigorously, presents the solution to this exacting case as a matter of opinion or as subject to historical interpretation. While the perspective held by historians is not without interest, the pertinent question for us is not who is right or wrong in this particular case but whether and, if so, how an objective or definitive answer can be given in these kinds of political quandaries.

The purpose of starting my study with an example taken from one of the most turbulent episodes of England’s history is not to settle the question of whether Charles I was a tyrant or the “regicides” were justly punished. Instead, my aim is to show that the discussion of the concept of tyranny—who is and what makes a tyrant—naturally gives rise to further, more profound questions, which are less the concern of history than they are of political philosophy. How do we distinguish a king from a tyrant? How can we determine whether a ruler is good or bad? Or what makes a ruler or a regime legitimate? These kinds of questions were *en vogue* for a long time in Europe as different peoples struggled to check the power of kings, and their discussions helped to gradually shape modern public law. Borne by history, these same questions acquire a special, deeper character when they seek to transcend the urgency to avoid impending abuses.

Indeed, when they point beyond the historical context from which they stem, those questions pertain to the realm of political philosophy. While the specific answers or solutions that can be drawn from the reflections of the political philosopher can change in time, the teachings themselves have a perennial character because they address topics that lie beyond the grasp of

²² Turchetti, “Regicide or Tyrannicide,” 110.

any legal or constitutional framework. Political philosophy is, when properly understood, so intimately tied to the nature of political things that it remains illuminating for all peoples regardless of place and time.²³ In this chapter, I will lay down what I take to be the meaning of political philosophy according to the classics and I will explain why political philosophy thus understood ought to be recovered. I will then turn to the problem of law and legitimacy by discussing unjust regimes, and finally, I will show how this problem is linked to the concept of tyranny.

I. The Origin of the Quest for Wisdom

Today it is not uncommon to encounter the term “political philosophy.” There are entire books devoted to it: introductions to political philosophy, histories of political philosophy, works of contemporary political philosophy, or the political philosophy of this or that author. While we are now used to seeing the dyad “political philosophy,” originally the combination of these two words must have sounded almost like an oxymoron because whereas philosophy dealt mainly with the nature of the cosmos, of its principles, and of being in the broadest sense, politics is all about human affairs: it is the science of how to govern human beings. It is well known that Socrates was the first thinker to make human affairs the concern of philosophy. Socrates turned away from the “physical universe” toward “ethics.”²⁴ Before Socrates, philosophers examined the cosmos, “how it is, and which necessities are responsible for the coming to be of each of the heavenly things.” But Socrates showed that those philosophers were foolish. He questioned their approach because they were “disposed toward one another like madmen” in trying to explain what lies beyond human grasp, and yet ignored or neglected the human things.

²³ See Aristotle’s reference to the best regime in *Eth. Nic.* 5.7, 1135a4-5.

²⁴ *Pl. Phd.* 96e-100b; *Arist. Met.* 1.6, 987b1-4.

Why should human beings spend a lifetime examining the working of the heavens, or worry about the nature of divine things, which are “not discoverable by human beings,” when they haven’t understood the nature of human things? Such pursuits, Socrates believed, prevented them from acquiring many beneficial things or made them go out of their minds.²⁵ The way to proceed, as Aristotle would put it, is not by studying what is first by nature but what is first for us; and in the order of cognition, human things come first.²⁶ Philosophy can therefore be defined as the quest for wisdom or the quest for knowledge of the natures of all things: of God, the world, and man,²⁷ but it’s a quest whose beginning lies necessarily in politics.

Political philosophy can be defined as the quest for knowledge about human nature. Indeed, political philosophy results from the confrontation of two opposing views of human nature: the philosophic and the political view as to what constitutes the highest good by nature for human beings. Political philosophy is animated by the longing for the most authoritative good of all in the city, the “political good” or “the just,”²⁸ which ought to be understood in the light of the highest good for individuals rather than on its own. It is the attempt to answer the deepest political questions to bring them to bear on every kind of regime. Deeply preoccupied with justice, political philosophers undertake a complex task. On the one hand, they must distance themselves from both the whirlwind of the present and from the stiffness of preconceived notions of the past in an effort to replace opinions of political things with knowledge. They are thus compelled to move away from common opinion, to call tradition into question, and to bring laws themselves to account before the tribunal of genuine justice.²⁹ To do this, they formulate their inquiries based on the nature of man as man, apart from all political

²⁵ Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.11-14 and 4.7.5-6; see Pl. *Rep.* 7.529b-d; see also Cic. *Rep.* 1.10.15.

²⁶ See Arist. *Phys.* 1.184a17-18.

²⁷ See Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 11.

²⁸ See Arist. *Pol.* 3.12, 1282b16-23; also Strauss, 10.

²⁹ See Strauss, 12, 14, and 93-94.

ties. On the other hand, they must keep one foot in concrete reality: judgment according to a theoretical standard does not mean that reality can or should be forced to meet that standard.³⁰

The search for justice leads to the awareness that the nature of political things or the political nature of men is unalterable. Hence, political philosophy straddles between the concreteness of political life and the ways in which political life can be improved or even transcended—as we will have a chance to explore more carefully in chapter 3—always with a view to knowledge.

The questions posed by the political philosopher might strike anyone involved in everyday politics as otiose or pointless, in the same way that, in Cicero's *Republic*, Scipio and Tubero's conversation about the appearance of a second sun seemed frivolous to Gaius Laelius. Having more pressing matters to attend to, namely, household management and politics, Laelius wonders why they would devote their time to converse about heavenly matters. In that same spirit, one could ask what's the use of discussing the legitimacy of kings and tyrants today, in times when democracy is the prevailing form of government in the Western world. Although our investigation need not yield practical advice because the questions are worth pondering for themselves, I contend that due consideration of these problems, which lie in the limit between politics and philosophy, necessarily touches the raw nerve of politics. Certainly, in the attempt to draw a line between kingship and tyranny, we are compelled to raise questions about justice not only in monarchies but also in every other political regime, and to delve into their relations with the rule of law. Political philosophy, in consequence, casts doubt on the legitimacy of every regime and questions every legal framework, even or precisely when it seeks to improve them. In doing so, it rocks the foundations of politics. We can therefore recognize an inherent tension between political philosophy and politics per se that may be reconciled to some extent but can never be overcome.

³⁰ See Arist. *Pol.* 3.4, 1276b16-1277b32; *Eth. Nic.* 5.2, 1130b28-29.

Statesmen are likely to overlook the inquiries of classical political philosophers either because they sincerely consider them ineffectual or because they wish to circumvent the difficulties that these matters involve. Moreover, political rulers are compelled to avoid or disregard the deepest questions concerning justice simply because they lack the time to approach them. Rulers are expected to carry out their duty to administer justice and to uphold the law, and especially to attend to urgent matters, lest they be accused of fiddling while Rome burns. But even those political rulers with philosophical inclinations, who might find the time to reflect upon these matters, cannot bring these questions to the fore without risking the stability of their rule. Instead of occupying themselves with the discussion of what the best regime might look like, or with how to bring it about, they must focus on attaining only a qualified good, a good that is subject to the given circumstances.

Statesmen are respected and admired on account of their actions, which are conducive to the public good, rather than for the innovations they might suggest: in everyday politics action is generally judged superior to thought. Additionally, statesmen have the duty to abide by the laws—at least those that give form to the regime—which means that they need to take for granted that what the law says is right and just, or they at least need to act as if they believed so. Since politics necessarily deals with the concrete, the justice that political men pursue must be justice as it has been established by the law, regardless of whether the constitutional framework itself can in theory be perfected, or even if the regime is not genuinely just from the standpoint of philosophy. Rulers are expected to preserve the regime and to act on its behalf. They are accordingly forced to shirk facing questions related to the justice of the regime, even if the questions are raised with the intention of improving it.³¹

The distinguishing characteristic of the statesman—as opposed to the wise man—is his

³¹ See Pericles's disposition in Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.40-46.

practical wisdom.³² Statesmen must be perfectly well acquainted with the present circumstances to determine what is just here and now. At the same time, they must try to accommodate the ideal³³ or theoretical account of justice to the present situation as best they can. Otherwise stated, rulers must be politically prudent: they must strike the right balance between theory and practice, or between the general and the concrete, which is the arduous task of the political art. As Aristotle puts it, “prudence is not concerned with the universals alone but must also be acquainted with the particulars: it is bound up with action.”³⁴ That political action is marked by practical wisdom means that it must be connected somehow to universal rules, that is, not every political action is valid or justifiable. One must keep in mind, however, that the inexorable character of political things renders the connection between theory and practice problematic, to say the least. Since prudence is concerned both with universals and particulars, there will always be a compromise between theory and practice: every political instantiation will inevitably fall short of the best regime.³⁵ Although no existing regime will ever be perfect, many imperfect regimes, if properly guided, can in different degrees approximate to the best regime.

From the viewpoint of the statesman, political philosophy seems not only unnecessary but even an impediment to the improvement of politics. Indeed, in the opinion of political men, politics can succeed without the help of philosophy. Whereas the Socratic quest for wisdom requires politics, politics does not require philosophy. Pre- or non-philosophic communities have managed to contrive legal frameworks based on common sense and tradition with satisfactory results. Based on experience, it is hard to deny that on many occasions the questions that the

³² See Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 6.7, 1141b5-8.

³³ I am aware that the use of the word “ideal” is potentially misleading to the extent that the term carries the connotation of being both desirable and attainable. Nevertheless, I mean to use it in the classical sense—etymologically linked to *eidos*—in which something “ideal” is not necessarily attainable and thus looked up to but not *ipso facto* desirable.

³⁴ *Eth. Nic.* 6.7, 1141b15-16.

³⁵ See Arist. *Pol.* 4.8, 1293b25.

political philosopher raises are not indispensable to attain a relatively healthy political life. In fact, while political philosophy addresses matters of great political import, often it seems politically salutary to avoid its incisive questions. For this reason, even statesmen who acknowledge the utility of political philosophy will probably not wish to pursue it. Consequently, it would seem reasonable to accept that before calling politics to the tribunal of genuine justice, political philosophy must itself be justified in the eyes of the political community.

It is therefore pertinent to ask, why or when do politics need the insights of philosophy?³⁶ The quick answer is that political philosophy becomes most necessary in turbulent times. Indeed, all political regimes eventually face hardships due to external or internal threats that may bring the regime back to a state of weakness or uncertainty, in which the principles that hold the people together can be undermined or decimated. Admittedly, it could be said that external threats such as an enemy attack can be anticipated, while internal conflicts like those incited by factions can be prevented with good policies or dealt with by enforcing the law. But even if we grant that the effect of good political measures may be long-lasting, adherence to the laws does not guarantee stability. Indeed, as Aristotle says, the destruction of the regime can come from within, if legislation is not suitable for the people.³⁷ In such cases, the moderate teachings³⁸ of political philosophy are an indispensable source to help regimes recover strength and social cohesion. Political philosophy and politics are not altogether at odds with each other.

But let us go back to the tension between philosophy and politics, a tension that stems from their differing goals. Whereas philosophy seeks truth, politics or good politics is aimed at the well-being of the political community. For politics to attain its goal, it must first guarantee

³⁶ See Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 93.

³⁷ See Arist. *Rh.* 1.4.12-13, 1360a18-34; see also Locke, *Second Treatise*, 412 (§§ 221-22).

³⁸ By saying “moderate” I mean that political philosophers advice against radical measures because of their impartial interest in the common good.

the safety and stability of the regime by embracing tradition and by encouraging concord, whereas philosophy, to transcend the realm of opinions, must question especially the most widely accepted views. The core of political philosophy thus runs counter to the harmony and cohesion of the political community. Yet the assault on politics that the quest for wisdom necessitates need not be tactless. On the contrary, for politics to bear the onset of philosophy and, moreover, to let itself be guided by philosophers, wisdom must be presented in a politic manner, hand in hand with moderation. Indeed, when radically undertaken, the quest for wisdom becomes incompatible with political life even to the point of becoming itself unacceptable to the political community.

The Socratic quest for wisdom, however, is tied to moderation in more than one way. To mention just its most manifest aspect, those who seek wisdom must be moderate regarding politics, for if philosophy starts with the study of politics it must preserve politics as much as it needs to preserve itself. Therefore, one of the tasks of political philosophers in their treatment of politics is, if not to reduce the tension between philosophy and politics, at least to make it appear as less strong than it really is by showing the public utility of their reflections and by persuading the political community that their teachings are innocuous or helpful. As we dig deeper into the topic of tyranny, other reasons why tyranny is useful for the study of political philosophy will become apparent. At the same time, as regards their philosophic pursuit, political philosophers must point to and underline that tension because only there is knowledge of the nature of political things available.³⁹

³⁹ In order to be clear, I must say that the tension between philosophy and politics exists regardless of the regime. Tyranny is a good starting point from which to start to delineate this tension precisely because it is more difficult to recognize it in “correct” regimes (to use Aristotle’s terminology, *Pol.* 3.7, 1279a30). Following Leo Strauss, when I say “knowledge” of the nature of political things, I think of it in opposition to “opinion” of the nature of political things (see Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 11-12).

II. Reexamination of the Classics

It is not modern but classical political philosophy that is more fully in tension with politics. The political philosophies of Hobbes or Locke, no longer based on the teleological nature of man, are compatible with politics to a greater degree than classical political philosophy because they are concerned with how things are rather than with how they ought to be. Their philosophies are closer to politics because they start from the same premise as bare politics does, that human nature is base. And human nature is base because, they assert, it is defined by the “similitude of passions” rather than by the capacity of human intellect.⁴⁰ Admittedly, the moderns acknowledge that there is a tension between philosophy and politics, but that tension is of a different character than the tension generated by the philosophical questioning of the law. Unlike the tension produced by the quest for wisdom, which is permanent, the tension that the moderns point to can be surmounted in time. However, notwithstanding the insurmountable character of the tension that the classics point to, reflecting on it bears insights that are necessary to see both philosophy and politics in the proper perspective, a perspective of which modernity has lost sight.

Although the moderns took the sordidness of human life as fixed or given, they had even greater expectations than the ancients about the possibility of ameliorating the bleak outlook of political coexistence. They pinned their hopes on the power of a well-designed commonwealth to tame man’s impulses with a view to both the common good and individual freedom. Through the popularization of philosophy, they sought to educate statesmen and enlighten citizens. But the divulgence of philosophical insights goes hand in hand with their vulgarization, with the diffusion of vulgar or coarse knowledge. Political philosophy thus understood contributes to the

⁴⁰ See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 4 (introd., par. 3).

education of the people but it cannot be genuinely edifying⁴¹ to the extent that it desists from the prospect of wisdom which constituted the essence of classical political philosophy. Classical political philosophy, in turn, is not immediately useful to either statesmen or enlightened citizens. On the contrary, despite its moderate character, classical political philosophy tends to be subversive and thus useless or even prejudicial. But it is not the intention of political philosophers to be subversive just for the sake of it. Subversive speeches are dangerous because they can undoubtedly turn into subversive deeds. Nevertheless, subversive speeches are needed to seek truth, because truth can only be found by calling into question the political good as opposed to the good unqualifiedly. When carefully addressed, however, subversive speeches need not undermine politics; they can also help to make political changes for the better to the extent that they propose more favorable alternatives.⁴²

To illustrate the latter, we can think of the following example. Every regime is born with an end in mind but, over time, people can easily lose sight of the original goal that brought their political community together. All peoples undergo changes that can make them forget the founding principles or they might come to disagree as regards their interpretation.⁴³ In such cases, regimes are likely to deviate from their original purpose and legislation will cease to be suitable for the people. More importantly, legislation itself, which originally reflects the founding principles of the regime, becomes a reason for dispute and loses the force to hold the people together. While legislation presupposes the principles that guide the political community, since laws are only a perfectible reflection of those principles, they are incapable of explaining the

⁴¹ Despite the negative connotations that the verb “edify” may carry, I do not mean to use it pejoratively or ironically, but, on the contrary, in a positive sense, as improvement of the intellectual condition of mankind. I believe this is how Leo Strauss understands the term when he uses it to translate Hegel’s “erbaulich” and to say that philosophy “is of necessity edifying” (*Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 294).

⁴² That subversive speeches are both needed in the search for truth and can be useful in political life exemplifies that philosophy and politics can work together to enhance each other.

⁴³ Although he offers a different solution, see Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* 3.1: “Because in the process of time [the goodness of the beginnings] is corrupted, unless something intervenes to lead it back to the mark....”

principles themselves. The political community cannot be made to be of one mind by legislation alone. To preserve the regime, due reflection on the principles becomes essential, but the principles remain unknown if one does not question legislation or if one does not try to understand its roots. It is in those cases, when legislation fails to cohere with the political community, that classical political philosophy and its subversive speeches become imperative for politics.

Legislation proves to be insufficient to unite the people and guarantee the stability of the regime especially when the regime is deviant, when the rulers fail to advance the common good. If rulers equate good rule with having a strong rule, the “improvement” of the regime amounts to intensifying tyrannical measures—*summum ius, summa iniuria*—with the result that citizens secretly flee the law.⁴⁴ Likewise, when rulers center their attention solely on preserving stability, they can very easily deviate from the common good. While rulers should foster a sense of community and enhance the ability of the people to undertake purposeful activities, they might have vicious reasons to atomize society, to undermine people’s mutual trust, and to enfeeble them so that they are less likely to carry out ambitious enterprises.⁴⁵

The limited horizon of politics, one without the guidance of philosophy, can drive rulers to commit the most atrocious crimes in the name of the common good. To make real improvements to political life, rulers must be able to look beyond what is possible here and now. Statesmen who aim at governing well need to seek philosophic insights to discover what is veritably good and to acquire the capacity to evaluate what decisions are truly best. In other words, despite the tension that inevitably arises between political philosophy and politics, reasonable politics needs to be complemented by the standard that the teachings of political

⁴⁴ See Arist. *Pol.* 2.9, 1270b21-36.

⁴⁵ See Arist. 5.11, 1314a15-25.

philosophy provide. Although classical political philosophy is likely to furnish a severe guidance, for the good of their regimes statesmen should have recourse to its direction.

The full awareness of this problem led the classics to offer a stable and universal standard from which to address the political problem. While they realized that the political questions are always the same because the nature of political things remains essentially the same, they also acknowledged that every concrete situation calls for different solutions. Since the manifestations of politics vary, as do all practical human endeavors, how ideal justice can be instantiated necessarily varies as well. The classics knew that political philosophy is therefore best formulated as a complex set of questions rather than as an array of straightforward claims. By addressing the political problem in the form of questions, political philosophers allowed for flexible answers, so that they might be adapted to the given circumstances. Thus, classical political philosophy formulates insights that bear on the nature of political things in a way that the quest for wisdom becomes both possible for philosophers and useful for political life. The richness of the classical approach is so vast that one can hardly overestimate its value and the importance of its contribution to the understanding and betterment of political life.

Yet today classical political philosophy needs to be recovered mainly because its teachings are no longer believed to be valid. The reason for this, I believe, is that modern thinkers have placed more emphasis on judging the classical solution than on trying to understand the problem it was meant to solve. Indeed, a correct understanding of the problem—namely, the insoluble tension between philosophy and politics—makes clear that any solution must be, by definition, imperfect and provisional. But the classical solution is mistakenly read as if it had been intended to be universal and permanent, whereas the most profound questions the classics raise are dismissed out of hand, as no longer useful because they must be limited to their

time and place in history. Moreover, contemporary political science has purportedly superseded old political philosophy in the belief that human nature has undergone a fundamental change so that we require a new, true science of politics. The understanding of classical political philosophy began to be eroded with the efforts of modern political philosophy to disprove the main tenets of the classics. Modern political philosophers sought to replace the classical standard with a new science of politics because the classical solution was in their eyes useless and prejudicial.

Indeed, for the moderns, the best regime proposed by the ancients was not only unattainable but also, according to them, based on an erroneous understanding of human nature. With the idea of a *summum bonum* in mind, they believed, the classics had mistakenly assumed that the wish to attain some higher good—intrinsic to human nature—could adequately mold people’s character so that they could live peacefully together. However, the moderns argue, the political problem cannot be solved by falsely postulating that the nature of man is teleological. In contrast to the classics, modern political philosophers propound that the truly basic inclination of all men is not some higher good but “perpetual and restless desire of power after power.”⁴⁶ The nature of man thus ceases to be a telos and becomes a starting point: not something to be attained but something common to all human beings.

With blind faith in the advent and progress of science in all human endeavors, the moderns thought it would eventually be possible to overcome the allegedly unsolvable tension between philosophy and politics. But while their apparent innovation in politics led to real improvements in some aspects of political life, the neglect of other aspects resulted in the impoverishment of political thought as a whole. To mention just one significant change that the moderns had no qualms acknowledging, their “novel” approach caused the human end to be substantially lowered. How and why such competent thinkers, who were also often remarkably

⁴⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 11.2; see also Niccolò Machiavelli’s “effectual truth” in *Prince* 15.

good readers of the ancients, arrived at the conclusion that the ancient paradigm should be replaced will be the concern of chapter 4. For the moment, however, we will simply start from the premise, based on facts, that the effect of the modern revolution had important consequences on our way of thinking about the human things. The movement that began with the rejection of teleology has, without doubt, brought us closer to democratic ideals of equality and mass-education, but because it rejects any higher standard by which to be guided, it has also pulled us farther away from wisdom and virtue.

As a corollary to the modern revolution, which began in the seventeenth and culminated during the twentieth century, we have become less capable of understanding the weightiest political problems that afflict us, even to the point that we no longer identify them as problems but merely as differences of opinion. The purported progress brought about by the “scientific” understanding of human affairs has in fact proven to be a regression, for while today’s political science can observe and measure political phenomena with ever-improving quantitative methodologies, it is unable to judge them as better or worse and is therefore impeded from offering genuine solutions. Moreover, it is detached from the most fundamental questions that philosophy poses. Classical political philosophy has become a precious relic but a relic nonetheless, to say nothing of the quest for wisdom, which seems to have been all but abandoned. Unlike classical thinkers, modern political philosophers neglected the interplay between the nature of political things and the quest for truth. They chose to embrace the former and reject the latter. The result is that their political philosophy ceased to ask the most relevant political questions, among which, to cite Xenophon, are those that Socrates constantly discussed:

what is pious, what is impious, what is noble, what is shameful, what is just, what is unjust, what is moderation, what is madness, what is courage, what is cowardice, what is

a city, what is a statesman, what is rule over human beings, what is a skilled ruler over human beings.⁴⁷

The confrontation of these kinds of questions necessarily points in the direction of the philosophic view of human nature. Only by going back to them today will we be able to bridge the divide between the nature of political things and the higher, philosophical truth, so that the wise and moderate approach to politics that the most discerning thinkers of the past have handed down to us may be recovered. Likewise, it will serve to remind us about the crucial importance of recognizing the tension and complementarity that exists between philosophy and politics, indispensable for a proper assessment of classical thought. I therefore propose a reexamination of classical and modern texts as they bear upon the concept of tyranny. The reappraisal of their insights will shed new light on the concept of tyranny, ancient and modern, which, in turn, will hopefully help to counteract the inertia of our times and contribute to the recovery of classical political philosophy.

III. Unjust Regimes

“Law is king of all / of mortals and immortals; / It pushes through and makes just the greatest violence, / With a high hand.” These memorable lines from a poem by Pindar⁴⁸ pinpoint perhaps the deepest and most characteristic political problem, namely, the difficult concordance between the lawful and the just. The determination of whether the lawful is just is intimately tied to the idea of the common good. As Thomas Aquinas says, law “is nothing else than the ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and

⁴⁷ *Mem.* 1.1.16.

⁴⁸ Thomas Pangle’s translation of frag. 169 in *The Laws of Plato*, 522, n. 24.

promulgated.”⁴⁹ But to speak of the common good is problematic, to say the least, because the determination of whether there is such a thing as the public good and of what would be the best means to attain it is not made by an entire community but is rather established by the authoritative or preponderant element of the political community.

Therefore, the so-called common or public good may well come into conflict with the individual or the private good, or with the idea of public good as conceived by different parts of the community. Thus, the public good cannot be determined decisively, let alone justly pursued, if there is no consensus about it or if it is imposed rather than willingly accepted by all, especially by the weaker elements of the community. It can be readily inferred that the question of legitimacy becomes crucial in the definition of the public good as well as in the judgment of whether laws are just or unjust. As our discussion unfolds, it will become apparent that however just regimes might seem, every regime is unjust to a certain degree: none can be claimed to be free of tyrannical traits.⁵⁰ The concept of tyranny, as we will see, is in fact so intricately linked to political life that it is impossible to escape.

But let us look more closely at the problem of law in its connection with the public good first. The question “What is law?” is comparable to the question “What is just?” Law, it is generally assumed, is just because it aims at the public or private good by ordaining what one ought to do and what to abstain from.⁵¹ Law therefore implies at least a conception of the good. It follows that when laws are not observed, regress can be expected as lawlessness facilitates chaos and violence. Even well-formulated laws need fit magistrates to look after them.⁵²

⁴⁹ *ST* 90.4.

⁵⁰ In the words of Catherine Zuckert, “all political orders include a measure of tyranny and none is perfectly just.” “Connection between Liberty and Tyranny,” in Charlotte C. S. Thomas, ed., *Liberty, Democracy, and the Temptations to Tyranny* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2021), 20.

⁵¹ See Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1.3, 1094b5-6; see also Cic. *Leg.* 1.6.18.

⁵² See Pl. *Leges* 6.751b.

However, regress is more likely to occur when laws themselves stray from their alleged purpose to unjustly privilege the private good of some individuals to the detriment of the public good. Corrupt or incompetent legislators might write laws that only benefit themselves.⁵³ Although they may hide their wrongdoings behind a veil of legality, those laws have a pernicious effect on the political community as a whole. Clearly, when this happens, Pindar's pithy verses become true, since unfair laws that are imposed upon others make just the greatest violence simply by making it legal.

Notwithstanding this instance of self-serving use of the law, one can also think of a somewhat counterintuitive example: legislators might seek to privilege only one part of the community with the sincere conviction that benefitting a particular group is just. Precisely with the public good in mind they might wish to privilege a particular group to give them more access to political decisions and thus improve the living conditions of the entire political community. Yet one is compelled to ask, in the first place, on what grounds can the alleged public good be justified as superior to the private or individual good? Secondly, who can judge whether the privileges bestowed on just one part of the political community will truly enhance the public good? Lastly, and more to our point, would such a regime be exempt from being called tyrannical because it is supposed to further the good of the city or nation? Although there is no readily available answer to these questions, it is important to keep them in the background of our discussion.

From Aristotle's political perspective the public good is deemed the greatest good, superior even to the individual good. That the public good is prior to the individual good is manifest because the latter can hardly exist without the former.⁵⁴ In the words of Aristotle, "to

⁵³ See Pl. *Rep.* 1.338e-339a.

⁵⁴ See Arist. *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a20-23. To be clear, I must immediately add that Aristotle's *political* perspective is not

secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine.”⁵⁵ Yet even if we grant this classical premise, when it comes to defining what constitutes the public or common good—not to speak of the means to attain it—there are many and great disagreements. Legislators and statesmen, one would expect, should have clarity about what constitutes the public good and the means to attain it to reach consensus among the population. But is this the case?

While statesmen seem to know with certainty what the public good is when they enforce the law, it in fact comprises so many subtleties and it is so difficult to grasp that, upon inspection, it is not hard to discover that even the leading men in a given city are in the dark as regards the good.⁵⁶ How can a law, whose aim is the public good, be judged as legitimate or illegitimate if there is no agreement as to what constitutes the public good? Consequently, the definition of and agreement as to what constitutes the political good is prior to the law, for without consent about the good, law will be viewed as mere violence—or at least as injustice—by all who disagree with it. Law, therefore, in the highest sense or in its connection with the public good points in the direction of the most important political questions.

Xenophon’s masterful dialogue between the renowned Athenian leader Pericles and the clever Alcibiades lays out the intricacies of the problem at hand.⁵⁷ It is said, Xenophon narrates, that before Alcibiades was twenty years old he turned to Pericles, who was then his guardian, to ask if he could teach him what law is, for law-abiding men can be justly praised only if they

necessarily compatible with his philosophical perspective. Although the city is by nature prior to the household and to individuals—because without the city human nature can hardly be developed—philosophically speaking, to attain full perfection of their nature human beings must transcend the limits that the city imposes. The highest human good is superior to the greatest political good.

⁵⁵ *Eth. Nic.* 1.2, 1094b8-11; see also *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a31; *Pl. Rep.* 9.578d-e.

⁵⁶ See *Plato Rep.* 6.505d-506a.

⁵⁷ See *Mem.* 1.2.40-46.

know this. Ignorant of Alcibiades's furtive motives, Pericles candidly accepts to answer, claiming that the question Alcibiades poses entails no difficulty. He then defines law by saying that "all things are laws that the assembled multitude has approved and written pointing out what should and should not be done." To that definition Alcibiades responds by asking whether what should be done according to them are good or bad things. Underlying Alcibiades's apparently dull and naïve question is the awareness that, due to ignorance, the many are likely to be mistaken as to what is good. But Pericles, who is still unaware of Alcibiades's intention, condescendingly—one can judge by the tone—responds that the good ought to be done, not the bad.

The assumption behind Pericles's assertion, validated in a democracy, is that the good is defined by the many. Consequently, Alcibiades then asks what happens when the assembled few rather than the many write what should be done. Pericles, in turn, needs to adjust his answer to include what he thinks would be a correct definition of law regardless of the regime:

"Everything," he says, "is called law that the overpowering part of the city, upon deliberation, writes that one should do." Thus, Pericles acknowledges that what law is depends on the regime, but his troubles are not over, for then he must agree that even what a ruling tyrant promulgates is called law. In short, Pericles has unwittingly asserted both that laws are promulgated by the strong over the weak, and that what they say is good. How is law, as defined by Pericles, different from violence?

Alcibiades opportunely changes the focus to inquire into what violence and lawlessness is: "Is it not when one who is stronger compels one who is weaker—not by persuasion but by use of violence—to do whatever is in his opinion best?" Pericles must grant this and is therefore forced to rectify what he said earlier about the tyrant. Cornered by Alcibiades, he acknowledges that "everything that one compels someone to do without persuading him, whether he writes it or

not, is violence rather than law.” But just as his modified definition of law fits all regimes, his definition of violence fits not only tyranny, but also oligarchy and democracy. As Alcibiades is quick to point out, Pericles has thus conceded that by imposing the will of the many upon the few, alleged laws in a democracy are truly mere violence against the wealthy.

At this point and frankly exasperated by Alcibiades’s inquiries, which led him to propound two contradictory views of law, Pericles acknowledges that Alcibiades is clever but he dismisses the conversation by saying that when he was of Alcibiades’s age he too used to argue with such kind of sophistry. Alcibiades haughtily retorts that he would have liked to meet Pericles then, when he was at his cleverest. In the end, he has achieved his true goal, which is to prove that even Pericles, the leading man in Athens, is unable to answer what law is correctly. What Alcibiades does, at bottom, is to question law itself and qualify the praise of law-abiding men, for how can one be praised for being lawful if laws enact the greatest violence? With Alcibiades as his spokesman, Xenophon points to the problem of law inherent to every regime. Given that the most characteristic trait of tyranny is that it is rule over unwilling subjects,⁵⁸ Xenophon provocatively, though also humorously, insinuates that all regimes are in a sense tyrannical.

Every political community that seeks stability must try to hide the problem of law as exposed by Alcibiades. While the specificity of positive laws makes them subject to modification, the problem of law itself ought not be too evident or a matter of public discussion. As Aristotle advises, even laws that can be improved ought to be changed only with great caution, for “the alteration of existing laws in favor of new and different ones weakens the power of law itself.” Aristotle teaches that although many laws can in theory be improved, to change them in practice might prove counterproductive, because the power of law stems from its being

⁵⁸ See Arist. *Pol.* 5.11, 1314a36-38.

valid for a long time or from habituation. Hence, he says, one ought to avoid “the reckless dissolution of laws.”⁵⁹ If this is true for laws within the scope of a given regime, it helps explain why matters concerning legislation at the highest level—that is, laws with which the specific regime is founded—are usually kept away from open public deliberation. Since people generally rest satisfied when general rules seem fair and are set beforehand—despite the fact, or precisely because they know that the result of the actual exercise of power will fall short of the perfect good—it is politically salutary to preserve the same laws over time even if they are defective or perfectible. For laws to fulfill their purpose, it is necessary to avoid questioning the highest law, which defines the character of the regime.

Although most people are not commonly aware of the problem of law, that they are concerned about the public good is manifest in the heated discussions—which, at least in democracies, are relatively common—over the mechanisms to decide who will rule, how the rulers come to power, for how long and on what conditions they are allowed to rule, etc. Yet one ought not confuse the procedures with the ends. While it is true that the desired end of a regime must be sought through legitimate means, the means alone cannot guarantee that the end is good or noble. Even so, not every political community, or not at all times, agrees with the mechanisms to decide who will rule because different people deem valid different claims to rule. The principles of legitimacy, as Xenophon’s Alcibiades adumbrates, vary according to the regime, and are, in part, the mark of the regime.

Like Xenophon, Plato intimates as much when indirectly posing the problem of law and legitimacy in his works. One prominent passage concerning legitimacy appears in the *Laws*, when the Athenian Stranger points out that according to convention, there are many different

⁵⁹ *Pol.* 2.8, 1169a24-25 and 1169a16.

worthy titles to rule, which are opposed to one another.⁶⁰ Combining public and private forms of rule, the Athenian Stranger lists a total of seven: (1) rule of parents over children, (2) of the well born over the not well born, (3) of the elderly over the young, (4) of masters over slaves, (5) of the stronger over the weaker, (6) of the prudent over the ignorant and, finally, (7) rule of those elected by lot. The Athenian Stranger makes the point that legislation must be taken seriously because the different worthy titles to rule—indeed, one wonders whether all these are worthy—are a source of civil strife. Those who tread without due care when laying down laws risk destroying the regime itself.

Why the Athenian Stranger asserts that two (numbers five and six) out of these seven titles are according to nature leads to certain difficulties, the resolution of which can yield important insights. Though it will be necessary to clarify this point regarding the different understandings of “nature,” we don’t need to take up that analysis now. More immediately relevant to our present discussion, however, are the implications that follow from the opposition or conflict between the different claims to rule, especially between these two that are “according to nature.” From a political perspective, that is, from the viewpoint of each particular regime, it is not possible to settle whether one title to rule is indisputably superior to the rest, because the partisans of each regime will always claim that their view is best and therefore, hierarchically superior to any other view.⁶¹

Admittedly, to speak of “superiority” is ambiguous, for different regimes are superior to others in different respects. While rulers might wish to boast that their nation is the greatest and most powerful in every respect, in reality one nation might be superior when it comes to strength and defense in the face of foreign attacks, whereas others are, for instance, superior as regards

⁶⁰ *Leges* 3.690a-d.

⁶¹ See Pl. *Leges* 4.714b-715b; also *Rep.* 9.581c-d.

freedom, commerce, or virtue.⁶² Unless one regime were superior to the rest in every respect, it does not seem possible to establish an absolute superiority of one regime over the rest. Therefore, what we mean when we speak of superiority is not superiority in every respect but in the politically most important one, namely, superiority with respect to genuine justice.

Since, as we have said, law establishes what ought to be done and avoided, to determine what is genuinely just one might be tempted to look in the direction of the highest laws, of the laws that determine the character of the regime or which uphold the principles of legitimation. But even the highest laws cannot resolve which regime is best because law is relative to the regime. Indeed, the principles of legitimacy that substantiate the good of each regime serve to judge whether the government is just in a qualified sense only, for they merely indicate whether the rulers are leading the people in the direction the community has set, or whether they have strayed from their goal.

To the extent that the principles of legitimacy ground the end in pursuit of which the regime is constituted, they are the most authoritative guidelines available to assess whether a particular way of ruling is according to the regime's end, but they are insufficient to judge the end of the regime itself. Hence, principles of legitimacy are unfit as the basis for an assessment of justice in an unqualified sense, and equally unsuitable to establish a hierarchy of regimes. The judgment concerning the authoritative superiority of a regime in relation to others can only be established on the assumption that there is no dispute about what is just and unjust (either because there is actual agreement as to what is just or because justice is not being used as a standard). The concept of justice must transcend the particular interests of the diverse regimes and point to a higher, universal form of justice. It must be established on the basis of the

⁶² Compare Pericles's funeral oration in Thuc. 2.34-46 with Xen. *Mem.* 3.3.13 and see the final outcome of the war in Xen. *Hell.* 2.1.27-28 and 2.2.20-23.

unqualifiedly just, of which all actual regimes fall short (something the partisans of each regime would only grudgingly accept, if at all). To define justice in this broadest sense requires the formulation of the best regime, which despite existing only in speech, is the only truly authoritative standard to assess the just or unjust ends of regimes that exist in deed.

One might ask, is it possible to establish a hierarchy of regimes, or to judge the ends of existing regimes? And if so, is it desirable, or why is it so important? This brings us back to our original question: if there is no objective standard against which to measure the ends of regimes, then there is no way to distinguish law from violence, or enacted laws from finely enacted laws.⁶³ Contrary to the classical tradition, modernity has shifted the focus from the ends of regimes to the processes. How political things are decided has become more relevant than why they are decided. In other words, whether the end in mind will be beneficial for the political community as a whole seems less important than to know it was legitimately chosen. There is little or no interest in judging the ends of regimes so long as law-abidingness and democratic procedures are respected.⁶⁴ According to the modern view, which in the West has dominated the international scene for the past century, principles of legitimacy are not superior or inferior to each other but incommensurable between them: all peoples have the right to self-determination.⁶⁵

⁶³ See Arist. *Pol.* 4.8, 1294a5-9.

⁶⁴ An example of the emphasis placed today on the superiority of procedures and law-abidingness over what may be good can be found in Robert P. George's defense of constitutionalism: "Sometimes courts have no legitimate authority to set right what they perceive (perhaps rightly) to be a wrong; and where this is the case, it is wrong—because usurpative—for them to do so. There is no paradox in this. Fidelity to the rule of law imposes on public officials in a reasonably just regime (that is, a regime that it would be wrong for judges to attempt to subvert) a duty in justice to respect the constitutional limits of their own authority. To fail in this duty, however noble one's ends, is to behave unconstitutionally, lawlessly, unjustly." Robert P. George, *Natural Law, the Constitution, and the Theory and Practice of Judicial Review*, 69 *Fordham L. Rev.* 2269 (2001), p. 2283. Admittedly, this article does not discuss the ends of regimes, but the allusion to "a reasonably just regime" as "a regime that it would be wrong for judges to attempt to subvert" is meaningful.

⁶⁵ The two United Nations covenants where this is stipulated are 1) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Dec. 19, 1966, art. 1; and 2) the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Dec. 16, 1966, art. 1.

We cannot discuss here the several dimensions that the concept of self-determination supposes,⁶⁶ but let it suffice to say that it is partly based on the conventionalist rejection of classical natural right, the rejection of what the classics thought to be by nature just.

At the same time and not unsurprisingly, the right to self-determination is based on the assumption that democracy is universally recognized as the best attainable regime: consent predominates over wisdom.⁶⁷ The principles on which democracy is grounded, such as political egalitarianism, are assumed to be incontrovertible. Their peremptory character, focused on correct procedures rather than on correct ends, precludes the possibility of calling into question the aim of existing regimes. To the extent that regimes today are marked less by the duties of the citizens than by their rights, the champions of democratic values as universal values act like the passengers of a ship concerned with the correct navigation of the helmsman regardless of the destination. What modernity has lost sight of is that no matter how noble the principles of democracy may be, they cannot in and of themselves be a warrant against tyranny. The twentieth century witnessed terrible crimes whose origin may be traced to the alleged quest for the common good with due respect to democratic procedures. While in a sense it is true that every regime is in its origin tyrannical, as we will show below, it is of the utmost political importance to be able to recognize, both during the founding moment and afterwards, when political actions

⁶⁶ For a quick view on how self-determination evolved from a “principle,” in the nineteenth century, to a “right,” and on the problems the latter entails, see Hurst Hannum, *The Right of Self-Determination in the Twenty-First Century*, 55 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 773 (1998), <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/wlulr/vol55/iss3/8>.

⁶⁷ On this topic, Martin Rhonheimer’s analysis of Pope Benedict’s address to the Bundestag (commonly referred to as the “Regensburg Address”) is especially valuable. According to Rhonheimer, the Pope’s words “can quite reasonably be understood as *not* calling into question the principle of majority rule... but rather as reminding those who practice politics that even democratic, procedurally correct majority decisions can legislate materially *unjust* decisions,” Rhonheimer, M. (2015). “The Secular State, Democracy, and Natural Law: Benedict XVI’s Address to the Bundestag from the Perspective of Legal Ethics and Democracy Theory.” In M. Cartabia & A. Simoncini (eds.), *Pope Benedict XVI’s Legal Thought: A Dialogue on the Foundation of Law* (Law and Christianity, pp. 79-92). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 83 (emphases in the original). doi:10.1017/CBO9781316106303.006. Although as Rhonheimer later adds, “it is not the principle of democratic majority decision making that is called into question; it is only, and exclusively, the material results of the process that are being subjected to critique” (p. 85), Pope Benedict’s address certainly serves the purpose of pointing to the limits of majority rule and to the need of a higher standard to judge what is just.

take a turn for the worse.

IV. Toward the Best Regime

That there is a hierarchy of regimes recognized and accepted by most people is indicated at least by the distinction between correct or legitimate regimes and tyranny, a distinction that remains valid today even if that distinction has been blurred by modernity or if modern thinkers refuse to acknowledge such a hierarchy categorically.⁶⁸ While the use of the word tyranny is less frequent today than it was, for example, at the end of the eighteenth century (in the period of the American and French Revolutions), printed publications suggest that it is used more frequently today than it was during the first quarter of that century.⁶⁹ Presently, as in ancient times, it is widely accepted that unlike legitimate regimes, tyranny is characterized by imposition and oppression, and that its end is to satisfy the desires of the tyrant rather than to attain the common good of the people. This implies that the common good is not among the desires of the tyrant or that his desires run counter to the good of the people, whereas the purported aim of legitimate regimes is precisely to attain the common good.⁷⁰

It is when regimes deviate or appear to deviate from their goal (which is rule by law with a view to the good of the whole political community as opposed to the good of only one part of

⁶⁸ Thomas Hobbes has no reserve in defending monarchy (which he equates to tyranny!) over democracy; he even goes so far as to recommend the banning of Greek and Roman texts that make tyrannicide “lawful and laudable.” Although he does emphatically speak of a hierarchy of regimes, he places monarchy (especially against democracy) at the top, because he sees the alternatives to a strong monarch as chaotic and leading to perpetual war. See *Lev.* 2.29.14 and 4.46.35.

