Spring 2007

Mark Kremer  Two Tales of Tyranny: Images of Despotism in the Odyssey

James L. Wood  Politics and Dialogue in the Philebus

Christopher Whidden  Deception in Xenophon’s Cyropaedia


Spring 2007

103  Mark Kremer  Two Tales of Tyranny

109  James L. Wood  Politics and Dialogue in the Philebus

129  Christopher Whidden  Deception in Xenophon’s Cyropaedia

157  Fred Baumann  The Case for Public Morality:
       Public Morality and Liberal Society:
       Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography,
       by Harry M. Clor

165  Will Morrisey  Learning from Aristotle:
       Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of
       Aristotle’s Politics, by Mary P. Nichols;
       Aristotle’s “Best Regime”: Kingship,
       Democracy, and the Rule of Law, by Clifford
       Angell Bates; and Aristotle and the Recovery
       of Citizenship, by Susan Collins

©2007 Interpretation, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of the contents may be
reproduced in any form without written permission of the publisher.

ISSN 0020-9635
INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The journal welcomes manuscripts in political philosophy in the broad sense. Submitted articles can be interpretations of literary works, theological works, and writings on jurisprudence with an important bearing on political philosophy.

Contributors should follow The Chicago Manual of Style (15th Edition). Instead of footnotes or endnotes, the journal has adopted the Author-Date system of documentation described in this manual and illustrated in the present issue of the journal. The Chicago Manual of Style offers publications the choice between sentence-style references to titles of works or articles and headline-style references to them. INTERPRETATION uses the headline style. Parenthetical references no longer use “p”, “pp.”, “cf.”, “see”, “f.”, “ff.” or the like. The year of publication follows the author’s name in the list of References. As implemented by INTERPRETATION, the Author-Date system requires titles of books and articles in a list of References always to be followed by a period rather than a comma.

Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions which have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

To insure impartial judgment, contributors should omit mention of their other publications and put, on a separate title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address with postal zip code in full, email address, and telephone number.

Please send one copy in Word or Rich Text Format as an attachment to an email message to interp@nyc.rr.com.

It is particularly important for the journal to have the present email addresses of authors submitting articles.
Introduction

The Lotus Eaters and the Cyclops are Homer’s two images of despotism. The first seems to be an image of weakness rather than of despotic rule, but it is through their weakness that they enslave. They are the classic example of soft despotism, as opposed to the violent despotism of blood and iron practiced by the Cyclops.

The images of the Lotus Eaters and of the Cyclops are images for the education of children, as well as adults. They teach children about virtue through impressions of the inhuman. The Lotus Eaters are ethereal and weak, whereas the Cyclops is monstrous in size and appearance. Children are capable of contempt for weakness and horror at violence. These passions are not themselves virtue but they prepare it by teaching that the beauty of the human form requires a soul informed by both proud strength and fellow feeling.

The images are also for adults because they teach about virtue in relation to the extremes of life including the extremes of political life. The Lotus Eaters fall beneath the exercise of the virtues because of their love of pleasure, whereas the Cyclops is a monster on account of his excessive pride. The former incline towards nothingness, whereas the latter inclines toward the self-sufficiency of a god. The virtues require weakness and strength because man is the in-between being—neither nothing, nor a god but a mortal with an awareness of eternity.

The images also reflect the vices of governments. The Lotus Eaters mirror the extreme dangers of democratic government and of democratic man, whereas the Cyclops reflects the extremes of patriarchal monarchy and the patriarch. The Lotus Eaters are cosmopolitan. Every man is equal because no man exercises his will over any other. All are equal in their nothingness. They would rather have all mankind enslaved than to have anyone stick
his head up from the grazing herd. The Cyclops is patriarchal. He is a father whose will is that of his family. There is no law or god to which he answers other than his own will.

It is not difficult to see that the danger of despotism today remains just as Homer understood it. The East and the West dominate the world and the despotisms to which they incline are violence and indolence, respectively. And as Homer knew, these forms of barbarity are the effects of their own respective and untempered principles and inclinations.

**The Lotus Eaters and Pleasure**

Odysseus’s men meet with neither suspicion nor anger when visiting the Lotus Eaters, as they possess neither a love of their own nation, nor the hatred of foreigners that accompanies it. In fact, they have neither love, nor families. They are without sexuality and families, which are a source of both attachment to one’s own and animosity towards outsiders. They have no beliefs, perform no deeds, and are appropriately faceless. Yet, although they are without substance and are weak, they have the power to make others impotent. In effect, they are even more powerful than their antipode the Cyclops.

The Lotus Eaters are an image of pleasure and of pacifism. Their story is an examination of the paradoxical strength of the enervated spirit. They give Odysseus’s men the lotus plant, but it would be a mistake to understand this act of giving as either gentleness, generosity, or pious hospitality. These vegetarians do not know strife and do not have any of the virtues to endure it, and must therefore make others harmless by making them impotent. The pleasure of the plant brings peace but at the cost of pride and all that accompanies it—not only love and hate, but also self-explaining and examining reason.

Sensual pleasure is an intoxicant relating one to one’s senses and thereby severing one’s relation to others and to eternity. The men who eat the lotus plant forget their home and their duties to it, and live in the ever-vanishing present without an awareness of past and future. Their existence is terminated at the point where sensations of pleasure end. They want to live with and be like the Lotus Eaters, which is to say that they want to be free from the attachments and duties that defined them as husbands, fathers, and friends. Their self-satisfaction destroys their capacity for love, esteem, and even self-awareness.

The power of the plant is made known through the force necessary to combat it; Odysseus’s men must be stolen away and tied down in
their ship to keep them from returning to their poison. Calls to duty and to love of home are too weak to take hold of them because shame and reason are no match for their addiction. The men are effectively destroyed. They can be forcibly removed from the plant but the love for it can never be eradicated, and consequently their duties can no longer have any charm for them. They are forced home but they no longer have a heart for it.

The story of the Lotus Eaters is a warning against the stratagems of the meek and weak. They seem harmless and agreeable because non-violent but the peculiar nature of this false generosity and aggressive passivity actually constitute a tyranny. The Lotus Eaters effectively weaken the spirit to the point of annihilating all aspiration towards love and virtue. Perpetual peace and universal good will are the path to an abyss where consciousness is lost to immediate sensation and conformity to mass behavior.

**Cyclops and Pride**

In moving from the Lotus Eaters to the Cyclops Polyphemos, Homer takes us from the gentlest to the most savage, from vegetarian to cannibal, from the least violent to the most violent. Polyphemos fears no gods, is subject to no laws, and rules his family by force. The Lotus Eaters were enemies of pride whereas Polyphemos is pride itself. His is not a tyranny stemming from weakness but from force. He has no need for others. His grains and fruits grow of their own accord, so there is no need for division of labor, farming, or any of the arts. His harbor would be ideal for navigation and trade, but the Cyclops has neither because he extends his rule through his force rather than through the freedom of his subjects. Homer paints for us a picture of what man would be like if he was as strong and as self-sufficient as a god.

By situating his savage in a nature that is bounteous and by giving him strength to rival the gods, Homer teaches that education requires dependence. Polyphemos’s single eye is an image of his proud self-sufficiency as well as his monstrousness. He does not know of politics and the arts because his existence does not extend beyond his self-sufficient economics and violence. There is no difference between his desires and his ability to satisfy them. Family, country, and poetry have no meaning for him. His opinion of his unlimited strength makes him a blind giant without piety, justice, and wisdom.

Although Polyphemos is proud and savage, and the Lotus Eaters are weak and sensual, both share a similar deficiency. Like the Lotus Eaters, Polyphemos has no need for a celebration of home. What is essential to him is himself. Being immortal and believing himself invulnerable, he has no
need for a community with others and a world to support it. He attaches himself to eternity through himself whereas the Lotus Eaters forget eternity by forgetting themselves. Both fall beneath love and virtue but for opposite reasons; the Lotus Eaters are nothing whereas Polyphemos thinks he is everything.

Odysseus knows that savages have neither reason nor habits of restraint, and that their proud freedom is a weakness that can be used against them. Consequently, Odysseus arms himself with wine when investigating the island, on the chance that he will meet a savage people. Odysseus is himself a foil to savagery. When given the opportunity to kill Polyphemos, Odysseus holds back his sword, even though it means even more of his men will be eaten, as he needs to keep Polyphemos alive to move the boulder blocking the opening of the cave. He is not completely free from the need for honor and revenge, but he knows of other conflicting goods like the preservation of his own life and the lives of his men, and this awareness tempers and civilizes him.

In addition to wine, Odysseus defends himself with lies. He tells Polyphemos that his name is “noman,” so that Polyphemos will not receive any assistance when he calls for help. Having neither fear of wine nor of Odysseus, Polyphemos over drinks and falls asleep. He is a loathsome brute who knows no measure in anything other than his own passions and his own will. What need could there be for virtue and reason in a being without limits? Polyphemos’s opinion of his strength and self-sufficiency turns out to be a delusion. While he is asleep, Odysseus and his men transform Polyphemos’s cane (a symbol for weakness and mortality) into a spear, and then blind him. Through their courage they overcome their individual weakness and free themselves from the tyrant.

Polyphemos’s introduction to wine and to Odyssean falsehood is the introduction to his own suffering and vulnerability, and provides the beginning of his own education. After he is blinded he moves the giant rock blocking the cave and cries out to his neighbors that “noman” has blinded him, but where there is “noman” there is no blame and no justice. Polyphemos will have to seek revenge on his own. The blind giant is no match for the crafty Odysseus, who exits under the belly of the biggest ram, which normally leads but which is held back by Odysseus. Polyphemos believes that his ram was the last to leave, because of its love for its master and pity for its master’s suffering. In other words, he believes nature has been reversed for his sake. Polyphemos is now free from the illusion that he is invulnerable and
greater than Zeus, but now he believes that his ram loves him. He attributes human emotion where there is none, because he believes that the world is not indifferent to his suffering. Whether he knows it or not, his weakness and suffering has made him poetic. It is a small step, and perhaps not even a step, to go from Polyphemos’s belief that he is loved by his ram to the belief that there are gods who pity him.

Neither Polyphemos, nor Odysseus can live as “noman,” or what amounts to the same thing, as nothing. Despite his prudence, Odysseus cannot restrain himself from shouting out his real name to Polyphemos. This act of reckless pride puts him and all his men in immediate danger, delays his own homecoming, and indirectly costs all his men their lives. Polyphemos can now pray to his father Poseidon for revenge. From pity and hate, piety is born.

The Lotus Eaters lack suffering and the spirit to contend with it because they are immersed in self-forgetting pleasures, whereas the Cyclops lives by the tyranny of his own will. It is worth noting that of the two, Polyphemos has a greater capacity for education.

**The Poet and the Home**

The stories of the Lotus Eaters and of Polyphemos outline the extremes of existence in order to guide man’s education. To be human requires the exercise of the virtues, which means avoiding the self-forgetfulness of pleasure and the self-indulgence of the will. The extreme defects of education point to civilization or the enjoyment of life’s pleasures accompanied by self-respect. Civilization is to be found not only in the life of the hero, but also in Homer’s own poetic activity. He celebrates the home, where man finds himself through others and where the familial community is formed by a tradition that connects one to an eternal order. Yet, the creator of the tradition is not beholden to it. The capacity for enjoyment and restraint take on a different meaning in the wisdom of the poet. Though the awareness of the human situation requires an understanding of man in relation to the eternal, the awareness need not be an awareness of tradition.
Politics and Dialogue in the *Philebus*

**James L. Wood**

*Boston University*

*woodj@bu.edu*

I.