⁶⁹ See Google Books Ngram Viewer in English [2019] under “tyranny,” 1500-2019 (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>). To be more accurate one would have to compare not the frequency of the word now and then, but its proportional use in comparison with other words. While I am aware of the limitations of my claim, I believe it is nevertheless an interesting exercise. See also “monarchy, tyranny, democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy” for the same period.

⁷⁰ We will introduce the discussion of beneficent tyranny (where the tyrant seeks the common good) below and in chapter 2, and will discuss it further in chapters 3 and 5.

it) that they cease to be considered legitimate and are called tyrannical.⁷¹ Legitimate regimes count on the citizens' willing obedience to the stipulated laws so long as the authoritative element of the political community presents itself as capable of and willing to further the good of all. In contrast, since the will of the tyrant commands what is good for him alone, no reasonable person would willingly obey a tyrant, unless it were to avoid a greater evil. The tyrant's cruel exercise of authority renders his rule unendurable, making it the least desirable form of rule. From this brief description of tyranny, it is evident that citizens ought to avoid tyranny at all costs. The question we will explore throughout the dissertation is whether tyranny can be avoided and, if so, which regime would best replace it.

Perhaps a Lydian word in origin, *tyrannos* was not always pejorative but was used to refer to any reigning monarch.⁷² Herodotus comments that "in the old days even tyrants were poor, not only common people."⁷³ Originally, there seemed to be no real difference between a king (*basileus*) and a tyrant (*tyrannos*). As Lynette Mitchell explains, "the real differences between *basileis* and *tyrannoi*, so entrenched in our sources, were a product of a construct of ruling developed in the late fifth and fourth centuries, especially at Athens, and not a reflection of political realities."⁷⁴ During the seventh and sixth centuries BC, many Greek city-states fell under the rule of tyrants, who came to power with the support of the demos and the assistance of mercenary troops.

Although tyrants usually belonged to an aristocratic family, they fought the aristocratic powers that competed against them, and they tended, at least initially, to favor the many. There were tyrants honored for their benevolence toward the many, who lent money to the poor, used

⁷¹ See Arist. *Pol.* 3.7, 1279b5-6 with 4.4, 1292a15-19 and 4.5, 1292b5-11.

⁷² See Carolyn Dewald in Hdt., 837.

⁷³ Hdt. 8.137.2.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Heroic Rulers*, 32.

revenues to embellish their cities, fostered the arts, and even helped to preserve democracies elsewhere.⁷⁵ But in time, either tyrants themselves or their heirs after them often turned oppressive against the people, while they became self-indulgent and delivered themselves to all sorts of bodily pleasures.⁷⁶ Tyrannies thus came to be viewed as the lowest form of government because of the way tyrants ascended to power (through civil strife and against the laws), because of their propensity to depravity and violence, and because of their instability. In Ancient Greece, most tyrants were killed and no more than two generations of tyrants remained in power.⁷⁷

Somewhat paradoxically, in the greatest power of the tyrant—his capacity to oppress—lie, as it were, the seeds of his own undoing: not to be willingly obeyed. “For it seems to me that this good—to rule over willing subjects—is not altogether a human thing but, rather, divine; it is clearly given only to those who have been genuinely initiated into the mysteries of moderation.” These are Ischomachus’s words in his conversation with Socrates, as they appear in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*.⁷⁸ Ischomachus then adds that to tyrannize over those unwilling to obey is given by the gods to those whom they deem worthy of living like Tantalus, the Lydian king who spends eternity in Hades fearing a second death. According to Ischomachus’s belief, the gods reward kings with a divine good and punish tyrants with evil that resembles infernal torture. Not only kings are rewarded by the gods, but so is any ruling person or group of people who manage to maintain the willing obedience of those under their authority, be it in democracies, monarchies,

⁷⁵ It is noteworthy, for example, that Diodorus Siculus always refers to Hieron as a *basileus* and never as a *tyrannos*, even in his condemnation of Hieron in 11.67. See Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 16.2; Diod. Sic. 11.38, 53, 66; Pind. *Ol.* 1.8-23, 100-108, *Pyth.* 1.46-50, 2.57-67; Mitchell, *Heroic Rulers*, 42.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Diod. Sic. 11.67.

⁷⁷ See James McGlew’s *Tyranny and Political Culture*, 133: “Yet if strong tyrannies could as a rule endure safely the transfer of power from father to son or from brother to brother, nonetheless no tyranny, with the possible exception of the Orthagorids of Sicyon..., made it safely through a second such transference. Those unfortunate individuals who undertook to assume a tyranny after two predecessors... were besieged from the very outset of their reigns. Even strong tyrants of the second generation seem to have felt some anxiety about their position. It was said in antiquity that second generation tyrants were harsher than their predecessors.”

⁷⁸ *Oec.* 21.12. Carnes Lord’s translation in Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse*, 80.

or oligarchies as regards the public realm, or masters in their private households. Yet in his *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon confronts us with the practically universal fact that “human beings unite against none more than those whom they perceive attempting to rule them,” with the result that democracies are brought down, monarchies and oligarchies are overthrown, and even masters cannot gain their servants’ benevolence.⁷⁹ The allegedly divine good of being willingly obeyed seems out of the reach of humans, and every regime seems bound to be overturned. Tyranny or imposed government appears thus to be the only practicable alternative to any other form of rule.

Like Xenophon, Plato tells us, in the mouth of the Athenian Stranger, how difficult it is for human beings to rule over other human beings: “there can be no rest from evils and toils for cities in which some mortal rules rather than a god.”⁸⁰ Likewise, the Athenian Stranger gives as well the reason why men resist the rule of other men: “human nature is not at all capable of regulating the human things, when it possesses autocratic authority over everything, without becoming swollen with insolence and injustice.”⁸¹ Human beings are unwilling to be ruled by other human beings because power breeds injustice. To oppose rulers seems a necessary measure to avoid or attenuate injustice. Nevertheless, it is not true that human beings do not allow other human beings to rule over them. Examples abound of peoples who willingly obey their rulers. Willing obedience, as Xenophon tells us, is one of the traits that distinguishes kingship from tyranny. In his *Memorabilia*, he asserts that according to Socrates kingship and tyranny differ from each other in that the former is “rule over the human beings who are willing and according to laws of cities,” whereas the latter is “rule over the unwilling and not according to the laws.”⁸² Kings are esteemed on that account and have citizens guard them, whereas tyrants are reprobated

⁷⁹ *Cyr.* 1.1.2.

⁸⁰ *Leges* 4.713e.

⁸¹ *Leges* 4.713b.

⁸² *Mem.* 4.6.12.

and require foreign bodyguards to look after them.⁸³

However, despite their reputation for cruelty, not everyone in ancient Greece disapproved of tyrants. For one, the demos in different cities was inclined to favor a tyrant as a means to gain political turf against aristocrats. No doubt, aristocrats were in turn afraid of the arbitrary rule of tyrants and scandalized by their popular support, as the poet Alcaeus shows in the following verses: “they set up Pittacus, base of lineage / as tyrant of a city lacking bile and heavy with doom, / with great praise of the crowd.”⁸⁴ But, while accurate, the criticism against tyrannies obscured the fact that other regimes carried out similar practices. As Aristotle puts it, “those who criticize tyranny and the advice Periander gave to Thrasyboulus must not be supposed to be simply correct in their censure”⁸⁵ (the advice Aristotle refers to here is the “removal” of the preeminent men in the polis, who compete with or put the authoritative power at risk on account of their superiority). In other words, those who condemn tyranny because it does away with those that stand out fail to recognize that every regime—even those considered legitimate—does the same and, perhaps, justifiably so.⁸⁶

Whereas tyranny was especially despised by those who cherished freedom,⁸⁷ to get rid of adversaries was not practiced by tyrants alone, nor were they the only beneficiaries of such acts, but oligarchies and democracies did the same. In fact, Aristotle goes so far as to say that this “issue is one that concerns all regimes generally, including correct ones,” and he adds, “for the deviant ones do this looking to the private advantage of the rulers, yet even in the case of those that look to the common good the matter stands in the same way.”⁸⁸ Thus every regime, not only

⁸³ Arist. *Pol.* 3.14, 1285a27-28. See also *Rhet.* 1.2.19, 1357b30-35 and 1.8.5, 1366a6.

⁸⁴ Frag. 87 Diehl. Carnes Lord’s translation in Arist. *Pol.* 3.14, 1284a37-85b2.

⁸⁵ *Pol.* 3.13, 1284a27-28.

⁸⁶ See *Pol.* 3.13, 1284a5-16.

⁸⁷ By “freedom” I hear mean it both as freedom to participate in the political decisions of the city and as freedom to go about safely, without fear of losing one’s life or private property, and at liberty to speak one’s mind.

⁸⁸ *Pol.* 3.13, 1284a34-37 and 1284b4-7.

tyranny, is in a sense tyrannical because all rulers are compelled to impose themselves at least over some, who are then exiled or downright killed.

Admittedly, to say that all regimes are to a certain extent tyrannical does not make tyranny any better than them. Following this train of thought, however, it could be argued that beneficent tyrannies can in theory reach the common good more expeditiously than other regimes can.⁸⁹ Although tyrants are ignoble and make more use of repugnant measures than legitimate or checked rulers can, their extreme methods would seem to be justified if they are in consonance with the agreed ends of the city, that is, if they seek political justice.⁹⁰ Moreover, tyrannies could even appear as more desirable than other regimes if they can in truth further the common good more effectively (which would, moreover, presume that part of the common good is *not* the absence of tyranny). Since with a view to the common good even the crimes of tyranny appear to be justifiable, it must be true that the correct assessment of regimes cannot be done on the basis of the common good alone. We must find another, higher standard than political justice to judge the true value of tyranny as well as of other regimes. To give it due consideration, we will take up that discussion in chapter 3. For the moment, let us just add a few precisions regarding tyranny itself.

It could be said that wherever the subjects of a single ruler did not object to being subdued, there was no tyranny properly speaking. Indeed, if by tyranny we understand rule over unwilling subjects, many places outside the Greek world where freedom was not so valued, even absolute or oppressive governments would still be considered kingships rather than tyrannies. As Aristotle puts it in his discussion of the several varieties of kingships, “it is because barbarians

⁸⁹ See Pl. *Leges* 4.709e-710b, 5.735a-736b.

⁹⁰ See Arist. *Pol.* 3.13, 1284b14-17. This, I believe, is the argument that supports the Machiavellian teaching that “the end justifies the means.” I, however, argue that that phrase ought to be interpreted as a philosophical rather than as a political teaching (see below, chapter 4),

are more slavish in their characters than Greeks (those in Asia being more so than those in Europe) that they put up with a master's rule without making any difficulties." Even within the Hellenic world, tyrannies such as the one for which the above-mentioned Pittacus was elected, fell partly into the category of tyranny because it was despotic (like that of a master over his slaves), and partly into the category of kingship, because it was elective and over willing subjects.⁹¹

Aristotle himself is said to have dedicated a few verses of his own to the tyrant Hermias of Atarneus, his father-in-law, after he was killed by king Artaxerxes III of Persia, in the following epigram: "This man in violation of the hallowed law of the immortals / was unrighteously slain by the king of the bow-bearing Persians, / who overcame him, not openly with a spear in murderous combat, but / by treachery with the aid of one in whom he trusted."⁹² Aristotle thus deplores the cowardly deeds of a king against a tyrant who strove for virtue. Is tyranny, then, not always condemnable, even when measured against kingship? If we grant that Aristotle truly wrote these poems, then we need to find a legitimate reason why he would defend a tyrant over a king. It is not simply because Aristotle valued more his kin, nor because the tyrant was Greek and the king Persian, though these could be good enough reasons—indeed, politically speaking, patriotism suffices to defend one's rulers over foreign ones, regardless of their morality. Not to muddle our discussion with what Aristotle might have personally felt toward Greeks or Persians, we can make a judgment based on what he says in the *Politics*.

Aristotle knew that whereas Persian kingship, as a regime, was difficult to change due both to its hereditary character and to what he considered the slavish character of barbarians, in Greek poleis the citizens were capable not only of overturning rulers but above all of

⁹¹ Arist. *Pol.* 3.14, 1285a20-23 and 1285b2-4.

⁹² See Diog. Laert. 5.6. For Hermias's virtue, see in Diog. Laert. 5.7 the paeon Aristotle wrote in his honor.

revolutionizing the regimes themselves. In Persia, after the death or murder of a king, another absolute king would rise. In contrast, Greek poleis that underwent civil strife often saw not only the overturning of rulers but a change of regime, “so that it will be transformed from the established one into another sort, for example from democracy into oligarchy or from oligarchy into democracy, or from these into a polity or aristocracy, or from the latter into the former.”⁹³ Therefore, even though tyranny is most dangerous for the citizens, and although it is the lowest form of government, not every tyranny is hopeless, and not every tyrant is necessarily evil. In fact, it could be argued that the central books of Aristotle’s *Politics* are devoted precisely to the issue of improving tyranny by making it beneficent, or, more importantly, of moving away from tyranny—and from all deviant regimes—altogether in the direction of the best regime.⁹⁴

Although civil strife (*stasis*) might lead to a desirable change of regime, gradual and peaceful changes are more advisable. In book 5 of the *Politics*, Aristotle therefore provides two important ways of preventing civil strife (*stasis*). One of them is focused on the distribution of offices and hence of political power among the citizens; the other one is based on education, to help reconcile antagonistic groups in the city, who hold different views of justice. Regarding the first one, I want to point to the seldom acknowledged fact that already in book 4, Aristotle introduces a new typology of regimes as he moves from the theoretical discussion of the city, in books 1 to 3, to the more empirical solution of the best possible regime in book 4. This shift has been eloquently explained by Mogens Hansen,⁹⁵ whose findings I briefly summarize next.

One of Aristotle’s most important contributions to the study of regimes is precisely one that differs from the traditional six-fold classification of regimes which, as Hansen points out, is

⁹³ *Pol.* 5.1, 1301b6-10.

⁹⁴ See especially *Pol.* 5.11, 1314a30-b11 and 4.9, 1294a30-b40.

⁹⁵ Mogens Hansen, *Reflections on Aristotle’s Politics*, ch. 1.

not Aristotle's.⁹⁶ Indeed, though with slight variations, the six-fold typology of regimes already appeared in Plato's *Statesman*, and another similar version in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.⁹⁷ Aristotle's new approach divides the regimes into two main sorts of regimes, oligarchies and democracies, and considers four different types of each one according to their degree.⁹⁸ The "purest" or most extreme versions of both oligarchy and democracy are bad and are closer to tyranny.⁹⁹ On the other side of the spectrum, the "mixed" or lightest versions of oligarchies and democracy look more like an aristocracy or a polity, respectively, thus approaching what is best, that is, virtue, rather than mere freedom or wealth.¹⁰⁰ According to this scheme, the aristocracy/polity regime is practically the same, with just slight inclinations toward a more oligarchic or a more democratic form of rule, but "it is evident... that they are not far from one another."¹⁰¹

Aristocracies and polities, which are the least common regimes, take in book 4 of the *Politics* the place of the best regime, though they also fall short of the best regime unqualifiedly. Oligarchies and democracies are improved by mixing elements which will bring them closer to either an aristocracy or a polity, and away from tyranny, "since of all of them this is least a regime."¹⁰² With this typology, Aristotle establishes a new hierarchy of regimes and shows the way in which every regime can improve, by distancing itself from tyranny in the direction of the best regime. It is noteworthy that kingship is left out from this empirical scheme, probably because as Aristotle says, "kingships no longer arise today" except in the form of tyrannies, that is, imposed, because "there are many persons who are similar, with none of them so outstanding

⁹⁶ Hansen, 2.

⁹⁷ Pl. *Plt.* 291c-292a, 302c-d; Xen. *Mem.* 4.6.12; see also Arist. *Rhet.* 1.8.3-4, 1365b-66a.

⁹⁸ See *Pol.* 4.4, 1291b13 and 4.5, 1292b12.

⁹⁹ *Pol.* 5.9, 1309b23-34; Hansen, *Reflections*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ See *Pol.* 4.8, 1294a10-29.

¹⁰¹ *Pol.* 4.8, 1294a29.

¹⁰² *Pol.* 4.8, 1293b29. According to Aristotle, tyranny "is least a regime" because it is not based on law but on the will of the tyrant.

as to match the extent and the claim to merit the office.”¹⁰³ Ideal kingship is extremely unlikely because it requires a person outstanding in virtue, whose wisdom would obtain the willing obedience of the unwise, who need compulsion rather than persuasion to be ruled. If virtuous kingship were to arise, it would be in the form of tyranny. In this sense, to the extent that every regime requires compulsion, they are all to a degree tyrannical.

Conclusions

We have departed from the historical perspective of tyranny to turn to the study of tyranny as a philosophico-political concept. Our inquiry has by necessity begun with the political understanding of human things, for it is not possible to ascend to the viewpoint of philosophy without having looked at the city from its own perspective. Although we have focused on the problems that arise from practical matters, we have shown that the solution to these problems points to the necessity of philosophy. To restate briefly the practical matters that we referred to, we can say that good citizens, especially the more patriotic, are not likely to acknowledge the shortcomings of the regimes under which they live. Yet to acknowledge the shortcomings of each regime is for all practical purposes the first step toward improving them or setting them in the right direction. Since the clearest distinction between regimes is that of legitimate regimes and tyranny, to call legitimate regimes into question it is helpful to first look into tyranny and its limitations.

Tyranny is closest to the nature of political things: it does not presuppose that the ruler is enlightened or that he knows what the public good is, and subjects are plainly conscious that

¹⁰³ *Pol.* 5.10, 1313a5-9. This is not to deny that there are certainly inequalities among citizens in all regimes and that some are undoubtedly more competent to rule than others; however, Aristotle here seems to refer to those who were “very outstanding in virtue” (*Pol.* 3.15, 1286b8-14) so that the city could only unjustly legislate over them, for “they themselves are law” (*Pol.* 3.13, 1284a13).

there is room for the betterment of the law and the regime. Unlike what happens in oligarchy or democracy, in which adherents and rulers assume that their law is supreme and good; in tyranny, which excludes all except the ruler from decision making or from giving laws, it is easier to acknowledge the violent element of law. Having recognized the violence of law, it is possible to see that, at bottom, all regimes are in a sense tyrannical. The discussion of tyranny is thus necessary to the extent that it helps us to understand the greatest problems of every political regime. In other words, while tyranny is undesirable for all practical purposes, it is theoretically useful.

Besides suggesting that philosophy is necessary to find solutions to the greatest political problems, we also said that political concerns are not the primary aim of philosophy. Taken on its own, philosophy confronts the city and can potentially raise more problems than it solves. Yet from the perspective of philosophy, it is also necessary to understand the city and to help it improve. Theoretically speaking, one cannot attain knowledge of human things if one is unable to recognize political opinions for what they are. Tyranny is for this reason useful for the study of political philosophy. Still, tyranny is not without champions and, from the perspective of unenlightened citizens, it can be defended. To see the limitations of tyranny it is necessary to understand the presuppositions behind the judgment that tyranny is bad or to prove that tyranny is undesirable. In the end, our purpose is not only to discover what just regimes are like but to find what is required to make them not only just but also noble. In the following chapter, we will address the reaches of tyranny, and in chapter 3 we will speak of the contrasts and similarities between tyranny and philosophy.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REAL MAN AND THE CITY

Be men, my friends, and take thought of furious valor.
Homer, *Iliad*

Tyranny is a slippery possession; many are in love with it.
Herodotus, *Histories*

“When the curse was pronounced, the remains of the original offenders were uprooted from their graves and expelled, and their descendants were sent into perpetual exile. It was on these terms that Epimenides the Cretan purified the city.” These are some of the first lines that have been preserved from the Aristotelian *Athenian Constitution*, which begins with the narration of the sequel to a violent episode in Athenian history, after Cylon’s failed attempt to make himself tyrant of Athens in the late seventh century BC.¹⁰⁴ Cylon had been a victor at the Olympic games in 640. He was powerful and of good birth, and was married to the daughter of Theagenes, himself tyrant of Megara. In Delphi, Cylon had been advised by the oracle to seize the Acropolis of Athens during the grand festival of Zeus, so he gathered support from his father-in-law and persuaded his friends to make the attempt.

The Athenians resisted Cylon’s tyrannical coup and laid siege to the citadel. Cylon and his brother managed to escape, but Cylon’s associates, who took refuge at the altar as suppliants, were slain, having been led out under the promise that if they surrendered they would be liable to any punishment except death. The incident had multiple reverberations in Athenian politics for a

¹⁰⁴ Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 1.1 (P. J. Rhodes’s translation). For the following remarks on Cylon see Hdt. 5.71 and Thuc. 1.126.

long time. As can be gathered from the lines cited above, it was used by some to accuse the offenders—of the Alcmeonid family—of committing sacrilege, which tarnished the city. Others, however, believed that the gravest offense was the attempt to tyrannize the city. Indeed, because of its fervent defense of democratic principles,¹⁰⁵ Athens was considered, especially in later centuries, the democratic city par excellence—enemy both of oligarchy and tyranny—and the democratic spirit of Athenians was thought to date back to its very origins. They adduced a verse of Homer’s *Iliad* as evidence: in the Catalogue of Ships the Athenians are the only people referred to as “demos.”¹⁰⁶

Having sprung from the soil they inhabited, Athenians were said to be autochthonous—the implied assumption being that they were all equal among themselves. Despite their allegedly natural egalitarianism, democracy was by no means prevalent when the city originated. As stated in the *Athenian Constitution*, in the early sixth century BC “the Athenians’ constitution was oligarchic in all other respects, and in particular the poor were enslaved to the rich—their children and their wives.”¹⁰⁷ For a long time, there was civil strife between the notables and the masses, the champions of oligarchy and democracy respectively. Due to the continued oppression exerted by the notables on the poor and to the exclusion of the rich that were politically unprivileged on account of not being well-born, the people rose against the notables and the strife became more violent until both factions agreed to appoint Solon as mediator.

Solon carried out several measures to face agrarian and political discontent, but he ended up being hated by the two parties alike, for he did not satisfy their expectations. Although he was chosen with a view to reconciling the two conflicting factions, it can be inferred from Aristotle’s

¹⁰⁵ Consider, for example, the restoration of democracy after the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, two centuries later, in 404 BC.

¹⁰⁶ *Il.* 2.546-47.

¹⁰⁷ *Arist. Ath. Pol.* 2.2.

narration that each party wanted Solon to take sides with them and to overpower the rest of the people. Aristotle *twice* tells us that Solon could have made himself tyrant of the city by taking sides with either of the two parties:

Solon was so moderate and impartial in other respects that, when he could have got the rest of the people into his power and made himself tyrant over the city, he instead accepted the hatred of both sides and set a higher value on honour and the safety of the city than on his own advantage;

and after five chapters, he again says:

But Solon was opposed to both; and, while he could have combined with whichever party he chose and become tyrant, he preferred to incur the hatred of both by saving his country and legislating for the best.¹⁰⁸

More than Solon's refusal to become a tyrant, what is remarkable about these passages is what we can learn about tyranny, at least in the so-called Archaic period of Athens, and about the human heart in the political struggle of all times. Tyranny was not understood merely as personal rule. Tyranny was a political instrument, albeit unconstitutional, that was used by partisans to overpower the opposite faction and to impose their way of governing. By refusing to take sides with either party, Solon disappointed those who chose him as their leader. It's almost as if tyranny had been expected as a natural result of Solon's appointment as archon and mediator. As it became apparent not long after his departure, Solon's reforms did little to restore peace in Athens. The instability that ensued allowed Pisistratus to make himself tyrant on three occasions, with the support of the people. In the span of thirty-six years, Pisistratus spent nineteen in power,

¹⁰⁸ *Ath. Pol.* 6.3, 11.2.

during which he managed to weaken the rival notables. With the power given to Pisistratus by the people, he managed to accomplish through tyranny what Solon failed to accomplish through changes in the legislation. Because of its equalizing effect, it could be said that Pisistratus's tyranny paved the way for the democratic stability that Athens would enjoy in the following centuries.

By the time of Aristotle, the age of tyrants seemed to have come to an end. As Aristotle writes, the reason for this was that popular leaders were no longer experienced in military matters, as they used to be in ancient times. Since popular leaders were now experienced in rhetoric instead, "they do not attempt anything," Aristotle concludes.¹⁰⁹ But tyranny continued to be a threat, so much so that Aristotle recommends a mixed regime to avoid extreme democracies as well as extreme oligarchies, all of which are tyrannical. As Aristotle explains, oligarchies also turned into tyrannies when military power was given to a single individual or because the greatest offices were held by the powerful.¹¹⁰ In well-blended regimes, in which power is not given to a single individual but divided among many, and where offices are not held for a long time, tyranny and revolutions in general can be avoided. Aristotle's recommendation to implement institutional mechanisms to procure the stability of regimes implies that without those mechanisms, both oligarchy and democracy tend to degenerate into extreme forms of government, which are fertile soil for tyranny to grow in. Without those mechanisms, ambition for power will sooner or later make a popular leader or a powerful notable seek tyranny. "Hence," Aristotle asserts, "we do not permit a human being to rule, but rather law, because a human being makes this distribution of things good and bad for himself and so becomes a

¹⁰⁹ *Pol.* 5.5, 1305a8-16.

¹¹⁰ *Pol.* 5.8, 1308a21-24.

tyrant.”¹¹¹ Yet even if there were perfect laws, law needs human implementation. Institutional mechanisms may extend the duration of regimes but, according to what we know, all regimes will sooner or later become corrupt or perish.

The classics were plainly aware of the aberrant passions that inevitably and recurrently scourge human beings. Although they wished to devote their lives to the contemplation of higher things, they understood that it would be a mistake to look away from the life in the city without having considered it thoroughly.¹¹² The theoretical life must consider the practical life, for “nothing which is practically false can be theoretically true.”¹¹³ Selfishness and greed for power are permanent elements of political life and a frequent motive of human action: they are part and parcel of the nature of political things. While the classics believed that by nature human beings could rise above the passions, they were not blind to the fact that only few are able to fulfill that nature: most human beings will not desire, let alone lead, a theoretical life. As I will try to show in chapter three, the classics were therefore compelled to publicly advance a noble way of life that not only fell short of the theoretical life but was in certain respects at odds with it. But before we can turn to this last claim, it is necessary to lay a foundation that will help us better understand the workings of the city, with special attention to the real man, on whom we focus in this chapter. We will also study here the tension between the real man’s way of life (the honorable life) and the different parts of the city: private men, lovers of gain, and the tyrant.

I. The Most Pleasurable Life

In the introductory remarks to Cicero’s *De Finibus*, he argues that for those who are used

¹¹¹ *Eth. Nic.* 5.6, 1134a35-b1; see also *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a31-33. Plato’s Athenian Stranger speaks too of the necessity of laws as well as of correct education and lucky nature (*Leges* 6.766a, 9.874e-75a, and 10.896d-97b). As for the ineradicable character of evil in the city, see Strauss, *The City and Man*, 127.

¹¹² See Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 39; and *Origins of Political Science*, 164.

¹¹³ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 99.

to reading philosophy with diligence, no other books are worth reading more than those which concern the ultimate aim of human life: “For what problem does life offer so important as all the topics of philosophy, and especially the question raised in these volumes—What is the End, the final and ultimate aim, which gives the standard for all principles of well-being and of right conduct? What does Nature pursue as the thing supremely desirable, what does she avoid as the ultimate evil?” Though the discussion of other questions is more popular, as Cicero asserts, none is more fecund than this one. Yet “it is a subject,” Cicero continues, “on which the most learned philosophers disagree profoundly.”¹¹⁴ We will have the chance to deal more closely with this question from the viewpoint of philosophers in the following chapter.

Before we can move on to study all these matters from the highest point of view, following Socrates’s approach to philosophy we must dwell on a more urgent discussion, namely, what the final and ultimate aim is not for the few learned but for most human beings—and especially for the most public spirited of all, the *anēr* or real man, whose character and way of life we will discuss in this chapter. Indeed, we think that this is what is meant when it is said that Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens:¹¹⁵ that knowledge of the whole must begin by studying the human things, good and evil, notwithstanding the conflicting stance toward philosophy of the former or the baseness of the later. The human things constitute a whole within the whole, a whole whose nature reveals part of the larger whole to which it belongs.

Let us begin with a few remarks Cicero makes regarding philosophy from the viewpoint of the city. Philosophy, according to Cicero, far from being praised, is neglected by most and even disparaged by many. Very many do not love philosophy and even some who are not unlearned disapprove of studying it. Only very few consider that the study of philosophy can be

¹¹⁴ *Fin.* 1.4.11-12.

¹¹⁵ See Cic. *Tusc.* 5.4.10-11 and *Brutus* 31; also Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.11-12 and 1.15-16.

good; nonetheless, even they do not deem its study fitting for statesmen. The leading citizens of the Roman Republic were outspokenly unfriendly toward philosophy because it stood for something foreign, but especially because it alienated the patriotic Roman spirit.¹¹⁶ After Cicero's introduction of philosophy, Rome had to wait two hundred years before one of its rulers, namely, Marcus Aurelius, could embrace philosophy and write in Greek without having to justify himself. And even he, the philosopher emperor, admonished his readers not to hope for Plato's Republic.¹¹⁷ What Cicero says about Rome's censure of philosophy is by no means limited to Rome or to that time in history but, *mutatis mutandis*, it is valid for all nations even today.

Cicero's remarks remind one of the censure against philosophy made by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*. According to Callicles, philosophy "is a graceful thing, if someone engages in it in due measure at the proper age; but if he fritters his time away in it further than is needed, it is the ruin of human beings."¹¹⁸ Philosophy, Callicles explains, drives real men away from their nature because it prevents them from acquiring the experience necessary to become noble and good men (*kaloï kagathoi andres*) and to have a good reputation in the city. Moreover, Callicles continues, it leads to inexperience both in private and public affairs, so that those who continue to philosophize well into adulthood are ignorant about the laws of the city and about the speeches one must use in association with other human beings. They also ignore human pleasures and desires and "in sum they become all in all inexperienced in customs and characters," Callicles concludes, with the result that, on account of their uselessness to the cities, they do not deserve praise but are instead a cause of laughter.¹¹⁹

These and other reasons that will be developed below make clear why, from the point of

¹¹⁶ *Fin.* 1.1.1; *Tusc.* 5.2.5; *Acad.* 2.2.5; *Off.* 2.1.2.

¹¹⁷ See *Med.* 9.29.

¹¹⁸ *Grg.* 484c; see also *Rep.* 6.487d.

¹¹⁹ *Grg.* 484d-e; see also *Rep.* 6.487c-d and *Tht.* 173c-174a.

view of the political man—and of many private men—philosophy is the ruin of human beings. As it appears, philosophy is not good but rather harmful as regards political affairs or household management. Such opinions of philosophy are perfectly comprehensible from the point of view of the *anēr* or the real man. The Greek word *anēr* (pl. *andres*), often rendered simply as “man,” is generally used in contradistinction to *anthrōpos* (pl. *anthrōpoi*), a mere human being, to emphatically express the virile and dauntless character of certain men. Homer reserves the use of *anēr* for heroic deeds, and *aneres* is commonly combined with the imperative *este* to instill courage in the soldiers, lest they flee from battle: be men!¹²⁰ In Greek literature, traditionally manly deeds are performed by *andres*, never by *anthrōpoi*.¹²¹

The word *anthrōpos* is mostly neutral, used in contradistinction to the gods or to beasts. However, when opposed to *anēr*, it can have a somewhat negative connotation. For example, in Xenophon’s *Hiero*, the poet Simonides tells the tyrant Hiero that “a real man (*anēr*) differs from the other animals in the striving for honor.... But love of honor¹²² does not arise naturally either in the irrational animals or in all human beings (*anthrōpoi*). Those in whom love of honor and praise¹²³ arises by nature differ the most from cattle and are also believed to be no longer human beings (*anthrōpoi*) merely, but real men (*andres*).”¹²⁴ Love of honor is the distinguishing characteristic of the real man in opposition to animals and to slavish, meek human beings¹²⁵. The noun *anēr* also shares the same root as the cardinal virtue of fortitude or courage, *andreia*, which could be etymologically translated as “manliness.” Therefore, *anēr* usually describes a

¹²⁰ For an enlightening exposition of the nuances between *andres* and *anthrōpoi* in Homer, see Seth Benardete, *Achilles and Hector: The Homeric Hero*, Chapter 1.

¹²¹ Contrast, for example, the use of *anthrōpos* and *anēr* in Xen. *Cyr.* 1.4.12 and 1.4.25, respectively.

¹²² The Greek term for “love of honor” is *philotimia*, often translated also as “ambition.”

¹²³ The Greek phrasing is *erōs timēs te kai epainou*; both “*erōs*” and words with the root “*phil-*” can be translated as “love.”

¹²⁴ *Hiero* 7.3; see also *An.* 1.7.4.

¹²⁵ It is worth noting here that from the viewpoint of the city, Socrates is seen as meek or even cowardly ; but from the viewpoint of wisdom, he is more courageous than even real men. We will deal with Socrates’s courage in chapter 3.

redoubtable man who is courageously resolute, fierce in battle, and worthy of receiving honors from the city.

Book 3 of Plato's *Republic* seems entirely devoted to the rearing of real men. There, Socrates shows Glaucon and Adeimantus that through the appropriate mix of music and gymnastic the statesman can properly inform the spirit (*thūmos*) of real men to become courageous (*andreios*) and keep it from turning too soft or tame, on the one hand, or cruel and harsh, on the other.¹²⁶ The real man's character is defined by the "proper degree of tension and relaxation" between the philosophic and the spirited, or between *logos* and *thūmos*.¹²⁷ How the tension between reason and spiritedness is resolved differs depending on whether it is experienced by the real man or by the philosopher. It is noteworthy that Socrates leaves aside until book 4 the discussion of the desiring part, whose close relation to *erōs* he studiously omits.¹²⁸ The apparently natural harmony between spiritedness and reason over desire is unquestionable only from the viewpoint of the real man.

Diametrically opposed to the real man is the character of the unambitious man, whose description might well accord with that of Socrates or of the philosopher. In book 8 of the *Republic*, Socrates says that the timocratic man is born of an unambitious man "who flees honors, the ruling of offices, the lawsuits, and everything of the sort that's to the busybody's taste, and who is willing to be gotten the better of so as not to be bothered." That man does not rule, he is not serious about money, "and doesn't fight and insult people for its sake in private actions in courts and in public but takes everything of the sort in an easygoing way." Remiss, simpleton, and idle, he is held in small account even by his domestics, to the point that they urge

¹²⁶ See *Rep.* 3.410d-411e.

¹²⁷ *Rep.* 3.412a; see also 4.441e-442a.

¹²⁸ See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 111.

the son “to be more of a man (*anēr mällon estai*) than his father.”¹²⁹ Though gentleness ought to be fostered in the city, from the viewpoint of the real man gentleness is a subsidiary aim and, as such, it is rather blamed than praised.¹³⁰

In contrast, Xenophon’s old Cyrus, who it could be argued is the real man *par excellence*, is described as “most ambitious (*philotimotatos*),¹³¹ with the result that he endured every labor and faced every risk for the sake of being praised.”¹³² We also learn from the *Cyropaedia* that the real man is a lover of victory (*philonikos*) and, if he is capable enough, he can teach others to be continent and to abstain from what is shameful to defeat the enemies: his men do not flee when war does not favor them, and they do not plunder when it does.¹³³ The real man practices continence: he abstains from pleasures at hand to defeat his enemies and to enjoy more of them in the future. The real man is not reckless, for he mixes courage with cleverness, though we must note that by cleverness the real man understands to seek virtue not in itself but for the fruits it bears, namely, pleasure.¹³⁴

If the real man happens to have a less kingly penchant, instead of receiving honors he is envied because he seeks to have more than others, and he is blamed and accused of leading a shameful life by the many. Yet far from thwarting his enterprises, risks that arise from envy spur the *thūmos* of the real man. The real man is courageous, willing to carry out the enterprises that

¹²⁹ *Rep.* 8.549c-550a.

¹³⁰ See Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, interpretive essay to *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 265-66.

¹³¹ To be sure, the term *philotimos* can have a both a positive and a somewhat negative meaning. When negative, it is often translated as “ambition” rather than love of honor (see Bartlett and Collins, interpretive essay to *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 265). From the viewpoint of wisdom, “love of honor and love of money are said to be reproaches” (*Pl. Rep.* 1.347b). Socrates is here referring to the viewpoint of “most decent men” (*epieikestatoi*); that this is the viewpoint of true philosophers and not conventional human beings is hinted by their rejection of honors (see Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 102), and because he cautiously reserves the use of the superlative of *epieikēs* for the philosopher (see *Rep.* 6.488a2, 489b2; also Joshua Parens, *Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions*, 36). I must note here that Socrates uses again the superlative only when referring to the enslaved part of the tyrant’s soul (*Rep.* 9.577d).

¹³² *Cyr.* 1.2.1; also 1.5.12. Xenophon also refers to Agesilaus as *philotimotatos*, and says that the man who is a lover of honor (*erastheis tou eukleēs*) since youth is justly counted as blessed (*Ages.* 10.4).

¹³³ *Cyr.* 4.2.25.

¹³⁴ See *Cyr.* 1.5.9 and context.

mere human beings cannot carry out due to softness, unmanliness, or lack of ambition. What good can philosophy bring to a man whose ultimate aim is to receive honors and praise on account of his bravery? In the eyes of the real man, philosophy is evidently prejudicial to the extent that it weakens the character of men and produces cowardice, which renders them unable to rule. The philosopher does not wish to rule and places thought before action, but for the real man action is more important than thought.¹³⁵ Whereas the philosopher considers the discussion concerned with the best way of life of the utmost importance, a real man does not waste his time on a question whose answer is obvious to him.

For the real man his own way of life is, of course, the correct and most choiceworthy way of life. Moreover, from the viewpoint of the real man it would be unreasonable and negligent to spend time discussing the nuances of an evident truth while political matters call for urgent solutions. Far from perceiving the philosopher's way of life as highest, the real man sees such a life as deplorable. Socrates's life would not be in the least attractive to the real man because Socrates is poor, powerless, and thus deprived of what the real man deems the greatest—almost divine—good, to rule over willing subjects.¹³⁶ Unlike the real man, the philosopher is unambitious: he does not pursue honors or wealth. The philosopher as characterized by Socrates is the antagonist of the real man, for the principles he postulates are exactly opposite to those of the real man, who loves the city and the honors and praise that it gives in return.¹³⁷

To return to Callicles, he takes the side of Euripides's Zethus, who champions the active life, and not of Zethus's brother, Amphion, who prefers the theoretical life: the correct way of life involves action rather than thought.¹³⁸ Admittedly, Callicles acknowledges that, at a young age,

¹³⁵ See Arist. *Pol.* 7.2, 1324a40-b2.

¹³⁶ See Xen. *Oec.* 21.11-12, *Mem.* 1.6.2-3, 12, 15; see also Pl. *Menex.* 234a-b.

¹³⁷ See Pl. *Grg.* 481d; for the political man's rejection of Socrates's way of life see Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 199.

¹³⁸ See *Grg.* 485e.

the study of philosophy is not shameful but fitting, and can even be admirable. Young men are not expected yet to have the experience or the manliness that statesmanship requires. However, an older man who flees the agora on account of his philosophical pursuits “surely seems to me,” says Callicles, “to need a beating.” Callicles sees the philosopher as little more than an unmanly rumormonger, who lives his life “whispering with three or four lads in a corner, never to give voice to anything free or great or sufficient.”¹³⁹

Despite Callicles’s accusation that Socrates is a “popular speaker,”¹⁴⁰ Socrates is wholly unconcerned with the opinion of the many, as becomes apparent in the exchange between Socrates and Polus. Whether the many agree or disagree with the philosopher is indifferent to him.¹⁴¹ Given the resolved and unyielding personality of Callicles, who judges the philosopher by his actions only and not by his thoughts, he is unable to distinguish the wise man from the slavish human beings that he despises. Since according to his view the apex of human life is the political life—specifically the life of the strong man who rules over others—from where he stands the philosopher is as reproachable as any other unambitious person. Callicles champions the view of the real man *tout court*, without any necessary connection to the noble and good. According to Callicles, to satisfy one’s greatest desires there is no need to rely on the well-being of the citizens or be in any way connected to the good of the city. For Callicles, the real man is and must be absolutely free.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ *Grg.* 485c-e.

¹⁴⁰ The Greek word is *dēmēgoros*, a mostly pejorative word that combines *dēmos*, the people, and *agoreuō*, to speak in the assembly; see *Grg.* 482c, 494d, and 520b.

¹⁴¹ See *Grg.* 474a-b; see also *Cic. Tusc.* 5.2.6.

¹⁴² In *Grg.* 483b, Callicles opposes the attitude of the *anēr* to that of the *andrapodon*, ‘slave,’ which supports the claim that for the real man only he himself is truly free. It is useful to contrast this view of human freedom with that of the philosopher. For Socrates, human freedom begins with knowledge of the human things, especially the knowledge of the noble, the just, moderation, and courage. Human beings will be slaves as long as they are bound to bodily pleasures, regardless of the regime or of the ruler that happens to be in power. Self-rule is more liberating and more truly free than rule over others (see *Grg.* 491d-e). The first step toward freedom is to emancipate from bodily pleasures through a good education. Indeed, a good education is the greatest good for human beings (*Xen. Oec.*

The guiding principle of the real man's way of life is the law of nature as Callicles understands it: "nature herself, I think," he says, "reveals that this very thing is just, for the better to have more than the worse and the more powerful than the less powerful."¹⁴³ Therefore, Callicles argues that laws—established by convention against nature—that purposefully thwart the efforts of those whom he thinks are real men by accusing them of immoderateness and injustice go against the highest law, the law of nature. Although Callicles briefly acknowledges afterwards the importance of becoming good and noble and of having a good reputation,¹⁴⁴ nowhere is it clearer that Callicles sees power and ambition as most choiceworthy than when he praises Socrates for suggesting as the only escape from suffering injustice that "one must either rule in the city oneself—or even rule as tyrant—or else be a comrade of the existing regime."¹⁴⁵

Callicles does not seem concerned at all with the means to gain power. Besides, he is confident that Socrates is mistaken when suggesting that rule over oneself is important. To the contrary, Callicles asserts that moderation and self-control preclude human beings from becoming real men. Callicles adamantly argues against Socrates's position: "he who will live correctly must let his own desires be as great as possible and not chasten them, and he must be sufficient to serve them, when they are as great as possible, through courage and prudence (*di'andreian kai phronēsin*), and to fill them up with the things for which desire arises on each occasion."¹⁴⁶ If the ultimate aim of a man's life is to be happy, and pleasure brings happiness, then the key to the most choiceworthy life lies there, in being strong enough so as to rule over

21.11). Socrates rightly points that "those who are ignorant of [the human things] would justly be called slavish" (*Mem.* 1.1.16). The word 'slavish' translates the Greek adjective 'andropodōdēs', which itself comes from 'andrapoda,' "of whom only the feet are human" (see Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, s.v. ἀνδράποδα). Socrates's intention is to show that without knowledge of what is most noble or best there can be no freedom.

¹⁴³ *Grg.* 483c-d.

¹⁴⁴ *Grg.* 484d.

¹⁴⁵ *Grg.* 510a, my emphasis; see also Arist. *Pol.* 7.2, 1324b2-5.

¹⁴⁶ *Grg.* 491e-92a.

others, in having more, and in satisfying one's greatest desires. The greatest and most blessed human beings are the strongest because only they can live the most pleasurable life.¹⁴⁷

One cannot dismiss Callicles's posture out of hand. While for readers used to reading philosophy Callicles might seem little less than a caricature of an obtusely unphilosophical man, one can hardly accuse his discourse of being altogether inaccurate. To be fair with Callicles, one must at least examine his sayings from his own point of view. Let us briefly review his disposition toward Socrates first. Though he indeed asserts that the man who continues to philosophize past his youth deserves a beating, Callicles does not want to beat up Socrates but sincerely intends to open Socrates's eyes to the effectual truth of things—if I may borrow the expression. Two moments in the dialogue can help us better understand his posture. Early on in the dialogue, Callicles shows a candid eagerness to continue to listen to Gorgias and Socrates discuss: “I don't know if I have ever had such pleasure as now. So for me, even if you should want to converse the whole day long, you'll be gratifying me.”¹⁴⁸ Whether he agrees or not with Socrates, he evidently acknowledges Socrates's ability with words. During the subsequent exchange between Callicles and Socrates proper, Callicles says explicitly that he is fairly friendly toward him. A few lines below he even asks Socrates, his friend, not to be annoyed at him, for he will speak with goodwill toward him.¹⁴⁹

Whether Callicles is being sarcastic is a moot point; nevertheless, he makes great efforts to convince Socrates that the alleged wisdom Socrates professes would easily prove false if he were unjustly accused of something and taken to prison, for Socrates would be unable to defend himself. Moreover, Callicles argues, Socrates would die if the accuser demanded the death penalty for him! Of course, the reader of Plato is plainly aware of Socrates's fate, that Callicles's

¹⁴⁷ See Xen. *Cyr.* 7.2.23.

¹⁴⁸ *Grg.* 483d.

¹⁴⁹ *Grg.* 485e-86a.

hypothesis did in fact occur, and that Socrates was, if not unable, at least unwilling to defend himself. How can an innocent man who is sentenced to death be wise and yet incapable of defending himself? From the point of view of the real man and, to be sure, of most human beings who seek happiness in pleasure, no such man can be considered wise.¹⁵⁰ The most pleasurable life—for the real man and those who look up to him—is the life of the tyrant.

But if this is so, a practical problem arises in the city, namely, that only one person can be happy. At the same time, the city cannot allow one person to be happy at the expense of the rest: just as there is a tension between the philosopher and the city, so there is a tension too between the city and private life, as we will see next. Despite the tensions that arise between rulers and ruled or private and public life, from the standpoint of the many, the tyrant's life is most pleasurable, hence happiest, whereas the way of life of the philosopher is both contemptible and most wretched.

II. The Honorable Life

“Some Saian exults in my shield which I left—a / faultless weapon—beside a bush against my will. But I saved / myself. What do I care about that shield? To hell with it! I'll get one / that's just as good another time.”¹⁵¹ Surely to lose one's shield and abandon it is one of the most dishonorable acts for a soldier, who is expected to risk his life for the sake of the fatherland or, in the case of mercenaries, for the sake of whomever is paying. But not according to Archilochus, who in another verse asserts that, when it comes to saving one's own life, “feet are most honorable there.”¹⁵² Archilochus's famous verses at once question the patriotic ideal of placing honor above one's own life and they pinpoint perhaps the most human of all passions, or

¹⁵⁰ See Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.12.

¹⁵¹ Archil. frag. 5. Douglas Gerber's translation in *Greek Iambic Poetry*, 80-83.

¹⁵² Frag. 233, my translation.

the most base desire: self-preservation. While the real man vies for honor and is willing to risk his life for the sake of praise, as a rule, most human beings would rather be dishonored than lose what is most precious to them.

Not only in matters of life and death can human beings be inclined to put their own interest before the common good, it may be that without proper education, training, and laws, many human beings would prefer even trivial goods for themselves over the good or well-being of others, especially in dire situations. Even if the pristine nature of human beings were compassionate, as Plato's Athenian Stranger and Rousseau could argue, it would not invalidate the fact that, as things stand, human beings are in need of both persuasion and compulsion to show concern for others, particularly when it is at the expense of their own good.¹⁵³ The requirements of political life—the supreme form of association among human beings¹⁵⁴—are in tension with the private life or with the life of individuals. Archilochus humorously, and blatantly, draws attention to this tension by exhibiting himself as a shameless pragmatist.

The difficulty in, or the key to, dealing with political things is that human beings straddle between selfishness and generosity. As Socrates puts it: “by nature human beings have, on the one hand, inducements to friendship... and, on the other hand, inducements to hostility.”¹⁵⁵ Though contrary to each other, friendship and hostility are both essential parts of political life. The good of the city depends largely on friendship, that is, on the citizens' willingness to cooperate with one another, and on their contribution to the common good. Hostility ought to be avoided within the city, although, properly channeled, it is useful and necessary to defend the city from enemy attacks. In any case, political life demands politically virtuous citizens, who will abide by the laws and will risk their lives for the fatherland if need be. Therefore, the ruler must

¹⁵³ See Pl. *Leges* 4.711c; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 10.9, 1180a6-10.

¹⁵⁴ At least according to Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2, 1252b28-35.

¹⁵⁵ Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.21.

be concerned with the best way to stimulate citizens to become politically virtuous, which seems to be a mixture of praise and honor, on the one hand, when they act nobly, and of punishment and fear, on the other, for those in need of coercion.¹⁵⁶ While compulsion is inescapable, good rule must aim at conferring more honors than punishments, as well as at the appropriate conferring of honor—honor, to whom honor is due—for there lies the essence of good rule.

Since we've said that the real man is characterized by his love of honor and praise,¹⁵⁷ he would seem to be most useful to the city because he is most compatible with good political life. Yet most human beings are opposed to the real man and are as such either a burden or a threat to the city. As a rule, we can say with Aristotle, that "he who is without a city through nature rather than chance is either a mean sort or superior to man; 'he is without clan, without law, without hearth,'" like Homer's Polyphemus.¹⁵⁸ Only life in the city is self-sufficient and can bring the numerous benefits that are required to ennoble their lives. The city is necessary to edify human beings.¹⁵⁹

However, to profit from the benefits that the city gives, men's lives need to be molded from a rustic or semi-rustic form to a civilized or political one.¹⁶⁰ For a founder truly to bring about the "greatest of goods,"¹⁶¹ it is not enough to found a city—it must be a healthy city, one that provides the right incentives for its citizens to become noble and act honorably, to be willing to risk their lives for the fatherland and place the common good before their own good. From the

¹⁵⁶ See Xen. *Hiero* 9.2-4, *Cyr.* 1.6.10; Pl. *Rep.* 3.411d-e, *Leges* 4.711b-c; see also Strauss, *The City and Man*, 64, for his remarks on justice.

¹⁵⁷ See *Hiero* 7.3.

¹⁵⁸ See Arist. *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a2-6; also Pl. *Leges* 3.680b-c.

¹⁵⁹ As Aristotle puts it, "he who is without a city through nature rather than chance is either a mean sort or superior to man; he is 'without clan, without law, without hearth'" (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a2-5). Most, if not all, human beings need the city to properly develop their human nature. Although at some point the city also sets a limit to natures who are exceptionally superior by their excess of virtue, it is doubtful that those natures would flourish without a city. See also the reference to Strabo in the following footnote.

¹⁶⁰ See Strabo 13.1.25.

¹⁶¹ Arist. *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a32.

viewpoint of the city, *thūmos* is more important than *erōs*.¹⁶² Different human beings need different incentives to let go of their well-entrenched attachments or their strongest desires and to work in favor of the city. Whereas the real man may be quite comfortable with the demands of political life, unambitious private men are more likely to feel disturbed and unwilling to yield to those demands. “Lovers of gain,” in turn, will go with some of these demands, so long as they can reap some benefit for themselves. The tyrant will use the city to satisfy his own demands. In the following subsections we will focus on each of these kinds of men.

PRIVATE MEN

Plato’s Socrates, in the *Republic*, states that there are three primary classes of human beings: “wisdom-loving, victory-loving, gain-loving.”¹⁶³ Many human beings, we may suggest, are neither victory-loving nor are they gain-loving, but rather something in between: they are good-natured and persuadable.¹⁶⁴ Though not honorable, they are not necessarily dishonorable or base. They share with the philosopher his lack of ambition—they do not want to become rulers in the city—yet unlike the philosopher, their interests lie in their family and possessions rather than in the quest for truth. They live by opinion and are unable and unwilling to pursue truth because they cleave to all that is their own: their family, their property, and their freedom. With the real man, many such human beings share the view that pleasure leads to happiness; however, they do not identify pleasure with rule or power but with less abstract possessions. Because they are not interested in public life, the Greeks referred to them simply as “private” individuals. The term is *idiōtēs*, which may be used in opposition to public spirited men or rulers, in general, or to the tyrant in specific cases, for example, in most instances in Xenophon’s *Hiero*. The Greek

¹⁶² See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 110-11.

¹⁶³ *Rep.* 9.581c. The Greek terms are *philosophos*, *philonikos*, and *philokerdēs*.

¹⁶⁴ See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 123.

idiōtēs also means “amateur” or unskilled, as opposed to a specialist or trained person.¹⁶⁵

The viewpoint of private men is well articulated by Aristippus in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*: “it is quite senseless,” he tells Socrates, “that it not be enough for a human being to furnish himself with what he needs, although this is a lot of work, but instead to take on the additional task of procuring also for the rest of the citizens what they need.”¹⁶⁶ Aristippus identifies himself as a human being, not as a real man, and he has no qualms about it. He does not seek honor and, in fact, he sees the pursuit of honor as an unnecessary hurdle to overcome in the path of pleasure. He prefers to live as easily and as pleasantly as possible as a private man, being only master over his slaves. He rejects all public effort and chooses neither to become a ruler in the city nor a slave: he deems himself free from political ties.

When confronted by Socrates with the inescapable fact that those who choose not to rule are subdued by the stronger and become vulnerable to their abuses, Aristippus argues that he does not confine himself to any regime but is a stranger everywhere.¹⁶⁷ Aristippus refuses to acknowledge what for Socrates seems clear, that there is no “middle way” between rule and slavery, for one has to either rule or be ruled. To be sure, coming from Socrates, who did not rule and thought of himself as freest among human beings,¹⁶⁸ this assertion must be taken with a grain of salt. Socrates is not speaking in his own name but in the name of the city.¹⁶⁹

From the viewpoint of the city, Aristippus’s cosmopolitanism and his neglect of politics are detrimental, for the city is defined in no small part in opposition to its enemies and by the

¹⁶⁵ See Xen. *Hiero* 4.6 and Arist. *Pol.* 2.7, 1266a31-32; also Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 121 n. 3.

¹⁶⁶ *Mem.* 2.1.8.

¹⁶⁷ *Mem.* 2.1.9-13; see Arist. *Pol.* 7.2, 1324a16-17.

¹⁶⁸ Xen. *Apol.* 16.

¹⁶⁹ That Socrates acknowledges a middle way is apparent when he refers to the democrats’ ability to avoid ruling or being ruled in Pl. *Rep.* 8.557e-558a. As to why Socrates acts here as the spokesman of the city I believe has to do with his habitude of addressing different people in different manners; not every person is open to a philosophical education but can nevertheless profit from a civic education, which will in turn help keep or make the city healthy (see Xen. *Mem.* 4.1.3-5). This tells us much about Socrates’s benevolence, but also about his prudence, of which I will say more in chapter 3 (see below the section “Eros and Friendship,” pp. 121).

danger of war. As Heraclitus has it, “war is the father of all and the king of all.”¹⁷⁰ If all human beings in a city were to follow Aristippus’s example, there would be no one to rule or to defend the city. They would easily fall prey to foreign attacks and all would be reduced to slavery. While Aristippus’s position could be considered plausible from the point of view of private, individual men—although Socrates, no doubt, would also question it—his way of life and character are politically undesirable, for no city can thrive without honor-seeking men.

The ruler who aspires to rule a healthy city must count among his main duties to make its citizens love their fatherland in the same way that they love their kin. Likewise, he must work to make them friendly amongst themselves by straightening their judgment through speeches and by directing their actions toward noble deeds, for which he will grant prizes and honors. Far from moralistic concerns, what really ought to drive the ruler to guide the citizens in the direction of friendship and concord is political expediency, for a city where friendship and concord prevail is easier to govern and stronger against enemies.¹⁷¹ Moreover, it is not only beneficial for the political community but for the ruler as well, since those who are praised by the ruler will not only be persuaded by him but will also hold him in high esteem.¹⁷² If Aristotle is right when he asserts that “speeches appear to have the capacity to exhort and to incite those youths who are free, and to make someone who has a wellborn character and is truly a lover of what is noble receptive to virtue,”¹⁷³ then rulers must try to turn as many citizens as possible to gentlemanliness (*kalokagathia*) so that loving what is noble they will be more easily directed to political virtue not through compulsion but through speeches alone.

When a city is mostly made up of noble and good men there is less need of compulsion;

¹⁷⁰ Frag. 53. Laks and Most’s translation in *Early Greek Philosophy*, 168-169.

¹⁷¹ See Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.16 and 2.6.27.

¹⁷² See Xen. *An.* 2.6.20.

¹⁷³ *Eth. Nic.* 10.9, 1179b7-10.

friendship and concord prevail, citizens cooperate with one another and they are grateful to their ruler.¹⁷⁴ But since the city must also be concerned with its defense against enemies, some inducement to hostility is also necessary.¹⁷⁵ The ruler ought to encourage contests among citizens by inculcating them with love of honor (*philotimia*), by which they will be stimulated to compete against each other for prizes and try to become best at whatever they do, which undoubtedly redounds to the benefit of the city too.¹⁷⁶ Not only does competition for honors prepare the citizens physically to face enemies but also, if the city fares well, men will be more willing to risk their lives for it. “Love of honor (*philotimia*),” Socrates says, “[is] the thing that especially spurs one toward what is noble and honored.”¹⁷⁷ If all men were to vie for honors nobly, their city would soon improve in all areas, from military expeditions, to farming, commerce, choruses, or horsemanship.¹⁷⁸ Love of honor is a political necessity because it helps to harmonize life in the city and makes it strong before its enemies.

Nevertheless, to enjoin human beings to live a life of honor is problematic to the extent that the honorable life conflicts with private life. If in chapter 1 we said that statesmen deem philosophy unnecessary for the improvement of politics, and that political philosophy must be justified in the eyes of the political community; it could be said, analogously, that conjugal or familial life does not require politics, and that political life, accordingly, must be justified in the eyes of private men. As we saw in the case of Archilochus and Aristippus, there are unpatriotic human beings who are wholly unambitious and would prefer to live as far as possible from political life. Their very way of life calls into question Aristotle’s famous assertion that human

¹⁷⁴ See Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.17 and 2.6.22-24; also Pl. *Rep.* 4.425d-e.

¹⁷⁵ See Pl. *Leges* 5.731b-d.

¹⁷⁶ See Pl. 7.796d.

¹⁷⁷ Xen. *Mem.* 3.3.13.

¹⁷⁸ See Xen. *Hiero* 9.6-9.

beings are by nature political animals.¹⁷⁹

As it happens, it could be adduced that Aristotle himself also says that “a human being is by nature more a coupling (*syndyastikos*) being than a political one, inasmuch as a household is earlier and more necessary than a city and the begetting of children is more common to animals.”¹⁸⁰ Similarly, he also holds that “a human being is not only a political but also a householding animal (*oikonomikos*),” and that among human beings “there would be partnership, and justice of a sort, even if there were no city (*polis*).”¹⁸¹ Conjugal life comes before political life and is therefore more necessary than politics. In the household, Aristotle adds, we find the springs of friendship, of regimes, and of justice.¹⁸² Therefore, for political life to be justified in the eyes of private men, it must be in accordance with private life.¹⁸³

How difficult it is to justify political life is manifest in Pericles’s funeral speech, which we find in Thucydides’s narration at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War. Pericles is faced with the challenge to speak favorably of Athens to the survivors of the war, a war whose end is not near and in which they will soon be fighting again. Never is it more necessary to justify the political life than when citizens die for the fatherland. And never is it more difficult. Rulers are compelled to honor the dead in speech and in deed with extreme care not to offend the living who might expect either more or less.¹⁸⁴ Funeral speeches often exaggerate the virtues of the dead, as Socrates sarcastically remarks in Plato’s *Menexenus*.¹⁸⁵ Yet even exaggerations need to be handled with great care, for to praise someone for something he lacks constitutes an offense

¹⁷⁹ *Pol.* 1.2, 1253a2.

¹⁸⁰ *Eth. Nic.* 8.12, 1162a17-19.

¹⁸¹ *Eth. Eud.* 7.10, 1242a23-28. H. Rackham’s translation.

¹⁸² *Eth. Eud.* 7.10, 1242b1-2.

¹⁸³ For a fine analysis of Aristotle’s claim that human beings are by nature political animals, see Ambler, “Aristotle’s Understanding of the Naturalness of the City.”

¹⁸⁴ *Thuc.* 2.35.1-2.

¹⁸⁵ *Menex.* 234c1-35a3.

rather than praise and makes the speaker hateful.¹⁸⁶ In truth, it seems that no honor and no speech can justify the death of a son or husband to a bereft mother or wife. Whatever the speaker might say, “it is hard to speak properly upon a subject where it is even difficult to convince your hearers that you are speaking the truth,” Pericles acknowledges in his speech.¹⁸⁷ But rulers, especially in the middle of war, are compelled to justify the death of valorous soldiers so that others will still be willing to die for the fatherland: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

Like Pericles, rulers must praise not only the dead or the living but the city itself, to show the reasons why dying for one’s city is worth more than wealth or than any other personal blessings. Underlying Pericles’s praise of Athens is the need to make clear that without the sacrifice of some, nobody would be able to enjoy the privileges that make all Athenians superior to the rest of the Hellenes. Soldiers must therefore choose to die resisting or to live submitting.¹⁸⁸ And when the dangers of war are not imminent, rulers must still emphasize that a life of dishonor (*atimia*) is so unpleasant, so wretched, that it is better to die for the city than to live dishonorably. The primitive sense of the word “*atimos*” was more than mere dishonor: it implied a state of outlawry in which the “dishonored” could be killed with impunity.¹⁸⁹ Though the legal punishment grew milder in time, to be an *atimos* in the time of Aristotle still meant a loss of political rights, and it was used to preserve good morals.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, according to Aristotle, honor and dishonor were held to affect even a dead person.¹⁹¹ In short, when honor does not suffice to spur men’s courage, dishonor must be used to discourage cowardice.

¹⁸⁶ Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.12.

¹⁸⁷ Thuc. 2.35.2.

¹⁸⁸ Thuc. 2.42.4.

¹⁸⁹ Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 8.5 and 22.8; see also Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaiion Politeia*, 221-22.

¹⁹⁰ Arist. *Pol.* 7.6, 1336a2 and 7.17, 1337b11.

¹⁹¹ *Eth. Nic.* 1.10, 1100a18-20.

LOVERS OF GAIN

“For a real man, indeed, to become truly good / is difficult, in hands and feet and mind / four-square, wrought without blemish.” These lines, ascribed to Simonides by Plato,¹⁹² show how complicated it is to be a real man who is also noble and good (*kalokagathos*). If one can say that the majority of private men are not real men by defect, because they are not lovers of honor, it is also possible to assert that there are human beings who are not real men by excess, because they desire more honor than they deserve or—since their understanding of honor is distorted—because they aim at getting honor from where they ought not or for the sake of something base.¹⁹³ Having looked closely at private men in contrast to the real man, let us now focus on the tension between the noble and good real men and base human beings, who are hostile, not willing to cooperate with others, and who pursue their own good by any means available.

While the ruler of the healthy city should try to make the citizens live by Aristotle’s adage that reads thus: “one ought not to be courageous (*andreion*) on account of compulsion but because it is noble to be such;”¹⁹⁴ he should do so in full awareness that he will not be able to persuade either with speeches or prizes those who do not yearn for noble things and are hostile toward other members of their own political community. Lovers of gain have an ill-willed desire to acquire, they live by passion and pursue base pleasures. Since they are greedy for wealth and some also for power, they will promote seditions and make war to be lords of all things.¹⁹⁵ It would be a mistake to try to exhort these men through a sense of shame or by pointing to the noble because, as Aristotle observes, “as for what is noble and truly pleasant, [the many] do not

¹⁹² *Prt.* 339b.

¹⁹³ Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 4.5, 1125b9-10; Pl. *Rep.* 2.347b, *Leges* 5.727a; Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.24, 2.1.25.

¹⁹⁴ The phrase is attributed to Tyrataeus (frag. 9) in *Eth. Nic.* 3.8, 1116b3-4; see also Pl. *Phd.* 82c.

¹⁹⁵ See Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.1-5.

have even a conception of it, never having tasted it.”¹⁹⁶

If the ruler is unable to straighten the judgments of the many through reason, he must use coercion, punishments, and above all, instill fear in them, for they cannot be compelled through shame but only through fear and to avoid pain.¹⁹⁷ To cite Plato’s Athenian Stranger, “every real man should be of the spirited type, but yet also as gentle as possible. For there is no way to avoid those injustices done by others that are both dangerous and difficult, or even impossible, to cure, except to fight and defend oneself victoriously, in no way easing up on punishment.”¹⁹⁸ The lesson for the ruler is that he must aim at friendship but also find the right balance between persuasion and compulsion. It is one of the lessons Socrates taught using Homer’s Odysseus as an example.¹⁹⁹

Base human beings cannot be called noble and good real men because, although they do want to be honored, to gain recognition they use any means available, whether honest or dishonest, and they do not seek to benefit the city but only themselves. More importantly, they identify honor less with respect or recognition than with the gifts, wealth, possessions and pleasures they can attain thereby, so that they are better described as lovers of gain (*philokerdeis*) than as lovers of honor (*philotimoi*).²⁰⁰ That calling them lovers of gain is potentially offensive is apparent from the fact that in Xenophon’s *Hiero*, Simonides is silent regarding love of gain.²⁰¹ In contrast, in Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* Ischomachus explains the distinction to Socrates thus:

¹⁹⁶ *Eth. Nic.* 10.9, 1179b15-16; see also *Top.* 105a5-7.

¹⁹⁷ *Eth. Nic.* 10.9, 1179b11-12, 1180a4-10 and 3.8, 1116a27-33; Xen. *Oec.* 13.7-9; Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 214-15.

¹⁹⁸ *Leges* 5.731b.

¹⁹⁹ Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.58-59. As Xenophon explains there, Socrates taught that those who are not beneficial to the city, whether they are rich or poor, ought to be checked by every means, that is, with gentle words or beatings, if necessary.

²⁰⁰ Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.24, *An.* 2.6.21-29. See also Plato’s *Phaedo* 82c, where Socrates refers to the “many and the lovers of gain” (*hoi polloi kai philochrēmatoi*); but cf. 68c where the *philosōmatos* can also be *philochrēmatos*, or *philotimos*, or both.

²⁰¹ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 114 n. 29.

“‘For it seems to me it is in this, Socrates,’ he said, ‘the lover of honor [*anēr philotimos*] differs from the lover of gain [*anēr philokerdēs*—in his willingness to toil when there is need of it, to risk danger, and to abstain from base profits, for the sake of praise and honor.’”²⁰² In other words, lovers of gain are not noble because they are unwilling to toil; they are not valiant because they do not take risks; and they are not virtuous because they are corrupt.

In the final chapter of the *Cyropaedia*, after the death of old Cyrus, Xenophon portrays the bleak outlook of a political community made up mostly of men who, without the guidance of Cyrus’s rule, have become impious, treacherous, selfish, lawless, greedy, indolent, soft, cowardly, and unambitious.²⁰³ Through that pithy narration, Xenophon suggests that the springs that move human beings when their actions are not properly channeled toward the common good are utterly base, to the point that men are willing to betray not only their fatherland but even their own family for the sake of gain.²⁰⁴ Base human beings have a vulgar misconception about what is good for them and of what is good for the city. They share the view that Callicles attributes to the real man, that the greatest good is to satisfy one’s greatest desires, but, it almost goes without saying, they think that that good is largely based on bodily pleasures rather than on pleasures of the soul, such as love of honor or love of learning.²⁰⁵

The critical aspect of this way of thinking is that it is dissociated from the common good. Whereas the aim of the good and noble real man—to rule over willing subjects—is associated with the well-being of the citizens, lovers of gain doubt or deny that there is such a thing as the so-called common good: the only good that exists is individual, selfish, and belongs to the strongest alone. We thus arrive at an insight of utmost political relevance: most base human

²⁰² *Oec.* 14.10. The translation is Carnes Lord’s with slight modifications for the Greek terms in square brackets (taken from Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse*).

²⁰³ *Cyr.* 8.8.2-26.

²⁰⁴ *Cyr.* 1.6.32.

²⁰⁵ For a reference to love of honor and love of learning as pleasures of the soul, see Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3.10, 1117b29.

beings are unable to distinguish unjust violence from the necessary compulsion every ruler must implement. Therefore, they believe that to be tyrant is best for a human being and that tyranny itself is not different from any other rule over human beings, except for the number of people who exercise power. For that reason, when a lover of gain becomes a tyrant he does not hesitate to rule oppressively, trampling over his subjects to satisfy his own desires. The vulgar incapacity to distinguish just from unjust compulsion helps to explain why ancient philosophers chose to cover the imperfect and violent character of the law with a discreet veil of excellence—to admit the occasional need of violence may open the way to the indiscriminate use of violence, or to violence which is not used for the common good.²⁰⁶

Xenophon knew too well the nature of political things to overlook it. Having lived several centuries before Virgil, he could not have read Dido's words in the *Aeneid*: "Stern necessity and the new estate of my kingdom force me to do such hard deeds and protect my frontiers far and wide with guards,"²⁰⁷ but he surely would have agreed with them. By "hard deeds," Dido refers to what was stated before, that she must curb haughty tribes with *justice*.²⁰⁸ Xenophon's Simonides, in the *Hiero*, teaches as much: no ruler can make his city thrive without punishments. But he takes it a step further, or maybe two: Simonides tells Hiero that while the ruler—not only the founder—ought to award prizes himself, it's better to command others to punish those in need of coercion than to punish them himself.²⁰⁹ Simonides intimates that inducements to a life of honor are more credible and look better in a ruler with a good reputation and that the infamy of a ruler would prevent many from pursuing honors.

It is of special interest too that, in contrast to the passage cited from the *Aeneid*, in

²⁰⁶ *Cyr.* 1.6.31-34.

²⁰⁷ *Aen.* 1.563-4.

²⁰⁸ *Aen.* 1.523, my emphasis.

²⁰⁹ *Hiero* 9.3.

Simonides's advice justice is not mentioned. To be sure, the word "justice" (*dikaiosynē*) is mentioned by Simonides a few lines below, but it specifically refers to contractual relations, that is, justice in the private, not the public realm.²¹⁰ While Hiero laments that he cannot be genuinely honored because he is compelled to do injustices, Simonides is far from berating Hiero; on the contrary, he comforts him by teaching him when and how to safeguard justice. Hiero must see to it that justice in contractual relations alone is rewarded. As for public justice, Simonides leaves it open for Hiero to decide when and how to act. One is inclined to think that Simonides's veiled suggestion is that rulers must act unjustly sometimes, with those in need of coercion. Simonides only adds that it is Hiero's mercenaries who will be in charge of punishing those who commit injustice and aid those who are unjustly wronged.²¹¹ While Hiero will be able to enjoy a good reputation among the lawful, he will be feared by those in need of coercion, so that both sides of the equation will be considered.

A ruler who only instills fear in citizens is infamous and hateful, yet one who cannot punish but only praise will not last as a ruler. In the *Anabasis*, Xenophon tells the story of his Boeotian friend Proxenus, who from adolescence wanted to become a real man, competent to do great things. Not wanting to do injustice and unable to instill fear in his soldiers, he was only held in good esteem among the noble and good, but the unjust conspired against him.²¹² Speeches alone will never redirect the souls of lovers of gain,²¹³ or as Sophocles has it, "he who is not afraid to do some great thing is not frightened by a word."²¹⁴ Laws, therefore, must have teeth in them: punishment is the counterpart—or sometimes the substitute—of persuasion.

²¹⁰ *Hiero* 9.6. It is the only occurrence of the word "justice" in the whole dialogue. Whereas very few cognates of the "just" are used (see 4.10, 5.1), those of the "unjust" abound (see 1.12; 2.17; 4.11; 5.2; 7.7, 10; 8.9; 10.8).

²¹¹ *Hiero* 10.8.

²¹² *An.* 2.6.16-20.

²¹³ See *Cyr.* 3.3.51-55.

²¹⁴ *OT* 296.

Honors and praise are good and useful for the city so long as punishments are also justly distributed to those who deserve them. But even more important than punishments, the fear of punishment can truly transform or curb lovers of gain.

Again, in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Tigranes—who had been the pupil of a wise man²¹⁵—tells Cyrus that fear is a greater punishment than actual harm. According to Tigranes, it is less effective to inflict harm in deed than to show one's power to inflict harm, for “fear especially subjugates souls.”²¹⁶ If without fear lovers of gain are a threat to the ruler and to the city, when fearful, they even become useful,²¹⁷ for “fear makes people more attentive, more obedient, and more orderly.”²¹⁸ Therefore, it is more convenient for rulers to induce fear in lovers of gain than it is to offer them honors or prizes, for whereas honors foster hopes of aggrandizement in men, fear renders men moderate. Fear, indeed, is most necessary to keep lovers of gain in check. We mentioned above the fate of Cyrus's empire after his death, at the end of the *Cyropaedia*. One does well to return to the beginning to ponder again what is told about Cyrus there: although he was admired by all, he managed to control such a vast empire through fear.²¹⁹

It must be noted here that Xenophon's older Cyrus could be the sort of real man that characters like Plato's Callicles praise, especially if we believe that his noble goodness is a façade. Cyrus would then be a special kind of lover of gain because he is able to exhort others to be noble and good by appearing to be noble and good himself, although a ruler of his stature is necessarily beyond *kalokagathia*.²²⁰ To sum up, if the inclinations of human beings call for political life to drive them away from a merely sensual and beastly life, the nature of political

²¹⁵ *Cyr.* 3.1.14.

²¹⁶ *Cyr.* 3.1.25.

²¹⁷ *Cyr.* 3.1.16.

²¹⁸ *Mem.* 3.5.5.

²¹⁹ *Cyr.* 1.1.5.

²²⁰ Consider the advice he receives in *Cyr.* 1.6.27 and 3.1.23; see also 7.1.13 and 8.2.20-23 (in connection to this view of Cyrus, see the subsection *Tyrannikos* in the next chapter); see also Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 90-91; *Natural Right and History*, 140.

things compels rulers to use both persuasion and compulsion to guide citizens toward the noble and the honorable. Fear and rewards are the two basic elements that a ruler must use to make human beings meet the requirements of political life.

THE TYRANT

The tyrant is among the lovers of gain one of a special kind: he already possesses what he desires. Having attained power, the tyrant is also close to the real man: he is praised and honored above all other human beings. The life of the tyrant appears to reach the pinnacle of human life, whether one seeks pleasures or power. Of all men, the life of the tyrant must be most blessed because he can both enjoy all pleasures and rule over subjects as he likes. But though the many deem the tyrant happiest, for he can enjoy all the pleasures they only dream of, can it be said that he is truly satisfied? Instead of houses, fields, or domestic slaves, a tyrant wants cities, extensive territories, harbors, and strong citadels.²²¹ The tyrant's insatiable appetites prevent him from being happy.

Using Xerxes as an example, Cicero points to the necessary unhappiness of absolute rulers when their power is not counterpoised with moderation of desire: "though loaded with all the privileges and gifts that fortune bestows, he was not content with cavalry, with infantry, with a host of ships, with boundless stores of gold, but offered a reward to anyone who should discover a new pleasure: and had it really been found he would not have been content; for lust will never discover its limit."²²² Rather than finding more pleasures, it seems the only way for a tyrant to feel more satisfied is to make his tyranny better so as to rule over willing subjects and so be loved by them. For though we said that the tyrant is honored above all other human beings,

²²¹ See Xen. *Hiero* 4.7.

²²² Cic. *Tusc.* 5.7.22-26.

he is not honored for his virtue but for his strength and power, out of fear and compulsion rather than out of true admiration. He must therefore also be fearful of his subjects, for, so long as he is not benevolent, there will be more and more people seeking to end his tyranny.

The tyrant has no friends, only slaves, “for whoever journeys to a tyrant is his slave, even if he was free when he set out.”²²³ The tyrant is thus compelled to secure his reign, especially against domestic enemies. Of course, this means that the tyrant may aim at being loved not because he is genuinely concerned about his subjects’ opinion about him but because he could make his tyranny more stable and less fearful for himself, on the one hand, and to defeat other tyrants by surpassing them, on the other. If the tyrant could live a genuinely honorable life, it would redound to the benefit both of his people and of himself. In other words, for the tyrant to be happy it seems necessary that he make his selfish pursuit coincide at least to some extent with the common good.

The question then arises, whether the tyrant, who to attain power has committed innumerable crimes, can turn to a life of honor. Interestingly, among Aristotle’s remarks concerning honor and dishonor, he also says that they play an important part in the preservation of tyrannies. A tyrant who wants to preserve tyranny by making his rule more kingly ought to avoid dishonoring the ambitious (*philotimoi*), for “a slight involving dishonor bears heavily on the ambitious and the respectable among human beings.”²²⁴ The improvement²²⁵ of tyranny that Aristotle suggests is thus summarized:

[The tyrant] should appear to the ruled not as a tyrannical sort but as a manager and a

²²³ Soph. frag. 873.

²²⁴ Pol. 5.11, 1315a19-20.

²²⁵ To be sure, Aristotle speaks of two ways of preserving tyranny. Here I focus on how to preserve tyranny through improvement. The other way cannot be called an improvement (except perhaps from the viewpoint of the tyrant himself) but rather the exacerbation of his tyrannical ways.

kingly sort, not as an appropriator of the things of others but as a steward. He should pursue moderateness in life, not the extremes; further, he should seek the company of the notables, but seek popularity with the many. As a result of these things, not only will his rule necessarily be nobler and more enviable by the fact that he rules over persons who are better and have not been humbled and does so without being hated and feared, but his rule will also be longer lasting; further, in terms of character he will either be in a state that is fine in relation to virtue or he will be half-decent—not vicious but half-vicious.²²⁶

What Aristotle proposes is not only a change in the tyrant's form of ruling but something deeper: a change in the character of the tyrant himself. If he says that "the tyrant's goal is pleasure; the goal of a king is the noble,"²²⁷ then the tyrant must rechannel his desires, turn to moderation (*metriotēs*), and become, if not virtuous, at least "half-decent." Aristotle's suggestion is that the tyrant should rechannel his efforts to seek the common good rather than his own, selfish good. To address this possible transformation of the tyrant, it is appropriate to return briefly to Xenophon's *Hiero* for, as it happens, it depicts the conversation with a view to honor between a private man, the wise poet Simonides, and the tyrant Hiero.

Even though the *Hiero* is a dialogue, before one can have access to the dialectical teaching of the text it is appropriate to read it as a rhetorical text, that is, not dialectically but as the exposition at length—*oratio perpetua*—of the two interlocutors. Let me state as concisely as I can what I mean by the contrast between a rhetorical and a dialectical reading of a text. I hold the view that some texts can be read both as rhetorical or as dialectical texts, as I assert is the case with Xenophon's *Hiero*. What changes is the reader's approach. For a rhetorical reading one needs to follow the argument continuously without stopping to notice contradictions, gaps, and

²²⁶ *Pol.* 5.11, 1315b1-11.

²²⁷ *Pol.* 5.10.9, 1311a5.

possible intentions of the speakers. The reader lets himself be driven by the “sails of eloquence” rather than rowing himself “with the oars of dialectic.”²²⁸

Although a continued discourse can be delightful, as Cicero says, “when the exposition goes rushing on like a mountain stream in spate, it carries along with it a vast amount of miscellaneous material, but there is nothing one can take hold of or rescue from the flood; there is no point at which one can stem the torrent of oratory.”²²⁹ Since the aim of rhetoric is not to seek truth but to reach an agreement in consonance with common opinion, vulgar rhetoric “must necessarily sometimes be more superficial.”²³⁰ A rhetorical reading implies that one does not “stop point after point, and make out what each person is willing to admit and what he denies,”²³¹ but allows oneself to get carried away with the flow of the text. Therefore, the one who unwittingly reads rhetorically assumes that common opinions are correct. In the words of Plato’s Socrates, “it escapes the notice of the many that they do not know the being of each thing.”²³²

One can however choose to consciously read a text rhetorically and only provisionally accept what such a reading suggests. The rhetorical reading of a text may be just as valuable as the dialectical reading, especially if the former serves as a preparation for the latter. To go back to the *Hiero*, the rhetorical reading stresses its political aim, as opposed to its philosophical aim. Since rhetoric is based on opinions rather than on knowledge, its aim is, accordingly, to persuade, not to search for the truth. Indeed, the most superficial teaching of the *Hiero* has precisely this politically salutary purpose: to persuade the readers that private life is compatible with political life—even in a tyranny—and that honorableness is best. The *Hiero* shows that it is

²²⁸ See Cic. *Tusc.* 4.5.9.

²²⁹ *Fin.* 2.3; see Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse*, 176-77.

²³⁰ *Fin.* 2.17.

²³¹ Cic. *Fin.* 2.3.

²³² Pl. *Phdr.* 237c.

possible even for a tyrant to turn to honorableness so as to transform his way of ruling from one based mostly on violence and fear to a more benevolent one, over willing subjects, which, although it does not give up compulsion, is balanced through persuasion.

We said above in passing that Simonides tells Hiero that the good ruler uses prizes and punishments to help mold the people into behaving more honorably. It is better for a city to have selfish citizens who vie emulously for honors and a higher social status than selfish citizens who are wholly unambitious and lead ignoble lives. While the *Hiero* presents Hiero's and Simonides's points of view as two apparently opposed postures, in essence both postures are not only compatible but also belong to one and the same view of life, to the extent that their discussion revolves non-philosophic pleasure.²³³ Indeed, the conversation between Hiero and Simonides begins with the question about whether the tyrannical or the private life is superior as regards "human joys and pains."²³⁴ Because the *Hiero* does not ask about the best way of life unqualifiedly but about the best way of life as regards pleasure, one comes to the conclusion that the *Hiero* is based on the vulgar premise that the good is pleasure.

Notwithstanding its hedonistic appearance, in the conversation between Hiero and Simonides, it is possible to distinguish an ascent of sorts. The first part (chapters 1 through 7), in which Hiero leads the conversation, starts with bodily pleasures, but soon makes its way up to abstract pleasures, like friendship and love, peace, trust, and most especially honor, none of which, Hiero argues, can be enjoyed by the tyrant, mainly due to his constant fear of being killed. In the second part (chapters 8 through 11) Simonides takes the lead and speaks almost without interruption about the way in which Hiero can in fact enjoy these pleasures and be honored as he dreams, without fear, without envy and without danger. The transformation that Simonides

²³³ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 60.

²³⁴ *Hiero* 1.2.

suggests is dependent on Hiero's willingness to give up the pleasures he already enjoys—even though Hiero denies enjoying them—to replace them with the pleasure of being genuinely honored in the city. Moreover, it requires a shift in Hiero's attitude toward the fatherland because, although Hiero desires to be loved by his subjects, he treats them as enemies. Simonides thus advises Hiero to “consider the fatherland to be your estate, the citizens your comrades, friends your own children, your sons the same as your life.”²³⁵ The honorable life requires that the ruler and the citizens alike extend the love they feel for their own, their family and friends, to the fatherland.²³⁶

In this way, the rhetorical reading of the *Hiero* serves to educate the readers by placing all the emphasis on the refinement of pleasure with a view to honor and the entailing extension of love of one's own to love of the fatherland. Nevertheless, since rhetoric is wholly dependent on common opinion, it cannot lead to a higher ascent. Read rhetorically, the *Hiero* does not educate in the highest sense because it does not transcend the boundaries of the hedonistic plane. It does not involve a genuine conversion on the part of the reader just as it does not involve a genuine conversion of the tyrant himself.²³⁷ Even so, the rhetorical reading of the *Hiero* has in and of itself valuable insights, necessary to understand the nature of political things, the low truth of politics. The rhetorical reading alone points to the necessity of persuasion and compulsion for successful rule. Also, if one sticks to the rhetorical reading of the *Hiero*, one can readily appreciate that it imitates political life, for it reproduces the reaches and limitations that the nature of political things inevitably imposes on human life. Carefully assessed, it obliquely unmask the limitations of rhetoric when confronted with politics in general, but especially when confronted with tyranny. In political matters, the *Hiero* subtly suggests, persuasion is never

²³⁵ *Hiero* 11.14.

²³⁶ Consider *Pl. Rep.* 3.414e and 5.463b-c.

²³⁷ See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 93.

enough: Hiero's last response is silence. The rhetorical reading, even if only as an afterthought, raises the question as to whether Hiero or any other tyrant would in fact be able and willing to undergo the suggested transformation. It points to the need of a more careful analysis, which can only be done by reading the text dialectically.²³⁸

One cannot conclude that Hiero's silence means agreement or disagreement with Simonides. Yet his silence is meaningful because it opens, for the attentive reader, the question about the most choiceworthy way of life not only as regards base human pleasure but unqualifiedly. The wise man is obviously aware of the obstacles the tyrant would need to overcome and, more importantly, of the limitations that a beneficent tyranny, were it to come into being, would inevitably face. Even a beneficent tyranny should be compared not with private life simply, but with the private life of the wise man. One is thus prompted to pose the question of whether Simonides's proposal is meant seriously. Or more precisely, one must wonder about Xenophon's intention in writing this dialogue.²³⁹ It becomes necessary to look at the phenomenon of tyranny not from the viewpoint of the city but from the viewpoint of the wise man. What is clear, however, is that given the nature of political things, any discussion regarding the most choiceworthy way of life must consider the tyrant's life as a serious option.

For now it must suffice to suggest that the tyrant's life as presented in the *Hiero* points to the limit, to the boundary that political life cannot transcend. Within that limit, perhaps the tyrant's life, if he becomes benevolent, is after all the most choiceworthy way of human life. Yet all humans are by nature capable of thinking beyond the city and its inherent limitations. The perfection of human nature entails questioning and transcending political life. Just as the basest human beings without laws and education can fall well beneath the life of beasts, well-educated

²³⁸ We offer such a reading in the next chapter.