Two related aspects of Plato’s philosophy have come increasingly to the attention of scholars in recent years, due largely to the influence of Leo Strauss and his followers: the political and the dramatic. By the former I mean the general theme of politics, the interaction of human beings together in the *polis*. By the latter I mean the aspects of the dialogue form—time and place, character and context—that they have in common with actual dramas. But while it is obvious that Plato writes in dialogue form and often takes up politics as a central theme in his dialogues, there may be a broader and less obvious sense in which Platonic philosophy itself, as informed by its dialogical character, is fundamentally political in nature. We might call this the “political thesis.” As Strauss puts it, “All Platonic dialogues refer more or less directly to the political question” (Strauss 1975, 160). But as he points out immediately following this statement, there are only three dialogues that deal directly with politics and indicate this in their titles: *Republic, Statesman*, and *Laws*; and it is in these dialogues that one can best discern Plato’s political teachings. This limitation suggests the corresponding difficulty of extracting the political significance of other dialogues.

Here the dramatic dialogue form becomes particularly useful. Plato’s dialogues always take place as a living interaction between different sorts of people, often historically based and politically significant, in the concrete context of a given time and place, typically in or near the city of Athens (cf. Nails 2002, xxxvii). As dialogical, then, Platonic philosophy is also political. It may be said that in this sense the form of Platonic philosophy determines its content. In addition, by presenting his philosophy in the conversations of human beings with each other, Plato gives dramatic expression to the political
possibilities and limits of philosophical activity, and in particular to the relationship of philosophers and non-philosophers in the city. The juxtaposition of philosophical activity and the city in or near which it takes place in the dialogues also perpetually calls to attention the potentially fertile but also precarious relationship that exists between philosophy and the city. The dialogues as a whole, then, show Plato to be particularly attuned to the problems and the possibilities inherent in the relationships between man and city, philosophy and politics.

One cannot, of course, simply assume the “political thesis” to be true; such a claim would require a good deal of justification. But since a complete justification of this thesis would require a thorough investigation of the dialogues as a whole, such a task is well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I mean to provide a partial and negative justification for the political thesis by considering and then dismissing an apparently powerful counterexample to it: namely, the Philebus, which is notable for its lack of both dramatic context and political content. It is not so unusual that this dialogue does not explicitly address political themes, as there are many dialogues that do not; but the absence of the explicitly political from the Philebus is reinforced by the near-absence of the explicitly dramatic, with the result that the broad sense in which every dialogue is political becomes severely weakened and seriously questionable in the case of this dialogue.

In the following section (II), I will review the apparently non-dramatic and apolitical features of the Philebus, then contrast it with other “late” dialogues, by way of showing the peculiar nature of this dialogue. Next (III), I will attend more closely to the one explicitly dramatic feature of the Philebus – its characters—and explore each of the characters, their positions, and their interaction in order to elicit their significance both individually and collectively for the dialogue. Finally (IV), I will argue on the basis of this investigation that, far from indicating a decline or even disappearance of Plato’s concern with political philosophy in a broad sense, the Philebus rather reaffirms this concern and indicates its most important expression and application.

To state the matter in advance, the political significance of the Philebus can be seen in its use of dialogical interaction to overcome obstacles to philosophical discussion and secure and further the possibility of philosophy within the city. Looked at in this way, the Philebus shows Plato coming full circle to the Socratic political mission as articulated in the Apology: the transformation of the city through the individual transformation of its
citizens, their awakening to the value of living virtuously and philosophically, so far as this is possible. That there are limits to this possibility is also shown in the *Philebus*, so that once again we are presented through the medium of dialogical interaction with both the ultimately insurmountable tensions between philosophy and politics, as well as the urgency of overcoming them as much as possible.

II.

The peculiarities of the *Philebus*’s dramatic form are immediately apparent, for the dialogue begins without dramatic preface or preliminaries. It opens in the middle of an ongoing discussion over the nature of the good, in which Philebus has been advocating the goodness of pleasure and delight and Socrates that of intellect and wisdom (*nous* and *phronēsis*) and the like (11b4-c1). This beginning marks a transition from Philebus to Protarchus, who is supposed to take up and defend Philebus’s position. We have some indication that there are some other characters, probably young men, present as an audience (cf. 16a4-6, 66a5), but only these three speak and are explicitly identified. In short order we are thus introduced to the main theme and the characters of the dialogue, and as the dialogue proceeds we do receive some clues as to the nature of these characters. But these clues are very scant, and otherwise Plato tells us nothing about the context in which this discussion about the good is taking place.

Let us begin with the characters. In the first place, while many of the characters in Plato’s dialogues have an historical basis, this is not the case in the *Philebus*. Philebus himself is entirely fictitious (cf. Nails 2002, 238); and while Protarchus may not be, we do not have any information about a possible historical antecedent for him aside from a single reference to him as the “son of Callias” (19b5), and just who this Callias is we are not told. At any rate, despite claims by Bolotin and others to the contrary, he cannot be the Callias from the *Apology* and *Protagoras*, the famous lover of sophists, on account of the age of his younger son at the time of Socrates’ death (cf. Nails 2002, 257; Taylor 1956, 12; Benardete 1993, 14). The real-world political significance of many of Plato’s characters is thus simply not an issue here. The Socrates character is, of course, historically based, but even in view of the considerable liberties Plato takes with the historical Socrates in his dialogues generally, this Socrates is a remarkable departure from type. Even more than the Socrates of the so-called middle dialogues, he is given to lengthy metaphysical and analytical discourses, has little apparent concern for eliciting and investigating the views of his interlocutors, and makes little use of his typical homespun metaphors and
playful irony. Compared with the “Socratic dialogues,” there is little in the way of Socratic dialogue in the *Philebus*, as Taylor in particular has remarked upon (1956, 9-11). Plato’s choice of Socrates to lead this dialogue may signify nothing more than Socrates’ historical appropriateness for conducting a discussion about the good, and perhaps, the dialogical precedent of the *Republic*, in which Socrates first mentions the competition between pleasure and wisdom for the title of good (*Republic* 505b). Taking these considerations together with the relative paucity of information given us about these characters, we might well conclude that they are nothing more than placeholders for the positions Plato wishes to discuss, with Plato’s own view put into the mouth of Socrates. This has been the conventional, if usually tacit, interpretation of the character roles in Plato generally, and the *Philebus* seems to provide solid support for this view.

Beyond the basic presence of characters conversing together (and it is Socrates who does most of the talking), there is no dramatic structure or setting in this dialogue at all. Plato says nothing at all about when or where the dialogue takes place; and while it is likely that it takes place in Athens, given Socrates’ role in it, we do not even know this for sure. Aside from Protarchus’s remark that Socrates agreed to hold this discussion to find out what “the best of human possessions” is, and promised to investigate it to its end (19c6, e2-4), we are told nothing about how or why this particular discussion arose. One reason for the indeterminacy of the context is another manifestation of it: the lack of a clear-cut beginning and ending. The fact that we enter a dialogue which is already in progress leaves us guessing about the way in which it began; and similarly, the fact that it ends with an indication that the conversation continues leaves us guessing about its ultimate outcome. There is also no clear sense of the “middle” of the dialogue, since there is significant difficulty surrounding its thematic unity. It thus appears that Plato has deprived us of all the usual parallels between dialogues and dramas: there is no dramatic structure of beginning, middle, and end, and there is no indication of dramatic time, place, and context whatsoever.

It is true, of course, that the *Philebus* is similar to other so-called late dialogues (whatever their actual chronology) in many of these respects. These dialogues—which conventionally include *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*—are noteworthy for their diminishment or outright abandonment of Socratic-style dialogue, and with it the character of Socrates, as well as for the decreased emphasis given to literary qualities and dramatic features such as character development, time and place, and contextualization generally. However, none of these dialogues is less
dramatically explicit than the *Philebus* in any one of these respects, and none
combines all the features just described. So, for example, while the *Laws*, like
the *Philebus*, provides precious little detail about its characters (of whom one at
least, Megillus of Sparta, is apparently historical; see Nails 2002, 101-2, 197-98,
328), it does at least provide some details about where and why the dialogue
takes place. The *Timaeus* and *Critias* provide more information about their
characters, at least three of whom (Socrates, Hermocrates, and Critias) have
some historical basis (cf. Nails 2002, 106-8, 161-62, and 293, on Critias,
Hermocrates, and Timaeus, respectively); and we do have some indication of
the time, place, and dramatic purpose and context of this discussion. We have
a clear indication of the time and place of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*; and the
characters of Socrates, Theaetetus, Theodorus, and (Young) Socrates are all
historically based, while even the Eleatic Stranger, despite being left deliberately
unidentified, is identified by his place of origin, which has important repercus-
sions for the thematic discussions in these dialogues. The same may be said for
the Athenian and the other characters in the *Laws*.

There are also important differences between these dialogues
and the *Philebus* as concerns the theme of politics. In two of them, the
*Statesman* and *Laws*, politics is explicitly the unifying theme, which indicates
at least that Plato’s concern with political philosophy does not decline, and if
anything increases, late in his life (assuming, again, that these dialogues actually
are the latest ones he composed). But more importantly, all of the others in
different ways are concerned with politics in the broad sense. The *Sophist*, as
the title indicates, is concerned with investigating the nature of the sophists,
so the assessment that this dialogue gives of their nature has important
implications for the rivalry between philosophy and sophistry for intellectual
authority in the realm of politics. The *Timaeus* is linked to the *Republic’s*
discussion of the city (or one similar to it), and is supposed to lay the
cosmological groundwork for the central task with which Socrates charges
his interlocutors at the beginning of the dialogue: bringing the city to life in
speech (*Timaeus* 19b)—a task which the *Critias* directly undertakes, though
incompletely.

The *Philebus*, however, does not address the theme of politics
at all in an explicit sense, and it should now be more apparent how its lack of
dramatic context impairs our ability to identify a broadly political significance
to this dialogue as we can in the other late dialogues. The characters are
unhistorical and underdeveloped; there is no dramatic link to a political
discussion in another dialogue; and there is no obvious thematic discussion of
a politically relevant topic such as sophistry. Even the connection to the *Republic*’s discussion of the good noted above is remarkable precisely in the contrast between the political context in which the latter discussion takes place and the apolitical context in which it takes place in the *Philebus*. We are left wondering: what bearing, if any, does the discussion of the good and the good life in the *Philebus* have on politics, i.e., on the political aspect of human existence?

At this point, I would take note of one final dramatic peculiarity of the *Philebus*, which I shall pick up and discuss in part IV: its *title*. In most of the dialogues the title provides a direct indication of either the main topic or one of the main characters of the dialogue. But the *Philebus* is named after a character who virtually disappears after the first few lines of the dialogues. Why is the dialogue named after Philebus? It is with this question in mind that I turn to a deeper exploration of the one explicitly dramatic feature of the *Philebus*, the characters engaged in the dialogue, beginning with Philebus. Moving forward, I hope to show that these characters, the positions they represent, and the nature of their interaction, are the dramatic key to understanding the political significance of the *Philebus*.

III.

In spite of the fact that Philebus plays a very minor role in the conversation once he turns over his position to Protarchus to defend, we still can glean some insights into his character from his own brief remarks and those of the other characters to him and about him. There is also his name, which literally interpreted means “Youth Lover,” or even, “Lover Boy.” This name could hardly be accidental, for not only is it a very unusual name, it is also quite in keeping with the character of the man—or the boy—as it is given to us. He is probably quite young (cf. Taylor 1956, 11-12), and as Protarchus says, “fair” (*kalon*) (11c7). He is thus himself a beautiful youth and, so it seems, a lover of the same. We need not rely on his name alone to infer the latter, however. Philebus is a declared hedonist—holding that pleasure and pleasure alone is good—and as his oath at the beginning (12b1-2) suggests, a devotee of Aphrodite, which gives us a good indication of just which pleasures he is most inclined towards: namely, the erotic. In fact, Socrates makes this link explicit in replying to Philebus, noting that Aphrodite’s proper name is simply “Pleasure” (12b7-9).

Furthermore, Philebus’s hedonism—in contrast to Callicles’ in the *Gorgias*—does not seem to be accompanied by an appreciation of the
more refined or intellectual pleasures. Thus Philebus, as David Bolotin points out, is a more consistent, which is to say a more genuine hedonist, than Callicles (1985, 2). Philebus swears by Aphrodite following an expression of defiant loyalty to pleasure, let us recall, in the course of giving over the defense of his position to Protarchus. Why does he do this? Protarchus says he has “tired out,” or “given up” (apeirêken, 11c8), which suggests that Philebus has gotten frustrated in the course of his debate with Socrates prior to the beginning of the dialogue, or else has simply grown weary of debating. In either case, he can clearly have made no headway in overcoming Socrates in debate, and refuses to be overcome in turn. Philebus thus exhibits only limited patience for defending the value of pleasure as a philosophical position, and no patience for philosophical discussion as such. He seems mainly to want to defeat Socrates in debate; and when that proves to be impossible, he loses interest. The few remarks he utters after this point indicate irritation at Socrates’ apparently irrelevant philosophical excursions (18a), irritation at Socrates’ apparent excesses in defense of his own position (22b, 28b), and in reply to a direct question from Socrates, praise for his own position (27e).

These brief clues suggest two things about Philebus: first, that he is not primarily a theoretical hedonist; and second, that he is not in any case a sophisticated hedonist. By “theoretical hedonist” I mean someone who holds and defends a philosophical thesis about the value of pleasure; and by “sophisticated hedonist” I mean someone who values or defends the value of the “higher” pleasures, and especially the pleasures of intellectual discussion. Here we can see the significance of Philebus’ unwillingness either to give up his position or to continue discussing it: his hedonism is not primarily an intellectual thesis but an expression of his own way of life. He defends the value of pleasure in speech only because he himself actually values pleasure; and once intellectual defense ceases to be itself pleasurable, which it does the moment he proves unable to defeat his opponent in debate, he loses interest in theoretical hedonism. Philebus’ stubborn loyalty to his position is therefore not a sign of an unconscious and inconsistent “attachment to the virtue of loyalty” (as Bolotin supposes); rather, it is a mark of the man’s basic indifference to the outcome of the debate once he leaves it (cf. Bolotin 1985, 3-5, esp. 4). Philebus may indeed suffer the sting of defeat, ridicule, and betrayal in this discussion (cf. Bolotin 1985, 5), but it is not likely that he suffers very much, for he chooses to remain until its end. Why should he do so? Perhaps because he derives more pleasure (or less pain) from remaining than he would from leaving—not, surely, because he enjoys listening to Socrates, but perhaps because he enjoys listening to, looking at, or simply being with
Protarchus. Protarchus’s reference to the “fair” Philebus (11c7) might well indicate more than simple companionship between the two. And if Philebus does actually care what Protarchus thinks about hedonism, the best way to ensure that Socrates’ work is undone is to remain until Socrates leaves, then to seduce Protarchus back into a love of pleasure—whether through words, deeds, or both.

In any case, nothing that happens to Philebus’s theoretical position in the hands of Protarchus need diminish in the slightest his practical attachment to hedonism. His hedonism is a way of life grounded on the love of pleasure, and indeed—to take Philebus’s oath seriously—the worship of pleasure. It is a fundamental existential commitment to the exclusive value of pleasurable sensation as such, which then becomes subject to no standard beyond the intensity, duration, and number of the sensations themselves, as qualified in turn by personal predilection for one sort of sensation rather than another. Pleasure thus conceived and valued tends to degenerate to the lowest common denominator, to those pleasures held in common by men and animals alike (cf. 11b5, “pasi zōois”); and this is just the sort of pleasure Philebus defends and desires. One might object, as Gosling does, that “It is hard to imagine any hedonist seriously holding this position” (1975, xi); but this is then just further evidence that Philebus is not, in the first place, a theoretical hedonist.

This kind of hedonism is not only not itself a philosophical position, but is in fact directly antagonistic to philosophy, at least as Socrates conceives it. As Socrates remarks to Protarchus, they are engaged in a search for truth rather than victory in the discussion (14b5-7), which means they must be prepared to sacrifice subjective preference for the sake of the truth. But as just noted, Philebus is not only a dogmatist, loyal to his position rather than to the search for truth, but his position is itself grounded on the elevation of subjective preference over against any possible objective standard of truth. To call pleasure and pleasure alone good, and to live accordingly, is to make the truth about the good utterly contingent on one’s own preferences and desires. And this is, in effect, to make oneself into the sole standard of truth and value. Philosophical discussion then becomes simply a means to the furtherance of that end: the subjugation of other opinions, and other people, to oneself, to the end of self-aggrandizement and the pleasure it brings. Socrates’ remarks about the dangers of “shallow and immature” (13d1) youths to philosophical discourse, and his description of their eristical way of behaving in discussions (13d-e, 14d-e, 15d-e), should be understood in the light of these observations.
about Philebus’s character and position. Eristical behavior, as an expression of the love of victory, is also and more fundamentally an expression of hedonistic self-worship; and as such it is diametrically opposed to philosophy, the love of truth and wisdom.

At this point it is appropriate to turn from Philebus to Socrates, and again on the basis of this dialogue alone, see what we can determine about the character and position of Socrates. In the previous section I made reference to the peculiar nature of the Socratic character in this dialogue, the extent to which he seems to be removed from his historical prototype, at least so far as we can determine what that is. But this Socrates is not completely different from the others, and the respect in which he most closely resembles the other Socratic characters Plato gives us is by far the most important. In every dialogue, including the *Philebus*, Socrates is concerned above all with living the philosophical life and leading others to that life—the life which is the love of wisdom.

Here Socrates’ position in the debate over the good becomes as illuminating of the nature of his character as Philebus’s position was of his. Socrates defends the goodness of “wisdom and intellect” (*phronēsis* and *nous*), as he tells us at the beginning, as well as that of “memory” and their “kindred,” “right opinion and calculation” (11b6-8). This is a loose and fluid list of goods, which later also includes “science” and “art” (*epistēmē* and *techne*) and their specific kinds, but in any case seems intended to include the intellectual faculties and their possessions in general as “good.” Socrates does not, however, intend to defend the exclusive goodness of intellectual activity as such or to denigrate and dismiss pleasure absolutely. The love of wisdom is not the same thing as the love of intelligence and knowledge. Already near the beginning of the dialogue he raises the possibility to Protarchus of a third candidate, a good superior to both pleasure and intellect (11d11). This good, as he makes explicit some lines later (22a1-2), is the mixture of pleasure and intellect, in which, as he will argue, intellect has a superior position to pleasure as the cause of the mixture. It is the business of the intellectual faculties both to apprehend this mixture and to bring it into being. As a bringing-into-being, this is not merely a theoretical activity, but also and more importantly a practical and productive activity—practical because it is a way of living and productive because it brings something new into existence (namely, ourselves as good) through the “mixing” or “blending” of elements of pleasure and knowledge (cf. esp. 61b ff.). Socrates’ position, like Philebus’s, emerges from and is directed towards a certain way of living, which in his case combines thought and desire, intellect
and pleasure. This way of life is, in short, the philosophical life.

Let us briefly review Socrates’ subsequent elaboration of the nature of this life. Just after introducing the mixed life as the good life, Socrates proposes to explain the composition of the mixed life by reference to the fundamental cosmic genera—unlimited, limit, mixture, and cause (23b5 ff.); then after analyzing each of these he explicitly links them to the mixed life and its components (27c3 ff.). Human beings become good just to the extent that they use their intellects (nous) to bring limit and order to their unlimited nature (in this context exemplified by pleasure and pain). The human mixture comes to reflect the cosmic mixture when pleasure is liberated from the degenerative motions of pain (cf. 31d4-6), so that it no longer embodies the “more and less,” or the ceaseless and aimless flux of the unlimited (cf. 24a6 ff.), but rather takes on the order and measure of the mixture (cf. 26b7-c1, 52c1-d1). This liberation is realized most of all in the pleasures Socrates calls “true” or “pure,” of which the best example is the “pleasures of learning” (51e7-52b8). These pleasures are the immediate sensual manifestation of intellectual growth, which in the most important sense is philosophical progress. Socrates, in short, unifies the most subjective dimension of the human good, pleasure, with the most objective standard of the good, the cosmic order, and makes nous the agent of unification.

We can understand the pattern of Socrates’ philosophizing in the Philebus in the light of this conception of the good: his metaphysical investigations (of the one and the many, of the cosmic genera, of being and becoming, etc.) are in the service of his attempt to explicate the order of the cosmos on which the mixed life is grounded; and his analytical investigations (of the forms of pleasure and knowledge) are in the service of his attempt to outline the mixed life by appropriating pleasure and integrating it with knowledge. In turn, his desire to explicate and ground the mixed life in this way should be understood in the light of the fundamental opposition between Socrates and Philebus with which this dialogue begins. It is the precise nature of the philosophical threat which Philebus poses that generates the need to overcome his way of life in the way Socrates does: its extreme subjectivity demands a standard of objectivity to refute it, but a standard which does not in turn alienate the subjective or the subject. The good is not an object detached from the subjects who investigate it, for the most important characteristic of the good, as Socrates says, is that it is desirable and desired (cf. 20d8-10): it is that which most of all matters to people, that which resonates within their own lives as desirable in its seeking and pleasant in its obtaining. Transcending,
transforming, and mixing pleasure are the philosophical tasks necessary both
to preserve and to ground objectively the subjective dimension of the good.

The opposition of Socrates and Philebus can only be a partial
explanation, however, of Socrates’ philosophical strategy in the Philebus. For
on the one hand, Socrates overcomes Philebus in debate before he has even
introduced the true nature of his position; and on the other hand, none of
the elaborate metaphysical and analytical apparatus that follows Philebus’s
withdrawal from the discussion succeeds in converting him to Socrates’
position. Nothing Socrates says or does, in other words, succeeds in truly
defeating Philebus, i.e., removing him permanently as a philosophical threat;
he can only disarm Philebus temporarily by shutting him down in debate. His
position and way of life remain as permanent possibilities for human beings,
and hence as permanent threats to the philosophical way of life.

We have not yet considered the character of Protarchus,
however, with whom Socrates conducts the vast majority of the dialogue.
Protarchus represents another level of dramatic significance in the Philebus,
and one which helps to explain both Socrates’ philosophical endeavors in the
dialogue and the nature and significance of his opposition to Philebus.
Protarchus seems to occupy an intermediate position between Philebus and
Socrates. He defends Philebus’ hedonistic thesis, but not with Philebus’
dogmatic fervor, and Socrates succeeds in detaching him from it in relatively
short order and without much difficulty. Protarchus also seems to enjoy
philosophical conversation, for more than once he urges Socrates to continue
their discussion, and does not at any point appear to be driven to defeat
Socrates in the debate. And by the end he appears to be fully converted to
Socrates’ position.