²³⁹ To cite Leo Strauss, "a pupil of Socrates must be presumed to have believed rather that nothing which is practically false can be theoretically true" (*On Tyranny*, 99).

human beings whose virtue is outstanding can aspire to be above the city's laws, and become almost divine or partake of divinity by attaining wisdom, the greatest good of all.²⁴⁰ The most choiceworthy way of life need not be limited to the all-too-human. To round off with a few words from Aristotle, "such persons can no longer be regarded as part of the city. For they will be done injustice if it is claimed they merit equal things in spite of being so unequal in virtue and political capacity; for such a person would likely be like a god among human beings."²⁴¹ Such a person is the subject of the next chapter.

Conclusions

We have thus far seen that the most pleasurable life is the desire of the real man and of most human beings. We argued that pleasure, however, is not a good guide toward political life if it is base, and that, according to the ancients, pleasure ought to be refined for it to be compatible with political virtue. The sublimation of man's passions results in the honorable life, the best life to which the city can aspire. Though imperfect, the honorable life is better than life without the laws and restrictions that the city imposes. While it is true that it demands the greatest sacrifice, to die for the fatherland, it also promises the greatest good available for the many, to be ruled honorably. The honorable life is very different from the philosophic life and even at odds with it at times, as we will see in the next chapter, yet ideally it may coexist with the philosopher and make it possible at least for some to follow the path of the theoretical life.²⁴² Whether political life leads to that path or blocks it, political philosophy must all the same begin its pursuit by studying the nature of the city.

²⁴⁰ Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.10; also Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 85 and 200.

²⁴¹ *Pol.* 3.13, 1284a8-11.

²⁴² If not themselves, then perhaps their sons might choose a philosophic path. This goes well with one of the definitions Leo Strauss gives of political philosophy, as "the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life" (*What Is Political Philosophy?*, 94).

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the study of the real man, of regular private men, of lovers of gain and of tyrants is not a detour from the study of wisdom but a necessary starting point. Our purpose in looking closely at all individuals that make up the city, with their desires and aspirations, their weaknesses and their limitations, is not to look down on them or to reprove them morally. Instead, our purpose is to understand without judgment the human things as they are and to know common opinions both to be able to benefit political communities and to have a solid starting point in the search for truth. The quest for truth is not dissociated from the effectual truth of things, and knowledge of the city, of men, of opinions, is already part of the truth that the philosopher seeks. In chapter 3 we will focus on this quest by looking at the life of the philosopher in comparison to the life of the tyrant from a philosophic standpoint. While we will address the problem of the most choiceworthy way of life, at the heart of our discussion, to continue our ascent, will be the investigation of tyranny not as a political phenomenon but as a philosophical inquiry.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE TYRANT

There is no horror, so to speak,
no suffering, no god-sent affliction,
whose burden man's nature might not bear.
Euripides, *Orestes*

Therefore the man who is really a lover of learning must from youth on strive as intensely as possible for every kind of truth.
Plato, *Republic*

In Plato's *Phaedo* we learn about Socrates's last words to his friends that were present at the sweet-and-sour scene of Socrates's death and who witnessed as he drank the cup of hemlock. Though *Phaedo* relates that during their last conversation he experienced a strange mix of pleasure and pain, when the final moment came, all, except for Socrates, were burdened with sadness and burst into tears—even the assistant of the Eleven, the executioner who was in charge of preparing the poison and of commanding the sentenced to drink it, left crying.²⁴³ The contrast between Socrates's undaunted poise and the resigned despair of his companions forcefully portrays the difference between the political and the philosophic way of life. Only the philosophic way of life is truly free and blessed. Yet it's disconcerting to call Socrates's life either free or blessed precisely at the moment when his life was cut short because he was unjustly sentenced to die. How could he be free if he spent his last days in prison? Likewise, no one in their right mind would call such a man blessed, especially when in the eyes of regular men

²⁴³ Pl. *Phd.* 59a, 115d-118a; compare the death of Theramenes in Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.47-56.

he had lived a wretched life.²⁴⁴ The Socratic or the philosophic way of life cannot be properly assessed from the standpoint of the city.

In order to assess the philosophic way of life, it is necessary to turn to Socrates's philosophic teachings. Since Socrates did not leave us any writings, to have access to his teachings we must resort to the teachings of his pupils, namely, Plato and Xenophon. But anyone familiar with their writings knows that they are filled with political lessons, for Socrates constantly conversed about "human things," which for him entailed the discussion of political life and of all things concerned with the city.²⁴⁵ To be sure, the political and the philosophical appear as intimately intertwined, but for the purpose of analysis it is possible to separate the two realms by discerning the difference between their goals. The highest goal of the city or the aim of politics is the well-being of the political community—even in the case of tyranny for, as we have seen, the happiest tyrant must concern himself with the common good. Philosophy, in turn, is the quest for wisdom and its highest goal is to attain truth. If in chapter 2 we have looked at philosophy from a political perspective, in this chapter we will center our attention on the philosophic way of life, for which we shall study the city from a philosophical perspective.

A question that might immediately arise is, why should a philosophic pursuit begin with the study of the city? Or why should the center of our investigation be to understand the way of life of the philosopher, a practical matter, rather than a theoretical one about higher things? To answer this question, we must remember Socrates's philosophical approach. The quest for wisdom is the quest for knowledge of the whole or the quest for knowledge of the nature of all things.²⁴⁶ Socrates became aware that knowledge of the whole must begin with knowledge of

²⁴⁴ See, for example, Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2-3; also Pl. *Phd.* 65a.

²⁴⁵ See Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.16.

²⁴⁶ See Strauss *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 11.

oneself, and that knowledge of oneself entails knowledge of the human things.²⁴⁷ Since the aim of Socrates's investigations is not the human things for themselves but with a view to the whole, he sought to understand the natural hierarchy that exists within the human things as well as the place that human things occupy within the whole.²⁴⁸ For Socrates, a proper investigation of the human things cannot disregard the distinction between good and bad, and more importantly, it cannot overlook the relation between the high and the low.²⁴⁹

Socrates's quest for wisdom is inextricably tied to knowledge of human things, hence also to political life. If we can trust Diogenes Laertius's testimony of how Socrates "hunted" Xenophon, then it is likely that Socrates sought young men to teach them how human beings become noble and good.²⁵⁰ Xenophon himself depicts his Socrates as "not inexperienced in the hunting of human beings" and willing to teach Critobulus how to "hunt after those who are both noble and good."²⁵¹ According to Xenophon, Socrates believed that knowledge of the human things "makes one noble and good."²⁵² Therefore, although we aim at understanding the philosophic way of life, the study of the political way of life is not only unavoidable but also indispensable from a Socratic viewpoint.

²⁴⁷ See Xen. *Mem.* 4.2.24-31, *Cyr.* 7.2.19-24, *Cyn.* 12.16; also Pl. *Phd.* 96e-100b, *Phdr.* 229e-30a.

²⁴⁸ See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122-24.

²⁴⁹ See Xen. *Mem.* 3.1.9, 4.2.26, 4.5.12, 4.6.1; also Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 7.11, 1152b3. To be sure, Xenophon does not mention "high and low" explicitly, but he does say that for Socrates "conversing was named from the collective deliberation of those who come together and discriminate affairs according to class" (*Mem.* 4.5.12). To discriminate according to class implies not only separating (as the active verb *dialegō* primarily suggests), but also ordering things. Both the verb *dialegō* and especially the expression *kata genē* have a connotation of "order" which is only a small step away from rank (see Xen. *Oec.* 8.9). In *Mem.* 3.1.7-9, the adjective *taktikos* and the verb *tattein* are explicitly used; while they seem to refer simply to the "tactics" of a general and his "ordering" of troops, Socrates's criticism of the general's teachings is that he did not teach the most important "ordering," namely, the distinction between good and bad or between noble and counterfeit, where there is an obvious hierarchy. In connection to this use of *tattein*, see also *emprosthen tetaktai physei* and *takteon* in Pl. *Leges* 1.631d, with special attention to the modifier *physei*, "by nature."

²⁵⁰ See Diog. Laert. 2.48.

²⁵¹ *Mem.* 2.6.28-29.

²⁵² *Mem.* 1.1.16. The Greek is *kalos kagathos*, which is generally translated as "(perfect) gentleman," or, more literally, also as "beautiful and good." Although I will not translate *kalos* as "beautiful" here, one must not forget that *kalos* also carries that meaning.

Awareness of Socrates's inclination toward the study of human things helps explain his interest in noble and good human beings and could justify why a philosopher would accede to help found, in speech, the best regime. However, such awareness does not by itself unveil the place that noble goodness—that is, *kalokagathia*—occupies within the philosophic mindset. It also does not suffice to explain why the philosopher, although he does not wish to engage in political affairs himself, considers it both reasonable and desirable to make others fit for political affairs.²⁵³ More importantly, however, awareness of Socrates's interest in the human things fails to explain why Socrates, through his allegedly noble teachings, won the enmity of the city to the point of being sentenced to death. Why would a man, so praised by his companions, be accused of teaching them “to be doers of mischief and skilled at tyranny”?²⁵⁴

There are reasons to suspect that Socrates's teachings have a stronger connection with tyranny than what appears at first or than one would be easily willing to accept. The commonplace perception that philosophy is supposed to be politically educative and that it must be primarily concerned with the common good has played a part in misconstruing Socratic philosophy, with the result that our approach to the ancients is biased. Until we explore the city in terms of the quest for truth, we will be unable to unveil the sincere judgment of political things from the philosopher's point of view. And unless we look at the philosopher's life from his own perspective, we will remain ignorant of the true status of political life from the point of view of wisdom. This means that we shall look at the regimes not from a political perspective but from a theoretical perspective, to study the way of life that each of them represents.

Consequently, our purpose in this chapter is twofold. In the first section, we wish to explain the philosopher's view of the city to understand the status of political life at its best from

²⁵³ See *Mem.* 1.6.15, 3.7.9.

²⁵⁴ *Mem.* 1.2.56.

a philosophical perspective. Political life at its best entails the study of the virtuous life, a way of life without which there can be no good city, as well as its link to the noble. By emphasizing that the virtuous life of the city is a concession, we want to point to the limits of the political life—even at its peak—and to the superiority of the philosophic way of life. In the second section, we will look at the philosopher’s view of tyranny to show the traits that distinguish the philosophic from the tyrannical nature, as well as the traits they share in common. Having established the link between tyranny and philosophy, we will look back at the philosopher’s way of life to evaluate whether he is truly blessed and to shed light on his relation to the city.

I. The Virtuous Life

DIFFERING TRUTHS

“I, who know the good, will speak to you, Perses, you great fool: / To choose Vice, even in abundance, is easy; / for the road is smooth, and she lives nearby; / but before Virtue the immortal gods have set sweat, / and the path to her is long and steep, / and rough at first—yet when one arrives at the top, / then it becomes easy, difficult though it still is.” Hesiod dedicates these words to his brother Perses to persuade him to choose the strenuous but noble path of Virtue rather than the easy and ignoble path of Vice.²⁵⁵ Xenophon’s Socrates cites some of these lines in his dialogue with Aristippus and observes that noble and good works are only attained through endurance.²⁵⁶ Plato’s Adeimantus also cites them after saying that speeches in prose and by poets alike “with one tongue they all chant that moderation and justice are fair, but hard and full of drudgery, while intemperance and injustice are sweet and easy to acquire, and shameful

²⁵⁵ *Op.* 286-292.

²⁵⁶ *Mem.* 2.1.20; see also *Cyn.* 12.18.

only by opinion and law.”²⁵⁷ So rough is the path to virtue that a life of vice would seem to be more natural for most human beings.

Likewise, both the prevalence and recurrence of vice point to its apparent naturalness. Just as it is natural for plants to grow or for fire to burn, without laws and compulsion human beings seem to be naturally vicious. In Plato’s *Laws*, however, the Athenian Stranger—ahead of Rousseau—argues to the contrary. He alludes to the naïve simplicity of pre-political men, and to their seemingly natural goodwill toward each other.²⁵⁸ But then again, the reason why those men keep peace among them is that they rely on an economy of plenty. Their good mutual disposition is owed to the fact that they live neither in wealth nor in poverty, both of which breed insolence and injustice. While it is true that a favorable environment positively affects human behavior, the view that nature determines the characters of human beings denies freedom of human action. It disregards the most significant trait of human beings, that we possess reason, and that we are in consequence free to choose a path of vice or virtue, regardless of the circumstances.

But whether vice or virtue are natural is difficult to ascertain, because there is no complete agreement as to what is natural when it comes to defining human nature. That the natural can be defined as that which is not made or caused by human intervention reveals the potential opposition between the natural and the human. The concept of human nature is problematic to define precisely because it is not always in accordance with nature or, more exactly, because reason is natural in human beings but reason may guide actions that are against nature.²⁵⁹ In view of this, Aristotle recognized that sound human reason stands above nature:

“For men act in many ways contrary to their habituation and their nature through reason, if they

²⁵⁷ *Rep.* 2.363e-64a and 364d.

²⁵⁸ *Leges* 3.679a-c.

²⁵⁹ Though, of course, men may act against nature as a consequence of imperfect reason (which I believe is a characteristic trait of modernity, in its eagerness to dominate nature), here I mean that even informed reason can do so too, but with a higher and correct end in mind, namely, to enhance or perfect human nature.

are persuaded that some other condition is better.”²⁶⁰ To stand above nature, however, does not mean that reason is always against nature. It means that human beings do not have to conform themselves with nature if they judge, through correct reason, that a better option is available.²⁶¹

The very fact that we can judge, not by nature but by reason, what is better or worse sets us apart from the rest of the animals, which are non-rational. Whereas “a brute animal has neither vice nor virtue,”²⁶² human beings are capable of virtue and vice because we can tell the difference between good and bad. For classical political philosophers, the determination of good and bad was ultimately grounded in reason, with a view to human telos. They believed “it is best to be taught the good from nature itself,”²⁶³ and they thought of human nature as the fulfilling of our end, and “reason and intellect are the end of our nature.”²⁶⁴ Though neither Plato nor Xenophon ever defined human nature in such terms, they are of the same mind in regard to Aristotle’s teleological understanding of man. In other words, they agree that the human good is defined with a view to the correct ordering of the human soul, which by necessity, if it can be accomplished, results in having a good life as a whole.

From the teleological understanding of human nature a hierarchy of goods can be derived and, with it, also a hierarchy of ways of life.²⁶⁵ Since for classical political philosophers human telos is grounded in reason and good things are defined with a view to it, they held that the greatest good is wisdom and the best way of life is one devoted to the pursuit of wisdom or the

²⁶⁰ *Pol.* 7.13, 1332b6-8.

²⁶¹ See Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 2.1, 1103a18-26. For the rendering of *orthos logos* as “correct reason,” see Bartlett and Collins’s note 4 to *Eth. Nic.* 2.2, 1103b32. Besides this first use of that expression, I have traced six other passages of *Eth. Nic.* where it appears: 3.5, 1114b30; 3.11, 1119a20; 6.1, 1138b20-35; 6.13, 1144b24-30; 7.4, 1147b3-4; 7.8, 1151a12.

²⁶² Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 7.1, 1145a15.

²⁶³ Xen. *Cyn.* 13.4. Michael Ehrmantraut and Gregory A. McBrayer’s translation in *The Shorter Writings*.

²⁶⁴ Arist. *Pol.* 7.15, 1334b15; see also 1.8, 1256b21-22.

²⁶⁵ See Pl. *Leges* 1.631b-d, 7.803a-b; Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 139.

search for truth, whereas a life without toil, devoted to ill-suited pleasures is by nature worst.²⁶⁶

Aware of the greatest human truth, they were nevertheless not blind to the apparent truth imposed by the brutal reality produced by unscrupulous and ambitious men. They could not deny that only very few natures are in actuality apt for the pursuit of wisdom,²⁶⁷ and that human life is much more often stamped not by wisdom but by base desires. Furthermore, they were aware that as a result of our failure to perfect human nature, most human beings are bound to disbelieve or outright deny our teleological nature as well as the consequent inequality that exists among human beings.

The prevalence of base ways of life implicitly denies the natural telos of human beings and refutes that wisdom is the greatest good. For one, Plato's Gorgias—who is the representative of a widespread opinion—deemed that the greatest good “in truth” is rhetoric, for it is “the cause both of freedom for human beings themselves and at the same time of rule over others in each man's own city.”²⁶⁸ Gorgias, like Polus and Callicles after him, equates the good with power, not with wisdom. Power as such is indifferent to vice or virtue. While Gorgias's assertion is called into question by Socrates, it nevertheless unveils the affections that more often drive human beings.²⁶⁹ It uncovers the nature of political things—more bluntly expressed by Callicles—according to which human life is guided by passion and toward action rather than by reason and toward thought. The nature of political things powerfully confronts the truth that “all human beings by nature stretch out toward knowledge.”²⁷⁰ The political realism that Gorgias stands for—which modernity would embrace as the “effectual truth”—questions the truth of philosophy. Political philosophy is the battleground where these differing accounts of truth might

²⁶⁶ See Xen. *Mem.* 4.5.6, *Cyn.* 12.15.

²⁶⁷ See Pl. *Rep.* 6.491a-b.

²⁶⁸ *Gorg.* 452d.

²⁶⁹ See Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3.1, 1111b1-3.

²⁷⁰ Arist. *Met.* 1.1, 980a21. Joe Sachs's translation (2002).

be reconciled.

Going back to Hesiod's passage regarding the contrast between virtue and vice, we may see that the philosophic truth, which stretches out toward wisdom and is grounded in virtue, stands above the nature of political things and may illuminate life in the city. At the same time, however, we are compelled to accept that, though inferior, the political reality is stronger at least insofar as it is more prevalent.²⁷¹ Therefore, it cannot be ignored or neglected or erased. Plato and Xenophon accepted it as the inevitable reverse side of their own truth. However, they thought it wiser to be as silent about its inevitability as possible, on the one hand, while they found a noble way to attenuate it, on the other. That way is the path of political virtue that leads to noble goodness or gentlemanliness (*kalokagathia*), which we will address below. Let us speak first of the refinement of political virtue.

POLITICAL VIRTUE AND THE NOBLE

"You have heard in Homer what the Sirens chanted to Odysseus," says Socrates to Critobulus, "which begins somewhat as follows: 'Come here, much-praised Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans.'" To Critobulus's ensuing question, whether the sirens chanted this incantation to other human beings too, Socrates responds: "No, but they chanted in this manner to those who love the honor accorded to virtue."²⁷² Though the Greek may be rendered differently, as Amy Bonnette notes in her translation, the essence of the passage is the same: not all honor is gained through virtue. That this is true is apparent from the fact that there are corrupt cities and bad regimes that honor vicious men as long as they are willing to gratify and flatter the

²⁷¹ See Pl. *Leges* 3.690b.

²⁷² Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.11-12.

rulers of such cities and contribute to the preservation of their regimes.²⁷³ Corrupt and dissolute cities breed and honor corrupt and dissolute citizens. Even disreputable tyrants can be “distinguished in honor from other human beings.”²⁷⁴ Honor per se is not a reliable standard for goodness because the standard for honor is not philosophic.

We have said that only life in the city is self-sufficient and apt to ennoble the members of the political community, and that honor is the cornerstone of political life. Although honor “is pretty much the end of the political life,” from the standpoint of philosophy honor is primarily a means to cultivating virtue. For decent men, it does not suffice to be honored simply but they need in addition “to be honored by the prudent.”²⁷⁵ Virtue is higher than honor. Or, as Aristotle also says, “honor is the prize of virtue and is assigned to those who are good.”²⁷⁶ The good city must therefore aim at teaching virtue alongside the inculcation of honor, for only with a view to virtue can honorableness constitute something more than mere partisanship. The overarching character of virtue helps to moderate the view that justice is what a part of the city says is its own advantage; it redirects justice toward the common good. The guidance of virtue contributes to the right orientation of the city’s goals just as it helps order the different parts of the human soul.

Although in extreme situations rulers might not be able to rely solely on noble acts to foster the good of the city—enemies might constrain cities to commit atrocious deeds—for the most part rulers should direct their citizens toward nobility. In the words of Aristotle, “the political art... exercises a very great care to make the citizens of a specific sort—namely, good and apt to do noble things.”²⁷⁷ A minimum of decency is necessary to make the individual private good compatible with the common good to some degree. However, the problem arises that while

²⁷³ See *Pl. Rep.* 4.426c.

²⁷⁴ Xen. *Hiero* 7.4. David K. O’Connor’s translation in *The Shorter Writings*.

²⁷⁵ Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1.5, 1095b24-26, 28-30; see also 8.8, 1159a22.

²⁷⁶ *Eth. Nic.* 4.3, 1123b35-36.

²⁷⁷ *Eth. Nic.* 1.9, 1099b30-32.

rulers can promote virtue, they cannot prevent citizens from using alleged virtue for depraved ends. In Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, we even witness Cyrus encouraging his soldiers to practice virtue and sacrifice present pleasure to acquire wealth and enjoy more pleasures in the future. He tells them that he doesn't "think that human beings practice any virtue in order that those who become good have no more than do the worthless."²⁷⁸ If those who fail to recognize wisdom as the highest good choose to pursue virtue it will be with a view to utility alone (toward wealth, power, or pleasures), with the result that their purported virtue can hardly be considered genuine.

While human beings who are guided by ambition or by opinion—as opposed to correct reason—may seem virtuous because they can endure pain and are willing to make great sacrifices, such as those that war demands, nothing guarantees that their sacrifices will be made for the sake of being virtuous or for the common good. It is true that from the viewpoint of the city it is of little or no importance what the inner motivations of the citizens are, so long as the city fulfills its purpose. But can the city fulfill its purpose if citizens only seek their own advantage?²⁷⁹ According to the classics, to see virtue as a means is dangerous—unless virtue is directed toward wisdom—because those who aim for virtue will do so to gain advantage over friends.²⁸⁰ Since most human beings do not live for the sake of becoming wise, it is best to teach political virtue as an end in itself and not as a means for something else.

Perhaps nothing can be done in the city to ensure truly virtuous behavior and only the philosophic way of life can turn souls in the right direction. Since political virtue is insufficient when it comes to procuring the right ordering of the human soul, one must rest satisfied with however much the city can attain. But even if no city will ever hit the mark, a good city must aim at virtue, for the good life in the city cannot be attained without it. Even though very few human

²⁷⁸ *Cyr.* 1.5.7-9.

²⁷⁹ Only in modernity would such a view gain prevalence.

²⁸⁰ Although virtue is not mentioned there, see Menon's example in *Xen. An.* 2.6.21-28; see also *Cyr.* 1.6.32.

beings are apt or willing to turn to a philosophic way of life, the alternative need not be the opposite extreme. Fortunately, such is human nature that, notwithstanding limitations, human beings are moved by the desire for improvement. Human beings are willing to cooperate with one another for the sake of a better life. In the words of Bartlett and Collins,

if the political community habituates us to accept the view that the preservation of its good is "nobler and more divine" than the attainment of our own, it must be said that we are creatures peculiarly open to such habituation; we are by nature "political animals," in part because we can be deeply moved by considerations of what is noble and divine.²⁸¹

Therefore, the political community that wants to turn the city into a good city can take advantage of human sociability and nourish the inclination toward the noble and the divine. By tying honor to virtue and virtue to the divine, the city can aspire to a life that comes closer to the best way of life.

Having shown a way in which political virtue may attenuate the force of the nature of political things, now we must add that while political life civilizes human beings, it is unable to educate them to the highest degree. However refined political virtue might come to be, the improvement it furthers is one of degree only: political virtue will never match the virtue of the philosopher. Political virtue at its best points to the noble, and while the noble is akin to philosophic virtue, we must keep in mind that political and philosophic virtue belong to different realms because the former is determined by the end of the city, whereas the latter owes its character to the end of man.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Bartlett and Collins, interpretive essay to *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, 250.

²⁸² Philosophic virtue as such is cosmopolitan, hence apolitical and unpatriotic, and at odds with political virtue. More importantly, according to a life of philosophic virtue "it is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one" (for both of these points, see Socrates's dialogue with Polus in *Pl. Grg.* 469c-81b).

As far as the refinement of political virtue goes, what must be aimed for is to cause the greatest benefits to friends and the greatest harms to enemies. Although from the standpoint of philosophy producing harm belongs to vice rather than virtue, to produce harm to enemies is not altogether vicious when the good of the city is at stake. Especially for the sake of fighting enemies, the city should strive to make its citizens good and noble, for good and noble enemies are more difficult to fight against.²⁸³ Moreover, harming enemies may indeed be noble if it produces in them a change for the better. For enemies may even assist other human beings if they choose to act more as correctors, making them prudent, than as enemies.²⁸⁴ Indeed, unlike vices, noble and good enemies can prove to be beneficial to human beings:

Enemies, when they are gentlemen and have enslaved others, have in fact compelled many to become better by moderating them and have made them live in greater ease in the time remaining to them; but these mistresses²⁸⁵ never cease to plague the bodies, the souls, and the households of human beings as long as they rule over them.²⁸⁶

The greatest enemy of man and city is vice. Because the end of political virtue is the good of the city as a whole but the city exists for the sake of individuals, and not the other way around, political virtue must consider as well, though indirectly, the good of individuals. Political virtue cannot turn citizens to philosophic virtue, but it must seriously try to make citizens noble and good. In this final sense, political virtue shows simultaneously the limit of political life as well as its connection to philosophy, its connection to the human good beyond the boundaries of the city. The greatest refinement of political virtue constitutes, as it were, a new, higher virtue, which is

²⁸³ See Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.27.

²⁸⁴ See *sōphronistai* in Pl. *Rep.* 5.471a.

²⁸⁵ I.e., vices, such as gluttony, lust, drunkenness, or foolish and expensive ambitions (see Xen. *Oec.* 1.22).

²⁸⁶ Xen. *Oec.* 1.23.

called *kalokagathia*: “*kalokagathia* is perfect virtue.”²⁸⁷

KALOKAGATHIA AS PEAK AND CONCESSION

Kalokagathia is the peak of political life because it supersedes the view of the real man—which is based on strength or on mere desire for power. The gentleman or *kalokagathos* seeks honor like the real man, but he is in addition law-abiding, noble and good. From the standpoint of philosophy, the actions of the perfect gentleman stand above those of the real man but below the actions of the philosopher.²⁸⁸ The noble goodness of the gentleman is not identical to the noble goodness of the philosopher: what the city holds to be noble and good does not always coincide with what others deem noble and good.²⁸⁹ *Kalokagathia* as a political teaching differs from the noble goodness of the philosopher primarily because the philosopher’s virtue is of a different kind. But it is also different because the philosopher is not ambitious; the philosopher’s *kalokagathia* is not sought with a view to honor. The philosopher is not an honor-seeking *anēr*, but a noble and good *anthrōpos* simply. Unlike real men or gentlemen, the philosopher does not hope to be honored by the city but only to pursue the truth. The perfect gentleman, in contrast, is necessarily guided by accepted opinions, not truth. The way of life of the gentleman is “held in highest repute by the cities, for it seems to provide the best and best-willed citizens to the community.”²⁹⁰ He is noble and good not as a human being but as a citizen.

While it is true that most people are very unlikely to attain virtue in the highest sense, political philosophers do not for that reason renounce the world. On the contrary, they try to engage with political life differently. Aware of common human limitations, Plato and Xenophon

²⁸⁷ Arist. *Eth. Eud.* 8.3, 1248b11, 1249a17.

²⁸⁸ See Strauss *Natural Right and History*, 141-43.

²⁸⁹ See Pl. *Leges* 7.801d.

²⁹⁰ Xen. *Oec.* 6.10.

each found in *kalokagathia* a way to actively encourage the virtuous life. They understood that what the virtuous life looks like for most must differ from the virtuous life of the philosopher. At the same time, they acknowledged the challenge that lovers of gain pose to the pursuit even of a politically virtuous life. Because they recognized that from a philosophical perspective there need to be inducements, different from compulsion, to lead a good and noble life, in writing about virtue they sought to displace sordid desires with loftier passions and to confront and replace base opinions with other, nobler opinions.²⁹¹ The role of civic *kalokagathia* is thus to educate citizens by inspiring longing and action.

Building on Socrates's teachings, Plato and Xenophon contrived a way to inspire noble actions and to substantiate, in the eyes of the many, the claim that the life of gentlemen is most choiceworthy. Though the style and tactics of Plato differ from those of Xenophon, I hold that their views of philosophy are compatible and that at bottom they coincide in their approach to politics. In fact, one could say that at some point their tactics overlap. They both agree that to make peace with political life, the philosopher must become friends with statesmen or reach an agreement, so to speak, with the real man. The implication of having to make this compromise is that, in their writings, philosophy as such recedes into the background, awaiting the scrutiny of other seekers of truth who will question the assumptions that the philosophers make or the conclusions they arrive at. Superficially, however, both authors seem to favor the politically salutary view of gentlemen according to which there is a harmonious cosmos: gods exist and keep a watchful eye over human affairs, there is a unity of mankind, and human life is best under laws dictated by gods or inspired by them.²⁹²

To use an anachronistic but perhaps useful term, *kalokagathia* is the *Weltanschauung* of

²⁹¹ See Pl. *Rep.* 4.430c.

²⁹² See Pl. *Rep.* 1.330d-31a, 9.592b, *Leges* 4.713e-14a, 7.804a-b; Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.19, 1.4, 4.3, *Cyr.* 8.7.22-23, *Cyn.* 13.17; Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 104.

the gentleman, that is, provided we look at *Weltanschauungen* with a critical eye, as inferior alternatives to philosophy.²⁹³ As a *Weltanschauung*, *kalokagathia* fulfills the task for which it was contrived: to provide a view of life useful for those human beings who, unlike philosophers, “need some kind of system to live by.”²⁹⁴ But just as other *Weltanschauungen*, *kalokagathia* is not philosophy and it certainly does not represent the view philosophers had about the whole or even the human whole. Unlike philosophy, *kalokagathia* relieves human beings from the anxiousness produced by the disharmony that exists within the whole, or by the absence of gods or their disinterest in human things. At the same time, pious belief in divine retribution may help to correct wrongful actions of lovers of gain. More importantly, this view of the world helps form in men the idea that by cultivating noble goodness they help fulfill the purpose of the whole to which they belong: they contribute to the perfection of the world. Citizens become law-abiding not because of compulsion but because they hold the conviction that noble goodness is most choiceworthy.

To repeat, one ought not confuse what political philosophers defend publicly with what they believe characterizes the best life. When they chose to promote a political life of noble goodness, it was because that was most beneficial to the political community and because by educating and ennobling the city they could hope to make the citizens more friendly toward philosophy and bring them as close as possible to philosophy.²⁹⁵ Moreover, by promoting *kalokagathia* they also managed to conceal those philosophical precepts that threaten the stability of political life: *kalokagathia* is part and parcel of philosophic politics. It is worth citing Leo Strauss’s full definition of “philosophic politics,” which, he asserts, consists “in satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city,

²⁹³ See Corine Pelluchon, *Leo Strauss and the Crisis of Rationalism*, 213.

²⁹⁴ Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 36.

²⁹⁵ See Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 17.

that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short, that they are not irresponsible adventurers but good citizens and even the best of citizens²⁹⁶.” Philosophers are compelled to coat their teachings with a pious and patriotic, law-abiding veneer. Philosophic politics is a necessary resource for philosophers that leads to a certain political action that is reconcilable with the higher truth of philosophy.

Against this view of *kalokagathia*, it could be argued that the classics did not distinguish the noble goodness of the philosopher from the noble goodness of political men. They never refer to what I have called above “civic *kalokagathia*.” Admittedly, they did not make that distinction explicit. I, however, contend that both Plato and Xenophon intimated the inferior character of men who are commonly called *kalokagathoi*. To show the plausibility of this claim, if not to prove it, one must show that the noble goodness of political men is not only imperfect but inferior to the philosophic life. Likewise, one must evince that, although in a way it points to the higher truth of philosophy, civic *kalokagathia* is subject to the constraints of prevalent and accepted opinions. Though the figure of the perfect gentleman serves in Plato as a subtle criticism that reminds us that his true convictions lie elsewhere, perhaps the most significant trait of his philosophic politics is the use of abstraction, which is indeed politically inspiring but whose radicalness ought to raise red flags for the most attentive readers. Xenophon’s philosophic politics, in turn, focuses more on the perfect gentleman, whose perfection he qualifies through apparently insignificant nuances and omissions that are easy to overlook.

Plato’s subtle criticism of gentlemen follows in the steps of Socrates’s inconspicuous insult of real men during his trial. One cannot help but notice a tinge of sarcasm when, at his trial, Socrates addresses the jury as “*andres*” dozens of times, while he also reproaches them

²⁹⁶ *On Tyranny*, 205-6. For a more detailed and eloquent discussion of philosophic politics as a part of political philosophy, see Heinrich Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, 9-11.

because, he indirectly suggests, “they’re not interested in the things they should be and think they’re something when they’re worth nothing,”²⁹⁷ a feature of his speech that is perhaps echoed by Shakespeare’s Marc Antony, whose growing sarcasm is manifest as he repeatedly calls Brutus an honorable man.²⁹⁸ In a similar vein, Plato’s Socrates refers to gentlemen as “surely the most charming of all” men.²⁹⁹ In the passage that leads to that purported praise, Adeimantus had suggested that it isn’t worthwhile to dictate laws to gentlemen (*andراسي كالويس كاثويس*), for they would easily find the required legislation for themselves. Socrates agrees but adds a strong caveat: “provided, that is, a god grants them the preservation of the laws we described before.” While Socrates grants that gentlemen strive to write good laws “to set a limit to wrongdoing,” their ignorance prevents them from succeeding.³⁰⁰

Socrates and Adeimantus argue that, charming as gentlemen may be, they are “sick” due to licentiousness. Socrates intimates that gentlemen will remain ignorant of what is best so long as they continue to see in the man who tells the truth their greatest enemy, this man being he who denounces their decadence and debauchery. Although they may be honored and held as good and wise in cities whose regimes are similarly decadent, being praised by the many does not make them truly statesmen. In other words, noble and good men may be decent according to the many, but their soul is maimed. Yet Socrates concludes the cited passage by asking Adeimantus not to be harsh on them for they are bad only due to their ignorance. Nonetheless, in another passage, Socrates picks up the topic of ignorance and describes the man who hates the willing lie “but is content to receive the unwilling lie,” as a swinish beast that is not vexed by its ignorance but

²⁹⁷ Pl. *Apol.* 41e-42a.

²⁹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 3.2.72-106. See the use of things “noble and good” in Plato’s *Apology* in 20b, 21d, and 25a. It is noteworthy that according to Meletus, all Athenians, except for Socrates, seem to make the young noble and good!

²⁹⁹ *Rep.* 4.426e.

³⁰⁰ *Rep.* 4.425d-e, 426e.

wallows in lack of learning.³⁰¹ Socrates's harsher rebuke of gentlemen's ignorance reveals that knowledge is more important than moral behavior—although in the case of Socrates the former implies the latter. Moral goodness does not suffice to make spurious men lovers of learning. Plato thus adumbrates the superiority of the philosophic way of life.

Xenophon speaks more favorably and more conspicuously about gentlemen than Plato.³⁰² Xenophon's qualification of *kalokagathia* becomes apparent only when we focus on its limitations as regards political life itself or its drawbacks as regards philosophy. A first remark we ought to make, however, is that since the tag "noble and good" was adopted in Athens in the fifth century BC to describe rulers or aristocrats regardless of their true qualities as citizens or human beings,³⁰³ its use especially in historical texts can be expected to be formulaic—though not necessarily free from criticism. For example, when dealing with Theramenes's death under the government of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens (of which Theramenes was part), almost every time Xenophon uses the expression "noble and good" he does so solely with reference to them.³⁰⁴ It goes without saying that if anyone was unworthy of that title it was precisely the Thirty Tyrants, at least in that very context in which their injustice and cruelty is emphasized.³⁰⁵ Aside from the formulaic usage of the term, Xenophon's efforts are directed to make *kalokagathia* appear as the peak of life (without the specification "political"). Therefore, to reveal its true status from the viewpoint of philosophy it is crucial to pay heed to context and

³⁰¹ *Rep.* 7.535e.

³⁰² I have traced 40 occurrences of the dyad "noble and good" in the *Memorabilia*; 24 in the *Cyropaedia*; at least 15 in the *Oeconomicus*; 3 in the *Anabasis*; and none in the *Hiero*. It goes well beyond the scope of the present study to give a fuller account of *kalokagathia* in Xenophon, let alone an exhaustive one. A good source to approach this topic more extensively is Eric Buzzetti's *Xenophon the Socratic Prince* (2014), the axis of which book is the relation between the noble and the good. For a detailed study of the superiority of the philosophic way of life over the way of life of gentlemen in Xenophon's shorter Socratic writings, see Thomas Pangle's *Socrates Founding Political Philosophy in Xenophon's Economist, Symposium, and Apology* (2020).

³⁰³ See Roscalla, "Kalokagathia e Kaloikagathoi in Senofonte," 115.

³⁰⁴ See *Hell.* 2.3.12-53.

³⁰⁵ For Plato's appraisal of the Thirty Tyrants, see his *Seventh Letter* 324c-325c. Their rule was so unjust that, according to Plato, there were men who looked back on the former government as a golden age.

weigh each word with the same care with which Xenophon surely chose them. Xenophon unobtrusively conveys the status of *kalokagathia*—as we stated above—by qualifying it through nuances and omissions that are easy to overlook. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this.

According to Xenophon, Socrates was competent to turn others to gentlemanliness and “showed himself to his companions to be noble and good.” He also thought that those who weren’t gentlemen could be rightly called slavish.³⁰⁶ Xenophon’s positive remarks about *kalokagathia* and its closeness to Socrates should not prevent us from taking notice of the qualifications he makes. In one of the two dialogues between Socrates and his pupil Aristippus, Socrates makes clear that one cannot speak of things noble and good in absolute terms. What is noble and good for one thing is bad and shameful for another.³⁰⁷ If nothing else, readers should ask themselves, for what things is noble goodness well-suited and for what things is it ill-suited? In the *Anabasis*, Xenophon gives us an example of the latter, when he speaks of his friend Proxenus’s death, whom we mentioned in chapter 2. From Xenophon’s description, we can conclude that Proxenus was a gentleman, for he avoided doing shameful or unjust things and because he was held in high esteem by noble and good men. The “unjust,” however, “plotted against him as against someone easily manipulated.” Xenophon immediately adds that “when Proxenus was killed he was about thirty years old.”³⁰⁸ While it seems that those who killed him are not the same men who plotted against him, the lesson about *kalokagathia* remains the same: *kalokagathia* is not helpful when it comes to ruling unjust men or saving one’s life. *Kalokagathia* is ill-suited to deal with brutes.

Xenophon also hints at the limits of *kalokagathia* in the *Cyropaedia* when Cyrus’s father tells his son that to get an advantage over his enemies he “must be a plotter, a dissembler, wily, a

³⁰⁶ *Mem.* 4.8.11, 4.7.1, 1.6.14, 1.2.18, 1.1.16.

³⁰⁷ *Mem.* 3.8.5-7.

³⁰⁸ *An.* 2.6.16-20.

cheat, a thief, rapacious, and the sort who takes advantage of his enemies in everything.”³⁰⁹ Cyrus’s father outspokenly, if indirectly, reveals to his son that gentlemanship is insufficient to attain justice if indeed justice requires one “both to lie and not to lie, to deceive and not to deceive, to slander and not to slander, to take advantage and not to do so,” as a man—who is highly reminiscent of Socrates—once used to teach. The ready lesson is that *kalokagathia* might be well-suited for pursuing domestic justice³¹⁰ but is surely ill-suited in dealing with enemies. However, an even more significant insight can be derived from this passage, for Cyrus’s father also asserts that that man also taught “that it was just to deceive even one’s friends, at least for a good [result], and to steal the belongings of friends for a good [result].”³¹¹ Xenophon subtly points to a superior kind of justice that transcends the legal. Furthermore, he intimates that the city cannot teach that kind of justice lest one with a “natural gift” for love of gain take advantage of his fellow citizens.³¹²

Linked to the justice of the city, *kalokagathia* proves insufficient to face ruthless enemies but also and more importantly inadequate to pursue a philosophic education. Just as the nature of the perfect gentleman is unfit to preside over other human beings, especially over lovers of gain, it is also unsuitable for pursuing wisdom. Since civic *kalokagathia* is based on noble lies, the perfect gentleman is unable to see wisdom as the highest good and has a hard time dealing with wrongdoings attributable to the nature of political things: he does not “spend his life considering the just and the unjust things.”³¹³ On the one hand, he is repulsed by unscrupulous men who seek power, wealth, honor and pleasure by all means available, and because he is morally impeded from using their methods, he cannot rule over them through compulsion. On the other, he cannot

³⁰⁹ *Cyr.* 1.6.27.

³¹⁰ See *Cyr.* 1.6.7.

³¹¹ *Cyr.* 1.6.31.

³¹² See *Cyr.* 1.6.32.

³¹³ Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse*, 165; see also *Xen. Oec.* 11.25.

pursue wisdom because his horizon is limited by whatever the law of the regime dictates, especially his piety. Indeed, the gentleman believes to be true what the city holds to be true, including the gods, for he knows that a gentleman shall gratify the gods “by law of the city.”³¹⁴

Although Xenophon does not explicitly say that piety is a noble and good possession for a real man—and not necessarily for human beings in general or the philosopher in particular—he hints at this when, right after a chapter devoted to piety, he begins by saying that perhaps continence *too* is a noble and good possession for a man (*anēr*).³¹⁵ Unlike the philosopher, who is noble and good through virtue, because it is right to be so according to reason, the perfect gentleman owes his noble and good behavior to the belief that the gods signal what should and should not be done, as well as to the conviction that the law of the city is just.³¹⁶ Perfect gentlemen are not guided by truth but by a virtuous untruth that is necessary to ameliorate life in the city. Consequently, though their thoughts are at odds with the philosophic way of life, their actions come closer to the actions of the philosopher.

Perhaps philosophers would be willing to grant that in politics action is more important than thought. If that is the case, it would help explain why despite their seeing *kalokagathia* as a concession they preferred it to the view of the avaricious real man or to the view of the selfish private man. *Kalokagathia*, we said at the beginning, is the peak of political life because it supersedes the view of the real man. Through their writings, philosophers shore up the way of life of gentlemen as they help perfect it, so that public life may become at once nobler than common opinion and kindred to it. While the low nature of political things cannot be neglected or erased, the philosophers’ outward support of the noble and good life shows that it can be tamed. By instilling *kalokagathia* in the youth, philosophers manage to make the untruth true in

³¹⁴ See *Mem.* 4.3.16.

³¹⁵ See *Mem.* 1.5, my emphasis.

³¹⁶ *Xen. Mem.* 4.3.12, 4.4.12.

the noblest way. Although based on noble lies, *kalokagathia* spurs actions that are more compatible with the way of life of the philosopher and is the most palpable expression of the philosopher's humanity.

At the same time, the philosophers' support of civic *kalokagathia* goes against the public indifference of private men who evade or avoid public responsibility. We may once again take Socrates's way of life as an example. Against Aristippus, who chose a "middle way" that freed him from engaging in political affairs, Socrates thought that one ought to be concerned with doing good to one's fatherland no less than to one's friends or household. While Socrates refrained from engaging in political affairs directly, his public-spiritedness is apparent in that he sought to make others competent to engage in them and exhorted to get involved in politics those he thought measured up to the task just as he tried to discourage those whom he judged incompetent.³¹⁷ Through *kalokagathia*, the majority of human beings whose nature shies away from the philosophic way of life can reach out for an incomplete but reasonable form of happiness that benefits them and their community.

To conclude, we must add that since *kalokagathia* is largely based on common opinion, education in gentlemanliness necessarily varies in time and from one place to another. In other words, gentlemanliness as presented by the classics may cease to be useful as the circumstances of a given city change. Unlike the theoretical insights of classical political philosophers, gentlemanship does not have a universal or permanent character. It is the best political solution that the classics found and offered, but it was not meant as a definitive solution to the political problem. Needless to say, another education is necessary to have access to the universal teachings of philosophy. In the following section we will discuss what constitutes a philosophic education, as opposed to education in *kalokagathia*, and who is apt to receive it.

³¹⁷ Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.15, 2.1.11-19, 3.6-7.

II. The Blessed Life

THE MOST CHOICEWORTHY WAY OF LIFE

On his deathbed, Xenophon's older Cyrus asks his two sons not to forget this last piece of advice, that by benefiting their friends they will be able to punish their enemies.³¹⁸ For Cyrus this seems to be the key to leading a happy life. At bottom he suspects that unless, or even if, he tells this to his sons, after his passing they will have inducements to hostility. Aware of this possibility, Cyrus tries to persuade them that they should nourish their mutual friendship, if not out of respect which they owe to their father's soul then maybe for fear of offending the gods. Cyrus is particularly conscious that Tanaoxares, his younger son, is more likely to turn against Cambyses, Cyrus's firstborn, driven by envy and a desire to have more. To dissuade Tanaoxares from becoming his brother's enemy, Cyrus tells him that he bequeaths to him "a happiness more free from pain," for ruling is accompanied with toil, anxieties, war, competition and fear, all of which "provide many interruptions to the leisure needed for taking delight."³¹⁹ In appearance, Cyrus is of a like mind with the philosopher, who does not desire to rule.

It is hard to believe that Cyrus is being completely honest with Tanaoxares. Had Cyrus been in the place of his younger son, would he have followed his own advice? Besides the obvious fact that Cyrus's life aimed at becoming an absolute ruler, being a real man, he must certainly hold the view that the greatest good is to rule over other human beings despite the "interruptions" that come with ruling.³²⁰ To enjoy the benefits of ruling without the subsequent pains is possible but does not befit real men: it does not yield true happiness. Indeed the *punishment* Cyrus inflicted upon Croesus after defeating him was the prohibition to engage in battles and wars. Croesus responds that he will thereupon be able to live a blessedly happy life,

³¹⁸ *Cyr.* 8.7.28.

³¹⁹ *Cyr.* 8.7.11.

³²⁰ See *Cyr.* 7.1.13.

just as his wife had done, enjoying all the good things Croesus had but without the troubles.³²¹ A blessedly happy life without worries is becoming of women, not of real men. Croesus's alleged happiness, from the standpoint of the real man, is not comparable to Cyrus's blessedly happy life.³²² True happiness belongs to the real man, whose way of life is highest.

It is precisely in the expression “blessedly happy” that the life of the beneficent tyrant is confronted with the life of the philosopher. Either the tyrant or the philosopher can claim to have a blessedly happy life, but both cannot be right. Judging by how their lives came to an end, Cyrus's way of life seems superior: a tranquil death due to old age in one's own bed is better than being sentenced to die in prison. But whether they led just and happy lives must be considered as well. Whose way of life is most choiceworthy depends ultimately on what one deems to be the greatest good. The philosopher takes his bearings from looking up to wisdom, whereas the tyrant, from the power to rule over human beings. Since we've asserted that from the standpoint of philosophy perfect gentlemen are superior to real men because the actions of the former are more compatible with the way of life of the philosopher, it can be readily inferred that the philosophic way of life is supreme. But since real men hold that the greatest good is not wisdom but to rule over other human beings, nothing prevents them from asserting the contrary, that the philosopher is in truth inferior to the *kalokagathos*, and obviously below the ruling tyrant, whose way of life they deem most choiceworthy.

Just how difficult it is to settle this question is apparent from the fact that Socrates himself (who allegedly “dealt as he wished with all who conversed with him”³²³), failed to persuade Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*—one of the dialogues devoted to the art of persuasion—

³²¹ *Cyr.* 7.2.26-28.

³²² *Cyr.* 8.7.9.

³²³ See *Xen. Mem.* 1.2.14.

about how to be happy in life and when death comes.³²⁴ That Callicles is not moved by Socrates's exhortations is made explicit by Callicles himself, who just wants the conversation to be over.³²⁵ Although the confrontation with Callicles might be no more than a feigned representation concocted by Plato, it is also said that Socrates was unable to govern his wife Xanthippe,³²⁶ and it is well-known that he did not persuade the jury who sentenced him to die. Whether because of people's blind acceptance of common opinions or because the brutal harshness of reality prevents many from accepting the philosophic truth, the philosopher's appeal to reason as ultimate arbiter cannot but fail in the court of public opinion.

Socrates was plainly aware of the limits of reason in a world governed by opinion. Not only did he think no speeches can go counter to the opinion of the many and prevail but he also held that the attempt would be a great folly.³²⁷ Yet to see the philosopher's way of life as superior to every other way of life is a necessary premise to see things from the right perspective. And only from the right perspective is it both safe and profitable to study the tyrannical way of life and to establish connections between tyrannical and philosophic natures. In what follows we will highlight the resemblances between these two natures, but we will also show the tension and contrast that exists between them. It is by looking at the two ways of life and the tensions that arise therein that we can see in the proper light the full problem that constitutes the essence of classical political philosophy. We will now try to decipher the tyrannical teaching of the classics and explain why it is so important. Then we will speak of the possible connections between the philosopher and the tyrant, and we will conclude by explaining the relation of the philosopher to the city.

³²⁴ See *Grg.* 527c.

³²⁵ See especially *Grg.* 510a.

³²⁶ See *Xen. Symp.* 2.10; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 141.

³²⁷ *Pl. Rep.* 492d-e.

TYRANNIKOS OR “THE SKILLED TYRANT”

“Give me a tyrannized city... and let the tyrant be young, possessed of an able memory, a good learner, courageous, and magnificent by nature.”³²⁸ Tyranny per se is not rejected by the philosopher, at least in theory. If the tyrant were to possess these qualities and work together with an eminent lawgiver, then the strongest tyranny would be the swiftest and easiest means to establish a good regime. The most direct argument in favor of beneficent tyranny—though not in so many words—is given in Plato’s *Statesman*, when the Eleatic stranger argues that the rule of the wise and good man for the good of the citizens, with or without persuasion, must necessarily stand above any law or tradition.³²⁹ Xenophon too intimates that tyranny is not altogether bad. In the *Memorabilia*, he seems to judge it as neutral or ambiguous when he asserts that, for Socrates, the outcome of tyranny, like that of playing dice or of a battle is unknown.³³⁰ In other words, the outcome of tyranny could be good. Likewise, in a very interesting passage of the *Cyropaedia* whose deeper analysis we must leave aside, Cyrus adumbrates that bestowing tyranny upon human beings, among other goods, reveals what sort of people they are.³³¹ Tyranny helps to see clearly the nature of any given person.

The rhetorical reading of Xenophon’s *Hiero*, we suggested at the end of chapter 2, also enables one to see beneficent tyranny more sympathetically because it leads to the hopeful prospect of making the aim of tyranny coincide with the common good of the city. Due consideration of the fact that tyranny may be good opens up the possibility of a more nuanced interpretation of the *Hiero*. Read dialectically, one is compelled to reject all facile interpretations and be skeptical about them before drawing any conclusion. We must wonder what Hiero’s real

³²⁸ Pl. *Leges* 4.709e.

³²⁹ See *Plt.* 293a-296e.

³³⁰ *Mem.* 1.3.2; contrast 2.1.13-14 with 3.9.12-13.

³³¹ *Cyr.* 5.2.9.

posture is or how he may have reacted to Simonides's proposal of turning his cruel, self-serving tyranny to one focused on the good of his subjects. It is highly unlikely that Hiero was both skillful and willing enough to accept Simonides's proposal without further ado. Since one must assume that any thoughts Hiero might have had, the wise man, being wise, must have considered too, one must also wonder what Simonides's deeper intention was in giving such advice to Hiero.

Whether we assume Hiero is a real man or we identify him more with a lover of gain because he is more concerned with bodily pleasures than with honor "and hence perhaps not a 'real man,'" Hiero certainly does not consider wisdom to be the greatest good.³³² Since he is a tyrant it is very likely that he deems the greatest good to be to rule over other human beings. This, however, does not prove that he would reject Simonides's proposal: he could have welcomed Simonides's advice wishing not only to rule over others but to do so well. But if ruling well means to take into account others' well-being rather than satisfying his own desires exclusively, then such rule does not befit tyrants who would appear as weak by yielding to the needs of others. However that may be, Hiero's personality alone suggests that despite his efforts to condemn tyranny, he takes a perverse pleasure in harming others, picking quarrels, and even killing!³³³ It could be said that Xenophon's Hiero incarnates justice as presented by Plato's Callicles.³³⁴ Therefore, from Hiero's viewpoint, Simonides's proposal is unacceptable because to follow his suggestions would amount to becoming slavish.

More intriguing than Hiero's posture is Xenophon's interest in portraying the improvement of tyranny, in the way that he does, and through the mouth of Simonides. What could Simonides's intention be in presenting noble teachings to a man who laments being unable to openly gloat over others' misfortunes? Just as it is not reasonable to think that Simonides takes

³³² Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 60; Xen. *Hiero* 5.1-2.

³³³ Consider *Hiero* 1.35, 2.14-17, and *Cyr.* 7.1.13.

³³⁴ See *Grg.* 483c-d.

Hiero's indictment of tyranny at face value, it is also not reasonable that he would present his teachings to Hiero with the naïve belief that Hiero would find in them the necessary inspiration to become a beneficent ruler. It is therefore likely that there is more to Simonides's proposal than what appears at first. An indication that it is plausible to think there are ulterior motives behind Simonides's advice is the very fact that the wise man who gives the advice is not Socrates. Xenophon's choice of Simonides—who was famous for his greed—as the representative of the wise man is not fortuitous.³³⁵ Simonides could voice thoughts that would be unbecoming of a philosopher like Socrates to express.

According to Leo Strauss, the tyrannical teaching of the *Hiero* “is not more than a forceful expression of the problem of law and legitimacy.”³³⁶ To recall what we treated more extensively in chapter 1, the interplay between law and legitimacy poses the problem that all regimes are in a sense tyrannical to the extent that every regime must impose its laws at least on part of the citizenship, that is, rule over them without their consent. With the problem of law and legitimacy in mind, there seems to be no essential distinction—at least in theory—between tyranny and other regimes but only a difference in degree, on the one hand, and in the ability to persuade citizens to obey, on the other. But we cannot leave it at that. As we saw in chapter 2, Xenophon had presented the problem of law and legitimacy in the dialogue between Pericles and the young Alcibiades that appears in the *Memorabilia*. What is the use of expressing this same thought in such a bold way as he does in the *Hiero*? To find out, let us reflect more carefully on the implications of Simonides's teachings in the *Hiero*.

Beneficent tyranny, if it were to exist, would correct the faults of tyranny as we know it. Adequately managed, it could surpass all other existing regimes. But since it is doubtful that

³³⁵ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 33 and 107 n. 17.

³³⁶ Strauss, 76.

Hiero would follow Simonides's advice, we must wonder, what effect will Simonides's teachings have on the tyrant? What Hiero could take Simonides's advice to mean is that the tyrant can ensure good fame so as to persuade his subjects that it is in their own interest—and not his—that he rules. Simonides's teachings can potentially help the tyrant preserve all the pleasures he already enjoys, including the perverse pleasures of harming others, picking quarrels, and killing, so long as he is able to do so under the guise of honorableness and patriotism. The tyrant can justify his criminal deeds by commanding “others to punish those in need of coercion” in the name of the common good.³³⁷ There is no need for the tyrant to undergo a true conversion; it suffices that he appears to do so. Hiero's view would seem to indicate that the hidden suggestion in Simonides's advice is that the common good be used as a façade!

The tyrant's takeaway makes manifest the extremely bold but veiled suggestion of the *Hiero* that, despite Hiero's criminal deeds to become a tyrant and preserve his tyranny, he is not bad but perhaps only unskilled and therefore unintelligent. Indeed Hiero, being power-hungry even as he retains his tyranny, would interpret Simonides's advice as an invitation not to become a beneficent king but rather a skilled tyrant. Though from a perverse perspective, the tyrant's view encapsulates the philosophic truth according to which the individual good can aim higher than the common good. Both the skilled tyrant and the philosopher see the common good as indispensable but inferior. Through the tyrannical teaching Xenophon intimates with utmost caution that the common good is not the highest good but politically salutary at best. Most importantly, however, he alerts us (more forcefully than in the dialogue between Pericles and Alcibiades) to the dangers of grounding a regime on the common good alone. Paradoxically, to set the common good as the supreme rule and ultimate standard of right government opens the door to tyranny.

³³⁷ See *Hiero* 9.3-10; Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 70.

To return to the standpoint of philosophy, one ought not mistake the tyrant's takeaway for the takeaway of the reader. What the dialectical reading of the *Hiero* ultimately points to is the true place that the common good occupies from the philosopher's viewpoint. What is deemed the common good is not the highest good because it does not involve a genuine conversion to the philosopher's way of life.³³⁸ So long as people are guided by base desires or by spiritedness rather than by reason, the realm of the city will not be transcended. All efforts to move in the direction of the highest good will be like thrashing about in the darkness or like cutting off the heads of a Hydra.³³⁹ The common good, desirable and necessary as it is, falls short of the highest human good. Therefore, those who seek to be blessedly happy must transcend the idea of the common good. They must gain victory over the city without destroying the city.³⁴⁰ In short, what would seem to be an invitation to be impious, to disrespect the law, to gain victory over friends and enemies alike, to seek to become tyrants, is only so from the viewpoint of the petty tyrant who takes pleasure in exploiting others. The tyrannical interpretation of the philosophic truth that the common good is no more than a politically salutary façade fails to grasp the all-important fact that the philosopher does not wish to rule.

EVERY KIND OF TRUTH

Plato's Athenian Stranger succinctly reveals the inferior place human things occupy within the larger whole when he says that "of course, the affairs of human beings are not worthy of great seriousness; yet it is necessary to be serious about them. And this is not a fortunate thing."³⁴¹ At the same time, these words highlight the inescapable character of human things. The

³³⁸ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 289.

³³⁹ See *Pl. Rep.* 4.426e.

³⁴⁰ See *Xen. Cyn.* 13.15.

³⁴¹ *Pl. Leges* 7.803b.

philosopher must concern himself with them although or because he is devoted to “the contemplation of all time and all being.”³⁴² Human things are not the highest of things,³⁴³ but they constitute the best part of what we can know. The philosopher thus approaches the human things but not without contempt. Unlike the perfect gentleman, whose knowledge is guided by the precepts of the city and admires its laws, the philosopher questions the law of the city and transgresses—in speech, rather than in deed—all political principles. In his contempt for human things, the philosopher comes closer to the tyrant than to the *kalokagathoi*.

The actions of the tyrant set him apart from the philosopher, but the philosopher and the tyrant are in a way bound together by their knowledge of human things. Cognizant of the nature of political things, the philosopher admits what the tyrant sees as the highest truth, that most human beings are not guided by reason but by passion and desire. The difference is that whereas the tyrant takes his bearings from the nature of political things and either ignores or outright rejects any higher truth, the philosopher is not satisfied with knowledge of base things. The philosopher is a lover of learning and “must from youth on strive as intensely as possible for every kind of truth.”³⁴⁴ Whereas the tyrant aims for action and wishes to rule, the philosopher aims for thought and wishes to know. The tyrannical man cannot give credit to the philosopher’s unwillingness to rule. He simply cannot believe that the philosopher is not envious of the ruling tyrant.³⁴⁵ Although the nature of the tyrant is close to the nature of the philosopher, the tyrannical man who becomes a ruling tyrant is no longer able to approach philosophy due to his lack of proper education.

³⁴² Pl. *Rep.* 6.486a.

³⁴³ See Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 6.7, 1141b1-2.

³⁴⁴ Pl. *Rep.* 6.485d.

³⁴⁵ See Pl. *Grg.* 471c-e.

While it is true that “knowledge is intrinsically good, whereas action is not,”³⁴⁶ partial knowledge in combination with human passion or under the control of vicious desires cannot be considered good.³⁴⁷ Partial knowledge may lead to perverse actions if it is not complemented with another, higher form of knowledge. The philosopher rejects the idea that the nature of political things ought to determine human life not because he doesn’t believe it to be true but because he seeks to counteract it. The nature of political things may be blinding. It can prevent human beings from recognizing that human life is faced by a whole gamut of possibilities. Furthermore, recognizing only the basest forms of human life can prevent us from discerning the status of the human things within the larger whole. Awareness that partial knowledge of the truth might be worse than having no knowledge of it at all is what pushes the philosopher to openly favor generally accepted opinions that are noble and to show so much circumspection when dealing with the truth.³⁴⁸ Knowledge of the nature of political things alone may lead to cynical and violent behavior. Therefore, whenever the nature of political things is known, the philosopher thinks it is necessary to complement it with the higher truth of philosophy as an antidote to brutish behavior.

But the reverse is also true: just as knowledge of the nature of political things without knowledge of the higher truth is unlikely to lead to judicious actions, so too the higher truth can prove prejudicial if it neglects the nature of political things.³⁴⁹ Idealism is as dangerous and undesirable as crude realism. Therefore, knowledge of base human things is crucial to the proper understanding of the human whole. Philosophic natures must strive to know base things while

³⁴⁶ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 123 n. 35.

³⁴⁷ Consider Xen. *Mem.* 3.1 with Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates*, 57.

³⁴⁸ See Xen. *Mem.* 4.6.13-15.

³⁴⁹ See Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.12.

being able to judge them from the right perspective.³⁵⁰ This helps explain the philosopher's insistence on considering whether it is profitable to do injustice and be unjust³⁵¹ even after such an inquiry—having adopted the viewpoint of philosophy—has become ridiculous. Why the philosopher stoops to discuss the human things (both deviant regimes and unruly souls) is explained by the fact that precisely when one has adopted the philosophic point of view, it is most profitable to consider base things.³⁵² It is of the essence of classical political philosophy to deal with the tension produced by these two contrasting positions. The tyrannical teaching is as important as the philosophic one, and it is undesirable to learn one without the other.

Yet most human beings are unable or unwilling to go through the education required for philosophy, let alone live according to the highest human truth. Unlike political life, the philosophical way of life demands radical and, for most people, outrageous changes to their private lives. In Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon and Adeimantus, with Socrates's help, found a city which is not only friendly toward philosophy but is commanded by a philosopher king. However, as counterintuitive as it might seem, rather than paving the way for philosophy, the foundation of *kallipolis* at once alerts us to the dangers beneficent tyranny could bring—be it in the name of wisdom or whatever is deemed to be the greatest good for the city—on the one hand; and, on the other, it makes manifest to what degree the turn to a philosophic way of life is more difficult than the turn to civilized, political life. It is more difficult precisely because, unlike political life, philosophy offers no compromise: the philosophic way of life demands that individuals give up what they love most and replace it with love of wisdom. The philosophical way of life requires greater detachment from one's own than does political life.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ cf. Arist. *Met.* 12.9, 1275b25-34 and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 70.9.

³⁵¹ For the distinction between doing injustice and being unjust, see Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 5.6, 1134a17.

³⁵² See Pl. *Rep.* 4.444e-45b, *Leges* 7.803b.

³⁵³ Contrary to what Waller Newell argues regarding ancient tyranny (*Tyranny*, 6), Plato did not see the tyrant as

In book 6 of the *Republic*, Socrates proposes that philosophy be left as the single most important occupation for the elderly. Instead of teaching philosophy to the young, dedication to philosophy should be gradually intensified as citizens grow older. It is not easy to imagine old, law-abiding citizens contemplating the possibility of questioning their traditions, let alone their being willing to give them up for the sake of learning every kind of truth. It is more likely that they will object to the study of philosophy because they believe to be true and wise only what accords with their way of life.³⁵⁴ Or they might simply refuse to philosophize because they feel pressed to do their civic or religious duties (consider how Cephalus leaves the conversation to look after the sacrifices and hands down the argument to younger Polemarchus, his son).³⁵⁵

There is a greater probability to find a disposition toward the pursuit of wisdom among the young because the young do not frown on questioning authority and because they tend to be less attached to traditions and duties.³⁵⁶ But such a disposition does not make the turn to philosophy any easier. Eager as the young might be about pursuing wisdom, their interests lie less in the pursuit of wisdom in itself than in acquiring knowledge for the sake of glory or pleasure. As Thomas Pangle has said in his interpretive essay to Plato's *Laws*, "very few men live mainly for the sake of knowledge; most are tempted to use knowledge as a means to other desires."³⁵⁷ Consequently, from the point of view of the young, the demands of philosophy are much more exacting than the demands of any regular city—even if the latter entail the possibility of sacrificing one's life! To recall Dostoevsky's bold insight, the young are more prompt to sacrifice their lives for the sake of wisdom than to devote several years of hard and tedious study

"fundamentally venal" but in fact identified the nature of the tyrant with that of the philosopher, as we will suggest below.

³⁵⁴ See *Rep.* 7.539c-d; *Leges* 5.731e-732a; see also Strauss *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 31.

³⁵⁵ *Rep.* 1.331d; see Strauss, *The City and Man*, 65 and 126).

³⁵⁶ See *Rep.* 6.498b-c.

³⁵⁷ Thomas Pangle, interpretive essay to *The Laws of Plato*, 427.

to serve the truth.³⁵⁸ The turn to philosophy among the young is all the more unlikely if its study entails not postponing but permanently forgoing their base desires. To sum up, most human beings are not by nature gifted for the knowledge that a philosopher must possess.

DIVINE DEHUMANIZATION

In Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Socrates held that just as stronger wine must be diluted with more water, stronger human beings should be given to carry a greater burden, and "all weaker things should be ordered to do less." His suggestion arises from Ischomachus's teaching that less seed must be put in weaker earth, whereas stronger earth can hold more seed.³⁵⁹ The philosopher is bound to carry the greatest burden, to give up what ordinary human beings cherish most. According to this teaching, only very few human beings are capable of such a life.³⁶⁰ What could be read as an offensive air of superiority on the part of the philosopher is rather a sign of the philosopher's realism and an instance of his remarkable generosity. Despite his contempt for human things, the philosopher will unhesitatingly seek to benefit others by teaching what is best for each, according to his capacity, and without betraying his own convictions.

To benefit everyone in the manner and the measure possible with reference to each,³⁶¹ Socrates made a clear distinction between ordinary and extraordinary natures.³⁶² Among the ordinary natures, he found human beings who were good at learning, had a good memory, and were both shrewd and quick, and full of youthful fire and magnificence. He believed they would be well-suited for philosophy if they didn't lack orderly, quiet and steady lives, or if the city

³⁵⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 28 (book 1, chap.5); see *Pl. Rep.* 7.535b.

³⁵⁹ *Oec.* 17.8-11; compare *Pl. Rep.* 6.491d.

³⁶⁰ See *Pl. Rep.* 6.491a-b.

³⁶¹ I have borrowed this phrasing from Muhsin Mahdi's translation of Alfarabi's "The Attainment of Happiness," §54 (*Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, 43-44), a passage which I find closely related to the topic at hand but whose treatment, due to its own complexities, I must leave aside. See also *Xen. Mem.* 4.8.11 and *Arist. Pol.* 7.14, 1333a31.

³⁶² See *Pl. Rep.* 6.503b-d.

hadn't tried to coopt them.³⁶³ Others, who show the steadiness that the former lack, are courageous and trustworthy because they are not easily changeable. But they too are ill-suited for philosophy because they are "hard to teach, as if they had become numb, and are filled with sleep and yawning" in the face of studies.³⁶⁴ Ordinary natures possess great attributes that prove in one way or another beneficial to the city but that are not sufficient to pursue a philosophic education. Education in civic *kalokagathia* is thus most suitable for ordinary natures.

For their part, great natures participate in the positive attributes that make one well-suited for philosophy, and only they are by nature gifted for the pursuit of wisdom. It is thus only among those best natures that the philosopher finds suitable companions with whom to share "the treasures of the wise."³⁶⁵ Yet the philosopher does not limit himself to educate only his associates but seeks to educate everyone, for "the philosophers are sharers and friends with all."³⁶⁶ However, the philosopher does not educate everyone in the same manner but adapts his teachings to different characters and to different situations. For example, Xenophon says that while Socrates "produced by far the most agreement in his listeners" when he led an argument by himself, he directed those who contradicted him toward the truth by bringing the entire argument back to its hypothesis.³⁶⁷ Just as those held to be best by nature become "hardest to restrain and quite lowly" without a proper and timely education, the truly best natures become "worst and most harmful."³⁶⁸ Because "the best nature comes off worse than an ordinary one from an inappropriate rearing,"³⁶⁹ proper rearing is especially important for guiding the *erōs* of the best natures in the right direction.

³⁶³ See Pl. *Rep.* 6.492b-c and 494b-c.

³⁶⁴ *Rep.* 6.503d.

³⁶⁵ Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.14; see also 1.2.8, 4.1.2.

³⁶⁶ Xen. *Cyn.* 13.9.

³⁶⁷ Xen. *Mem.* 4.6.13-15.

³⁶⁸ Xen. *Mem.* 4.1.3-4.

³⁶⁹ Pl. *Rep.* 6.491d.

The severe demands and the strangeness of the philosopher's way of life make an education in wisdom undesirable for most. Since the demands of the philosopher's way of life by far exceed the demands of life in the city, imposing the philosophic way of life on everyone would be not only prejudicial but even cruel in most cases.³⁷⁰ It is therefore best to guide ordinary natures to a noble and good political life instead, which is beneficial not only for them but also for philosophy, if indirectly, because without a city philosophy can hardly exist. Education in wisdom is thus reserved for the very few who possess the best natures and are in most need of such an education, lest they, "not understanding how to decide what they should do," become harmful, as Xenophon suggests. "Since they are grand and impetuous they are hard to restrain and hard to turn back, which is why the bad things they do are very many and very great." Without a philosophic education, the best natures will not only turn out to be most wretched but will make others wretched as well.³⁷¹

Both philosophers and tyrants possess a great nature. That the one who is to become a philosopher has an extraordinary nature is explicitly stated in Socrates's description of the philosophic nature, but that the tyrant also possesses a great nature becomes especially apparent only when one reads that same description against the portrait of the ruling tyrant. In book 6 of Plato's *Republic* Socrates says that "the best natures become exceptionally bad when they get bad instruction" whereas "a weak nature will never be the cause of great things either good or bad."³⁷² Since in book 9 he says the ruling tyrant is the worst man, one who "will stick at no terrible murder, or food, or deed,"³⁷³ it must be the case that the tyrant has a great nature because he is capable of causing the greatest harms. At bottom, one is inclined to conclude, the

³⁷⁰ See Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 117.

³⁷¹ Xen. *Mem.* 4.1.2-3.

³⁷² *Rep.* 6.491e; see also 6.495b.

³⁷³ *Rep.* 9.574e, 9.576b.

philosopher and the tyrant share the same nature, for Socrates subtly suggests that the main difference between the philosopher and the tyrant is that in the tyrant desires and pleasures are not accompanied by intelligence and right opinion—an outcome that could be prevented if only tyrannical souls were properly reared.³⁷⁴

The best education need not be provided by others. Truly exceptional natures, like Socrates, do not require to be educated by others because their innate love of wisdom leads them in a path of self-education. While education is indispensable for all, Socrates was apparently able to educate himself spontaneously.³⁷⁵ His self-education consisted mainly in carrying out the maxim inscribed on the temple at Delphi: “Know thyself.” Socrates said that self-knowledge leads to wisdom, whereas ignorance of oneself and thinking to know things one ignores leads to madness or insolence: wisdom is the opposite of madness and insolence.³⁷⁶ Unlike the vast majority of human beings, Socrates was able to discover through his own effort who he was, not in absolute terms but in relation to the rest of the beings.³⁷⁷ By knowing himself he was able to obtain good things for, according to him, “human beings experience most good things due to knowing themselves.”³⁷⁸ Since the vast majority of human beings are not endowed with Socrates’s qualities, what determines in most cases whether a great nature will turn out to become philosophical or tyrannical is proper education provided by one who truly knows the good.

The proper education for the best natures certainly teaches how to foster civic

³⁷⁴ See *Rep.* 4.431c.

³⁷⁵ See *Pl. Rep.* 7.520b. Socrates was self-taught not because he neglected what others thought. In fact he mocked those who boasted to be self-taught regarding the greatest matters, and was himself eager to be educated by anyone who could teach him great things, such as the meaning of justice. He was also a great reader. However, he turned to finding out these things for himself because he was not satisfied with what others taught. See *Xen. Mem.* 4.2.2-5, 4.4.8, 1.6.14; *Pl. Phd.* 98b-99c.

³⁷⁶ *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.16, 1.2.19, 3.9.6; see also *Pl. Apol.* 21d; Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates*, 101.

³⁷⁷ See especially *Pl. Apol.* 21b-22d.

³⁷⁸ *Xen. Mem.* 4.2.26; see also *Cyr.* 7.2.20-24.

kalokagathia but, unlike the education of perfect gentlemen, it also points beyond it, toward wisdom. The turn toward the pursuit of wisdom can be done only when the best natures have reached a point from which to judge properly the hierarchy of beings and are able to recognize wisdom as the greatest good. The education of the one who is to become a philosopher requires the ability to look down on all human things, for “to an understanding endowed with magnificence and the contemplation of all time and being,” even human life is nothing great.³⁷⁹ Strictly speaking, wisdom lies beyond the human plane. Thus, the pursuit of wisdom does violence against human beings because it demands that they give up what most human beings ordinarily love most or what is ordinarily thought to be most human. In doing so, in a way that resembles tyranny, it casts a shadow over tradition, law, religion, family—in sum, over everything by which the city stands or falls.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of wisdom cannot be detached from human things but must embrace them, as can be inferred from the life of Socrates, who spent most of it conversing about the human things. The path that leads to the world outside the cave is built with elements from within the cave. Or, if I may use another hackneyed image, philosophy is like the lotus flower that grows out of the mud and mire of politics. To be sure, though from the standpoint of philosophy it would seem as if the human things undeservingly spattered philosophy with mud, the philosopher is aware that it is the philosopher who upsets human things by looking down on all we cherish.³⁸⁰ The philosopher is the true anomaly. Against the grain of the way of life of tyrants and gentlemen alike, the philosophic way of life challenges the most prevalent order of things. Yet the philosopher will not engage in subversive deeds. He will do everything in his

³⁷⁹ Pl. *Rep.* 6.486a. In the words of Leo Strauss, “as [the philosopher] looks up in search for the eternal order, all human things and all human concerns reveal themselves to him in all clarity as paltry and ephemeral” (*On Tyranny*, 198).

³⁸⁰ See Pl. *Rep.* 7.536c.

power to benefit the political community he lives in.

At the beginning of this chapter we said that the philosophical and the political could be separated for the purpose of analysis but that, at bottom, they are intimately intertwined. By artificially separating the philosophical from the political one may arrive at the conclusion that philosophy, just as tyranny, is a selfish pursuit. It is not surprising that from the viewpoint of the city the philosopher teaches “his companions to be doers of mischief and skilled at tyranny.”³⁸¹ This assertion is not altogether mistaken: while it is true that in despising the low philosophy helps to elevate one’s existence and to make life most blessed, the process necessarily brings about a dehumanization—a divine dehumanization, to be sure, but a dehumanization nonetheless. Then again, if the philosopher directs his companions in the way of tyrants, who stick at nothing to rule over others, he does so with the opposite end in mind: not to help them become tyrants but to rid them of the desire to rule. Since philosophy is not separated from politics but grows out of it, as it were, it is necessarily concerned with the betterment of political things.

Philosophical education thus presupposes the citizens’ education in *kalokagathia*—materialized in the figure of the perfect gentleman—but goes beyond and even contradicts it. Indeed, contrary to what pious gentlemen might believe, all efforts made in the city in the direction of moral virtue and nobility to attenuate the stark political reality only serve to prove that the high often fails to rule over the low, despite the odes philosophers often sing to the rule of the high over the low.³⁸² The view of the gentleman, directed to curb the ignoble, the shameful, and the base does not refute but confirms the most prevalent condition of human beings. The ruling tyrant, as it were, embodies that condition, which stresses the low nature of

³⁸¹ Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.56.

³⁸² Consider Joshua Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy*, 29-32.

human beings. In contrast, the education proposed by the philosopher consists in providing the young with correct knowledge that will make them both wise and good.³⁸³ To be wise and good the young must transcend the realm of the city, which means to let go of their personal attachments and their political ambitions. To be wise is to rule over political things, not in the manner of the tyrant who wishes to rule over all, but in the way the philosopher does, by making the high stand above the low.

To make this turn, the philosopher-to-be must undergo a genuine conversion. He needs to learn what the good is and, in the words of Xenophon, “it is strongest to be taught the good from nature itself, second from those who truly know something good.”³⁸⁴ It is meaningful that Xenophon does not say best (*aristos*) but strongest (*kratistos*). The most widespread condition of mankind needs to be confronted with the strongest, exceptional truth of philosophy. The tyrannical man, however, is not willing to entertain this possibility. To live like the philosopher seems to him like yielding to the power of the many. The uneducated tyrant thus chooses to rule over others instead.³⁸⁵ In choosing an ignoble way of life, he forgoes the pleasure that comes with wisdom.³⁸⁶ As a result, the tyrant is irreversibly tied to the low. His happiness does not depend on himself but on those he rules. For this reason, since the philosopher is truly free, the philosophic way of life proves to be the only way of life that is truly blessed.

³⁸³ See Xen. *Cyn.* 13.7.

³⁸⁴ *Cyn.* 13.4.

³⁸⁵ See Pl. *Grg.* 510a.

³⁸⁶ See Pl. *Rep.* 9.582c.

“For—whatever human beings I desire—loving them, I set out with complete intensity to be loved by them in return, and, longing for them, to be longed for in return, and, desiring to be together with them, to have them desire in return to be together with me.”³⁸⁸ Having argued that the philosopher looks down on human things, this passionate confession does not seem befitting of a philosopher. And yet it is Socrates who addresses these words to Critobulus after offering him help to hunt after those who are noble and good. Of course, they could easily be explained by arguing that they are part of Socrates’s effort to make of Critobulus a perfect gentleman and not a philosopher. Nevertheless, his words seem to be sincere. Moreover, it is not the only place where Xenophon refers to Socrates’s love of human beings, not to mention Plato’s depictions of a loving Socrates.³⁸⁹ How can one account for the philosopher’s philanthropy?

We have discussed why the philosopher would stoop to discuss human things, such as deviant regimes and unruly souls. We have said too that the philosopher, for politically salutary reasons, is a teacher of gentlemanliness and that he benefits each according to their capacity. What has not been made clear yet is how the contemplation of all time and all being is compatible with the love of noble and good human beings, whom Socrates hunts down. Moreover, we are told that Socrates both tested human beings to see whether their nature was apt for dialectics and taught how to use them nobly to “procure the good things and guard against the bad ones.”³⁹⁰ Depending on the point of view we adopt, the philosopher’s attitude toward others could be seen as slavish, to the extent that he does not rule over them and lives poorly, or else as

³⁸⁷ I am aware that a title so promising as “Eros and Friendship” is likely to raise the readers’ expectations far beyond what we can offer here (*parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*). To give a satisfactory account of either of these topics would require no less than a book-length study. Rather than treating these topics in themselves, my intention here is only to suggest what I see as plausible explanations for Socrates’s philanthropy. In the pertinent places below I will point to different books that do treat these topics extensively.

³⁸⁸ Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.28.

³⁸⁹ See Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.8, 1.2.60, 4.1.2; Pl. *Alc.* 103a-b, *Symp.* 213c, *Grg.* 481d.

³⁹⁰ *Mem.* 4.2.26, 2.6.6-7, 4.8.11; Pl. *Rep.* 7.537c-d.

abusive, to the extent that he is selfish and transgresses the precepts of the city.³⁹¹

From the viewpoint of the philosopher himself, he is not a slave of human beings. The philosopher only serves wisdom. How he interacts with other human beings is not dictated by the laws of the city or by others' desires, but only by what the pursuit of wisdom demands. He cannot be called slavish because he willingly obeys what is for him most worthwhile.³⁹² It could be said, however, that he *is* an exploiter of human beings because he uses them for his own personal benefit. Yet the philosopher's character, his orderly soul and his lack of base ambition make it possible for him to use others in the most noble way, in a way that is beneficial both for himself and for others. Whereas the tyrant does away with the best men and is compelled to make use of the rest, inferior men, to the detriment of both himself and others, the philosopher makes use of the best with the result that both he himself and those he uses become better.³⁹³ The philosopher can use others nobly on account of his virtue.

Indeed, the philosopher's intellectual pursuit cannot be dissociated from his virtue. The philosopher understands that an important requirement for the pursuit of wisdom is to be virtuous and to help others become virtuous too. For the philosopher, virtue is not an end in itself. But unlike lovers of gain that seek virtue for the sake of future pleasure in the form of wealth or honor,³⁹⁴ the philosopher belongs to the noble and good human beings who do not seek virtue due to ambition or love of honor, unless by ambition we mean ambition in the highest sense, ambition to be wise,³⁹⁵ and by honor, posthumous glory. The philosopher hunts those human beings whose nature makes them apt to become *kaloï kagathoi anthrōpoi* (not *andres*), that is,

³⁹¹ See Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2 and *Cyn.* 13.15-16.

³⁹² See Xen. *Cyr.* 8.1.4.

³⁹³ See Xen. *Hiero* 5.2, 8.9-10; *Mem.* 1.2.8, 48, 61, 64.

³⁹⁴ See *Cyr.* 1.5.9.

³⁹⁵ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 199.

the noble and good man or woman who can be happy without honor.³⁹⁶

It is noteworthy that Socrates refers to a noble and good woman (*gynaika*), because the expression *kalokagathos* is everywhere else reserved for men (*andres*) alone. Like his recurrent oath “by Hera!,”³⁹⁷ an invocation mostly used by women, his casual acknowledgment of noble goodness in women is very telling because it points to the fact that Socrates identifies himself with both women and men. It emphasizes the kinship between his courage and his moderation, which are masculine and feminine attributes, respectively.³⁹⁸ Socrates thus embodies philosophy, which is “the highest form of the mating of courage and moderation.”³⁹⁹ The philosopher’s courage is manifest in his willingness to question even the most authoritative opinions no less than in his willingness to give up his life for truth.⁴⁰⁰ The courage of the philosopher is not grounded in fear or shame but intimately related to his prudence and, thus, to reason.⁴⁰¹ The philosopher’s moderation, in turn, is apparent both in the harmony of his soul—attained without compulsion—and in the “achievement of harmony between the excellence of man and the excellence of the citizen.”⁴⁰² But to be more precise, Socrates identifies himself as neither male nor female; he is not an *anēr* and not a *gynē* but an *anthrōpos*: he is a human being *tout court*.⁴⁰³

Attention to Socrates’s “sexlessness” is important because it brings out both his humanity and his inhumanity. As a human being, he loves mankind, especially his friends, even over his

³⁹⁶ See Pl. *Grg.* 470e.

³⁹⁷ See e.g., Pl. *Apol.* 24e, *Grg.* 449d, *Phdr.* 230b; Xen. *Mem.* 1.5.5, 3.10.9, 3.11.5, 4.2.9, 4.4.8, *Oec.* 10.1, 11.19, *Symp.* 4.54. In her translation of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* (158 n. 116), Amy Bonnette notes that in Aristophanes’s *Ecclesiazusae* 155-56 and 189-90, “women attempting to disguise themselves as men are chastised for continuing to use” this oath.

³⁹⁸ See Pl. *Leges* 7.802e-803a.

³⁹⁹ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 40.

⁴⁰⁰ See Allan Bloom, interpretive essay to *The Republic of Plato*, 456 n. 16. Compare Pericles’s definition of happiness as freedom and of freedom as courage (Thuc. 2.43), where courage means to be willing to die for the fatherland.

⁴⁰¹ See Pl. *Leges* 12.963e and *Lach.* 199d; Strauss, *The City and Man*, 113 with n. 44.

⁴⁰² Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy*, 32.

⁴⁰³ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 190.

own family.⁴⁰⁴ As one who surpassed many human beings,⁴⁰⁵ his “first friend” is wisdom.⁴⁰⁶ Socrates’s erotic desire for human beings does not make him want to rule over them, as is the case with the political man. Socrates is happy in the company of friends but his happiness does not depend on others. It is not by chance that in the *Cyropaedia*, a text that tells the life of the most excellent political man, Xenophon would reserve the use of the expression “blessedly happy” for women or men who do not wish to rule or who have ceased to do so.⁴⁰⁷ In a similar vein, Socrates seems to fit the definition of the happy man, whose words he attributes to a woman who did not rule, Pericles’s wife Aspasia:

For if a man depends on himself for everything or nearly everything that brings happiness and does not depend on other human beings, upon whose doing well or badly his own fortunes would be compelled to wander, he is the one who is best prepared to live. This man is the moderate one, and so also the courageous and prudent one. When his wealth and children come into being and perish, then most of all will this man obey the proverb, for since he relies on himself, he will be found neither taking joy nor grieving too much.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ See Pl. *Phd.* 116a-b; Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 200.

⁴⁰⁵ See Xen. *Apol.* 15. Robert Bartlett reads *pollōn* instead of *pollōi*; if the latter were correct, it would give a slightly different sense to the sentence and say that Socrates “by far excelled the rest of mankind.” In any case, both readings go well with our interpretation.

⁴⁰⁶ See Pl. *Lysis* 219d. Although it is not explicitly stated as such, I take wisdom to be the “first friend” (*prōton philon*) Socrates refers to in this passage. For a fine study of the problem of friendship in Plato’s *Lysis* and of friendship in the classics more broadly, see Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*.

⁴⁰⁷ The expression “blessedly happy” is Wayne Ambler’s rendering of the Greek verb *makarizō*. If I am not mistaken, this verb appears twice in the *Cyropaedia*, one in reference to the woman who was going to be the wife of a young handsome man, the other in reference to Cyrus, who desires to be remembered as having been blessedly happy (*Cyr.* 5.2.28 and 8.7.9). There are five occurrences of the adjective *makarios*: 7.2.28 (twice), both in reference to Croesus’s wife; 8.3.39, 48, in reference to Pheraulas, who gives away his wealth to have leisure; and 8.7.25, where Cyrus asks “what is more blessedly happy than being mingled with the earth...” See also *Mem.* 1.6.9 with 1.6.14; Pl. *Rep.* 7.519c, 7540b; Arist. *Pol.* 7.2, 1324a25.