However, this behavior does not mean that Protarchus is, or
is capable of becoming, a philosopher. His friendship with Philebus and
willingness to defend his position aside, his manifest inability to follow much
of what Socrates says, and the unphilosophical way in which he proclaims
the final triumph of Socrates’ position (65b10-66a3), suggest that for all his
apparent enjoyment of philosophical discussion, Protarchus simply lacks both
the mental acuity and the particular psychological constitution necessary to
become a true lover of wisdom. Moreover, as Bolotin remarks, Protarchus
manifests “a lack of genuine openness to the inquiry,” in spite of his apparent
“eagerness to listen” (1985, 8). That is, he both wants to hear what Socrates says
and does not want to undertake the effort and risk of subjecting himself and
his beliefs fully to investigation. We need not conclude, as Bolotin does, that
Protarchus conceals a belief in the futility of philosophical inquiry, for this would make him as hopeless as Philebus (9). But we must balance his admiration for philosophy against his evident inability to do genuine philosophy and his probable unwillingness to make philosophy the basis of his life.

Some other observations of Protarchus's behavior serve to confirm his intermediate status and shed further light on his character and its sometimes contradictory manifestations. He makes a point of holding others to their promises (Socrates to continue, Philebus to abandon the discussion) while violating his own commitment to defend Philebus's position. He makes a notable outburst at one point (19c1 ff.), showing himself to be capable of losing his temper, and even playfully threatens violence (16a4-6); yet he also, in the act of making his first concession to Socrates, seems to do so for the sake of equanimity and fair play, and expresses a desire for all of them to be kept safe throughout the discussion (14a6-9). He rather emphatically rejects the blasphemous implications of an irrational and chaotic cosmos (28e1-2)—the very cosmos which undergirds the Philebian position he is supposedly defending—and shows thereby his acceptance of religious conventions; but he shows no signs of the zealous devotion which we see in Philebus, either to the cause Philebus embraces or to any other. And his enthusiastic denunciation of pleasure at the end appears to draw on the support of popular morality (65c4-66a3), even though this morality is directly at odds with the position of Philebus which he adopts with no compunctions at the beginning.

This inconsistent behavior may seem baffling, but in fact it is no different from the way most people tend to behave. To be in between philosophy and hedonism is to be in the condition of “the many,” the δῆμος of demotic morality as well as the unthinking mass of people who are said to favor the goodness of pleasure over wisdom in the Republic (505b). So like the many, Protarchus prizes the rule of law but wants the rules only to apply to others; he values equality but admires those, like Gorgias, who appear to hold the means for the obtainment of power (cf. 58a7-b3). He may be capable of violence—but only the violence of the mob. His strength comes only in numbers; alone he is weak. And he is inclined towards pleasure, but at the same time is capable of being persuaded by a philosopher to defend philosophy (cf. Republic 499d ff.). In all these ways he expresses the essence of the conventional man, the organization man, and perhaps most appropriately, the democratic man (see Republic 561c-e).

Protarchus, then, is the representative of hoi polloi and the embodiment of its contradictions. He may be better educated and socially
positioned than the majority, but even as such he is little more than a shallow sophisticate: in other words, a young man of the sort that Socrates often consorted with in the streets of Athens, less capable than some but less hopeless and recalcitrant than others. In sum, Protarchus is a rather generic representative of the city, its beliefs and its mores: neither a hedonist nor a philosopher, but subject to influence and conversion by either. He thus serves as the political face of an apolitical dialogue, the personification of the nameless and faceless crowd present in audience throughout the dialogue, charged at the end of the dialogue with communicating both to them and to the rest of the city the results of the dialogue, and especially the triumph of wisdom over pleasure in the contest of candidates for the good (cf. 66a).

IV.

On the basis of this analysis of the characters of the *Philebus*, what can we conclude about its political and dramatic significance? As I suggested at the conclusion of part II, the title provides us a significant clue, which I now interpret as follows: the dialogue is called “Philebus” because he is in a sense the main theme of the dialogue, both determining its content and shaping its form. In spite of the minimal role Philebus plays in the actual conversation of the dialogue, he affects it from beginning to end, coloring it with his near-absent presence, or rather depriving it of color through the shadowy veil of his character and way of life. The threat that Philebus represents to philosophy, discussed in the previous section, presents the dialogue with its central task: overcoming Philebian hedonism; and the nature of that hedonism is represented in the very form of the dialogue in its emptiness of dramatic detail and its indeterminacy of dramatic structure.

In short, Philebus is the source of the dramatic emptiness of the dialogue: the indeterminacy of its time, its place, and its beginning and end; for all of these are reflective of the hedonism he represents. The indeterminate time of the dialogue is of a piece with the indeterminate time in which the pleasure-lover, the practical hedonist, seeks to live. Socrates evokes the peculiar timelessness of pleasurable sensation by noting the loss of memory, calculation, and even immediate awareness that would result once the hedonist succeeded in obtaining his goal (cf. 21a8 ff.). One feels pleasure in the moment, which is to say, the experience is as such timeless; in pleasure we are “caught up in the moment” and “taken out of ourselves”—or rather become in ourselves that which we are feeling (cf. Gadamer 1991, 9). The past and future are forgotten, irrelevant. And in seeking these moments as the end of his activity, his life, his being, the pleasure-lover seeks to escape time itself and...
himself as a temporal being, and thus the unification (mixing) of himself through time. The pursuit of the ephemeral, of the immediately gratifying, of what reveals itself only in the moment and only as feeling to be good, has the effect of making oneself into an exemplification of these very qualities: this is pleasure as lived, and the truth of this life is the merging of oneself and what one lives for in an empty unity of pure sensation. There is perhaps no better image of the inherent truth and telos of this way of life than the one Socrates provides at 21c7: the pleasure-lover seeks to live not a human life, but the life of a jellyfish (pleumôn).

The indeterminacy of place, similarly, fits the pleasure-lover, and not just because the experience of pleasure is irrelevant to the location in which it is felt; more to the point is the disappearance of family and fatherland when place becomes irrelevant. Philebian hedonism is thus apolitical; but also, and more importantly, it is anti-political, perpetually opposed to and a threat to the moral order and collective wellbeing of the city, as the order of the city is in turn a threat to the pleasure-lover’s limitless will to self-gratification. The indeterminate beginning and end of the dialogue, in turn, conveys not just the atemporal or anti-temporal character of the hedonistic life but, as already noted, the eternal possibility of the hedonistic way of life for human beings, and hence the eternal nature of the threat it represents to both philosophy and the city.

The dialogue then begins, or is already underway, within the anarchic world of Philebus, his anti-cosmic cosmos, the shadows of his cave. His is the cave from which Socrates begins an ascent, and specifically through inducing the replacement of Philebus by Protarchus. Progress is impossible with Philebus, so the best thing that can be accomplished philosophically with him is to neutralize him as swiftly and efficiently as possible, which Socrates appears to have done by countering Philebus’ dogmatic position (pleasure) with his own (intellect), and out-arguing him. Only with Protarchus does progress become possible, so Socrates begins the task of ascending from the oblivion of Philebian hedonism with Protarchus, and in the process rescues him (at least temporarily) from Philebus’s hedonistic delusions. If Philebus determines the nature of the task, overcoming hedonism, Protarchus determines just how that task must be accomplished. That is, Socrates must not just overcome hedonism by besting Philebus in argument, which in any case he has already accomplished at the beginning of the dialogue; he must overcome hedonism in the person of Protarchus, remove it as a threat from him, and by extension from the city which he represents.
Socrates does this in a variety of ways. He occasionally flatters Protarchus, appearing to compromise with him at crucial junctures, with the effect of encouraging the latter to compromise in turn and allow the discussion to progress. He does this in extracting from Protarchus his crucial initial concession, to accept different and opposing kinds of pleasures, in view of Socrates’ apparent willingness to make a similar concession with respect to accepting different kinds of knowledge (cf. 13c6-14a9). Other notable instances are at the conclusion of the discussion of the one and the many and dialectic (20b1-4), and again just before beginning the investigation of the four cosmic genera (23a6-8), where in both cases he appears to allow Protarchus’s concerns to determine the course of the conversation. Later he goes so far as to pay Protarchus perhaps the greatest compliment he can: telling him that he will soon be capable not just of following but also of leading the discussion (45d2).

But Socrates also confronts Protarchus early on, appearing to frighten him with the possibility of failure and humiliation before the assembled company, and so provokes the latter’s explicit acknowledgement of his own ignorance and his recognition of Socrates’ authority in the dialogue (cf. 18e3-20a8). In other words, he brings Protarchus to a state of aporetic awareness and a renewed willingness to follow Socrates’ lead in search of the truth. Also he provokes Protarchus again much later in the discussion with his introduction of the notion of false pleasures (36c6 ff.), which seems deliberately designed to offend Protarchus’ common sense, and thus to lead him beyond common sense to the greater insights demanded by a thoroughgoing philosophical dialectic. And still later, at 48d4, he asks Protarchus to perform a dialectical division, forcing him to admit that he cannot, before doing it himself, as if to reaffirm his authority and remind Protarchus both of the importance of dialectical investigation and of the need to follow the lead of a philosopher so long as he is incapable of it.

Such moments aside, however, Socrates seems mainly to use the content and method of his philosophical discussion itself to wean Protarchus away from Philebus and convert him to philosophy. For in spite of the occasional concession and compromise to encourage Protarchus to persevere early on, Socrates for the most part conducts his philosophical investigations without any concessions to Protarchus’s limited capabilities. Even those initial concessions, looked at from the perspective of the larger discussion, do not appear to result in any significant dilutions or detours in the overall progression of Socrates’ argument. Oddly enough, Socrates apparently succeeds in converting Protarchus to philosophy—at least to its advocacy if not
to its practice—by conducting a philosophical discussion with him that in its metaphysical density and profundity and its technical sophistication far exceeds the ability of Protarchus to understand, let alone perform its like himself. Given Protarchus’s character, however, his eventual conversion to Socrates’ position is perhaps not so surprising; for Protarchus does seem to be quite taken with philosophical discussion, and far from flagging in his interest in the course of this long and difficult discussion, he repeatedly emphasizes his determination to continue and for Socrates to take the discussion to its proper conclusion (cf. 19d6-e5, 23b2-4, 67b11-13). The encouragement he receives early on is probably only necessary in view of Protarchus’s fear of failing and looking ridiculous before his friends, which he would if Socrates actually enforced his injunction to Protarchus to conduct a dialectical analysis himself (cf. 18e8-19a2). Making Protarchus feel this fear is perhaps a necessary component of the task of moving his allegiance from Philebus to Socrates, but once its purpose is served, further encouragement from Socrates does not appear necessary. The very complexity and ambitiousness of Socrates’ philosophical endeavors seem to appeal to Protarchus’ sensibilities, and increasingly so as the dialogue wears on, which leads us to the possibility that Socrates conducted his dialogue in this way precisely for Protarchus’s sake, as a necessary part of the dialogue’s central task of overcoming Philebian hedonism in the person of Protarchus, and so of immunizing him and the city which he represents from its dangers.