⁴⁰⁸ Pl. *Menex.* 247e-248a. For the translation see Susan Collins and Devin Stauffer, *Plato’s Menexenus and Pericles’s Funeral Oration: Empire and the Ends of Politics*.

One cannot help but notice a certain analogy between Aspasia, the wife of the most prominent political man in Athens, and the “blessedly happy” wives mentioned in the *Cyropaedia*. Socrates, who was close to men in power but did not rule himself, resembles these women more than he does political men.

We are now better able to state than we were at the beginning the relation between the divine and the human or between the high and the low. We have spoken enough about the disorder that characterizes the whole due especially to the prevalence of the low, to the political brutality that often dominates human life. Whereas gentlemen are persuaded to believe that there is a close connection between the divine and the human and that the gods are omniscient and care for human beings, from the standpoint of philosophy, that is no more than a noble lie. There is indeed a connection between the high and the low but not in the way that perfect gentlemen believe it to exist. The only and true connection between the two realms is the philosopher himself. Only those who follow the path of the philosopher will make the high rule over the low. The philosopher, like a great *daimōn*, acts as a bridge that binds mortals to the eternal. The *erōs* of the philosopher, his love of human beings, turns him into a daimonic intermediary between the human and the divine. In other words, Socrates takes the place of Eros.⁴⁰⁹

In his conversation with the sophist Antiphon, Socrates holds “that to need nothing is divine, that to need as little as possible is nearest to the divine.”⁴¹⁰ That Socrates approaches the divine is thus suggested by himself when he speaks of his justice. He asserts that he is “so well adapted to his present possessions as not to need in addition any of the possessions of others.”⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁹ See Pl. *Symp.* 202d, 204b. In his insightful book, *Eros and Socratic Political Philosophy*, David Levy argues that Socrates’s praise and blame of eros are both qualified. Interestingly to us, he links the praise of eros to the role it plays in knowledge of oneself. Moreover, he intimates that eros may reflect both the low longings of human beings and our highest concerns (110, 126-28, 151-52). For a broad study of political eros in antiquity, see Paul Ludwig, *Eros and Polis*.

⁴¹⁰ Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.10; cf. *Hiero* 7.4.

⁴¹¹ Xen. *Apol.* 16. For other places where it might be suggested that the philosopher is akin to the divine, see Pl. *Rep.*

Needing very little, he can be just also in another sense, namely, by not harming anyone and by benefiting those he dealt with to the greatest extent.⁴¹² It is ultimately Socrates's justice that helps explain his philanthropy. But since his justice would not be possible without courage and moderation, and since all three parts of virtue are in him directed toward wisdom, we must say that not a part of the philosopher's virtue but rather the unity of virtue in the philosopher accounts for his blessed way of life and his love of human beings. Whereas Socrates's death represents the result of the starkest confrontation between philosophy and politics, Socrates's life—which is the embodiment of his own *daimōn*—represents the greatest correspondence between the philosophical and the political, or the connection between the human and the divine.

Conclusions

We began our inquiry by asking what is tyranny, from the standpoint of political philosophy rather than from the standpoint of the city, noting that whereas tyranny is for all practical purposes undesirable, it is nevertheless theoretically useful. We then spoke of the possible defense of tyranny as necessary to understand the nature of political things. Furthermore, we contrasted the view of classical political philosophers with that of the moderns to argue that modernity has abandoned the quest for wisdom and neglected the interplay between the nature of political things and human nature as conceived by the classics. We argued that the demands of the city against private life call for the education of rulers and citizens in political virtue and arrived at the conclusion that civic *kalokagathia* is a concession on the part of the philosopher, but a concession that stems from his selfless generosity and from his desire to benefit all to the greatest extent possible. We noted that education in *kalokagathia* may cease to

6.500c-d, 9.590c-d, *Leges* 2.666d-e; Xen. *Apol.* 15, *Oec.* 21.11; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 10.7, 1177b27.

⁴¹² See Xen. *Mem.* 4.8.11; also Pl. *Rep.* 1.335b-e.

be useful and thus may need to change in time. The solutions that political philosophy may offer have a temporary, contingent character, whereas the theoretical insights of the classics (the understanding of the problems) have a universal, unchanging character.

As we have seen in these concluding pages, Socrates was happy right before drinking the hemlock because his death would be the emblem of his subversive thinking, of his daring speeches, of his life of questioning, of knowing: it would show that he was truly virtuous, that the high truth of human nature is confirmed because in him the high rules over the low. Socrates's exceptional character showed that it is possible to reconcile political actions with the higher truth of philosophy. From the all-embracing viewpoint of philosophy, it becomes clear that Socrates, by using his way of life as an example, sought to educate everyone, to impede tyrannies from arising whether in the city or in the souls of his closest friends.

CHAPTER FOUR

MODERN TYRANNY OR MACHIAVELLI'S RESTORATION OF PHILOSOPHY

A part of peace will be mine if I shake the hand of the tyrant.
Virgil, *Aeneid*

I should begin by saying that some of the claims that I make in this chapter, namely, that Machiavelli is both a philosopher *and* a Socratic one, are difficult to demonstrate, especially given the breadth and complexity of the topic and the limited space we have here. Although I admit that proving these claims is a tall order that would require no less than a book-length analysis, I do not believe a smoking gun is necessary to think more deeply about Machiavelli and the issues he raises. My wish in standing by these ambitious claims is both to sound the depth of Machiavelli's thought and to show some viable directions in which future research might go.

“Never believe that the things that depart from the ordinary modes are done by chance; and if you were to believe that they do so to be more beautiful, you would err. For where strength is necessary, one does not take account of beauty.”⁴¹³ Thus Fabrizio Colonna speaks to Batista della Palla in the seventh book of Machiavelli's *Art of War*. If these words are in some way descriptive of Machiavelli's own enterprise, we can begin to understand what made Machiavelli part ways with the ancients, at least in what concerns things beautiful. The word “beautiful,” as we saw in chapter 3, is one of the meanings of the Greek word “*kalos*,” which we have rendered above as “noble.” Machiavelli was compelled to deliberately abandon beauty or nobility in political things because strength had become more necessary. A great and continuous malignity

⁴¹³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War*, 7.52 (148).

of fortune, as he describes it,⁴¹⁴ had posed to him the challenge of finding a way to preserve or restore the heart of philosophy while doing away with its noble teachings.

Machiavelli believed to have found the solution to the problem facing his time in the radical subversion of conventional morality, which he would seek to replace with a wholly new understanding of morality. But Machiavelli's new morality called for new political standards that could give sufficient force and hopes of durability to his enterprise. Along with his critique of morality, especially of Christian morality, he needed to propose a new best regime that would not lie in the afterworld or in men's imagination, and whose attainment would not have to be left to chance or fortune. Machiavelli's politico-philosophical project, if it were to take root, entailed a "spiritual warfare,"⁴¹⁵ which itself required a defense of tyranny. Therefore, if one is to speak of modern tyranny, one must refer to Machiavelli's oeuvre. With Machiavelli as the leading philosopher of his time, tyranny would become the ultimate bulwark of philosophy. And real men who, we have seen, are otherwise opposed to philosophy, would become, if unwittingly, its defenders.⁴¹⁶

To explain more in detail what Machiavelli's project consists in seems less pressing than to explain how the defense of tyranny can in any way be considered necessary for the restoration of philosophy. That tyranny is not only a solution but also the best or the only possible solution for the recovery of the core teachings of classical political philosophy is perversely counterintuitive, to say the least. Though the ancients could not deny that there is a certain kinship between tyranny and philosophy and that the careful study of tyranny is a most useful way of pointing to the problem of law and legitimacy, they nevertheless referred to tyranny

⁴¹⁴ Machiavelli, *Prince*, Epistle Dedicatory (2). All references are to Leo Paul de Alvarez's translation.

⁴¹⁵ For an account of Machiavelli's "spiritual warfare," see Leo Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 35, 102, and especially 171-2.

⁴¹⁶ I believe that in his *Restatement*, Leo Strauss also arrives at this conclusion, of which we will speak more in the next chapter.

discreetly and explored the tyrannical way of life with the sole intention of pointing beyond it, toward the acquisition of philosophical knowledge. Philosophical knowledge, they believed, must be accompanied by full awareness of the limits that political life poses to human perfection. They never thought of tyranny as a practical proposal, whereas Machiavelli's aim was precisely to propound tyranny as the best political solution. Moreover, for Machiavelli, the defense of tyranny would be in accordance with his philosophical pursuit. To restore the heart of philosophy Machiavelli found a seemingly heartless solution.

How is it that tyranny turned from being theoretically useful or an inquiry worth exploring merely as a thought experiment to being desirable, sought and promoted as a practical solution? This is one of the questions I wish to answer in this chapter. But perhaps more startling than that is the fact that I consider Machiavelli a philosopher who espoused the main tenets of classical political philosophy or, in other words, that Machiavelli was a Socratic. Although I am not the first to make this claim,⁴¹⁷ I wish to show in what ways and to what extent Machiavelli may be considered a Socratic philosopher and how, on the basis of what I have argued in the previous chapters, it is possible to square Machiavelli's way with that of the ancients.

Admittedly, Machiavelli's utter discretion and almost absolute silence about his philosophic inclinations make it very difficult to prove *that* he was a philosopher, let alone to define what kind. Nevertheless, I consider it to be a worthwhile endeavor. To gauge the extent to which Machiavelli was a Socratic it is helpful to understand the universal and permanent character of classical political philosophy.

⁴¹⁷ Although I try to follow in Leo Strauss's footsteps, who comes closest to saying that Machiavelli was a Socratic, I wish to make Machiavelli's link to the ancients more explicit than he does. While Strauss concludes that Machiavelli's teaching "is obviously opposed to that of classical political philosophy or of the Socratic tradition (see *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 290), I want to show in what sense this is true and to what extent it is not. Besides Leo Strauss, Erica Benner has argued that Machiavelli is a Socratic but her assessment is based on a view of philosophy that differs from mine, for she conceives of philosophy as both public spirited and in harmony rather than in tension with politics (see *Machiavelli's Ethics*, esp. 50-51). See also Catherine Zuckert, "Machiavelli: A Socratic?"

The greatest obstacle to gaining access to Machiavelli's political philosophy are his prominent silences and omissions, of which we will say more below. In what follows, we will first treat Machiavelli's rejection of pious cruelty in favor of cruelty well-used, which shows his inclination toward the common good. We will then address Machiavelli's teaching of effectual truth which, I contend, replaces the ancient teaching of *kalokagathia*. In the second part of the chapter we will speak of Machiavelli's silences and deliberate omissions, of his understanding of arms as knowledge, to conclude with what I have called his "philosophical state." By uncovering the philosophical dimension of Machiavelli's teachings, we will be better able not only to see Machiavelli as a Socratic philosopher but we will reassert the fundamental tenets of classical political philosophy.

I. The Tyrannical Life

The works of Machiavelli can be understood in their own terms, without the need for recourse to the writings of other authors. However, they are best or more easily understood in the context of what, by the time he lived, can be called the philosophical tradition. Machiavelli is an inheritor as much as he is a founder. Despite his claim to be radically original,⁴¹⁸ and despite his remarkable silences regarding the ancients, his writings are part of the long conversation about God, the world, and man, that takes place over the centuries. While he might have joined that conversation had he lived many centuries before or after, it was his fortune that he should be born in a time when philosophy as he understood it had been abandoned and the possibility to restore it was in his hands. The need to bring about that restoration forced him to become a founder. He could not be a re-founder of ancient orders for a return to the past, to the original

⁴¹⁸ In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli declares to have taken "a path as yet untrodden by anyone." See Book I, Preface (5).

form of classical political philosophy, would have been either impossible or fruitless.⁴¹⁹

Machiavelli was compelled to introduce new modes and orders, but, as I will try to show, the desire to restore the past permeates his work. Readers of Machiavelli must therefore be prepared to read him both by himself and in conjunction with the political philosophy of the ancients, on whose old foundations he builds his new edifice.

By reading Machiavelli's works on their own, we learn why he was compelled to introduce new modes and orders. We learn what, in his view, had so changed in the world as to require the shocking boldness of his teachings. While it is true that his critique also reaches the ancients, I contend that his critique of the ancients is less severe than the critique against the spirit of his time. Whereas his critique of the ancients is aimed at adapting their philosophic politics to fulfill its purpose in the context of Christianity, the critique of his time is aimed at demolishing Christian political philosophy. Certainly, a superficial reading of Machiavelli's *Prince* leaves us with the impression that he attacks both the truth of the ancients and the truth of Christianity by putting forward the effectual truth as, so to speak, an instrument of universal measure. However, I will argue below, Machiavelli's effectual truth is intended to take in his own political philosophy the equivalent place that *kalokagathia* occupied within the larger frame of classical political philosophy. It is therefore crucial—not to be blinded by effectual truth, or in order to overcome its shocking effect—to distinguish between Machiavelli's philosophic politics and his political philosophy, especially if one reads him on his own.

But why was Machiavelli compelled to introduce new modes and orders? More specifically, what compelled Machiavelli to teach and defend the art of tyranny? If one truly believes that Machiavelli wanted to restore classical political philosophy, it becomes necessary to

⁴¹⁹ See King Agis's failed attempt to re-found Sparta, and the result of Cleomenes's futile success in *Discourses* 1.9.4 (32), examples which perhaps gave pause to Machiavelli and contributed to shaping his own enterprise; see also Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 114 and 172.

understand what change had occurred that made a full return to the classics both desirable and impossible. Moreover, it forces one to think, what could make the defense of tyranny necessary? The only reasonable way to explain Machiavelli's defense of tyranny is that he recognized that a worse kind of tyranny than the one he was forced to propose loomed large over the world. He seems to have reached the unfortunate conclusion that only through the promotion of outspoken tyranny could other forms of tyranny be stopped while making his own tyrannical project prosper in the way he contrived. In other words, I contend that he did not defend tyranny unqualifiedly: he defended and promoted a specific kind of tyranny against other, more undesirable kinds. This, of course, does not make his approach to tyranny or his evil or wicked teachings any less shocking. Nevertheless, looking into his teachings in this way might help us gain a broader perspective.

Before we embark on this challenge, I must say a word regarding Machiavelli's "evil" teachings, lest I am accused of defending tyranny myself. For those who are willing to give Machiavelli the benefit of the doubt it is necessary to wonder about his intentions in presenting his teachings thus. Machiavelli must have chosen to present his wicked teachings so openly and in his own name for a reason. If we manage to get past their shocking effect—without growing numb to the staggering coldness of Machiavelli's remarks but weighing every word—we might find a deeper meaning in his advice. Just as with the classics we were invited to look beyond the highest political good, aimed at through *kalokagathia*, toward the highest human good, with Machiavelli's writings we are pressured to look beyond the brutalization to which he subjects his readers toward the sub-human. Machiavelli's purpose in leading us in that dreary direction, I will argue, is no other than to restate the hierarchy of goods (which coincides to a great extent with that of the classics) in his own terms, that is, focusing on the lowest steps on the ladder. With

these reservations in mind, let us contrast Machiavelli's tyranny with those other forms of tyranny that he most forcefully rejected.

CRUELTY AND PIOUS CRUELTY

The commanding authority has the power to impose an obligation binding not only to external but also to internal and spiritual obedience.

Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum*

An indication that Machiavelli does not promote every kind of tyranny is that he also does not promote every kind of cruelty or, at any rate, he does not promote cruelty for its own sake. In the *Prince*, Machiavelli gives advice on the proper use of cruelty and provides examples both to support his view of well-used cruelty and to show that he finds fault with cruelty badly used. A memorable example of cruelty well used is that of Cesare Borgia, who first used the truculent governor Remirro de Orco (Ramiro de Lorqua) to bring order to the city and then had him executed, sawn in half, and his bisected body exposed in the public square. Cesare Borgia thus made the people believe that "if any cruelty had been done, it had not come from him," and, Machiavelli concludes, "the ferocity of that spectacle left the people at the same time satisfied and stupefied."⁴²⁰ Machiavelli further illustrates well-used cruelty with the example of Agathocles, whose brutal cruelty proved his virtue, except that, in his case, he acquired imperium but failed to acquire glory.⁴²¹ Through these examples, Machiavelli conveys that cruelty may be used so long as it does not tarnish the image of the prince.

What is remarkable about these qualifications on the use of cruelty is that the prince needs to take into account the effects his cruelty will have on the people, even if only to take care of his image, which is an indispensable measure to maintain his state. Aware that a tyrant might

⁴²⁰ *Prince*, ch. 7 (45).

⁴²¹ *Prince*, ch. 8 (52).

not be concerned with the common good, Machiavelli manages to make “princes” care for the common good out of selfish considerations. Despite his criticism of the character of the people,⁴²² Machiavelli insists that “it is necessary for a prince to have the people friendly,” for although the people is insufficient to sustain the prince if he is oppressed by enemies or by magistrates, without the people “he does not have a remedy.”⁴²³ Accordingly, well-used cruelties are “done at one stroke for the necessity of securing oneself, and which are afterwards not continued within, but converted to the greatest possible utility of the subjects.”⁴²⁴

Machiavelli also insists that a prince ought not take away his subjects’ property or women, for if he does, he would make himself hated and would not have the people’s support.⁴²⁵ In short, by suggesting that cruelty well used must make his state stronger without making him hated, Machiavelli sets a limit to the cruelties that a prince can use. By addressing cruelty, a common trait among tyrants, in this peculiar way, Machiavelli is able to make those tyrannies that are somehow tied to the common good more desirable than tyrannies that revolve around the wishes of the prince alone. In other words, if cruelty must ultimately redound to the benefit of the subjects so that they will be useful for the prince, then Machiavelli promotes what we may call beneficent tyranny. By showing himself as an utterly unscrupulous man, Machiavelli is more likely to gain the favor of tyrants, who might follow his advice to the letter. If this interpretation is correct, it would confirm Leo Strauss’s suspicion that “it is precisely Machiavelli’s perfect understanding of Xenophon’s chief pedagogic lesson [of the *Hiero*] which accounts for the most

⁴²² See *Prince*, ch. 17 (101): “For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, hypocrites and dissemblers, evaders of dangers, lovers of gain; and while you do them good, they are wholly yours, offering you blood, goods, life, and sons, as has been said above, when need is far off; but when it approaches you, then they revolt.”

⁴²³ *Prince*, ch. 9 (59).

⁴²⁴ *Prince*, ch. 8 (54).

⁴²⁵ See *Prince*, chs. 17 (101) and 19 (111).

shocking sentences occurring in the *Prince*.”⁴²⁶

But Machiavelli does not leave it at that. He does not seem content with the condition to satisfy the people that the prince is not cruel or that his cruelties are necessary for the common good or justly deserved. After all, people can be easily deceived. As he asserts in chapter 18 of the *Prince*, “men are so simple, and so obedient to present necessity, that he who deceives will always find one who will let himself be deceived.”⁴²⁷ To set a limit to cruelty by appealing to the people’s approval is insufficient. Therefore, what determines whether cruelty is well or badly used must be linked to the end for which it is used as well as its success in reaching that end. If the end in sight is not meritorious, or if the cruel deeds to attain it will fail to meet their purpose, then that cruelty is badly used and ought to be avoided. Although we are dealing with the base topic of cruelty, this classification already points in an interesting direction. Besides keeping the people friendly, Machiavelli intimates that the prince ought to be concerned with an end that lies beyond the people’s approval. Machiavelli is concerned with the common good, not as the people might conceive of it, but as a virtuous prince, or as he himself, conceives of it.

This leads to the fairly obvious question, what is the common good for Machiavelli or what ends are according to him laudable and which ones are worthy of reproach? The most obvious answer is that the end is marked by whatever the prince’s wishes are. His most important concern is to satisfy his own desires. And it is likely that the prince’s first desire is the same as what according to Machiavelli is most people’s desire, the desire to acquire, for “it is a thing truly very natural and ordinary to desire to acquire.”⁴²⁸ That such an end would set a limit to the prince is difficult to see unless one also considers that for Machiavelli not every acquisition is beneficial. Indeed, acquisitions are harmful if the one who acquires does not proceed according

⁴²⁶ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 56; see also *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 82.

⁴²⁷ *Prince*, ch. 18 (108).

⁴²⁸ *Prince*, ch. 3 (17).

to virtue—that is, according to Machiavelli’s understanding of virtue—or if his dominion is not well ordered.⁴²⁹ Virtuous princes and well-ordered dominions are those in which the people are so strong that they demand an even stronger prince.

Whence it follows that those dominions that do not make their people strong are not well-ordered, their acquisitions are harmful, and the cruelties committed to preserve them are very likely to be badly used. Although Machiavelli does not say explicitly that King Ferdinand’s cruelty is badly used, there are indications that suggest that his “pious cruelty” falls into that category. For even though Machiavelli describes King Ferdinand almost as a new prince “because from a weak king he became by fame and glory the first king of the Christians,” he also says that a more “miserable and rare example” of pious cruelty cannot be found than when he drove the Marranos out of his kingdom and despoiled them. It is not King Ferdinand’s cruelty per se that Machiavelli calls into question but the end which the king pursued. Machiavelli says the king turned to pious cruelty “in order to undertake greater enterprises, *always serving religion*.”⁴³⁰ King Ferdinand did not serve the people nor did he seek to make them stronger but served religion instead. In his case, this is particularly prejudicial because the religion he served, unlike Roman religion, weakens the people by praising humility and demanding not to sin.

King Ferdinand’s religion contrasts with Roman religion in many ways. According to Machiavelli “the religion introduced by Numa was among the first causes of the happiness of that city. For it caused good orders; good orders make good fortune; and from good fortune arose the happy successes of enterprises.”⁴³¹ Christian religion did the opposite, for it promoted orders that made the people servile. A king or prince who persecutes and despoils his subjects on account of their purported internal and spiritual disobedience weakens them. And a weak people

⁴²⁹ See *Discourses*, 2.19 (172-3).

⁴³⁰ *Prince*, ch. 21 (132-3), my emphasis.

⁴³¹ *Discourses*, 1.11.4 (35).

is doomed to live servilely. It follows that pious cruelty is badly used because it does not help to introduce good orders. Instead, it punishes men for their thoughts rather than their actions; it persecutes on account of sins committed in thought and fails to take notice of military sins, the only sins which according to Machiavelli ought to be avoided or punished.⁴³²

If a weak people is doomed to a life of servility, it follows that all regimes must be concerned with making their people strong, not weak. The sin of Christianity is to have made the people weak and to pride itself on it. From the viewpoint of Machiavelli, that sin is worse than the alleged sins of a tyrant, for a weak people cannot defend itself and is bound to fall prey to the first enemy that confronts it.⁴³³ Therefore, Machiavelli asserts, “it is more true than any other truth that if where there are men there are not soldiers, it arises through a defect of the prince and not through any other defect, either of the site or of nature.”⁴³⁴ Machiavelli accused Christianity of aiming too high because, as a consequence, it failed to benefit men not only to the greatest extent possible but even less than a reasonably humane tyranny would! By “humane tyranny” we mean one in which the tyrant “is not some barbarian prince, a destroyer of countries and waster of all the civilizations of men,” but one who “has within himself human and ordinary orders”;⁴³⁵ a tyrant who despite his selfishness or because of it will make his people strong.

After pondering the effects Christianity had on humanity, Machiavelli seems to have reached the conclusion that so long as the tyrant is intelligent enough to make his subjects strong, that tyranny is preferable to a free republic whose subjects are weak. For it is naïve to believe that a republic or principate can live a peaceful life without being subjected to the power of a

⁴³² *Prince*, ch. 12 (72); see also *Discourses*, 2.18, and Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 159.

⁴³³ Machiavelli intimates that as an indirect consequence of the Church’s debilitation of Italy, “Charles, King of France, was allowed to take Italy with chalk.” *Prince*, ch. 12 (72). On the attribution of that expression to Alexander VI, see Leo Paul de Alvarez’s note 5 (76).

⁴³⁴ *Discourses*, 1.21.1; see also Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 178.

⁴³⁵ *Discourses*, 2.2.4 (133).

stronger one. In a passage that is highly reminiscent of Socrates's conversation with Aristippus in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Machiavelli asserts that

it is impossible for a republic to succeed in staying quiet and enjoying its freedom and little borders. For if it will not molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and the necessity to acquire; and if it does not have an enemy outside, it will find one at home, as it appears necessarily happens to all great cities.⁴³⁶

Therefore, the main concern of a prince or republic ought to be to make their people strong. Christianity does the opposite because, concerned about the souls of men, it makes them humble and resistant rather than strong.

“Our religion,” says Machiavelli, “has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human,” so that “this mode of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them.”⁴³⁷ Machiavelli was more concerned about what he saw as the tyranny of thought of Christianity than about tyrannies of openly ambitious, selfish princes. Faced with those two options, he was compelled to make a prudential choice between them. Prudence, indeed, according to Machiavelli, consists in knowing how to choose between inconveniences, for one is never able to avoid one without running into another.⁴³⁸ Open political tyranny is preferable to the veiled tyranny of thought that Christianity represented, because whereas the latter has no remedy, the former one can try to transform so as to make it beneficent.

⁴³⁶ *Discourses*, 2.19.1 (173); see *Xen. Mem.* 2.1.14.

⁴³⁷ *Discourses*, 2.2.2 (131).

⁴³⁸ *Prince*, ch. 21 (135).

EFFECTUAL TRUTH⁴³⁹

We ought not to hesitate nor to be abashed, but boldly to enter upon our researches concerning animals of every sort and kind, knowing that in not one of them is Nature or Beauty lacking.

Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*

Classical political philosophers were conscious of all kinds of tyranny. They, however, did not feel the necessity to choose between them. But if they had to choose one, they would have chosen the tyranny of the philosopher, which is nothing else than the rule of the philosopher-king as depicted by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*. The tyranny of the philosopher is the only regime that is truly beneficent because it is concerned not with the common good in the political sense but with the common good simply, for mankind not as citizens but as human beings.⁴⁴⁰ The classics knew, however, that the conditions necessary for a philosopher-king to rule would never be met, and that to have the philosopher-king rule by compulsion would go against the nature of the philosopher and would defeat the purpose of his rule. Therefore, as Leo Strauss argues, in political terms the classics gave up the simply best regime and opted for the practically best regime, "the rule, under law, of gentlemen, or the mixed regime."⁴⁴¹

Among the classics, perhaps Xenophon alone would have chosen beneficent tyranny (in the political sense) as a desirable solution to the political problem. Indeed, his *Cyropaedia* seems to be a panegyric on beneficent tyranny. The disappointing endings of Xenophon's non-Socratic works are not necessarily meant as a critique of the political solution they offer but, as Eric Buzzetti has rightly pointed out, they are meant as a critique of politics as such in comparison to the philosophic way of life; they indicate that "the life devoted to politics is ultimately a

⁴³⁹ Many articles have treated the topic of Machiavelli's "effectual truth" more extensively than I do here. For two brief but useful accounts, see Harvey Mansfield's "Strauss on the Prince," and "Machiavelli's Enterprise."

⁴⁴⁰ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 284.

⁴⁴¹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 143; see also *On Tyranny*, 76.

disappointment.”⁴⁴² But in strictly political terms, it is not absurd to suggest that Xenophon contrived the *Cyropaedia* as the political solution *par excellence*. However, even if we leave aside the disappointment at the end of the *Cyropaedia* to focus on Xenophon’s praise of Cyrus, the *Cyropaedia* is still disappointing throughout because the solution it puts forward is difficult, nay, impossible to replicate. To realize the unlikeliness of an enterprise like Cyrus’s to occur, it suffices to think of the conditions that had to be met for someone like Cyrus (a Persian who was also the righteous heir to the Median throne) to receive the education he received and become the perfect prince he grew up to be. Though a rule like that of Cyrus is not as unlikely as the rule of a philosopher-king, Xenophon still thought of its coming about as highly dependent on chance.⁴⁴³

It was Machiavelli who thought that it was possible, if not to replicate Cyrus’s life, at least to produce beneficent tyrannies without relying on chance. Since, as we have seen, he felt compelled to choose among different kinds of tyrannies, it was absolutely necessary for him to find a safe way to attain the practically best tyranny. Only by putting forward the practically best tyranny would he be able to, on the one hand, replace and thwart in the future tyranny of thought and, on the other, transform petty tyrannies into beneficent ones. If any part of classical political philosophy was to be restored, Machiavelli had to face the formidable and unpalatable task of establishing the conditions for this new, practically unforeseen type of tyranny. Machiavelli’s beneficent tyranny is thus intended to preserve the core principles of philosophy by doing away with its peripheral teachings.

But was beneficent tyranny in the form Machiavelli contrived truly new and unforeseen? In chapter 1 we saw that every regime is in a sense tyrannical, even those regimes that seek the common good, because all rulers are compelled to impose themselves over some part of the

⁴⁴² Buzzetti, *Xenophon the Socratic Prince*, 294.

⁴⁴³ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 75.

city.⁴⁴⁴ Rather than discovering a wholly new form of government, Machiavelli seems to have focused on the tyrannical aspects that all regimes share, especially when they are founded. What characterizes Machiavelli's enterprise is less his discovery of a new manner of governing than his effort to make beneficent tyrannies replicable or, at any rate, more likely to happen. His originality lies in the boldness with which he treated human nature to attain that goal.

Here lies Machiavelli's starkest break with the ancients. Unlike the ancients, who always pointed to the perfection of human nature, Machiavelli proposed to exploit human nature without aiming at its perfection. Whereas the ancients always strived for virtue even though they acknowledged that few, if anyone, would ever be perfectly virtuous, Machiavelli—as regards his political solution—abandoned the prospect of perfect virtue altogether. Or, to be more precise, he replaced ancient virtue with his own *virtù*, a form of virtue deprived of nobility and which was valuable not in itself but as a means to acquire. As I argued in the previous chapter, the ancients saw gentlemanship or *kalokagathia* as the best political solution. They were fortunate enough to have found a way to make common opinion nobler and to a certain extent compatible with the philosophic way of life. Machiavelli was compelled to reject that solution. Machiavelli breaks with the ancients but this break is partial to the extent that he is guided by the same awareness of the problems that inspired the classics' thought.

In contrast to the classics, Machiavelli could not succeed in his enterprise by aiming at the ennoblement of common opinion because the very idea of noble things had been assimilated to Christian principles. Indeed, though in medieval times classical nobility had been adapted to fit a noble warrior society which clashed with Christian virtues, in time, that warrior society managed to conform to the most important of those virtues, especially mercy (*miser cordia*),

⁴⁴⁴ See above, pp. 18, 22, and 32-33.

humility (*humilitas*), and clemency (*clementia*).⁴⁴⁵ Since, as we argued above, Christianity had placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and the contempt of human things, Machiavelli could not be victorious in the spiritual war against Christianity by promoting nobility. To the contrary, he was forced to transform common opinion to make it ignoble or base. In fact, Machiavelli was compelled to cut all ties with anything deemed superior—philosophy included. It was inevitable for him to separate wisdom from moderation. For if the political realm was to regain its force it was necessary “to go behind [*drieto*] to the effectual truth of the thing,”⁴⁴⁶ so as to make worldly courage the highest good. Machiavelli refused to be guided by appearances and went under the classical veil of excellence to touch the truth.

Leaving aside for the moment the place that the teaching of effectual truth occupies within the larger frame of Machiavelli’s political philosophy, let us try to understand what that teaching consists in. To look at the effectual truth means to pay attention to how things are rather than to how things ought to be. This teaching gives more weight to the well-being of people’s bodies, so to speak, than to the well-being of their souls. It focuses on the necessary conditions for a society to thrive in terms of possessions, wealth, arms and strength rather than on the cultivation of more abstract goods. It is marked by the urgency to deal with political things in the best manner possible. By promoting a society that could thrive economically, people would be more able to withstand enemy attacks and to defend their freedom. Both in the *Prince* and in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli shows, in what may be called his prophecy of modern economy, what such a society might look like. Let us look first at the *Prince*:

⁴⁴⁵ See Gerd Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale*, 106-119.

⁴⁴⁶ Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. 15 (93). I here follow Leo Paul de Alvarez’s translation of the word *drieto*, which I believe he correctly renders as “behind,” in contrast to other translators who have translated it as “directly.” See Florio’s 1611 *Italian/English Dictionary: Queen Anna’s New World of Words*, s.v. “Drieto”; also Machiavelli’s use of *drieto* elsewhere, e.g., *Mandragola*, Act 2, Scenes 3 and 5 (in *Tutte le Opere*, 2236); and John Najemy, *Between Friends*, 189-90.

A prince should also show himself a lover of virtue, giving welcome to virtuous men, and honoring the excellent in an art. Next, he should encourage his citizens, enabling them quietly to practise their trades in merchandise and in agriculture and in every other trade of men—so that this one is not afraid to embellish his possessions for fear that these might be taken from him, nor this other to open a traffic for fear of taxes.⁴⁴⁷

One cannot say that Machiavelli revives ancient *kalokagathia* because he does not allude and indeed avoids referring to anything noble. But in a way that reminds one of Simonides's advice to the tyrant Hiero, Machiavelli keeps honors as a way to persuade men to make the city better. In other words, he maintains love of honor (*philotimia*) as the driving force that makes the city prosper. The teaching of effectual truth replaces the classical teaching of *kalokagathia*.

To build his new edifice, we said above, Machiavelli could not merely use the prevailing opinions of his time but needed to transform common opinion. Machiavelli knew that he did not have to conform himself to the existing common opinion because he had learned that lesson from Christianity itself. Indeed, Christianity had managed to change common opinion without compulsion and in such a striking manner that it even contributed to the fall of the Roman empire. In the words of Leo Strauss, "Christianity conquered the Roman empire without the use of force, merely by peacefully propagating its new modes and orders. Machiavelli's hope for the success of his venture is founded on the success of Christianity."⁴⁴⁸ In accordance with this, Machiavelli further suggests that a prince should, at the right times, keep people occupied with feasts and spectacles. He thus sought to change the paradigm people had of their private well-being and, consequently, their idea of the common good, now tied to safety, entertainment, wealth; in sum, to the economic rather than the spiritual prosperity of the city as a whole. Unlike

⁴⁴⁷ *Prince*, ch. 21 (135).

⁴⁴⁸ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 172-3.

the ancients, who saw the desire to acquire in excess as ill-willed, Machiavelli, as we mentioned above, made that desire not only acceptable but even commendable.⁴⁴⁹

Maybe Machiavelli would have agreed with Thomas Aquinas's phrase, "*et tamen minimum quod potest haberi de cognitione rerum altissimarum, desiderabilius est quam certissima cognitio quae habetur de minimis rebus,*"⁴⁵⁰ but he realized that any consideration of higher things is not possible if the most certain knowledge of low things is lacking or neglected. Though less desirable, to attend to political things is more feasible, more necessary, and more urgent because only thus can one hope for political freedom. And political freedom, as Machiavelli saw it, was the first step to attain freedom of thought.

Turning now to the *Discourses* we can see more clearly the close connection Machiavelli found between freedom and the increase of wealth:

For it all comes from the free way of life then and the servile way of life now. For all towns and provinces that live freely in every part... make very great profits.... He does not fear that his patrimony will be taken away, and he knows not only that they are born free and not slaves, but that they can, through their virtue, become princes. Riches are seen to multiply there in larger number, both those that come from agriculture and those that come from the arts. For each willingly multiplies that thing and seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired. From which it arises that men in *rivalry* think of private and public advantages, and both the one and the other come to grow marvelously.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ See Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.21; Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. 3 (17).

⁴⁵⁰ *ST I* q.1 a.5 ad 1, "yet the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things"; see also Arist. *Part. an.* 1.5, 644b, and Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 11.

⁴⁵¹ *Discourses*, 2.2.3 (132); the emphasis is mine.

I want to point to the importance Machiavelli places on rivalry over friendship. Like the classics, Machiavelli recognized that both friendship and hostility are essential parts of political life. But whereas the classics, in accordance with the practically best regime they promoted, put all the emphasis on friendship while they were quieter about hostility, Machiavelli did the reverse: he promoted hostility and was quieter about friendship.⁴⁵² Friendship in the city, desirable as it might be, was incompatible with the tyranny Machiavelli was pushing for. For although in theory friendship ought to make the city stronger, in practice, and especially in the Christian context, friendship reinforced values that were incompatible with a well-ordered regime in Machiavellian terms. Friendship promotes moderateness in property and wealth, gratefulness and mutual trust, all of which are good qualities in themselves but are undesirable to the extent that they allow both domestic and foreign enemies to take advantage of the good-willed. It is not friendship but hostility that breeds the kind of competition that will make a city safe against lovers of gain precisely by promoting that all become lovers of gain without shame.

It is only natural that Machiavelli should turn to the art of war as the best remedy against weakness. Knowledge of the art of war helps avoid the afflictions produced by the confrontation with ignoble enemies, which are precisely the afflictions that pious cruelty leads to. To return to the *Prince*, Machiavelli there asserts that “a prince, then, ought to have no other object nor any other thought, nor take anything else for his art, but war, its orders and its discipline; for this is the only art awaiting one who commands.” And again, that “he ought, therefore, never to lift his thought from the exercise of war, and he ought to exercise more in peace than in war.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² See Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.17-21; see also chapter 2 above, p. 91-92. I believe that a thorough study on the topic of friendship in Machiavelli’s oeuvre would be a most worthwhile endeavor. Aside from the explicit references to friends in, for example, the *Prince*, the *Discourses*, and *The Art of War*, one would have to look at Machiavelli’s correspondence as well. Although I believe that such a study could strengthen my argument that there is a close connection between Machiavelli’s philosophic stance and classical political philosophy, unfortunately, we cannot treat that topic more extensively here.

⁴⁵³ *Prince*, ch. 14 (88-89). I omit mentioning here Machiavelli’s *Art of War*, a fragment of which we used at the

Machiavelli thus resembles Severus, who acted as a ferocious lion and most astute fox to win his state. Severus was both feared and revered by everyone, and he was not hated by the armies. His reputation, even as a “new man,” protected him from being hated by the people for being rapacious.⁴⁵⁴ As much can be said of Machiavelli, but if that is the case, one must wonder, what does *his* state look like, if he was a prince without a kingdom?

In the next part of this chapter we will try to answer that question as we explore the possibility of seeing Machiavelli as a philosopher. Because if Machiavelli comes close to Severus as he tries to win his state, he is no less close to Marcus Aurelius—a warrior, philosopher, and Roman emperor—as he tries to preserve it.⁴⁵⁵

II. Machiavelli, a Socratic Prince

Each one spends his time in philosophy, but when his turn comes, he drudges in politics and rules for the city’s sake, not as though he were doing a thing that is fine, but one that is necessary. And thus always educating other like men and leaving them behind in their place as guardians of the city, they go off to the Isles of the Blessed and dwell.
Plato, *Republic*

TELLING SILENCES

As the best translator of the *Odyssey* into Spanish once said, Homer is not naïve when he repeatedly intensifies verbs of speech by adding the phrase “with words,” as when he says “she spoke and addressed Odysseus with winged words,” or “so he came near and spoke to him winged words,” or “questioning me with words, she said.” Homer is not naïve because he knew that there are non-verbal ways of communication, as when his Odysseus retells the experience with the sirens thus: “So they spoke, sending forth their beautiful voice, and my heart desired to

beginning of the chapter, because the form of that book seems to me to speak more of friendship than of rivalry. Although he does not say it explicitly, I believe Christopher Lynch intimates as much in his interpretive essay (see especially 179 and 224-5).

⁴⁵⁴ *Prince*, ch. 19 (117-8).

⁴⁵⁵ See *Prince*, ch. 19 (116).

listen, and I commanded my comrades to free me, nodding to them with my brows.”⁴⁵⁶

Odysseus’s words could not be heard, so he resorted to making gestures. In another passage, Homer makes Antinous’s anger apparent before we hear his words: “So he spoke, and Antinous became the more angry at heart, and with an angry glance from beneath his brows spoke to him winged words.”⁴⁵⁷ When we pay close attention to the details Homer offers, we confirm that not everything is said with words. This is an especially important consideration when one tries to make out Machiavelli’s deepest intentions.

At times, Machiavelli was compelled to be silent; at other times, he deliberately chose to omit treating specific subjects. We know the latter because he explicitly says so in several places.⁴⁵⁸ But whether he freely decided to omit something or felt obligated by the situation to do so, what his readers must be heedful of is that not everything Machiavelli wants to say is conveyed explicitly or “with words.” Could Machiavelli be nodding with his eyebrows as he wrote? I here argue that that is the case and it happens more often than one might suspect. Yet anyone familiar with Machiavelli’s writings might find it difficult to accept that Machiavelli is the type of writer who would show any kind of restraint when writing. If Machiavelli can give in his own name and shout from the rooftops the advice no one before dared to give—or those who dared, did so with utmost discretion—what can there be that Machiavelli cannot say? How can one square Machiavelli’s audacity and blunt cynicism with this purported circumspection?

The first reason is that any reference to higher things ran the risk of being associated with what he saw as the erroneous view of Christianity or with what happened with medieval warrior nobility; those “higher teachings” could be assimilated to Christianity. Consequently, to avoid

⁴⁵⁶ Pedro C. Tapia Zúñiga, “Cosas y Palabras, Textos y Traducciones” (lecture, Coloquio Internacional: La Traducción de los Textos Clásicos, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, September 6, 2019).

⁴⁵⁷ *Od.* 12.193-94 and 17.458-9.

⁴⁵⁸ See *Prince*, chs. 2 (8), 9 (59), 12 (71), 15 (94) and 19 (119); and, for example, *Discourses*, 3.1.6 (212).

any misinterpretation of his thoughts, Machiavelli, as Leo Strauss says, “expresses his disapproval of common opinion most effectively by silence.”⁴⁵⁹ Since according to common opinion, in Machiavelli’s time, those things were true which Christianity held as true, we may conclude that Machiavelli’s silences are intended as a rejection of Christian thought. His blasphemous silences direct our thoughts to the core of his political philosophy. For when one thinks about Machiavelli’s silences in this way, one discovers that his goal is not merely political. He does not wish to establish beneficent tyrannies only for the sake of benefiting mankind in the political realm. Machiavelli’s goal is more ambitious and more profound. Machiavelli wishes to debunk Christian principles for the sake of philosophy as well, if not primarily. In other words, Machiavelli openly taught political tyranny to bring down what he saw as the tyranny of God. Unfortunately for him—and for those of us who want to know his philosophic inclinations—however much he might have wanted to speak of philosophy, he was impeded from doing so by the prevailing opinions regarding things high.

The boldness of Machiavelli’s enterprise, once understood, evinces a second reason why he chose to be so cautious. For how could he be explicit about the conspiracy he was weaving without making himself hated or without putting himself in harm’s way? As we will see below, the establishment of Machiavelli’s new modes and orders amounts to founding a new state, and “new states are full of dangers.”⁴⁶⁰ That he was not unmindful of the dangers his enterprise entailed and of the possibilities of failure is apparent when he laments how undeservedly he bears “a great and continuous malignity of fortune.”⁴⁶¹ Machiavelli could not merely be an heir as he might have wished, but he also had to incur hardships and dangers as a founder. Therefore,

⁴⁵⁹ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 31. We should note that although Machiavelli expresses disapproval by silence, not all silences mean disapproval.

⁴⁶⁰ *Prince*, ch. 17 (100); see also *Discourses*, Book 1, beginning of the preface (5).

⁴⁶¹ *Prince*, Epistle Dedicatory (2).

he often resorts to an array of allusions and telling silences to let us know that there is something important of which, for some reason or another, he cannot speak openly, especially when he wishes to point in the direction of something higher, that is, philosophy.

Once one recognizes Machiavelli's impediments to speaking freely, it is not difficult to see him often, as it were, nodding to the readers with his eyebrows to indicate that there is something more to his thought than what is said explicitly. As a rule, he refuses to share any transpolitical teachings directly, and he becomes most secretive when it comes to discussing anything that departs from the effectual truth. Therefore, it would be a mistake to interpret his silences as ignorance or forgetfulness because "the silence of a wise man is always meaningful."⁴⁶² Of course, one would have to grant that Machiavelli is a wise man to give such weight to his silences. But if one grants that Machiavelli was wise or, at any rate, that he was a philosopher in the strictest sense of the term, then his silences become all the more striking and his allusions turn eloquent. Machiavelli's secretiveness can then be easily equated to the ancients' discretion about the highest truths.

ARMS AS KNOWLEDGE: MACHIAVELLI'S IMPLICIT PHILOSOPHICAL CONVICTIONS

When arms speak, the laws are silent.
Cicero, *Pro Milone*

If to make clear the truth concerning each thing belongs to the philosopher, as Aristotle says,⁴⁶³ how can Machiavelli, who deliberately omits the discussion of the highest things, be considered a true philosopher? If we were to judge Machiavelli based only on a superficial reading of his works, it would seem that rather than Socrates or Xenophon, he resembles Hiero

⁴⁶² *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 30.

⁴⁶³ *Eth. Nic.* 3.8, 1279b13-16.

the Syracusan, who “lacked nothing other than the principate to be a prince.”⁴⁶⁴ Indeed, although Machiavelli lacked a principate, his knowledge of political things is such that he can be easily considered a prince. But can he be considered a philosopher? And how is it possible to assert not only that he was a philosopher but even a Socratic one? The main reason to affirm that Machiavelli was a Socratic philosopher is that he shares the core principles of classical political philosophy or, to state the same thing differently, the pursuit of wisdom is what guides his thought.

To be sure, to see Machiavelli as a Socratic philosopher requires that we first grant that there is a dehumanizing aspect of philosophy. Let us not forget that although the philosopher genuinely cares for mankind, when absorbed in the highest kind of thought he cannot help but see all human things with contempt. Philosophy, as we argued in chapter 3, comes closest to tyranny when it is strictly defined as the pursuit of wisdom. Philosophy, we said, does violence against human beings because it demands that they give up what most human beings ordinarily love most or what is ordinarily thought to be most human.⁴⁶⁵ That wisdom guides Machiavelli’s thought can be known by looking closely at his works, for, even though they treat mostly political things, they are based on certain philosophical assumptions which reveal Machiavelli’s most profound convictions. Moreover, it is for the sake of the restoration of those very principles—among which the preeminence of wisdom is paramount—that he undertook the hard and dangerous task of innovating by introducing new modes and orders, as we will try to show below.

There are questions that must be raised in the interest of the city but whose answers nevertheless escape the political realm. To mention one among the most important, anyone

⁴⁶⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Dedicatory Letter (4).

⁴⁶⁵ See the section “Divine Dehumanization” in chapter 3, above, especially pp. 115-16.

interested in the well-being of the city and of its citizens must raise the question, what constitutes true happiness? Of course, to speak of the well-being of a community is one thing, but to speak of the happiness of the individuals that make up that community is another. How one answers the question of human happiness has direct implications for the political actions one defends or pursues for the well-being of the community. As Leo Strauss argued, “the partial human goods cannot be known to be goods except with reference to the highest or the whole human good,” but “the whole human good cannot be known to be good except with reference to the good simply, the idea of the good.”⁴⁶⁶ Because Machiavelli knew that from one’s political positions can be inferred one’s philosophic inclinations, compelled to be silent about the latter, he chose to reveal his own thought only through very subtle and scattered allusions. I therefore contend that paying attention to those allusions and reflecting upon what he defends and rejects politically, one can find the clues to Machiavelli’s philosophic path.

Of course, we cannot hope to show here all the dimensions and elements that make up Machiavelli’s philosophic thought. Again, as Leo Strauss suggests, “we must turn to the books of the ‘Averroists’ in order to complete Machiavelli’s inclinations and to fill the gaps between the seemingly unconnected denials without which his political teaching as a whole would be baseless.”⁴⁶⁷ It must suffice here to state that Machiavelli’s thought need not and, indeed, ought not be circumscribed to the political alone. For it is not until one sees beyond the political that wisdom appears as Machiavelli’s guiding principle. And it is only when one has recognized the pursuit of wisdom as Machiavelli’s central goal that his works reveal their full meaning. Let us then briefly reflect upon Machiavelli’s tactful but stark rejection of Christianity to try to find not his political but his philosophical stance and the place knowledge and wisdom occupy in his

⁴⁶⁶ Strauss, *The City and Man*, 29.

⁴⁶⁷ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 203.

thought.

At the root of Machiavelli's disagreement with Christianity lie implicit his philosophical convictions about human nature, the nature or origin of the world, and the question about God or wisdom, all of which are reaffirmations of what the classical thinkers believed to be true. Though he will never openly question the Christian views on these metaphysical matters, both that he was mindful of them and that he disagreed with them is adumbrated by Machiavelli when, for example, he briefly addresses the eternity of the world.⁴⁶⁸ Although at first he might appear to side with the creation of the world, other scattered assertions seem rather to confirm, if not his direct rejection of the creation of the world as such, at least that both creation and the afterlife are futile considerations for human life.

For example, Machiavelli asserts that "whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there *always* have been." Likewise, he also says that "men are born, live, and die *always* in one and the same order," and that men "have and *always* had the same passions and they must of necessity result in the same effect."⁴⁶⁹ Again, Machiavelli does not confront Christian beliefs forthrightly, but his striking silences regarding original sin or the multiple covenants God had with Noah, Abraham, Moses or David—not to say the coming of Christ—seem at once to dismiss the Christian account of God and of the world and is an open invitation to rethink human nature in different terms. Machiavelli's treatment of human nature as permanently fixed and determined by the passions—though comparable to the Christian account of fallen man—suggests that, for all practical purposes, that view constitutes the whole of human nature. In other words, he presents human nature as wholly determined by this-worldly life. Then again,

⁴⁶⁸ *Discourses*, 2.5 (138). For Strauss's discussion of this and the following passages cited in the next paragraph, see *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 201-2 and 333 n. 65.

⁴⁶⁹ *Discourses*, 1.39.1 (83); 1.11.5 (36); 3.43.1 (302); the emphases are mine.

Machiavelli exaggerates the role of the passions more to debunk Christian principles than to express his own view of human nature. As I will argue next, in Machiavelli's thought, it is not the passions but knowledge and wisdom that take the place of God.

Machiavelli's most direct references to the preeminence of knowledge appear in the Dedicatory Epistles of his two main works. In the *Prince*, he says that what he holds "most dear" among his (military) equipment is "the knowledge of actions of great men."⁴⁷⁰ Since, as we have said above, in political matters action is more important than thought, this assertion unveils that, for Machiavelli, political things have an inferior place when compared to thought or knowledge. Admittedly, it could be argued that Machiavelli here does not refer to knowledge unqualifiedly but specifically to knowledge of actions of great men. Still, it is not the actions but the knowledge of the actions that he holds most dear. The qualification of knowledge could be explained by Machiavelli's reluctance to speak of transpolitical matters. Moreover, precisely because he is not able to speak freely, this assertion concerning just how much he esteems knowledge should make us wonder about the scope of the work he is writing. While he speaks of the actions of great men, it is to his knowledge of them that we should pay more attention. Machiavelli's presence behind the actions he describes ought never be forgotten.

Machiavelli says that he has not found among his equipment (*suppellettile*) anything he esteems more. Let us not be misled by the expression *suppellettile*, a word which has a warlike or military connotation: Machiavelli's arms are his knowledge. Indeed, besides the fact that generals must be acquainted with the distinction between the good and the bad,⁴⁷¹ Machiavelli's discussions of arms can often—if not always—be also thought of as discussions of knowledge, as can be gathered from his use of the expression "armed legions" in the Dedicatory Letter of his

⁴⁷⁰ *Prince*, Epistle Dedicatory (1). For the translation of *suppellettile* as military equipment, see Leo Paul de Alvarez's introduction (xxiv) and Epistle Dedicatory, n. 5 (4).

⁴⁷¹ See Xen. *Mem.* 3.1.9; also 4.2.31.

Florentine Histories, where he appeals to Pope Clement VII's understanding. "I come happily to the task [of writing these histories]," Machiavelli says, "hoping that just as I am honored and nourished by the humanity of Your Blessedness, so will I be helped and defended by the armed legions of your most holy judgment."⁴⁷² Machiavelli's use of *suppellettile* at the beginning of the *Prince*, rather than weakening our argument, strengthens the idea we adumbrated at the beginning of this chapter, that his pursuit resembles war, or is spiritual warfare.⁴⁷³ It is a war that is fought with knowledge.⁴⁷⁴

In connection to Machiavelli's language of arms, let us add that Machiavelli appears as an unarmed prince only if we take his words literally. But upon considering that Machiavelli's arms are his knowledge, which he has in no small part inherited from the ancients, one comes to realize that Machiavelli is not unarmed. The figurative meaning of arms as knowledge in the *Prince* may add to our understanding of why one ought not use others' arms. Especially the knowledge that is not acquired by oneself but inherited from others ought to be adapted to, or assimilated by oneself before it can be of any benefit. It is well known that the strength of David's arms against Goliath resided more in David's wit than in the arms themselves. "In fine," says Machiavelli, "the arms of others either fall off your back, weigh you down, or constrict you."⁴⁷⁵ Machiavelli thus suggests that to use others' knowledge in a profitable manner it is necessary to strive to understand until you have made that knowledge your own, as he indicates in one of the few allusions to wisdom in the *Prince*: "a wise prince should found himself on that

⁴⁷² *Florentine Histories*, Dedicatory Letter (5).

⁴⁷³ See above, p. 127 with n. 415.

⁴⁷⁴ Consider how the following brutal phrase wholly changes its color when one thinks of this figurative meaning of arms: "because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there needs must be good laws, I shall omit the reasoning on laws and speak of arms." *Prince*, ch. 12 (71). On Machiavelli's exaggerated tone in the *Prince*, which ought not be taken literally, see Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 82. In the light of this reading, I believe there are also philosophic undertones in the phrase "it is more true than any other truth that if where there are men there are no soldiers, it arises through a defect of the prince and not through any other defect, either of the site or of nature." See above, p. 136 and n. 434.

⁴⁷⁵ *Prince*, ch. 13 (83).

which is his, not on that which is dependent upon others.”⁴⁷⁶ For that reason, too, Machiavelli says that the most excellent brain is one that understands on its own, and an excellent brain one that discerns that which others understand, whereas the brain that neither understands on its own nor through others is useless.⁴⁷⁷

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli says that “men wishing to judge rightly have to esteem... those who know, not those who can govern a kingdom without knowledge.”⁴⁷⁸ Machiavelli wishes to be judged not on account of his political actions or the political actions he promotes, but on account of his knowledge. Although he is cautious never to cite Xenophon’s Socratic writings,⁴⁷⁹ whereas he shows that he is well acquainted with the non-Socratic ones, it is likely that he knew both. If this is true, then it is not far-fetched to suggest that Machiavelli thought of himself as a king or ruler in the Socratic sense, by which I mean the teaching Xenophon ascribes to Socrates: “he said that kings and rulers are not those who hold the scepters, nor those elected by just anybody, nor those who obtain office by lot, nor those who have used violence, nor those who have used deceit, but those who understand how to rule.”⁴⁸⁰ Machiavelli considers himself an heir and a prince on account of the knowledge he has acquired, and a founder and a virtuous prince on account of his restoration of wisdom in the context where he lives.

As in the *Prince*, in the Dedicatory Letter of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli states as well that in this book he has expressed as much as he knows.⁴⁸¹ Again, the emphasis is not on actions but on knowledge. But even more importantly for our present discussion, let us note that the emphasis is not on God either. Wherever Machiavelli’s philosophic convictions may lie, he gives

⁴⁷⁶ *Prince*, ch. 17 (103).

⁴⁷⁷ *Prince*, ch. 22 (138).

⁴⁷⁸ Dedicatory Letter (3-4).

⁴⁷⁹ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 291.

⁴⁸⁰ Xen. *Mem.* 3.9.10; see also Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 83.

⁴⁸¹ In the Epistle Dedicatory to the *Prince* he says that he has reduced into that little volume “all that I, in so many years and in so many hardships and dangers, have come to know and to understand” (1-2).

every indication that they are at odds with Christianity or with any other religion because, unlike religion, he does not identify the highest good with God but with human wisdom. It almost goes without saying that he did not identify God with wisdom or, at any rate, he did not consider God's wisdom to be important for human affairs for it cannot be grasped by the human mind.⁴⁸² It's not that the demands of Christianity are foreign to the philosopher but that from a Socratic viewpoint they should not be imposed on everyone as a political goal. Individuals are certainly free to accept those demands for themselves, but to impose them as the goal of one's state will not only fail to make individuals better, and their communities are likely to perish as a consequence of such a measure. It is based on those convictions, which he shares with the ancients, and for the sake of philosophy thus understood, that Machiavelli founded his new state.

Machiavelli's emphasis on knowledge ought to make us reflect upon his seemingly total break with the ancients. That this break is only intended as superficial becomes apparent when we realize that his political teaching lacks a compelling theoretical framework. There is a gap between Machiavelli's treatment of human nature and the higher way of life that I here contend that he pursued and defended. Admittedly, critics of Machiavelli can easily attribute this shortcoming to his inability to forge a cogent theoretico-political account or to the absence of any higher element in Machiavelli's thought. In *What Is Political Philosophy?*, Strauss says that "Machiavelli's scheme was open to serious theoretical difficulties. ...he assumed, but did not demonstrate, the untenable character of teleological natural science. He rejected the view that man must take his bearings by virtue, by his perfection, by his natural end; but this rejection required a criticism of the notion of natural ends."⁴⁸³ However, Strauss also asserts that Machiavelli was a philosopher and treats him accordingly, as anyone familiar with his *Thoughts*

⁴⁸² See *Prince*, ch. 11 (66); also *Xen. Mem.* 1.1.13.

⁴⁸³ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 47.

on Machiavelli knows well. As a philosopher, Machiavelli could not simply assume the truth of something he could not demonstrate.

If Machiavelli was a philosopher, as we here hold that he was, it is more plausible to think of the discordance between his political and his theoretical account as yet another clue to his more profound thought. The boldness with which he treats human nature was necessary for political reasons, and it would result in the indirect restoration of philosophy. But this anti-teleological view of human nature was meant to be used only as a political solution. In other words, the shortcomings of Machiavelli's theoretical account reveal that he did not intend to replace the theoretical ground of the ancients. Strauss clearly states that there is a hidden kinship between the "new natural science" and Machiavelli's *political* science, but he does not allude there to Machiavelli's philosophical pursuit.⁴⁸⁴ For Machiavelli, it was necessary to introduce the view that rejects Aristotelian teleology for his new political modes and orders to succeed, but that view did not necessitate a solid theoretical base to support it because its aim was merely practical.

Moreover, because Machiavelli did not take the step to make his theoretical framework match his political scheme, we can gather that he did not see the theoretical implications of his political scheme as a serious or correct proposal. In harmony with the ancients, he was comfortable with the inconsistency between philosophy and politics. It was the wish to make philosophy and politics fully compatible that made the moderns, starting with Bacon, fill the gap that had been intentionally left open by Machiavelli. Although Machiavelli paved the way for this modern enterprise, we cannot wholly blame him for it. To ascribe to Machiavelli the theoretical implications that others developed as a result of his political proposal is a mistake equivalent to seeing the world-view of the *kalokagathos* as the core or the basis of the thought of

⁴⁸⁴ Strauss, 47.

Xenophon, Plato, or Aristotle.⁴⁸⁵

A PHILOSOPHICAL STATE

Once we recognize that wisdom is the leading feature of Machiavelli's whole enterprise, it is possible to see Machiavelli's political proposal as only one and inferior part of his more ambitious project, which includes a transformation of common opinion to restore the fundamental tenets of classical political philosophy. Moreover, as we discover that despite focusing on the lower steps on the ladder Machiavelli's hierarchy of goods is in essence the same as that of the ancients, we are able to justify his drastic measures concerning philosophic politics because of the high status of his goal. Only because in the eyes of Machiavelli the pursuit of wisdom itself was at stake did he dare to part ways with the ancients—and even then, he did not break with the core of their thought but only with the periphery of their teachings. By “periphery” I mean the ancients' teaching of *kalokagathia* as opposed to those philosophical precepts that threaten the stability of political life.⁴⁸⁶ When read in this manner, Machiavelli's understanding of the state and even his memorable teaching of the effectual truth take a different color, as we will see below.

According to Leo Paul de Alvarez's analysis of Machiavelli's use of the word *stato*, “one should understand the state as the extent to which the will of the prince is imposed upon the

⁴⁸⁵ See above, pp. 91-92. I think Waller Newell makes both mistakes because he fails to distinguish what the classics and Machiavelli defended publicly from what they believed characterized the philosophic way of life. On the one hand, he argues that the philosophic way of life according to the classics is grounded on the idea of a harmonious cosmos (*Tyranny*, passim); on the other, he argues that “Machiavelli's range... was never limited to the human world alone but always grounded the human in a new ontology of nature.” Despite citing Felice Beland who, following Richard Kennington, argues that Bacon *radicalized* Machiavelli's thought by extending to the natural world what Machiavelli restricted to the human world, Newell sees Bacon and Hobbes as narrowing the scope of Machiavelli's phenomenology of political existence; see Newell, *Tyranny*, 456-57.

⁴⁸⁶ See the section “*Kalokagathia* as Peak and Concession” in chapter 3, above, especially pp. 90-93; also pp. 139, 146-47, and 149. For Strauss's allusion to the difference between Machiavelli's innermost thought as opposed to its periphery, see *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 224-25; also Howse, *Leo Strauss*, 91.

matter which is given him.” Machiavelli’s *stato*, de Alvarez continues, is “the greatest manifestation of the *virtù* or excellence of a man,” it is “the realization in act of the will of someone.”⁴⁸⁷ Like any other virtuous prince, Machiavelli wished to acquire state. Unlike the state of ordinary princes, however, Machiavelli’s *stato* is best defined not in political but in philosophic terms, as the attainment of knowledge or the pursuit of wisdom. If princes are committed to the defense and welfare of their fatherland, Machiavelli’s fatherland is philosophy itself. Indeed, just as his discussion of arms may be understood as a discussion of knowledge, Machiavelli’s broad understanding of the word “state” allows for a philosophic interpretation of it as well. Whereas a state is most of the time and most clearly manifested in political terms as the power a prince exerts over his subjects, and in his relative independence from foreign power, a philosophical state is the greatest manifestation of philosophical virtue or the mastery of the prince over himself and only over himself.

Indeed, if the state is the realization in act of the will of the prince, the state’s genre is then defined in accordance with the will of the prince. If the prince’s will is simply to satisfy his lowest desires, then his state is of a base kind. But if the prince’s will is perfected through self-knowledge and knowledge of human and non-human things, the state of such a prince belongs to a much more elevated category, a philosophical rather than a political one. The philosophical dimension of the state is not external but internal; accordingly, the primary requirement to acquire such a state is self-knowledge and dominion of oneself.⁴⁸⁸ If, politically speaking, the province is the matter into which the prince introduces the form he wishes,⁴⁸⁹ according to our figurative reading of *stato* as philosophical, the matter the prince must give form to is not the province but the prince’s will itself. To acquire such a state, it is the will of the prince that must

⁴⁸⁷ *Prince*, Introduction (xvi-xviii).

⁴⁸⁸ See *Pl. Rep.* 9.591d-92b.

⁴⁸⁹ See Leo Paul de Alvarez’s Introduction, *Prince*, xvi.

be mastered and sublimated—not the will of others. It is primarily in this philosophical sense rather than in a political one that Machiavelli’s teaching according to which the end justifies the means must be understood.⁴⁹⁰

To illustrate this, I wish to study the beginning of chapter 11 of the *Prince*, in which Machiavelli’s odd remarks are hardly intelligible if one does not have the figurative sense of state in mind. As we suggested above, it is in Machiavelli’s subtle allusions and deliberate omissions that we can find indications about his thoughts concerning higher, transpolitical matters. Chapter 11 of the *Prince* is peculiar first because it comes unannounced. When Machiavelli lays out his plan at the beginning of the book, one expects to find the contents of chapters 2 to 7, but not those that come afterwards.⁴⁹¹ But chapter 11 is also peculiar because although the title indicates that he will speak of ecclesiastical principates, in the second paragraph he leaves off discussing them. Strictly speaking, the content of the rest of the chapter is not about ecclesiastical principates but about “how it came to be that the Church came to such greatness in temporal [affairs],” of which he is willing to speak not spontaneously but only if someone asked him about it.⁴⁹²

Machiavelli first omits mentioning ecclesiastical principates; then he announces them but leaves off their discussion. This double omission compels us to look closely at the opening paragraph of that chapter, which contains everything Machiavelli will say explicitly of those principates which are of a superior kind. Aside from the odd remark that they are acquired either through virtue *or* fortune, and that they are maintained without either, it is even more striking that “they keep their princes in state, in whatever mode they proceed and live.” Moreover,

⁴⁹⁰ Consider the phrase “let a prince then win and maintain the state—the means will always be judged honorable and will be praised by everyone.” *Prince*, ch. 18 (109). For Machiavelli, the pursuit of wisdom is inherently honorable or, to state it differently, there does not seem to be a dishonorable way of pursuing wisdom.

⁴⁹¹ See *Prince*, ch. 1 (5), and Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 45.

⁴⁹² *Prince*, ch. 11 (66).

Machiavelli says that “these alone have states which they do not defend and subjects which they do not govern; and these states, by not being defended, are never taken away and the subjects, by not being governed, never care.” Subjects of such principates, Machiavelli continues, “never think of alienating themselves from their princes, nor could they do so if they thought of it,” to conclude by saying that “only these princes, then, are secure and happy.” Machiavelli’s description of purported ecclesiastical principates seems to be more appropriate of a philosophical one. At any rate, what is allegedly true of ecclesiastical principates according to what he says in this introductory paragraph is unquestionably true of philosophy.

Let us go over each of these points. It is only that principate which is guided by wisdom that is maintained without virtue or fortune, because it is maintained through the attainment and communication of knowledge. Likewise, a philosophical state does not need defense. Indeed, to defend a philosophical state might prove counterproductive because it is precisely in publicly defending the principles of philosophy that the philosopher risks being punished “with dishonor, fines, and death.”⁴⁹³ And it is those who are philosophically inclined, those who have chosen the pursuit of wisdom, or those who have realized that wisdom is the guiding principle, who belong to a philosophical state. They would never think of alienating themselves from previous philosophers nor could they, because being loyal to wisdom they remain loyal to those who defend it too.⁴⁹⁴ Only those princes, that is, those who have chosen the path of wisdom, are secure and only they are truly happy because the changes of fortune cannot affect them if they have truly acquired that state.

To be sure, all these assertions could also be true of those who follow the path of God. It

⁴⁹³ See *Pl. Rep.* 6.492d-e.

⁴⁹⁴ On the “permission” the ancients might have given Machiavelli to depart from their orders, see *Discourses*, 2.33, “How the Romans Gave Free Commissions to Their Captains of Armies.” See also Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 106-107; Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*, 293-96, and “Strauss on the *Prince*,” 652 n. 18.

is precisely because Machiavelli is not unaware of the similarities between a philosophical and an ecclesiastical state that his account of the former is hidden in this chapter. But it is meaningful that Machiavelli leaves it to his readers to disentangle the philosophical from the ecclesiastical account. Machiavelli traces the path that leads to the replacement of faith by reason but conceals his blasphemy, so that it is ultimately the readers who will make wisdom take the place of God. Leo Strauss has explained such Machiavellian maneuvers when referring to Machiavelli's concealed blasphemies: "a concealed blasphemy is worse than an open blasphemy, for the following reason. In the case of an ordinary blasphemy, the hearer or reader becomes aware of it without making any contribution of his own. By concealing his blasphemy, Machiavelli compels the reader to think the blasphemy by himself and thus to become Machiavelli's accomplice."⁴⁹⁵ Machiavelli's double omission regarding ecclesiastical principates seems warranted.

Despite its departure from the first paragraph, the rest of chapter 11 confirms what we have suggested above, that Machiavelli departs from the ancients only to preserve political freedom and ancient philosophy.⁴⁹⁶ In the third paragraph, Machiavelli diagnoses the political illness caused by the Church and explains how it put Italy in a position of weakness and vulnerability before its enemies. Although Italy might have seemed strong to those under the sway of the Orsinni or the Colonnas, the invasion of King Charles made their weakness and vulnerability tangible. The Church's ailment is what necessitates Machiavelli's new political modes and orders. Only by radically subverting the existing order could political freedom be restored. And political freedom, to repeat what we said above, was the necessary step to make freedom of thought a viable possibility again.⁴⁹⁷

If we again ignore the name of the principate and pay attention to its description instead,

⁴⁹⁵ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 50.

⁴⁹⁶ See above, pp. 129-30 and 139.

⁴⁹⁷ See above, p. 143.

Machiavelli seems to further reveal the similarity between a philosophical and an ecclesiastical state when he describes the kingdom of the Sultan in chapter 19 of the *Prince*.⁴⁹⁸ He there says that:

this state of the Sultan is different from all other principates, because it is similar to the Christian pontificate, which one cannot call either a hereditary principate or a new principate; for it is not the sons of the old prince who are the heirs and remain the lords, but he who is elected to that rank by those who have authority. And since this order is ancient, one cannot call it a new principate, for one finds therein none of the difficulties that new ones have; for although the prince is new, the orders of that state are old and ordained to receive him as if he were their hereditary lord.

Could this not be a description of a philosophical state? A philosophical state is neither hereditary nor new in a strict sense. The authorities that sanction the ascent to the rank of prince are both previous and subsequent philosophers. Indeed, in a philosophical state, the rank of prince may be conferred posthumously.⁴⁹⁹ We said above that Machiavelli was both an inheritor and a founder. In accordance with the description of the Sultan's kingdom that we quoted, we could say that Machiavelli is an inheritor of the orders of the philosophical state, which are old and ordained to receive him as if he were their hereditary lord.

Machiavelli shows that he is a worthy heir of philosophy because of his serenity in the face of fortune. Machiavelli's imperturbability becomes patent in his efforts to acquire state, for he does not fall back despite the daunting task that lies before him. In his retelling of Livy's

⁴⁹⁸ That discrepancies between titles and contents are not unusual in Machiavelli's way of writing is apparent not only from the fact that he does not discuss ecclesiastical principates despite the title of chapter 11 of the *Prince*, but it is also indicated by those chapters in the *Discourses* where the content contradicts what the title says, not to mention the cryptic character of the titles of these works themselves. See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 16, 28, 37-38.

⁴⁹⁹ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 83.

description of Camillus in the *Discourses*, which reminds one of Aspasia's words in Plato's *Menexenus*, it is possible to recognize Machiavelli's own character: "Great men are always the same in every fortune; and if it varies—now by exalting them, now by crushing them—they do not vary but always keep their spirit firm and joined with their mode of life so that one easily knows that fortune does not have power over them."⁵⁰⁰ Despite the great and continuous malignity of fortune that Machiavelli bears, he remains adamant in his defense of the philosophic way of life, and loyal to his wise "counselors." We said above that Machiavelli was prudent because he knew how to choose between inconveniences. Now we can add that he was also prudent because, like a prudent prince, he knew how to choose from his state wise men and gave only to them the free will to speak the truth: Machiavelli's counselors are ancient philosophers. If he was not wise, he at least consigned himself to those who alone would govern him.⁵⁰¹

In chapter 3 we said that philosophy is like the lotus flower that grows out of the mud and mire of politics. Machiavelli is perhaps the clearest example of the philosopher who grows out of politics. In a now famous letter he wrote to Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli describes his politico-philosophical way of life thus:

When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments, and decently reclothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for.⁵⁰²

Machiavelli's writings are for this reason difficult to understand properly on their own and are

⁵⁰⁰ *Discourses*, 3.31.1; see p. 187 above; also Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 192-3.

⁵⁰¹ See *Prince*, ch. 22 (40-41).

⁵⁰² See Harvey Mansfield's translation of the *Prince*, Letter to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513 (109). For a commentary on this letter in the context of Machiavelli's correspondence with Vettori (or in relation to the *Prince* as what Strauss would call a "tract for the times," *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 56), see John Najemy, *Between Friends*, 221-241.

best read in the context of the Socratic philosophical tradition. In his analysis of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, Eric Buzzetti has suggested the ways in which Xenophon may be considered a Socratic prince. Buzzetti argues that in the non-Socratic works, Xenophon is very discreet in his references to philosophy and to Socrates, but he nevertheless points once and again in the direction of the Socratic works. In a similar way, at least in his two main works, Machiavelli points in the direction of the ancients, and especially to Xenophon. Unlike Xenophon, who points to wisdom through his Socratic dialogues, Machiavelli does not give himself the account of wisdom that guides his thought. Nevertheless, by pointing us to Xenophon, he indirectly points also to Socrates.⁵⁰³ It is true what Strauss says, that Machiavelli is less politic than Xenophon, but that Machiavelli showed so much circumspection as regards philosophy proves that it is only partially true that he separated wisdom from moderation.⁵⁰⁴ Both his courage and his moderation give sufficient proof that Machiavelli can be ranked among the greatest philosophers, and can be considered without reserve a Socratic prince.

Conclusions: Machiavelli's Ambiguous Legacy

The most characteristic trait of Machiavelli's enterprise is that he jettisoned nobility or what the ancients called *kalokagathia* and promoted virtue not as an end in itself but as a means to acquire. In the eyes of Machiavelli, *kalokagathia*, that veil of excellence, was like a fortress the ancients built to point to philosophy and protect it. But as with actual physical fortresses, Machiavelli thinks that nobility became, useless in times of peace, and dangerous or

⁵⁰³ Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 290-91. Although according to Strauss, Machiavelli, unlike Xenophon, "forgets Socrates," I hold that Xenophon plays in Machiavelli's works the same role that Cyrus plays in Xenophon's works. Just as Xenophon's account of Cyrus's life is ultimately meant to point to Socrates's life, references to Xenophon are indirect or silent references to the Socratic tradition.

⁵⁰⁴ See Xen. *Mem.* 3.9.4, and Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 56 and 184; *Natural Right and History*, 123; and *Xenophon's Socrates*, 7, 78, and 101.

counterproductive, in times of war. The best fortresses are those that protect the prince not from external enemies but from his own subjects, and the best way to be protected from one's own subjects is not to be hated by them.⁵⁰⁵ Machiavelli thus encourages princes to be of service to the people and to appeal to the people's desire to acquire. There is no better way to prevent hatred and, therefore, no better fortress.

The teaching of effectual truth was therefore indispensable to transform common opinion. This transformation aimed at turning people away from the abject condition in which he found them and lead them to a spirited way of life with ambition as their driving force. Likewise, the few who had truly philosophic aspirations would in theory be able to see beyond effectual truth. The teaching of effectual truth served to bring down the dominant power of Christianity; however, by abandoning nobility Machiavelli also abandoned any link there could be between his political teaching and his philosophical pursuit. If in the ancient context we think of *kalokagathia* as the burning fire inside Plato's cave, which is not the sun but in a way resembles it, Machiavelli deemed it best to put the fire out by pouring water onto the flames. In his time, everyone seemed to be captivated by a fire which resembled less and less the light of the sun because it no longer helped to benefit most to the greatest possible extent, on the one hand, and it prevented the few from pursuing a truly philosophic path, on the other. While it is true that darkness now infuses the cave, that darkness is, for Machiavelli, a more adequate description of the nature of political things and therefore closer to the truth.⁵⁰⁶

Although Machiavelli's break with tradition should perhaps be called Obfuscation rather than Enlightenment,⁵⁰⁷ through that Obfuscation he sought to benefit all to the greatest extent. For his new modes and orders would be more useful in politics and would make philosophy

⁵⁰⁵ See *Prince*, ch. 20 (129).

⁵⁰⁶ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 162-3.

⁵⁰⁷ See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 173.

possible again. In some of his minor works, he gives indications that the effectual truth is inferior to knowledge. For example, in the *Mandragola*, Machiavelli points in a vulgar but amusing way to the limits of the effectual truth by showing how "touching" the truth is useless if one lacks understanding and knowledge.⁵⁰⁸ But it remains a moot point whether he truly made philosophy possible again. The condition for the core teachings of philosophy to be restored is that at least a few will be able to see beyond the teaching of effectual truth to look for truth outside the cave. But Machiavelli was so successful in replacing nobility with the teaching of effectual truth that it is today difficult to see beyond that teaching. As Harvey Mansfield once said: "we are altogether too much impressed by effectual truth."⁵⁰⁹

Perhaps it is true that Machiavelli had no better option and was forced to choose between inconveniences. However, if he found himself between Scylla and Charybdis, one must say that he saved philosophy from the one but delivered it to the other. While he managed to escape Christian morality, he directed philosophy to the voracious impetus of what would come to be known as modernity, under the command of historicism, as we will see in the next chapter. The teaching that was intended to free humankind from religious tyranny of thought has led the world to new, unforeseen secular forms of tyranny of thought. In his favor, we may conclude by saying that against the standard of all time, the time for philosophy is not counted in seconds but in centuries. Whatever his intention might have been, perhaps Machiavelli's enterprise served to buy us time and to create the conditions that will allow us to undertake a true recovery of the classics. Since modern tyrannies seem to be based on Machiavelli's teachings or are a direct or indirect result of the revolution of thought that he led, we will reassess Machiavelli's enterprise

⁵⁰⁸ See how Nicia is deceived by his blind trust in the senses, *Mandragola*, 51. See also how Nicomaco is deceived in the *Clizia*.

⁵⁰⁹ Harvey Mansfield, "Machiavelli's Verità Effettuale" (lecture, University of Dallas, Irving, TX, February 7, 2014). https://youtu.be/T_tyqr8QuAc?t=2996.

after studying Alexandre Kojève's universal and homogeneous state in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

TYRANNY AS UTOPIA: THE STRAUSS-KOJÈVE DEBATE

Freedom becomes tyranny as soon as we try to impose it upon others.
Octavio Paz, Cervantes Award Speech (1982)

Contrary to today's commonplace belief that it is the ancients who were idealists whereas modern man has both feet on the ground, upon reflection one realizes that the ancients were much soberer in their enthusiasm about how much practical life could be improved by knowledge. With the advent of a new understanding of science, men revived the ancient belief that through the knowledge of causes any desired effects could be produced.⁵¹⁰ The Machiavellian teaching that human nature need not be pushed toward its perfection but can be molded to fit any political framework fueled utopian dreams and expectations. Whereas the ancients thought of the human *problems* as universal and permanent but were well aware that all solutions are of necessity partial and temporary—particularly in the sphere of politics—many thinkers in modernity are guided by the false impression that there are universal and permanent solutions that must, for that reason, be found, pursued, and put into effect.

One such modern thinker was Alexandre Kojève, or at least it so appears if one judges by the arguments he defends in his text “Tyranny and Wisdom.” This essay by Kojève is part of what has come to be known as the Strauss-Kojève debate,⁵¹¹ which begins with Leo Strauss's

⁵¹⁰ See, for example, Hobbes, *Leviathan* 5.17 (25); also Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.15.

⁵¹¹ There are numerous discussions of this debate, among which I would like to highlight four that I have found most useful: *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny*, edited by Timothy W. Burns and Bryan-Paul Frost (in their Introduction, p. 3 n. 4, they include a larger list of articles and book chapters that have been published on the debate); “Legitimacy and Legality, Thinking and Ruling in the Closed Society and the World State,” chapter 3 of Robert Howse's *Leo*

extremely detailed analysis of Xenophon's *Hiero*. According to Strauss, Xenophon's *Hiero* is "the only writing of the classical period which is explicitly devoted to the discussion of tyranny and its implications."⁵¹² Strauss was naturally attracted to this text because he considered that the question raised by the *Hiero* is of utmost relevance for a proper understanding of the problems facing political philosophy today. Although the *Hiero* does not offer answers to the problems it raises, it directs our attention to other texts in which those problems can be seen from a broader perspective. In agreement with each other, Strauss and Kojève decided to publish the book *On Tyranny* with a literal translation of the *Hiero*, Strauss's analysis, Kojève's critique ("Tyranny and Wisdom"), and Strauss's reply (the "Restatement").⁵¹³ It is in light of this most fertile discussion that, with the aid of Leo Strauss, we can approach modern tyranny to understand the problems it poses for political philosophy.

The Strauss-Kojève debate is important because it brings genuine problems to the foreground, even if the authors disagree about the way in which those problems ought to be understood. In one of his lectures, Strauss said that "every disagreement presupposes some agreement, because people disagree about something. If the disagreement is fundamental, they agree regarding the importance of that something regarding which they disagree." And in a letter to Kojève he says that they agree "about what the genuine problems are, problems which are nowadays on all sides denied [Existentialism] or trivialized [Marxism]."⁵¹⁴ As Victor Gourevitch and Mark S. Roth wrote in their introduction to *On Tyranny*, Strauss and Kojève "fully agree that there is a tension, indeed a conflict, between philosophy and society; and they agree that

Strauss; Steven Smith's "Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Strauss"; and Eric Buzzetti's "Guide to the Study of Leo Strauss' *On Tyranny*."

⁵¹² *On Tyranny*, 23.

⁵¹³ See *On Tyranny*, the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence, especially the letters of May 26, September 4, and December 26, 1949, and of January 18, 1950.

⁵¹⁴ *On Tyranny*, 244. Aside from Existentialism and Marxism, Strauss also refers there to Thomism.

philosophy and wisdom ranks highest in the order of ends, that it is an architectonic end or principle.”⁵¹⁵ Both agree that philosophy must turn to politics but they disagree regarding the relation between philosophy and politics.

Whereas Kojève believes that philosophy and politics ought to work as an ensemble because they are in the end expected to be in harmony, Strauss thinks that the goals of philosophy and of politics are not wholly compatible; indeed, in the final analysis, they are likely to be discordant. As a fitting representative of modernity, Kojève has lost sight of that broader dimension which reveals that “there is a disproportion between the intransigent quest for truth and the requirements of society.”⁵¹⁶ Thus, in “Tyranny and Wisdom” Kojève speaks of the final coincidence of philosophy and politics in the “final stage” of history, that is materialized in a form of beneficent tyranny which he calls the universal and homogeneous state.⁵¹⁷ Strauss’s concern is that the tyrannical project put forward by Kojève, rather than making philosophy and politics finally coincide, would surely make philosophy disappear.

Although this form of tyranny does not seem to be looming on the horizon, or not as prominently as it did in the postwar era of the twentieth century, one does well to take Leo Strauss’s words seriously when he says that “society will always try to tyrannize thought.”⁵¹⁸ Whether it might come from the far left or the far right, there is always a chance that tyranny will emerge; it is therefore worth exploring the scenario Kojève proposes as well as Strauss’s answer, which always reflects the classical teachings. In this chapter we will first take up the topic of Kojève’s universal and homogeneous state to understand both the premises of his thought and the goal he is aiming for. We will then address the primacy of politics over philosophy based on

⁵¹⁵ *On Tyranny*, xi.

⁵¹⁶ *On Tyranny*, 27.

⁵¹⁷ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 168.

⁵¹⁸ *On Tyranny*, 27.

Kojève's understanding of human beings. In the second part of this chapter, with the help of Strauss's insights, we will focus on how the classics might have responded to Kojève. We will finally examine to what extent facing modern tyranny might require a new, bold solution, in the style of Machiavelli or to what extent we are more in need of classical moderation.

A secondary but still important aim of this chapter is to reassess Machiavelli's enterprise. Since the origins of modern tyranny, or of the state as presented by Kojève, can be traced back to Machiavelli's revolution and to his defense of beneficent tyranny, guided by Strauss we can look anew at Machiavelli's enterprise by taking into account its effects today. We wish to round off our reading of Machiavelli by drawing his oeuvre as close as we can to the classics. Indeed, we will suggest that his break with the classics is best understood as a collaboration rather than as a genuine rupture with them.

I. The Laborious Life

THE UNIVERSAL AND HOMOGENEOUS STATE

As concerns the relations among states, according to reason there can be no other way for them to emerge from the lawless condition, which contains only war, than for them to relinquish, just as do individual human beings, their wild (lawless) freedom, to accustom themselves to public binding laws, and to thereby form a state of peoples (*civitas gentium*), which, continually expanding, would ultimately comprise all of the peoples of the world.
Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*

In Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger asserts that "there can be no rest from evils and toils for those cities in which some mortal rules rather than a god."⁵¹⁹ The ancients had the conviction that despite the progress political communities can make, no regime could ever make its citizens perfectly good or perfectly happy. All human regimes fall short and will always fall short of the best regime, regardless of the technological advances that continuously change the world. In antiquity, even the best feasible regime—the best version of the mixed regime—had its

⁵¹⁹ Pl. *Leges* 4.713e.

shortcomings. But the same holds true for all modern, contemporary, or future regimes. Despite social or intellectual revolutions, political life is essentially inferior to the best individual human life or to the way of life of the philosopher. No political community can ever be philosophical.

It is by virtue of these realizations that the ancients did not seek and in fact warned against seeking to instantiate the very best regime. They knew that although philosophy and politics can be gradually harmonized in several respects, full compatibility between them can never be attained. One must resist the urge to attempt to amalgamate philosophy and politics, not to make the one disappear and the other inordinately oppressive. In light of this, the best alternative that the classics found was to benefit the community to the greatest extent possible, without doing violence to it by trying to make it philosophical, on the one hand, but also without negating the possibility of philosophy, on the other. The risk of the latter is what compelled Machiavelli to welcome a more aggressive way of approaching both philosophy and politics. But we find that his success was relative because the efforts to thwart a pious tyranny of thought opened the door to another, equally dangerous, version of tyranny, a secular and universal tyranny of thought.