Far from indicating a neglect of dramatic form on Plato’s part, then, Socrates’ metaphysical and analytical quasi-mono- logues might be a direct consequence of dialogical considerations. This is surely not the full story, however. Assuming that Socrates does deliberately use philosophical complexity to awe Protarchus into submission, still it seems unlikely that Socrates needs such an elaborate philosophical edifice simply to convert Protarchus, or that its significance is exhausted by any such dialogical necessity. It may be that Socrates needs an extensive investigation of the one and the many, dialectical methodology, and fundamental ontology and cosmology in order to overcome Philebian hedonism thoroughly, but it does not seem to be necessary either to defeat Philebus himself, as we have seen, or even to convert Protarchus, efficacious towards that end as it may be. If it is the case, then, that dialogical necessity is not fully sufficient to determine Socrates’ philosophical conduct in this dialogue, the remaining possibility is that philosophical necessity itself drives him towards this end. In other words, the chief and decisive reason, though not the only one, that leads Socrates to conduct a dialogue dominated by metaphysics and analysis, is adequacy of philosophical
justification. Whether or not Socrates’ justification of his position (and his refutation of Philebus’s) is adequate cannot be addressed in this space, though my suggestion would be that at a minimum his metaphysical account of the cosmic order succeeds in demonstrating the inadequacy of Philebus’s (implicit) metaphysical presuppositions, while his dialectical analysis of pleasure succeeds in demonstrating the inadequacy of the brute experience of pleasurable sensation itself to satisfy us fully. Certainly there are problems and deficiencies in these and his other accounts, but I do not think there is any question that Socrates is portrayed by Plato both as seriously attempting to answer the questions that he addresses and as aware of the limits of his own success, and of the inherent limitations of philosophical inquiry more generally.

In the *Philebus*, then, we find Socrates working simultaneously towards three distinct, though overlapping goals: defeating Philebus, converting Protarchus, and conducting a high-level philosophical investigation in the company of both. All of these can be understood in terms of the central task of the *Philebus* as I have described it: overcoming Philebian hedonism—which as a negative goal points in turn to Socrates’ positive goal of promoting the “mixed” or philosophical way of life. This positive goal is in different ways the goal of every Platonic dialogue, or at least of every one that features Socrates in a leading role. That is, in the dialogues we witness Socrates attempting to varying degrees to accomplish one or more of these three goals: to refute his enemies, to convert potential followers, and to conduct specific philosophical investigations; and through his pursuit of these three goals he pursues his ultimate goal: defending, practicing, and promoting, in both word and deed, his way of life as the love of wisdom, truth, and goodness. One might say, then, that the various dialogues show Socrates investigating various aspects of his one fundamental concern—the nature of the human good—as tailored to the nature of those with whom he speaks and the context in which he is speaking.

In the *Philebus* we are witness to arguably the starkest and most direct articulation of this multi-faceted philosophical endeavor, for in it Socrates investigates the question of the good more explicitly than we find anywhere else, and in the process he attempts both to refute perhaps the most unrepentant and implacable of his enemies and to convert perhaps the most mediocre and generic representative of his fellow citizens to the advocacy of philosophy. At the same time, this very starkness allows us to witness the irresolvable tensions and limitations inherent in Socrates’ three-fold task. To review: while Socrates manages to reduce Philebus to silence and remove him
from the discussion, the defiance with which he withdraws and his stubborn silent presence until the end suggests that Socrates never defeats him personally or his way of life as a perpetual possibility for human beings. And while Socrates’ arguments are sufficient to refute Philebus’s position as represented by Protarchus, Protarchus only converts to Socrates’ position, the life of wisdom, within the limits of his own conventional understanding. In all likelihood, he does not go on to live a philosophical life himself, but at most only a more moral existence, inoculated against the temptation of hedonism, and a proponent of philosophy in general and Socrates in particular, but never a philosopher. Finally, Socrates gives indications throughout the dialogue that his account, and indeed any philosophical account, will be in many respects incomplete and insufficient to capture the full nature of the cosmic order, the one and the many, the good itself, and the good life for human beings.

So why does Socrates pursue goals in this dialogue that he knows he cannot fully achieve? Simply put, because their pursuit is part of his pursuit of the good. The philosopher is primarily concerned with seeking his own truth and goodness, which leads him to investigate his own nature in relation to the nature of the world. But this investigation, both intimately personal and cosmically impersonal, directed both outward to the universal principles of being itself and inward to the particular features of his own being, takes on a third aspect in relation to the other beings with whom the philosopher shares his world—namely, his fellow human beings. The philosopher attempts to bring others to his way of life and refute those who threaten it, together with their positions, because his very attempt to apprehend the good and manifest it in himself takes him beyond himself and back to the world of human affairs. Just as the Republic has it, the one who has seen the light of the sun must return to the darkness of the cave from which he came to free its prisoners and bring them out to share the light he has experienced. But the ascent to the sun and the contemplation of it are not independent of the return to the cave and the attempt to liberate its prisoners. These are all essentially interconnected aspects of the one fundamental activity of pursuing the good, none of which can be separated from the others without distorting and perverting the living of the good life.

On a more prosaic level, the philosopher attempts to defeat his enemies and gain converts and followers because doing so is necessary to secure the position of philosophy in the city. To defend and promote the way of life he believes to be the best for human beings, the philosopher must make the world safe for philosophy. Philebus will probably remain an unrepentant
opponent of philosophy, but Socrates can reduce him to silence and refute his position before other men. And Protarchus will probably never be capable of living a philosophical life, but he can certainly promote philosophy in general and Socrates in particular. By engaging him in philosophical dialogue, Socrates can both improve him personally, by making him more moral and reflective than before, and improve his city generally, by diminishing the appeal of hedonism in all its forms and increasing the appeal of rational reflection and moral rectitude.

In sum, the *Philebus* expresses and confirms the essential Socratic conviction that the good life for human beings lies in the pursuit of wisdom, truth, and goodness through dialectical investigations in dialogue with others, both friends and foes. As the above considerations have shown, this is an inherently political activity, not just because it necessarily involves social interaction, but because it consciously seeks to transform and improve the city by transforming and improving the lives of its citizens, turning them, as Socrates puts it in the *Apology*, from a love of wealth, honor, and reputation to a love of wisdom, truth, and the “best possible state” of their souls (29e). The limited success Socrates has with Protarchus, and with even the most promising of his other interlocutors (e.g., Alcibiades, Theaetetus), suggests that a complete conversion of the city to philosophy—the stated goal of the *Republic*—is impossible, at least through the means Socrates himself pursues. Moreover, as he himself notes both in the *Apology* (32a) and in the *Republic* (496d-e, 520a-b), any philosopher who attempts to influence political affairs directly, i.e., by direct political action, is a fool, doomed to failure and swift destruction at the hands of the city. After all, we should not forget that Socrates was perceived as a threat to the city even without his undertaking direct political action, and was executed precisely on account of the political implications of his merely private dialogical interactions with his fellow citizens.

The *Philebus*, then, is political in precisely the sense in which Socrates himself, and his way of life, is political. That is to say, both are political in that “broad” sense I described at the beginning: as concerned with the nature and goodness of human beings in the city and with the possibilities and limitations inherent in the relationship between philosophy and politics. The *Philebus* confirms the political thesis. The dramatic structure of the dialogues is the first and best indication of Plato’s abiding concern with politics in the broad sense, and even in the apparently non-dramatic *Philebus*, it is precisely the dramatic attributes of character and context, including the very absence of contextual details of place, time, beginning and end, that point
towards the dramatic and political significance of the Philebus. Its very lack of concreteness, including the fictional characters of Philebus and Protarchus, gives it an archetypal importance, makes it indeed the archetypal Socratic dialogue, or better, the archetypal Platonic articulation of the Socratic way of life, replete with the late-Platonic characteristics of metaphysical and technical sophistication. There is perhaps no better indication of the essential unity between the early and late Plato than this dialogue, and perhaps no better way of characterizing this unity, the essence of Platonic philosophy, than as dramatically dialogical in form and broadly political in content—or in other words, as philosophically Socratic through and through.

REFERENCES

(N.B.: All translations from the Philebus are my own.)


Deception in Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*

CHRISTOPHER WHIDDEN

LAKE FOREST COLLEGE
cwhidden@lfc.edu

*In memoriam Morton J. Frisch*

**Introduction**

In the compact prologue to his *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon succinctly states the reason why he saw fit to record the speeches and deeds that together comprised the life of Cyrus the Great. Contrary to the many democracies, monarchies, oligarchies, tyrannies, and even private households that Xenophon notes were “overthrown” and “brought down completely,” Cyrus alone proved capable of rendering “very many people [anthrôpoi], very many cities, and very many nations, all obedient to himself” (1.1.1-3). Cyrus’s remarkable ability to make others obey him prompted Xenophon to change his mind about the difficulty inherent to rule (archê), “to the view that ruling human beings does not belong among those tasks that are impossible, or even among those that are difficult, if one does it with knowledge [epistemê]” (1.1.3). For Xenophon, while Cyrus excelled all other kings in any number of ways (1.1.4), what ultimately set him apart from other rulers was his knowledge (epistemê), which enabled him to excel at ruling human beings and to found the Persian Empire (1.1.4-6). As Xenophon intimates in the prologue, the *Cyropaedia* taken as a whole is above all else an exploration of Cyrus’s knowledge. What did Cyrus and Cyrus alone know that enabled him to excel all other rulers, to render nations obedient to himself, and to found the Persian Empire?

This study of necessity limits itself to a discussion of one important element of Cyrus’s knowledge. Xenophon implies in the prologue that one facet of Cyrus’s knowledge involved knowing how to deceive others, which becomes a recurring theme throughout the *Cyropaedia*. In his analysis of the difficulty of ruling, Xenophon notes that “human beings unite against none more than against those whom they perceive attempting to rule them” (1.1.2). As Xenophon presents the problem, part of the difficulty inherent to rule is that individuals typically perceive that those who wish to rule over them do in fact seek power (dunamis). Like Machiavelli, Xenophon argues only that that individuals do not wish to be ruled by another, not that everyone desires to
rule (1.1.1-2; *Prince*, ch. 9). But if, as Xenophon suggests, human beings resist being ruled by anyone they perceive trying to rule over them, then one way for an aspiring ruler to avoid this seemingly inevitable resistance would be to disguise his true intentions. As the prologue implies and the *Cyropaedia* as a whole confirms, one way for a potential ruler to avoid others’ resistance is to deceive them, which explains why, as this paper endeavors to show, along the way in his meteoric rise to power Cyrus of necessity deceives both friend and foe alike at every turn.

I. **Cyrus’s Deception of Cyaxares**

Cyaxares, Cyrus’s uncle on his mother Mandane’s side, who at the outset of the narrative is the heir to the Median throne (1.4.7, 1.5.2; 5.5.8), is one of the most prominent and important characters in the *Cyropaedia*. According to Walter Miller, the translator of the Loeb edition of the *Cyropaedia*, “Cyaxares, the son of Astyages, is probably not a historical personage, but was invented by Xenophon to bring out Cyrus’s perfect discipline in obedience as well as in ruling” (Miller 1994, 468). While Miller is right to stress Cyaxares’ general importance, his assessment of Cyaxares’ specific role is problematic to the extent that Cyrus does not in fact obey Cyaxares and, to the contrary, repeatedly and quite deliberately seeks to deceive him and undermine his authority. In contrast to Miller’s reading, Machiavelli’s interpretation in the *Discourses* of the role that Cyaxares plays in the *Cyropaedia* is far more accurate. On Machiavelli’s reading, Xenophon makes his Cyrus “deceive Cyaxares…in several modes; without which fraud he shows that Cyrus could not have attained that greatness he came to” (*Discourses*, 2.13.1). As Machiavelli recognized, Cyrus’s repeated deception of Cyaxares brings to light as clearly as any passages in the *Cyropaedia* the lengths to which Cyrus is willing to go in order to secure power for himself.

The first time Xenophon mentions Cyaxares by name and the first time he speaks is at 1.4.9, which is to say that Xenophon did not see fit to give him a proper introduction until slightly past the midpoint of Cyrus’s childhood visit in Media (1.3.1-1.4.28). On the one hand, the fact that Xenophon does not introduce Cyaxares until approximately halfway through his account of Media is odd, given Cyaxares’ importance as the heir to the Median throne. On the other hand, by delaying the introduction of Cyaxares, Xenophon reinforces the suggestion he makes in the prologue that what is most important about the account of Media is the education Cyrus received there (1.1.6). As he does throughout the *Cyropaedia*, in the account of Media Xenophon keeps the focus almost entirely on Cyrus, such that other characters
are typically important only to the extent that they play a role in Cyrus’s life. In the case of Cyaxares, his importance as far as Cyrus is concerned lies in the fact that he is the heir to the Median throne, such that Cyrus must find a way to undercut his uncle’s authority in order to incorporate Media into his empire under his sovereign rule. The principal means by which Cyrus deposes Cyaxares involve repeatedly deceiving his uncle about his true intentions and his burning desire to rule. Though Cyaxares comes as close as anyone in the narrative to grasping the true nature of Cyrus’s plans to thwart his (and everyone else’s) authority, every time Cyaxares comes close to unearthing Cyrus’s plots and schemes, Cyrus throws his uncle off his trail by deceiving and mollifying him so as to create the illusion that his intentions are entirely benign.

Cyrus’s initial deception of Cyaxares occurs in the course of their conversation regarding how ill-equipped the combined Persian and Median forces are in comparison with those of the bellicose Assyrian king and his allies. Upon learning that the Assyrian is marshalling his forces for an impending attack on Media (1.5.2-3), Cyaxares, who witnessed firsthand Cyrus’s prodigious abilities as both a warrior and a military strategist during his nephew’s stay in Media (1.4.18-24), sends a request to Cyrus to personally command any soldiers the Persians might be able to spare (1.5.4-5). Cyrus, who even as a youth was already quite attuned to what Machiavelli would see as opportunities that fortune occasionally bestows (1.4.18), accepts his uncle’s offer and in so doing assumes command of the Persian contingent dispatched to help defend Media (1.5.5). When Cyrus arrives in Media, Cyaxares inquires as to how many soldiers Cyrus expects Persia to send. Most translations of the Cyropaedia, including the Loeb edition, render Cyrus’s response at 2.1.2 as “thirty thousand” so as to make his answer accord with Xenophon’s comment that Cyrus was allotted “ten thousand archers, ten thousand targeteers, and ten thousand slingers” (1.5.5). In contrast, Ambler’s translation of the Cyropaedia renders the figure at 2.1.2 as “twenty thousand,” which accords with the number stated in the texts of all surviving manuscripts (Buzzetti 2003, 160; Ambler 2001, 290 n.3). As Christopher Nadon correctly notes, “The usual emendation neither corrects a lapse on the part of Xenophon nor removes a corruption in the original text. Rather, it creates an additional impediment to a genuine appreciation of the character of Xenophon’s writing” (Nadon 2001, 61). While Xenophon’s quiet, understated, and rather polite style certainly does not highlight or unduly stress the discrepancy between the respective figures at 1.5.5 and 2.1.2, he no doubt means for the perceptive reader to note that Cyrus’s initial report to his uncle upon returning to Media is a lie, the true purpose of which can be gleaned from their ensuing conversation.
After Cyaxares tallies the number of enemy soldiers likely to march on Media, Cyrus summarizes the rather grave situation in which they find themselves, noting that their infantry will be about half and their cavalry roughly one-third that of the Assyrian (2.1.6). In response to this bleak assessment, Cyaxares inquires as to whether he should send for additional reinforcements, given that the size of the Persian force—at least so far as he knows, since Cyrus lied and said that only 20,000 troops were coming rather than the actual number of 30,000—is fairly small (2.1.7). But Cyrus states that he wishes to postpone the question of reinforcements and would rather learn from Cyaxares what the predominant method of fighting is likely to be. Cyaxares answers that on both sides the armies consist predominantly of archers and spearmen, which Cyrus understands to mean that the fighting will take place at a distance (2.1.7). Since the war will apparently be one of attrition whereby through a series of indecisive skirmishes the side with the greater numbers will eventually grind down the opponent and win, Cyaxares again suggests that he and Cyrus send to Persia for a larger army, stressing that if anything bad should happen to the Medes the danger will extend to her ally Persia as well (2.1.8). But Cyrus declares that “even if all the Persians should come, we would not exceed our enemies in number,” which prompts Cyaxares to ask if his nephew has a better plan (2.1.8-9).

Referring to the different social classes in Persia, Cyrus proposes that Cyaxares have armor like that which the “so-called Peers [homotimoi]” possess made for the Persian commoners (de-motai), who will also need to fight but who because of their poverty do not possess armor, corselets, shields, and sabers suited to hand-to-hand combat (2.1.9). If the commoners were to join the ranks of the peers and were better equipped to fight at close range against the enemy, Cyrus reasons that the Persians and Medes could thus avoid the inevitable defeat that they would incur were they to fight a long-distance war of attrition. By deliberately understating the number of Persian troops, Cyrus makes the need to arm the Persian commoners seem all the more pressing to Cyaxares, who agrees to supply the funds needed to arm them (2.1.10, 2.4.9). In what emerges as a familiar pattern throughout the Cyropaedia, Cyrus provides the vision and someone else provides the funds to help bring his plans to fruition.

In addition to the logistical reason, Cyrus’s proposal that Cyaxares arm the Persian commoners has an additional, unstated, and in many ways more important motivation as well. Cyrus uses Cyaxares’ concern over their forces being outnumbered as a pretext to institute a revolutionary and
far-reaching political reform that involves arming the Persian commoners and making them, for the first time, the equals of the heretofore elite peers. This change is necessary in order for Cyrus to begin his journey toward empire, insofar as it provides him with more troops at his disposal and, more importantly, serves to abolish the ancestral Persian customs, including especially the peers’ education in justice ( dikaiosunē ) and moderation ( sōphrosunē ), that are at odds with his imperial ambitions. If Cyrus needs to overcome the traditional Persian education which instilled justice and moderation so that the Persians can be encouraged to desire gain ( kerdos ) via imperialistic expansion, then one way to encourage them to abandon their education would be to encourage association and intermingling between the peers and commoners, since the commoners were not themselves the beneficiaries of the traditional education. In fact, prior to Cyrus the Persians institutionally segregated the peers and commoners for fear that the commoners’ commercial and bawdy way of life would distract and corrupt the peers (1.2.3). By abolishing the traditional class distinctions and encouraging the peers to desegregate and intermingle with the commoners, Cyrus hopes to create a situation whereby the peers will abandon their moderation in favor of the pursuit of gain. With this reform, he in effect institutionalizes in deed the revolutionary proposal he had previously made in speech when he boldly proclaimed:

I consider our ancestors to have been no worse than we. At least they too spent all their time practicing the very things that are held to be works of virtue [ aretē ]. What good they acquired by being such, however, either for the community of the Persians or for themselves, I cannot see. And yet I do not think that human beings practice any virtue in order that those who become good have no more than do the worthless. Rather, those who abstain from the pleasures at hand do so not in order that they may never have enjoyment, but through their present continence they prepare themselves to have much more enjoyment in the future… If any who have labored at these things see themselves become incapacitated by old age before they have reaped any fruit from them, they seem to me to suffer something similar to someone who, enthusiastic to become a good farmer, sows well and plants well, but when it is time for the harvest, lets his ungathered crop fall down to the earth again. And if an athlete, after undertaking many labors and becoming deserving of victory, should pass his life without a contest, it would not seem to me to be just that he not be blamed for folly. (1.5.8-10)

As Cyrus’s speech shows, immediately upon assuming control of the Persian army, he began contemplating reforming the traditional Persian education and with it the entire Persian regime by essentially equating virtue
with delayed gratification or enlightened hedonism, which becomes a recurring theme. The impending Assyrian attack and Cyaxares’ concern about the troops in effect provides Cyrus with the opportunity to institute his reforms in practice.

The arrival of an Indian embassy in Media affords Cyrus the opportunity to substantially increase his power in the eyes of others by manipulating, humiliating, and further deceiving his uncle. When the ambassadors arrive, Cyaxares sends a messenger to Cyrus ordering him to report to him immediately wearing his most beautiful (kalos) robe. As Cyrus well knows, Cyaxares wants him to dress splendidly as a sign of respect and deference to his elder, so as to make Cyaxares appear all the more powerful in the eyes of the Indian delegation (2.4.5). But after hearing the messenger—and in accord with Machiavelli’s advice that the prince “should never lift his thoughts from the exercise of war and in peace he should exercise it more than in war” (Prince, ch. 14)—Cyrus takes it upon himself to assemble 30,000 troops in formation and lead them to Cyaxares “at a brisk run” (2.4.2-3). Cyaxares ordered Cyrus to appear wearing his finest Median dress, but instead Cyrus brings the army. When Cyrus and his considerable contingent appear before Cyaxares, his uncle notices that Cyrus’s shabby Persian dress “was in no way ostentatious [hubrizomai]” (2.4.5). Cyaxares is pleased with his nephew’s promptness but annoyed by the drabness of his attire, for which he scolds his nephew (2.4.5). Cyrus pacifies his uncle a bit by pointing out that he came so promptly that he did not have time for elaborate dress and was instead “adorned with sweat and zeal” (2.4.6). Though Cyrus’s apologia satisfies Cyaxares, the fact remains that Cyrus deliberately disobeyed his uncle, presumed to know better than him what the best course of action was, and publicly embarrassed him.

The events following an important victory of the allied Persian, Median, and Hrycian forces over the Assyrians, Phrygians, and Arabians further illustrate the way in which Cyrus coolly manipulates and deceives Cyaxares. After the victory, far from decadently celebrating, the Persians under Cyrus enjoy a moderate dinner before diligently securing the camp from potential attackers and deserters (4.5.5). In contrast to the Persians’ discipline, “the Medes were drinking, feasting, having flutes played, and sating themselves with every delight, for many such things had been captured, so those awake were not at a loss for something to do [ergon]” (4.5.7). Never one to miss an opportunity for carousing, Cyaxares partook of the festivities, delighted with his good fortune as the victor and secure in his belief that the Medes were still present in camp, “for he heard a great commotion” (4.5.8).
However, contrary to Cyaxares’ assumption, the ruckus that he hears is not that of the Median soldiers celebrating, but rather the sound of the unsupervised Median servants making merry. Unbeknownst to Cyaxares, Cyrus took the Median troops in the middle of the night under the cover of darkness, ostensibly to further secure their position and to seek additional gain, maneuvers that just happen to further cement Cyrus’s authority and undercut that of his uncle.