To view that form of tyranny from the proper perspective, one has to consider that the prospect of modern tyranny stems from an erroneous conception of the relation that exists between philosophy and politics. How far one believes political life can be improved depends on whether one thinks that philosophy and politics can be made fully compatible or not. Belief in the full coincidence of philosophy and politics leads to the imposition of excessive demands on political life or to a considerable lowering of philosophical standards. Kojève's universal and homogeneous state seems to me to be a mixture of these two elements. On the one hand, his expectations about the possible improvement of political life lead him to favor tyranny for the

sake of what he sees as the “definitive solution” to the political problem. On the other, his view of philosophy is that it is valuable only insofar as it is translated into political action. According to Kojève, philosophy that does not have a direct impact on politics is just an endlessly ongoing discussion to a problem that has been “virtually resolved”; and History, he asserts, will ultimately put an end to it.⁵²⁰

Tyranny as Kojève thinks of it is for him a good solution to the political, and indeed to the human problem, because its aim is no longer to benefit the ruler or his class over and against the ruled. Tyranny is to be sought for the benefit of mankind. Moreover, tyranny is not only a solution but the *best* solution because only through tyrannical measures would it be possible to overcome the rigid limits of the polis or the nation, which tend to reproduce the master-slave relation between rulers and ruled. Since the cohesion of the ancient polis, like the modern nation, is largely based on geographical or ethnic grounds, only a universal empire could dilute those “limits,” for example, by means of intermarriage.⁵²¹ Likewise, the universal state alone could merge the conquerors and conquered so as to transcend their inequality by worshipping or being guided by something higher, namely, reason or *Logos*.

The most solid proof for Kojève that men have sought universal rule in this spirit, one that transcends the limits of the polis or the nation, is embodied by Alexander the Great. Alexander the Great is at the same time an example of a man of action who sought to rule an empire or a universal state, on the one hand, and both a direct pupil of a philosopher (Aristotle) and an indirect pupil of other philosophers (Socrates, Plato, and Xenophon), on the other. According to Kojève, “instead of establishing the domination of his *race* and imposing the rule of his *fatherland* over the rest of the world, [Alexander] chose to dissolve the race and to

⁵²⁰ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 167-68.

⁵²¹ Kojève, 170.

eliminate the fatherland itself for all political intents and purposes,” because he had been influenced by philosophy. As a result of his philosophical education, Alexander could devise a universal state whose cohesion would not be based on class, race, geography, but on man’s essence. Alexander might have realized that “all men can become citizens of the same State (= Empire) because they *have* (or acquire as a result of *biological* unions) one and the same ‘essence.’” Like Alexander’s struggle, many efforts to actualize the universal state or empire thenceforth are driven by a philosophical idea that can be traced back to Socrates.⁵²²

Although Kojève does not refer here to peace, it can be gathered that peace is yet another benefit that the universal character of the state brings because a universal state would have eliminated all external threats. The universal state precludes the possibility of enemy attacks and can focus on the well-being of its citizens without having to rely excessively on military force. No smaller nation could do so because for their survival they must be ready to fight against and to defend themselves from other states. This, however, does not mean that there will be no “police” to guard against internal disruptions or coups d’état in the universal state. Kojève, however, puts more emphasis on persuasion than on compulsion to prevent a citizens’ uprising. Indeed, citizens will protect rather than attack the state if they are satisfied. But for them to be truly satisfied, another criterion must be met, namely, the homogeneity criterion.

A homogeneous state is one that is made up of a “classless society.”⁵²³ Unlike what happens historically with the universal criterion, whose spirit was embodied by Alexander and other statesmen after him up to our time, Kojève can offer no example of a statesman who has attempted to establish a homogeneous state. To be sure, the first example of one who may have initiated those efforts is, Kojève says, the Egyptian Pharaoh Ikhnaton. Although certainly a

⁵²² Kojève, 171-72; all emphases hereinafter are in the original.

⁵²³ Kojève, 172.

statesman, Ikhnaton cannot be said to have pursued a homogeneous state as Kojève thinks of it because the equality that purportedly united the Pharaoh's empire does not originate on a rational basis but on a religious-theistic one. His empire was classless only to the extent that he considered all men equal before the god Aton. In the words of Kojève, "its basis was a common *god* and not the 'essential' unity of men in their capacity as humans (=rational)." ⁵²⁴

Aside from Ikhnaton's empire, Kojève says that the transcendent-religious unifying basis of an empire was also adopted, for example, "by St. Paul and the Christians, on the one hand, and by Islam, on the other." However, Kojève asserts, it is the universal Church that stood the test of history. Nevertheless, its religious basis "did not and could not engender a *State* properly so called," because the Church is not a state but a "mystical body." ⁵²⁵ But even if the world has not experienced political homogeneity, the example of the Church can serve as inspiration for it. In other words, although at the political level no one has yet achieved homogeneity, Kojève thinks that to attain the universal and homogeneous state has become a political goal of our time. The philosophy that drives this political urge is not philosophy in the classical sense but one that is derivative from Christianity insofar as it constitutes its negation. When attained, the universal and homogeneous state will be the first and only state to rule based on man's essence or on human nature. At this point, the question arises whether it is truly human nature or the perfection of human nature that would be the basis of this state. We will turn to that question in the final section, where we will also address Kojève's lowering of the classical philosophical standards.

But to conclude our exposition of Kojève's universal and homogeneous state, let us add that because he embraced modernity's deliberate abandonment of the perfection of human nature as the ancients understood it, he seems little concerned about the means to attain the truly

⁵²⁴ Kojève, 171.

⁵²⁵ Kojève, 171-72.

valuable goal, which for him is not individual but political perfection. In agreement with the ancients, tyranny is for him the fastest and most efficient way to improve political life.⁵²⁶

Whereas the ancients dropped tyranny as a viable solution because that cure seemed to them worse than the disease, Kojève is convinced that with the right goal in mind, tyranny can be made truly beneficent in the highest sense. His expectations that through tyranny the coincidence between philosophy and politics can be actualized betrays his idealism, the very idealism he criticizes and which he erroneously attributes to the classics.

PREMINENCE OF POLITICS OVER PHILOSOPHY

No work is disgraceful but idleness is disgraceful.

Hesiod, *Works and Days*

Since they do not toil, they do not discover what a good man should be; so they are able to be neither pious nor wise; and, being uneducated, they censure very much those who have been educated. Therefore, through these men nothing would be in a noble condition, but everything that is beneficial to human beings has been discovered through the better sort—and the better are those who are willing to toil.

Xenophon, *Cynegeticus*

We said above that Kojève *appears* to be like other modern thinkers because, against the thought of the classics, he does not believe in the permanent tension that exists in the relation between philosophy and politics. Whereas the classics thought that there are permanent problems and only temporary solutions, Kojève, conversely, believes not in permanent problems but in permanent solutions. But that Kojève espouses the main tenets of modernity does not make him a superficial thinker. Despite his inclination for historicism, Kojève's philosophy is in all seriousness rooted in the conviction that knowledge of the whole is an all-important matter. Furthermore, although he makes wisdom dependent on history, in a somewhat surprising agreement with the ancients he believes that the path toward wisdom culminates in self-

⁵²⁶ Pl. *Leges* 5.735d-36b.

knowledge: “that man is Wise who is *fully and perfectly self-conscious*.”⁵²⁷ In other words, as Allan Bloom said, “Kojève is above all a philosopher,” because “he is primarily interested in the truth, the comprehensive truth. His passion for clarity is more powerful than his passion for changing the world.”⁵²⁸ We must therefore read Kojève with the same seriousness with which he engages the fundamental human questions.

Kojève believes that philosophy or the path to self-knowledge begins not with thought but with desire, for “contemplation reveals the object, not the subject.”⁵²⁹ Philosophy is political because self-knowledge begins with Desire directed toward another Desire, and desire calls for action. Action is thus placed by Kojève above “‘thought,’ ‘reason,’ ‘understanding,’” because it is at the same time more fundamental and more necessary for the development of Being, which he understands as “becoming.”⁵³⁰ Likewise, for Kojève, human society is a set of Desires mutually desiring one another *as* Desires, and self-knowledge is attained through the desire of recognition.⁵³¹ Kojève would therefore agree with Strauss that there is a hierarchy of beings, except that according to Kojève it is not the philosopher but the man who seeks *honor* who ranks highest, the *aner* or “real man.” Indeed, Kojève argues that “Simonides does not believe that the quest for glory is the distinctive feature of *all* creatures with a human form. The quest for glory is specifically and necessarily characteristic only of *born* Masters.... these ‘real’ men who live for glory are to a certain extent ‘divine’ beings”;⁵³² the real man is the only one who is truly human because he alone is Being-for-Himself. But the view of real men or masters is only one part of the picture. It must be complemented with the view of slaves.

⁵²⁷ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 76; all emphases hereinafter are in the original.

⁵²⁸ “Editor’s Introduction” to Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p. viii.

⁵²⁹ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 3.

⁵³⁰ Kojève, 3-5.

⁵³¹ Kojève, 5-6.

⁵³² Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 140; see also *Hiero* 7.3-4.

To see the broader picture, one must look at Kojève's understanding of human beings. Kojève identifies the essence of human beings not with rationality but with struggle.⁵³³ Although wisdom or reason in the fullest sense certainly ranks highest in the hierarchy of goods, wisdom is not attainable through the experience of any human being alone due to our finite nature. "If the human reality can come into being only as a social reality," wisdom, if ever attained, must first be made accessible through and by history.⁵³⁴ And, since the development and progress of history is not furthered through thought but through action, the most characteristic trait of human existence cannot be thought but action, particularly action of man in opposition to man, on the one hand, and of man in opposition to nature, on the other.⁵³⁵ On these grounds, Kojève rejects the classic view that thought or contemplation is superior to action. Thought that does not result in action is idle thought.

In the same vein, Kojève rejects the utopias of the classics as either useless or defective, to the extent that they do not contribute to the development of history. That utopias may serve both to show the limits of political life and to point to wisdom, as the ancients thought, is something Kojève is not willing to acknowledge. For Kojève, the ancients' reliance on utopias betrays their "'aristocratic' existential attitude," the attitude Hegel would attribute to Masters.⁵³⁶ Inspired by the mind of aristocrats or masters, ancient utopias fail to encompass all the possible improvements of political life that can be attained through revolution. Moreover, they are flawed or vain because, by definition, they are not intended as political projects that will be actualized. Likewise, they cannot point to true wisdom because they disregard the viewpoint of the Slave, not to mention their disregard for history.

⁵³³ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, note to the second edition, 162; see also "Tyranny and Wisdom," 141-43.

⁵³⁴ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 16, 8.

⁵³⁵ See Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," 152, 168, 174.

⁵³⁶ Kojève, 140.

History, for Kojève, “must be the history of the interaction between Mastery and Slavery: the historical ‘dialectic’ is the ‘dialectic’ of Master and Slave.” And history in the full sense of the word, says Kojève, requires that the opposition of thesis and antithesis become reconciled in a synthesis. “If the science of man must possess the quality of a definitively and universally valid truth—the interaction of Master and Slave must finally end in the ‘dialectical overcoming’ of both of them.”⁵³⁷ Since for Kojève Being itself is not to be understood as static but as developing or unfolding,⁵³⁸ knowledge of the world and of oneself requires historical knowledge or knowledge of concrete historical reality. Of little worth are therefore utopias or even philosophy when they are not intended as a contribution to the development of history. Philosophy that uses dialectic not in the sense of dialectical history but only as “discourse,” does not further the progress of history and is destined to remain as endlessly ongoing discussion that will never attain truth.

The true path toward wisdom implies the synthesis between mastery and slavery. Therefore, even masters cannot overcome their state if slaves remain slaves. It is crucial for the reconciliation between mastery and slavery that the slave comes out of his slavish-animal condition or that he “overcome his being-outside-of-himself.”⁵³⁹ Moreover, since the struggle of masters for recognition ends in an existential impasse because the only recognition they can get is that of slaves,⁵⁴⁰ who are inferior, the true progress of history depends on the slaves’ emancipation from their condition as slaves. In the words of Kojève:

The complete, absolutely free man, definitively and completely satisfied by what he is, the man who is perfected and completed in and by this satisfaction, will be the Slave who

⁵³⁷ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 9.

⁵³⁸ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 152.

⁵³⁹ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 13, 16.

⁵⁴⁰ Kojève, 19.

has “overcome” his Slavery. If idle Mastery is an impasse, laborious Slavery, in contrast, is the source of all human, social, historical progress. History is the history of the working Slave.⁵⁴¹

It is through laborious life that history makes progress. In this regard, Kojève likes to refer to Prodicus’s myth of Hercules, according to which no honor is possible and no satisfaction can be attained if there is no noble work of one’s own.⁵⁴² And by work, Kojève means the production of something outside oneself or something objective. He does not count the noble work that can be done within because, being subjective, it cannot be recognized or earn recognition for the “worker.” The satisfaction that ancient philosophers might have found is inferior to the satisfaction of the working slave, for although philosophers are “lovers of the sight of truth,”⁵⁴³ according to Kojève they could not and did not find truth. They unknowingly remained trapped in the view of the Master.

It is understandable that Kojève should adopt this position in regard to the ancients because he had succumbed to the charm of absolutism. Perhaps he was repulsed by the idea of philosophy as a Sisyphean task, a philosophy that could never be able to bring about or materialize what good the ancients had found.⁵⁴⁴ Or maybe his noble aspirations regarding the perfection of political life made him see anything below it as mediocre. However, whether the actualization of the perfect political life as imagined by Kojève is necessary or sufficient for attaining wisdom depends wholly on the assumption that Being is not immutable but “becoming,” as we said above.⁵⁴⁵ But even if we were to grant that premise, it is still highly

⁵⁴¹ Kojève, 20.

⁵⁴² Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 140; see *Xen. Mem.* 2.1.31.

⁵⁴³ *Pl. Rep.* 5.475e.

⁵⁴⁴ See Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 40.

⁵⁴⁵ See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 213.

improbable, not to say impossible, that the perfect political life can be attained, whereas the risk one runs by seeking its actualization is all too great. Judging not by his personal political engagement—in which he showed considerable moderation⁵⁴⁶—but by what he says in “Tyranny and Wisdom,” it seems that Kojève ignored or decided to ignore such risk. If his noble aspirations led him to seek political perfection, they did not impede him from being blinded by the mirage of historicism.

II. Dystopia: Dangers of Modern Tyranny

KOJÈVE’S HISTORICISM AND THE PRIMACY OF HONOR

Philosophy, as defined by Strauss, is the quest for wisdom or “for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole.” It is “the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole.”⁵⁴⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapters, according both to Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates, the quest for wisdom must begin with examining what is better known for us, what is first for us, rather than by “examining what the sophists call the cosmos.”⁵⁴⁸ Socrates, we have said, turns to the political because in human nature lies our best chance of knowing the whole, both because knowledge of the nature of men is knowledge of a part of the whole and because the nature of the whole cannot be known directly. Philosophy must therefore turn to the study of the political or human things. But aside from the fact that the philosophical inquiry must begin as a political inquiry, it remains unclear what the precise relationship between philosophy and politics should be or how far one ought to influence the other.

As we have seen, one question raised by the discussion between Strauss and Kojève is whether the tension between philosophy and politics can be overcome or whether that tension

⁵⁴⁶ See Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss*, 52.

⁵⁴⁷ Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 11.

⁵⁴⁸ Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.11.

will always exist and even become stronger at times. According to Kojève, the full coincidence of philosophy and politics is possible, but it is possible only at the end of history, once the universal and homogeneous state has been established. To better understand Kojève's position we must examine the role that recognition plays in his perfect state. We mentioned above that, for him, it is through the desire of recognition that self-knowledge is attained. At the end of history, self-knowledge and recognition or honor can be equated, the only distinction being that the former represents the peak of the philosophic way of life whereas the latter is the peak of political life. Kojève's view of the relation between self-knowledge and recognition presupposes that all human beings, even philosophers, seek recognition and that without recognition they cannot fulfill their human purpose.

Given the emphasis on honor by the classics, one could be misled into thinking that Kojève is probably right in placing recognition or honor as highest, in seeing in honor the characteristic trait of Masters and that which distinguishes real men from "mere human beings" or beasts, as well as the final aim of Slaves once they have overcome their slavery. True, the classics put considerable emphasis on honor. For instance, according to Xenophon, Socrates "held that the gods are most gratified by the honors from those who are most pious," that those who "honor neither temple nor altar nor any other divine thing" are madmen, and that gods ought to be revered and honored for their works.⁵⁴⁹ If the gods themselves find pleasure in honors, how could one argue that honor is not highest for the ancients? However, one must consider that the ancients also held that honor cannot be good if it is not guided by something higher. Moreover, the tension between the philosopher and the city becomes apparent precisely in relation to honor and the life of Socrates.

Xenophon writes that "Socrates—since this was the sort he was—deserved honor from

⁵⁴⁹ Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.3; 1.1.14; and 4.3.13.

the city rather than death.”⁵⁵⁰ From what we know of Socrates’s life and because he was sentenced to death, it is clear that the city did not honor the right people and that those they honored were not honored for the right reasons. We are thus compelled to find out also what honor means for the many. Xenophon tells us both that Alcibiades was honored (*timōmenos*) by the demos “due to his power in the city and among the allies,” and that the many censure (*epitimōmenon*) the philosophers collectively.⁵⁵¹ Likewise, he writes that Socrates taught that the rich who think that their wealth, without education, is enough to be honored by human beings are foolish because they ignore how to distinguish the beneficial from the harmful.⁵⁵² Certainly, honor often implies benefit but different people understand “benefit” in different ways. Whereas most people believe that great wealth and valuable possessions are always goods, the philosopher argues that these can only be considered goods if one knows how to make good use of them.

Since the many mistake wealth and power for unqualified goods, they honor those who give them money and a share in power. The many, we are thus led to think, grant honors for the wrong reasons, such as wealth or power. The “honor” they bestow is low because it is based on ignoble actions and can only be called vulgar honor. Conversely, the many are incapable of honoring men such as Socrates, not only because they are unable to recognize their wisdom but also because they feel threatened by their teachings. Rather than being a source and object of honor, Socrates was accused of causing fathers and relatives to be dishonored. By praising those who know, rather than one’s own, he dishonored the family as well.⁵⁵³ As we saw back in chapter 3, seen from Socrates’s perspective one cannot rely on honor as a trustworthy standard for the many who are not philosophic and cannot judge properly what should be honored.

⁵⁵⁰ *Mem.* 1.2.62.

⁵⁵¹ *Mem.* 1.2.24, 1.2.31.

⁵⁵² *Mem.* 4.1.5.

⁵⁵³ *Mem.* 1.2.51.

Admittedly, against these arguments, Kojève would perhaps contend that the many will not always work for the sake of power over others nor to become wealthy, but merely out of the pleasure that labor brings. “The *joy* that comes from labor itself, and the desire to *succeed* in an undertaking, can, by themselves alone, prompt a man to undertake painful and dangerous labors... A man can work hard risking his life for no other reason than to experience the joy he always derives from *carrying out* his project or, what is the same thing, from transforming his ‘idea’ or even ‘ideal’ into a *reality* shaped by his own efforts.” This “slave” view of labor is lacking in the ancients and, Kojève asserts, it must complement the view of “idle aristocrats.”⁵⁵⁴

But Kojève, on the one hand, fails to see that Socrates’s life encompasses the view of the slave and surpasses it, because the actions he undertook were for their own sake and not for the sake of honor or recognition—and, in addition, they were *good* actions that would either benefit or do no harm to others, they were not only a selfish “project” that could either bring no benefit or even potentially produce great harm. On the other hand, Kojève also grants that those who find pleasure in mere labor will also seek recognition or honors as soon as “*emulation* among men appears which, in fact, is never absent, and which... is necessary even for agriculture, industry and commerce truly to prosper.”⁵⁵⁵ Despite underscoring the significance of the view of slaves and of labor for its own sake as liberating, in the final analysis Kojève places more importance on recognition. Rather than truly refuting the ancients, he reads them through the lens of historicism and ascribes to them views that are not theirs or fails to read them as they intended.

At this point, it is worth noting that in his analysis of the *Hiero* Kojève does not show any familiarity with Xenophon’s other texts nor does he refer to them—unlike Strauss, whose

⁵⁵⁴ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 140-41.

⁵⁵⁵ Kojève, 141.

analysis is full of references not only to every work by Xenophon known to us but to other classic authors as well, such as Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, or Cicero. Whereas Strauss strives to understand the ancients as they understood themselves, Kojève's "Tyranny and Wisdom" is devoted either to criticizing what, from the viewpoint of historicism, he sees as shortcomings in the *Hiero* or to taking from it only what helps him advance his historicist argument; rather than delving into the past, he hastily plunges into the present. The risk of Kojève's approach is that the subtle nuances of Xenophon's dialogue are likely to go unnoticed.

To be sure, Xenophon's dialogue can be understood in itself. Nonetheless, it is advantageous especially for us to read it against the broader background of Xenophon's other texts to adapt ourselves to the classical mindset. Among other nuances that Kojève misses or disregards as not crucially significant is the following: "Kojève—Strauss asserts—fails to distinguish between philosophic politics and that political action which the philosopher might undertake with a view to establishing the best regime or to the improvement of the actual order."⁵⁵⁶ Kojève is thus unable to recognize the role of philosophic politics within the larger framework of classical political philosophy. We said above that Kojève, like Strauss, acknowledged that there is a tension between philosophy and politics. But according to Kojève, the stark discrepancy between the philosopher and the many can be overcome by creating the "conditions that permit the exercise of philosophical pedagogy."⁵⁵⁷ Kojève's philosophical pedagogy takes the place of the philosophic politics of the classics.

Kojève's philosophical pedagogy serves a double purpose. First, it educates the many—for the philosopher will want to direct his teachings to as many people as possible—and, second, in its public confrontation it helps the philosopher to avoid being subject to sectarian prejudices,

⁵⁵⁶ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 206.

⁵⁵⁷ Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," 162.

it is “his guarantee against the danger of madness.” The real tension for Kojève stems not from the disproportion between the quest for truth and common opinion but from “man’s temporality and finitude.”⁵⁵⁸ Man’s tragic character and the inaccessibility of wisdom arises from our finitude. Unlike God, whose eternity—“in the sense of not needing time to act and think”—makes him simply wise, man needs time to become wise. And whereas the conflict between the philosophers’ individual meditations does not arise for God,⁵⁵⁹ it is precisely in that confrontation with others that the philosopher, with the help of history, can gain access to wisdom. The philosopher wishes to devote all his time to philosophy but in order to create the proper conditions for philosophy, he must turn to politics. Rather than ruling himself, however, he chooses to give advice to rulers instead.

In consequence, if Kojève were to admit the need of philosophic politics, he would admit it only *for the time being*. Precisely because he does not believe in the permanent character of the tension between philosophy and politics, he would deny the permanent necessity of a political defense of philosophy. Likewise, he reads philosophic politics as cowardly or insufficient efforts to improve political life to the highest degree. The reason why some philosophers think the necessity of philosophic politics is permanent is because they remain trapped in contemplation and do not wish to take action, or because they are not truly wise: they are skilled in imagining abstractions but lack knowledge regarding the concrete ways of actualizing such abstractions.⁵⁶⁰ Moreover, in connection with this argument, Kojève could have granted that philosophers are superior with regard to statesmen in their quest for wisdom, but even if that were true they remain inferior with regard to statesmen in the most important respect, the quest for honor which, by the way, comes closer to what he considers the true quest for wisdom. Philosophers

⁵⁵⁸ Kojève, 163.

⁵⁵⁹ Kojève, 168.

⁵⁶⁰ Kojève, 147-48.

are not truly wise not only because they do not take into account history but also because they do not help to take concrete actions that will further its progress.

Whereas Kojève believes that philosophy may be improved through action and popularization, the classics thought of such a turn as an inadmissible lowering of the philosophical standards. The classics would reject Kojève's arguments primarily because they considered the quest for honor inferior to the quest for wisdom as they understood it. It almost goes without saying, they believed that constant progress toward wisdom was always possible, even if one could only approach wisdom, as it were, asymptotically. In any case, if they did not think that full wisdom could be attained, they also did not think that history could change that fact. But they would reject Kojève's defense of the primacy of honor as well as his idea of the perfect state because, as Leo Strauss argues, they are based on two assumptions that were inadmissible for the classics, namely, the "conquest of nature" and the "popularization or diffusion of philosophic knowledge." The classics were familiar with both phenomena but, as Leo Strauss says, they "rejected them as 'unnatural,' i.e., as destructive of humanity."⁵⁶¹

Although we maintain what we said in chapter 3, that philosophy, as it were, grows out of the mud and mire of politics, the pursuit of wisdom is not dependent on the full success of politics. Knowledge of the human whole and of its place within the larger whole is available even if political perfection is not attained. This is a crucial insight to understand what we said was the double purpose of the ancients or their alternative to the establishment of the very best regime: benefiting the community to the greatest extent possible—without destroying humanity—and keeping the possibility of philosophy alive. In opposition to what Kojève expects from political life, the classics were completely aware that efforts to attain political perfection might be counterproductive. In trying to improve political life one must be careful not to cause

⁵⁶¹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 178.

greater harm than benefit, both politically and philosophically speaking.

ANCIENT WISDOM

However careful Kojève's reading of the ancients may be, it remains distorted because he does not try to understand them as they understood themselves but reads them instead through the lens of historicism. From his reading of Xenophon's *Hiero*, Kojève concludes that though the wise man says what measures can make tyranny beneficent, he fails to address the difficulty or impossibility for the tyrant to carry them out even if he wished to do so. Contrary to what Kojève argues, Xenophon intimates just how difficult it is to attain beneficent tyranny. Though with elegant subtlety, Xenophon shows that knowledge is not enough to transform tyranny into beneficent tyranny because such transformation depends largely on chance. For example, in the *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon explores a scenario in which fortune is so favorable as to allow the great nature of Cyrus to coincide with the ideal circumstances for beneficent tyranny to happen. It is not a minor detail that the *Cyropaedia* is not a historical treatise but fiction, if with historical characters. One must notice as well that however great Cyrus might have been, he was unable to ensure the continued success of his enterprise after his death. Perhaps wit and intelligence can be inherited and courage may be augmented through learning and practice,⁵⁶² but chance, according to Xenophon, cannot.

Based on Machiavelli's revolution, Kojève believes that fortune can be tamed; he therefore thinks that beneficent tyranny can and ought to be pursued. But for the classics, more important than realizing the difficulty or impossibility of beneficent tyranny is the awareness that even if attained, beneficent tyranny would be beneficent only in a political, qualified sense. What Kojève fails to acknowledge is that even if beneficent tyranny were to exist—something that

⁵⁶² See Xen. *Mem.* 3.9.2.

neither Strauss nor the classics are willing to grant⁵⁶³—it would fall short from truly beneficent tyranny, if we may call it so, that is, from that form of tyranny in which the tyrant is wise and takes his bearings from the simple common good and not the common good in a political sense. Likewise, whereas Kojève’s tyranny averts the danger of an enemy attack due to its universal character—as we mentioned above, no enemy is left “outside” that could put the state in danger—internal enemies would also have to be dealt with. The universal state requires homogeneity, and homogeneity does not come naturally but must be imposed by force.

While in a positive sense homogeneity means equality of opportunities, which is of course desirable, homogeneity also carries a negative, perverse sense, in which there is no room for thinking or acting differently.⁵⁶⁴ According to Kojève, in the universal and homogeneous state there will be room for a diversity of tastes, and while some might be more inclined to the arts, others might prefer other work or simple leisure. The philosophers can continue to be philosophers.⁵⁶⁵ The problem with this conclusion is how Kojève treats philosophy. Contrary to what Kojève insinuates about philosophers (at some point he seems to equate them with “intellectuals”),⁵⁶⁶ philosophy is not like any other activity that can be pursued under the rules and guidance of the state or only for the sake of political improvement.

One characteristic trait of philosophy is that it is exercised through dialectic or the confrontation of contrary opinions. Since philosophy departs from common opinions, to exercise philosophy there need to be different opinions about the human things.⁵⁶⁷ Different opinions about what is a statesman and what is a skilled statesman, or what is rule simply as opposed to good rule, will eventually lead to criticism of the existing regime and its laws. Moreover, as we

⁵⁶³ See Strauss *On Tyranny*, 194 and 201.

⁵⁶⁴ See Strauss, 208.

⁵⁶⁵ See Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 150.

⁵⁶⁶ See Kojève, 173.

⁵⁶⁷ See Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.16.

saw in chapter 1, philosophy is the pursuit of knowledge at the highest level; therefore, by definition, the philosopher stands above the law, for he possesses the knowledge necessary to write the laws. Since it is highly unlikely that philosophers will ever rule, their activity, however moderate and law-abiding, cannot but be seen to be a threat to the state.

Despite Kojève's condescending indifference toward philosophers who are no more than "idle" aristocrats, it is worth considering whether the universal and homogeneous state would really allow those philosophers to continue having their allegedly vain discussions. Though philosophers do not pretend to be revolutionaries, in a sense their philosophic activity cannot help but be revolutionary or the cause of revolutionary deeds. We have already seen that to thwart its revolutionary character, philosophers were more outspoken regarding philosophic politics than they were when speaking about philosophic truths. Could philosophers freely pursue wisdom in the universal and homogeneous state? Or would the state be compelled to do away with them to secure its continuity? Indeed, whatever Kojève might say to the contrary, to do away with the wise seems one of the necessary and inevitable steps to establish or secure the continuity of the universal and homogeneous state.⁵⁶⁸ While doing away with the wise is not unique to Kojève's state but a common trait of all tyrannies,⁵⁶⁹ the universal character of the former, with the additional aid of technology, renders it more dangerous than it had been ever before.

Tyranny in the form of the universal and homogeneous state that Kojève champions is built upon premises that threaten the very possibility of philosophy on a universal scale. Perhaps because it is hard to question the premises of modern science on the basis of the much discredited classical social science, rather than attacking them—tyrants of thought will not

⁵⁶⁸ See Kojève, 168.

⁵⁶⁹ See Xen. *Hiero* 5.2.

listen—Strauss chose to exhibit the main faults of the alleged utopia proposed by Kojève to show that, at its best, it would be a dystopia. By proving that the results Kojève expects from his “ideal” scenario will never be achieved, Strauss hopes to bring modernity back to its senses: he expects to restore sanity or “common sense.”⁵⁷⁰ To prove his point, Strauss argues, on the assumption that the wise do not desire to rule, “the unwise are very unlikely to force the wise to rule over them.” Moreover, even if the wise wished to rule, the unwise would never “surrender absolute control to the wise.” Therefore, Strauss concludes, “what pretends to be absolute rule of the wise will in fact be absolute rule of unwise men.”⁵⁷¹ What is implied in Strauss’s words is that if the wise do not rule, then the good that the universal and homogeneous state pursues is necessarily inferior to the human good simply. It does not pursue wisdom but equality and recognition. It might be presented as the state that pursues freedom, but there cannot be true freedom where there is no freedom of thought.

But Strauss’s analysis goes deeper than this. Toward the end of the “Restatement,” he examines whether the universal and homogeneous state would really live up to its promises. Strauss says that, according to Kojève, the universal and homogeneous state is the simply best social order because every human being finds in it his full satisfaction. But then Strauss calls into question the claim that both the criterion of full satisfaction and the criterion of universal equality of opportunity are met. Not everyone is equally satisfied. “The satisfaction of the humble citizen, whose human dignity is universally recognized and who enjoys all opportunities that correspond to his humble capacities and achievements, is not comparable to the satisfaction of the Chief of State. Only the Chief of State is *really* satisfied.” All those who are not the Chief of State, Strauss argues, “have very good reason for dissatisfaction,” for “a state which

⁵⁷⁰ See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 19.

⁵⁷¹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 193-94.

treats equal men unequally is not just.”⁵⁷² The purported goal of the universal and homogeneous state is not fully achieved. What is more, to reach that “perfect” state, slaves must have engaged in labor and bloody struggle that, according to Kojève, would allow them to raise themselves above the brutes. Strauss therefore concludes:

The state through which man is said to become reasonably satisfied is, then, the state in which the basis of man’s humanity withers away, or in which man loses his humanity.... Kojève in fact confirms the classical view that unlimited technological progress and its accompaniment, which are indispensable conditions of the universal and homogeneous state, are destructive of humanity.⁵⁷³

Conclusions: Reassessment of Machiavelli’s Enterprise

Near the beginning of “Tyranny and Wisdom,” Kojève had asked the following question regarding the relationship between philosophy and tyranny: “But does it follow that these modern ‘tyrannies’ are (philosophically) justified by Xenophon’s Dialogue?” The answer is simply no, because Kojève is here referring to those tyrannies that are “exercised in the service of truly revolutionary political, social, or economic ideas.”⁵⁷⁴ The classics, we have seen, rejected all these forms of tyranny because the rewards they might in theory bring are greatly outweighed by the harm they are likely to produce in practice. We have learned, however, that the classic view is not so rigid but gives room for dealing with exceptional situations so long as they truly constitute an exception. In this regard we may recall Aristotle’s words in book seven of the *Politics*, when he says that “war must be for the sake of peace, occupation for the sake of

⁵⁷² Strauss, 208.

⁵⁷³ Strauss, 209.

⁵⁷⁴ Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” 139.

leisure, necessary and useful things for the sake of noble things.”⁵⁷⁵ The ancients did not rule out tyranny as a possible solution definitively. Kojève’s question is interesting if we consider tyranny more broadly, or more profoundly, not for the sake of political, social, or economic ideas but for the sake of philosophy itself, that is, to guarantee the possibility of the pursuit of wisdom.

Our study of Machiavelli’s enterprise in chapter 4 dealt with exactly this scenario. Machiavelli, we have argued, was compelled to defend beneficent tyranny for the sake of philosophy. In harmony with the ancients, Machiavelli, on the one hand, sought to benefit everyone to the greatest extent possible without doing violence to political communities by trying to impose the demands of a philosophic way of life on them. At the same time, on the other hand, he was intent on reopening the possibility of philosophy. We may judge that Machiavelli failed only if we believe that philosophy is no longer possible today. Although it is true that one of the side effects of Machiavelli’s enterprise was that modernity, which he inaugurated, gradually lost sight of ancient wisdom, it is no less true that a careful approach to his works enhances rather than mars our reading of the ancients and, with it, our grasp of classical political philosophy. In other words, it is profitable to read the classics in conjunction with Machiavelli.

Machiavelli seems radically different from the ancients because he understood that “the line of demarcation between timidity and responsibility is drawn differently in different ages,”⁵⁷⁶ and acted accordingly. But not to misunderstand Machiavelli’s undertaking, one must read him with the classics as his background and foundation. Machiavelli’s oeuvre is a corollary to the classics; it is meant to complement, not to replace, the ancient teachings. Machiavelli’s teachings are profitable only if they are tied to the teachings of the ancients. But in the same way, the

⁵⁷⁵ *Pol.* 7.14, 1333a35-36

⁵⁷⁶ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 110.

ancient teachings are unlikely to survive or to be properly understood today without recourse to Machiavelli. These superficially opposed views are two sides of the same coin and, together, they express the starkest problem of political philosophy today. We need to mediate between the classics and Machiavelli in a seemingly impossible combination. That combination, however, is possible so long as we keep our compass in place, so long as philosophy—that is, knowledge of one’s ignorance⁵⁷⁷—remains the guiding principle of human affairs. (Lest anyone confuse the combination I propose with a Hegelian synthesis, we must keep in mind that the combination of the classical or Socratic tradition with Machiavellian politics ought not be understood as a blending of the two; each tradition must remain individually distinct. To use an image from Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, this combination resembles that of man and horse, although not that of a centaur.⁵⁷⁸)

That Strauss would approve of Machiavelli’s enterprise thus understood is, I believe, implied in his final words regarding the state proposed by Kojève. If the universal and homogeneous state is inevitable or is actualized, not all hope is lost: “there is no reason for despair as long as human nature has not been conquered completely, i.e., as long as sun and man still generate man. There will always be men (*andres*) who will revolt against a state which is destructive of humanity or in which there is no longer a possibility of noble action and of great deeds.”⁵⁷⁹ To repeat what we anticipated at the beginning of chapter 4, real men, who are otherwise opposed to philosophy, would again become, if unwittingly, the defenders of philosophy. Strauss seems to implicitly favor Machiavelli because according to this view, the boldest steps may be taken when philosophy and man’s humanity are at stake.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁷ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 196.

⁵⁷⁸ Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 290.

⁵⁷⁹ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 209.

⁵⁸⁰ See Strauss, 209-210.

We may conclude by saying that whereas the treatment of ancient tyranny constitutes an opportunity to address the tensions that arise between philosophy and politics, only by addressing present-day tyranny can those insights be transmitted in a meaningful way today. Unlike ancient tyranny, which can be transformed—at least in speech—into kingship, present-day tyranny, as presented by Kojève, eventually becomes universal and homogeneous. Present-day tyranny is different from ancient tyranny to the extent that the cause of philosophy is lost from the start.⁵⁸¹ Kojève's present-day tyranny is useful for us in speech only if we read it as a lesson that needs to be unlearned, if it makes us aware that a new education is required. Such education demands a return both to the classics and to the origin of modernity—a return to Machiavelli—for a restoration of their political philosophy.

⁵⁸¹ See Strauss, 212.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

We began our inquiry by arguing that when our interest in the study of tyranny transcends the urgency to avoid impending abuses, it naturally gives rise to questions which are less the concern of politics or history than they are of political philosophy. More than offering practical solutions, our study of tyranny as a politico-philosophical concept provides a framework from which to evaluate the political solutions that philosophers and statesmen have found through time. However, more importantly than identifying the best political solutions, our aim is to understand the problems that are a constant feature in the relation between philosophy and politics. Emphasis on problems rather than on solutions helps us to stay fixed on the original meaning of philosophy which, as Leo Strauss says, “is nothing but knowledge of one’s ignorance” and “genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems.”⁵⁸² The complex warp and weft of ideas that the concept of tyranny summons up prevents us from succumbing to the attraction of solutions; it helps us avoid becoming sectarians or blinkered ideologues. The study of tyranny is therefore crucial for political philosophy.

Tyranny, we said, is a danger that is coeval with political life.⁵⁸³ But we must clarify this. Political life and tyranny are coeval not only in the sense that they originated at the same time, but also in the sense that they permanently continue to coexist. In this dissertation, we have argued that no political regime is free from tyrannical traits. Although these traits may be so insignificant that they remain hidden or unnoticed, it is important to be aware of them both for political and for philosophical reasons. Tyranny may grow insidiously and manifest itself suddenly, once full-blown tyranny has become inevitable. But it may also grow gradually, with the quiet connivance of patriotic, incautious citizens. Civic education does not suffice to prevent

⁵⁸² Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 196-97.

⁵⁸³ Strauss, 22.

tyranny because civic education teaches to obey the law and, as we have seen, tyranny may develop in full compliance with the law. We have therefore shown that if our aim is to impede tyranny, our reflections must go beyond the realm of mere politics and into philosophy.

There is always a chance that tyranny will emerge because the perfection of human nature requires the development of civil society, but the necessary means for the preservation of civil society prove to be incompatible with man's highest end. Though philosophy and politics may be reconciled to some extent, the tension between them can never be overcome. Awareness of this tension makes us realize that human problems are permanent, and that we can only offer temporary solutions which are, even in the best case, inevitably defective. But not all causes are lost. So long as we remain aware of the danger of tyranny, philosophy will stay alive because it is through philosophical knowledge that we are able to recognize tyranny in all its forms.

Although the philosophic and the tyrannical nature may be closely linked, philosophy represents the opposite pole from tyranny. Whereas the tyrant is compelled to do away with the wise and has no trusted friends, the philosopher is characterized by both wisdom and friendship. Indeed, as we have discussed, philosophy is guided by two chief principles. The first and most important one is indicated in its name: love of wisdom. But since it is a moot point whether wisdom can be attained, we can safely say that philosophy is guided if not by wisdom then by the pursuit of wisdom, a pursuit that requires and is intimately tied to freedom of thought. To cultivate philosophy means to protect and promote freedom of thought.

We are aware that by asserting that the pursuit of wisdom is the most important principle for philosophy we may be accused of saying that philosophers profess a kind of "intellectual utilitarianism"⁵⁸⁴ because they are more concerned about freedom of thought than about human

⁵⁸⁴ I owe Antonio Sosa the coinage of this term, by which I believe he understands seeing morality as a means and not as an end in itself, and therefore as not genuinely good.

freedom or morality more generally. Or to put it differently, it may seem to be implied that philosophers care for human freedom and morality only in a secondary way, as a necessary, unavoidable means to pursue what is truly important. Though I contend that philosophy is first and foremost the pursuit of wisdom, in this dissertation I have given arguments to show that philosophy is not defined solely by the pursuit of wisdom. For wisdom to make sense, the second chief principle must come into play.

Philosophy, we have argued, is guided by another principle or motivation, namely, by the desire to benefit all human beings to the greatest extent possible. A wise man would cease to be wise if he did not genuinely care for humankind. But precisely due to his philanthropy or his love of humanity, and to his knowledge of the nature of political things, the philosopher is compelled to reject the philosophic way of life as the best way of life for everyone. Aware of the dangers of making the philosophic way of life a political pursuit, he is compelled to reject all idealisms. Yet he does not for that reason forsake humanity. Instead, the philosopher engages with humanity in a different way, by fostering the cultivation of the virtues. Though for his own way of life it could be said that morality occupies an inferior place and is merely a means to attain something higher, morality is not for that reason unqualifiedly inferior for the philosopher. It is true that the philosopher might seem to care only ostensibly for morality, but that would not account for his unselfishness.

The philosopher loves wisdom and, despite his contempt for human things, he cannot but love humanity as well. When he encourages in most people the moral way of life in lieu of the philosophic way of life, he is not being condescending. To repeat what we argued above, what could be read as an offensive air of superiority on the part of the philosopher is rather a sign of the philosopher's realism and an instance of his remarkable generosity: he knows that to impose

the philosophic way of life on those who do not freely choose it would be most unjust. But the philosopher would not be a realist if he lacked knowledge of human things and, more specifically, if he lacked knowledge of the nature of political things. The philosopher's realism comes from his engagement with human things and from his reflections on the subject of tyranny. Knowledge of tyranny is thus inseparable from knowledge of the highest things.

Our purpose in focusing on the concept of tyranny in connection to political philosophy has been to show the importance of their interrelatedness. Just as politics needs the guidance of philosophy to avoid falling into tyranny, the study of philosophy or the quest for wisdom too must be complemented by knowledge of the nature of political things—which is best attained through the study of tyranny—to avoid falling into the trap of utopianism. Although utopias are useful, utopianism must be avoided because it leads to the worst kinds of tyrannies. Efforts to bring about the best political regime that we can imagine will most likely prove to be counterproductive, for they will almost certainly give rise to tyranny. Tyranny as a politico-philosophical concept forces us to think of the best possible ways to benefit humankind. At the same time, tyranny makes us aware of the intrinsic limitations of political life and of the great dangers we would incur if we attempted to exceed those limits at a social level.

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