The next morning Cyaxares wakes to find that not a soul reports to his headquarters and that his camp has been abandoned while he was leisurely sleeping off a night of merrymaking (4.5.9). Known for bouts of being “savage and without judgment [\textit{agnomē}],” Cyaxares curses Cyrus and the Medes for departing without his knowledge or consent and leaving him all alone (4.5.9). He sends a message to Cyrus chastising him and demanding that the Medes return to camp as promptly as possible. To emphasize the urgency of his message, Cyaxares threatens the Medes, and even the messenger himself, such that the envoy became “distressed that he had not himself gone before with Cyrus” (4.5.13). Upon hearing Cyaxares’ demand that they return immediately even if Cyrus himself wished to stay, the Medes fell silent, owing to the fact that they could not conceive of disobeying Cyaxares and further aggravating his anger, though they also feared returning to him because he was in such a rage (4.5.18-19).

Sensing the soldiers’ indecision, Cyrus makes a speech and provides a rather duplicitous reading of Cyaxares’ message that is designed to persuade the soldiers to remain with him rather than return to Cyaxares (4.5.20-21). As Nadon points out, Cyrus’s “interpretation” of Cyaxares’ message differs from the original in several ways and is in fact a “gross misreading” (2001, 94). Cyrus begins by attributing Cyaxares’ rage to the fact that his uncle is concerned for the Medes’ well being, a situation Cyrus implies can be easily remedied once Cyaxares learns that the Medes are in fact faring quite well. Yet in point of fact Cyaxares never expressed any concern for the Medes or anyone else other than himself (4.5.10). Moreover, while Cyaxares expressed dismay at being deserted, contra Cyrus’s presentation he never stated that he was afraid; rather, as Cyaxares told the messenger, the true basis for his anger is the fact that Cyrus did not see fit to tell him about the Hyrcanian deserters who agreed to serve as Cyrus’s guides or about his nephew’s decision to leave in the middle of the night with nearly all the Medes (4.5.11-12). Finally, Cyrus’s argument that the Medes “came only after having been so ordered” by Cyaxares is not entirely true (4.5.21). It would be more accurate to say, as Cyrus himself privately admits, that Cyaxares merely agreed to permit those who wished to
accompany Cyrus to do so, without compelling anyone to go against his will (4.1.19; 5.5.21). Viewed in its proper light, Cyaxares’ anger stems in great measure from the fact that nearly everyone under his command chose of his own volition to follow Cyrus’s lead when given the opportunity. But however questionable Cyrus’s interpretation of Cyaxares’ message is, Cyrus’s speech works like a charm and Cyaxares’ demands prove futile as the Medes and even the messenger who was personally charged with delivering Cyaxares’ scathing rebuke decide to ignore his order and remain with Cyrus, which of course only further enrages Cyaxares.

In his letter of explanation to Cyaxares, Cyrus attempts on some level to reconcile with his uncle, but the message is also filled with condescension and loosely veiled threats. Even the most conciliatory line in the entire letter is simultaneously remarkably haughty, with Cyrus noting that he will not stoop to Cyaxares’ level and treat his uncle the way Cyaxares has treated him by trying to recall his cavalry (4.5.24, 31). Cyrus also lectures his uncle regarding the proper way for a leader to comport himself, advising him not to take back what he had previously given as he now attempts to do, “lest enmity be owed to you instead of gratitude [charis]” (4.5.32). Cyrus further advises Cyaxares not to summon with threats those he desires to come quickly and not to threaten large numbers of soldiers when he himself admits to being deserted and vulnerable. Given its pedantic tone, Cyrus’s letter is not at all the sort of respectful letter one would expect a nephew who has not yet inherited the Persian throne to send to his elder uncle, who is after all (at least nominally) the reigning king of Media. Far from showing proper respect to his senior uncle, Cyrus’s pompous tone leaves little doubt that he sees himself as the natural and rightful ruler of Media and his uncle as in every way his inferior. The last line of Cyrus’s letter leaves little doubt about who is really in charge of the Median forces and their allies, given that he repeatedly employs the singular “you” (as he does throughout the letter) so as to make Cyaxares feel as isolated, small, and weak as possible as compared to Cyrus and his forces: “We will try to be back with you as soon as possible as we accomplish what we believe would, when done, be goods in common for both you and us” (4.5.33). In other words, Cyrus wants his uncle to rest assured that he will make every attempt to return when he is good and ready.

After Cyrus summons Cyaxares and “invites” him to rejoin the troops, Cyaxares makes what amounts to his most moving and persuasive speech in the Cyropaedia, in which he articulates to Cyrus the precise nature of his grievance with his nephew’s behavior (5.5.25-34). While he grants that
Cyrus did help to weaken his Assyrian enemies, with each successive victory against them Cyrus's stock rises in the eyes of the Medes and their allies and the honor (timē) accorded to himself diminishes. As Cyaxares candidly admits to Cyrus, he would rather extend his nephew's dominion by his own power than sit idly and watch his own territory increased by Cyrus, “for your deeds are noble [kalos] to you who do them, but somehow the same deeds bring dishonor to me” (5.5.25-26). Cyaxares cannot help but feel that the more Cyrus enriches him, the poorer he actually becomes (5.5.27). Since he bears little responsibility for advancing his own fortune, Cyaxares likens himself to a woman, whereas Cyrus alone appears in the eyes of his subordinates to be a man (anēr) worthy of rule (archē) (5.5.33).

Before Cyaxares can finish his impassioned and moving speech on the causes of his discontent, Cyrus abruptly interrupts him by swearing an oath (5.5.35). Cyrus proposes that they put aside their differences and reconcile, a suggestion that Cyaxares accepts (5.5.36). But this sudden reconciliation is most unsatisfactory in the sense that Cyaxares had nearly finished establishing why, Cyrus’s protests and avowals of good faith to the contrary notwithstanding, he had just cause to be distressed by Cyrus’s behavior. Perhaps, as James Tatum suggests, Cyrus interrupts because Cyaxares comes dangerously close to unearthing and articulating his nephew’s strategies and methods for ruling over others (1989, 132). For example, when Cyaxares states that he would be less displeased to see his subjects harmed a bit by Cyrus rather than seeing them receive great benefits at the hands of his nephew, he comes very close to unearthing one facet of Cyrus's knowledge. As Cyrus knows well, and as Cyaxares begins to learn all too well for himself by observing Cyrus, he who consistently benefits others seemingly (but only seemingly) without regard for his own advantage thereby rules them. In this sense the title of the book—The Education of Cyrus—refers not only to the education Cyrus received, and not only to the education Xenophon conveys to the reader through Cyrus’s life, but also to the education Cyrus imparts to other characters in the Cyropaedia who, as in the case of Cyaxares, come to learn the secrets and consequences of Cyrus's rule for themselves only once it is too late to halt his meteoric rise to power.

After Cyrus “reconciles” with his uncle, he orchestrates a series of events that provides a nice summation of the extent to which he deceives Cyaxares and shows how he deliberately tricks his own soldiers as well. Following a contrived embrace with his uncle that Cyrus insisted upon, Xenophon notes that the soldiers who had been watching—for Cyrus had
presciently taken care to dismiss them all prior to speaking privately with his uncle (5.5.7)—“took immediate pleasure and beamed with joy” (5.5.37). Cyrus masterfully contrives the whole situation such that the soldiers are privy neither to the litany of Cyaxares’ grievances with Cyrus nor to the mostly inadequate replies Cyrus gives to his uncle’s primarily sound and well-articulated objections. The soldiers hear not a word and see only the purely theatrical embrace at the end of the discussion, which calls to mind Machiavelli’s advice to princes to be mindful that their subjects will only be able to see how the prince appears with their eyes and will not be able to touch him with their hands (Prince, ch. 18). After the contrived embrace, the Medes dutifully fall into line behind Cyaxares, though only because “Cyrus gave them a nod to do so” (5.5.37). Remarkably, the soldiers who are willing participants in Cyrus’s manipulation of Cyaxares apparently never suspect that when they witnessed the embrace between Cyrus and Cyaxares they too were being manipulated by Cyrus. Part of Cyrus’s success can thus be attributed to the fact that he allows others to feel as though they are his trusted confidantes who help him manipulate others, even as he simultaneously deceives those same “confidantes” so as to promote his own advantage.

When they arrive back at camp, Cyrus orders several of the Medes to bring presents to Cyaxares, which reinforces Cyrus’s authority in the eyes of his soldiers and further obfuscates in Cyaxares’ mind the dramatic coup that has occurred, such that Cyaxares rather blithely changes his mind and decides that Cyrus was in no way alienating the Medes’ affection for him (5.5.40). Believing himself reconciled to Cyrus, Cyaxares invites his nephew to join him to dine, but Cyrus declines, noting that he has other matters to which he must attend. Before leaving his uncle, Cyrus remarks that having successfully repelled the Assyrians, he, Cyaxares, and the chief aides (epikairioi) will deliberate the next day about whether to continue the campaign or dissolve the army (5.5.43). The specific reason why Cyrus declined his uncle’s invitation to dine is because he desires to meet secretly and in advance with his chief aides—and without Cyaxares—to decide in private whether to press onward or go home. The next morning, after everything had already been decided in private in accord with Cyrus’s wishes to continue the campaign, Cyaxares appears in his finest dress and takes his seat on the Median throne, ready to “deliberate” about a decision that has in truth already been made.

In the case of both the soldiers and Cyaxares, Cyrus is, as always, fully cognizant of the importance of appearances and the way in which he can best manipulate what others see so as to suit his own advantage. As is so
often the case in the *Cyropaedia*, both Cyaxares and the soldiers see only what Cyrus wishes them to see and do not see events in their proper context. By employing deception and manipulation at every turn, Cyrus successfully wrests power away from his uncle, who for the most part is unaware that a coup has occurred and is for the remainder of his days only a nominal ruler. Whereas Cyrus might not have been able to quite so easily construct his legendary and all-important reputation as a benevolent (*philanthrōpos*) ruler had he simply killed his uncle or if it became known that he opted to have him killed, he assumes near total control of Media fairly early in his life without having to kill his uncle and risk being thought of as a regicide (1.4.7, 9; 2.4.1-8; 3.3.24, 30-33; 4.6.11; 6.2.8, 6.3.2). In essence, Cyrus is content to bide his time until Cyaxares formally offers him Media as a dowry (8.5.17-20, 28), secure in the fact that he is already as a young man the *de facto* ruler of Media and that his uncle is merely a thoroughly deceived and pitiable figurehead.

II. CYRUS’S DECEPTION OF ENEMIES IN BATTLE

As he steadily wrests control of the armed forces away from Cyaxares, Cyrus employs them in his ongoing pursuit of gain, which requires deceiving and defeating enemies in battle. Whereas Cyrus’s manipulation of his uncle (and ostensible ally) Cyaxares is at odds with his Persian education (1.6.29-33), his deceptions of enemies in battle accords not only with his Persian education (1.5.27-29, 38-41), but also with his Median education (1.4.19-20), which is to say that in Xenophon’s view even regimes whose principles are as disparate and antithetical as Persian republicanism is with Median despotism must both alike deceive their enemies. Deception of enemies in Xenophon’s view would thus seem to be part and parcel of foreign policy and war.

Cyrus’s early campaign against the Armenian king who refused to render the proper tribute to Cyaxares exemplifies the sorts of cunning and trickery he routinely employed against enemies. For example, Cyrus knows that if he were to bring his forces to the Armenian border for a surprise attack he would excite no suspicion since he frequently hunted in this region (2.4.16). Because he wishes to bring more soldiers than usual, prior to leading his men toward Armenia Cyrus circulates the pretext that he wants to hold a great hunt (2.4.17-18). His deception works perfectly and catches the delinquent Armenian king off-guard, leaving him little choice but to make a desperate retreat to the top of a hill, which Cyrus’s forces quickly surround (3.1.1-5). Having tricked and thoroughly outmaneuvered the Armenian, Cyrus forces him to endure a humiliating line of questioning in which he
concedes his own wrongdoing and admits that death would be a fitting punishment for his crimes (3.1.12), though Cyrus decides it would be advantageous for several reasons to spare him (3.1.31-37).

The deceptive tactics Cyrus employs against the Armenian are indicative of the ruses he employs against his enemies throughout his life. As a youth in Media, Cyrus scores an initial victory against the son of the Assyrian king by leading a dangerous and unexpected charge, which catches the enemy completely by surprise (1.4.19-20). After conquering and befriending the Armenians, Cyrus uses them as a decoy to lure the Chaldaeans into a trap (3.2.8). Camping while on campaign against the Assyrians, Cyrus typically burned fires at the front of his camp, though he also burned fires behind the camp so as to deceive his enemies about his position and cause them to wander completely unaware into his camp due to their mistaken belief that they were still far away from his forces (3.3.25). Whereas the Assyrians camped surrounded by a ditch but in plain sight, Cyrus kept his forces out of sight so that they could flash suddenly into view, thus inspiring terror in the enemy (3.3.28). Upon learning that Gadatas, a neighboring prince subject to the Assyrian’s son, seeks revenge against the Assyrian crown prince for castrating him (5.3.8, 10), Cyrus contrives a plot whereby he will pretend to “attack” Gadatas, who will then “flee” to a key Assyrian base of operations as if seeking “shelter” from Cyrus, at which point Gadatas will provide “information” about Cyrus’s forces to the enemy; once Gadatas is inside, he leads an attack from within while Cyrus assaults the perimeter (5.3.10-18). As Cyrus makes final preparations for the great battle against the Assyrians, he instructs the Kurd Carduchas to place the women’s carriages in the rear so as to give the appearance of a larger force (6.3.30). Once the great battle begins, Cyrus realizes that the Persians have been dislodged from their position, but he halts the enemy’s progress by riding around to their rear and striking them “as they looked the other way” (7.1.36). As all of these examples indicate, it is hardly a careless oversight on Xenophon’s part that among Cyrus’s many virtues he mentions in the prologue and throughout the Cyropaedia, he never says that Cyrus was honest.

**Cyrus’s Deception of Subjects in Speech**

Along with his repeated deceptions of his uncle Cyaxares and his enemies in battle, Cyrus also manipulates nearly everyone else he meets, including his own subjects, most of whom he treats as little more than pawns to help him further his imperial ambitions. If Cyrus rises to power in part because of his prodigious talent in deed as a crafty military tactician, no less
important is his capacity to deceive his own subjects in speech by feeding them a steady diet of half-truths and outright lies.

At a young age, the talkative Cyrus showed an impressive burgeoning capacity to manipulate others through his speech so as to further his own interests. One facet of Cyrus’s Persian education in the schools of justice involved issuing judgments and obtaining accounts from others, activities that contributed to his loquaciousness (1.2.6-7, 1.3.16-17, 1.4.3). As a boy Cyrus was fond of chattering and enjoyed asking many questions of those around him (1.4.12). Moreover, when others questioned him, he had no difficulty answering (1.4.3). In fact, the main reason why Cyrus’s mother Mandane was able to temporarily remove him from the Persian curriculum and bring him to Media for an extended visit with his grandfather Astyages was that Cyrus was so precocious, talented, and far ahead of his classmates in all aspects of the Persian curriculum, including arguing cases in court (1.3.1, 15-16) (Newell 1983, 893). However, in Xenophon’s judgment, Cyrus was not only talkative, but also “was perhaps too ready with words” (1.4.1, 3; my emphasis). Given Cyrus’s extraordinary forensic talents, why does Xenophon suggest that he was as a child perhaps a bit “too ready with words”? And to what extent does the Cyropaedia as whole bear out Xenophon’s cautionary judgment regarding the verbal dexterity Cyrus exhibited at such a young age?

Xenophon harbors reservation about Cyrus’s verbal skill because Cyrus was not above employing his talent sophistically to win arguments and thereby promote his own self-interest. For example, on the heels of Cyrus’s attempt to persuade his mother Mandane to let him remain in Media, Xenophon notes that “Cyrus often chattered like this” (1.4.1; my emphasis). The context for Xenophon’s remark is important because Cyrus’s attempt to allay his mother’s fears as to whether an extended stay in despotic Media will undermine his republican Persian education is at times quite sophistical and thus highly dubious. In response to Mandane’s concern that he will return home to Persia believing in the tyrannical principle that it is right for one person to have more than everyone else, Cyrus sophistically responds that he is no danger, because his tyrannical grandfather Astyages actually teaches his subjects to make do with less, not more (1.3.18, 1.4.26). Yet Mandane’s valid concern is not whether Cyrus will return home from Media with too much loot, which Cyrus knows full well that the austere Persians would never permit him to return with anyway (1.4.26), but rather whether he will come back believing that it is proper for a single hegemonic individual to hold all the power. The rest of the Cyropaedia, which details Cyrus’s incredible rise to absolute authority, vindicates Mandane’s concern and
serves as an extended meditation on the evasiveness and weakness of Cyrus’s response to her. To return to the quotation in question, when Xenophon notes that “Cyrus often chattered like this,” in context he means that Cyrus was not above sophistically dodging the issue and deceiving others in order to get what he wants, a comment that explains and reinforces his belief that Cyrus “was too ready with words.”

Xenophon’s reservations about Cyrus’s extraordinary rhetorical skills come into sharper focus when viewed against the background of the *Memorabilia*, which consists of Xenophon’s recollections of his teacher, Socrates. The charge that Xenophon relates in his *Memorabilia* that Socrates should not have taught Critias and Alcibiades rhetoric and dialectic until he ensured that they were moderate (to which incidentally Xenophon does not provide much by way of an adequate defense) would also seem to apply to the Persians who educated Cyrus. Like Critias and Alcibiades, Cyrus displays occasional signs of immoderation (aphrosunē) after he has become quite skilled in forensics (1.3.16-17), which from Xenophon’s point of view is a sign that the Persians should probably have waited until Cyrus was a bit older before teaching him the finer points of dialectic. Moreover, just as Cyrus and Alcibiades remained moderate when they were with Socrates but began to fall away from the virtue Socrates had encouraged when they were no longer with him, so too did Cyrus act moderately on the whole while he remained in Persia, only to behave more immoderately when he left Persia and traveled to Media, where he was free from his austere teachers’ watchful eyes (1.3.3, 1.4.8-9). Despite the Persians’ systematic institutional attempt to make their young moderate—to “bend” them and give them an external “push” in the direction of virtue, as Newell puts it (1981, 146)—they ultimately failed in the case of Cyrus, much like Socrates in his attempt to do the same with Critias and Alcibiades, in part because they began teaching rhetoric and dialectic before they should have. Contrary to the view of those who argue that Xenophon was in no way critical of the Persia of Cyrus’s youth (Johnson 2005, 181), Xenophon in fact shows that the Persians were a bit imprudent to the extent that they taught rhetoric before the Persian boys’ “moderation” could be tempted and tested by the immoderate urges puberty typically incites and insofar as they (perhaps with the exceptions of Cambyses and Mandane) did not anticipate that Cyrus would begin to stray from his virtuous education when he visited the comparatively morally lax kingdom of Media.

By examining the context for Xenophon’s claim that “Cyrus often chattered on like this” and by briefly interpreting the *Cyropaedia* against
the background of the *Memorabilia*, we have thus arrived at an answer to the first question raised at the outset of this section as to why Xenophon believed that Cyrus was “too ready with words.” The answer, we have suggested, is that Cyrus’s rhetorical skills superseded his moderation, a situation that rendered Cyrus willing to resort to sophistry in order to get what he wanted.

We turn now to the second question we raised at the outset of this section regarding the extent to which the *Cyropaedia* as a whole bears out Xenophon’s judgment that Cyrus was overly skilled in rhetoric at too young an age. As we shall endeavor to show, Cyrus’s repeated deception and manipulation of Cyaxares in order to promote his own advantage is hardly exceptional or unique, insofar as this is consistent with the way he treats almost everyone with whom he speaks throughout his life, including his own subjects.

Taken together, Cyrus’s separate speeches to the Persian peers and then to the combined peers and commoners proposing that the commoners be admitted into the class of the peers and judged according to merit illustrate the sense in which he gives very different accounts to various audiences and omits relevant details when it suits his purposes. Cyrus opens his address to the peers by noting that he is “afraid” for them since they are few in number and without the help of the commoners in battle (2.1.11), a circumstance that he proposes to remedy. The peers are delighted with Cyrus’s proposal, since they saw that they would henceforth be going into battle with greater support to help them avoid the kind of unsavory demise on the battlefield that Cyrus predicted was in store for them if they did not agree to his recommendation (2.1.11, 13). Cyrus’s appeal to the peers’ fear and self-interest causes them to overlook his tacit and rather insulting suggestion that the commoners can adequately learn in a very short time skills that the peers apparently needed their entire lives to master (Rubin 1992, 456). Moreover, while Cyrus goes out of his way to stress the advantages that will accrue to the peers if they adopt his proposal, he is altogether silent about what they will have to give up in order to enhance their security. In contrast, when Cyrus later addresses the commoners and the peers together, he states that the commoners are to receive honor and an equal share of the spoil for their efforts, which he neglected to mention previously to the peers (2.1.14-15, 19). At this point, even if some of the peers caught the discrepancy, once the commoners have been apprised of Cyrus’s plan all the momentum inexorably careens toward blending the two classes into one. Any peer who was troubled by the discrepancies between Cyrus’s two accounts would have had to have spoken up not only in front of Cyrus, but also in front of the commoners, who Xenophon
notes were staring at a mass of weapons Cyrus had arranged and at which he encouraged them to look during his speech (2.1.14, 18).

Cyrus’s address to the peers differs in other ways from his speech to the combined group of peers and commoners. For example, whereas he tells the peers that the commoners are stout of body and that the peers thus need only steel the commoners’ souls (2.1.11, 13), he tells the combined group that the commoners’ souls are in all likelihood no less brave than those of the peers (2.1.15) (Nadon 2001, 65). While this discrepancy between the two accounts no doubt owes something to Cyrus’s desire to flatter the commoners, who are acutely aware of the disparity between their own lack of honors as compared to those accorded to the peers (2.1.13), it also points to the fact that he needs to devalue the traditional Persian education that was designed to make the peers’ souls moderate and just. As he shrewdly discerns, the old regimen is antithetical to his imperial ambitions, which require unleashing the desire for gain. As one who seeks to acquire and found an empire, it is in Cyrus’s interests to tacitly devalue the education of the peers without stressing the point, since from the perspective of the Persian education in moderation and justice Cyrus’s imperial project looks most immoderate and unjust (1.6.45). Whereas the Persians prior to Cyrus practiced moderation and justice, did not turn covetous eyes on their neighbors’ property, and successfully defended and perpetuated their morally decent if unspectacular way of life, Cyrus encourages immoderation, seeks always to acquire more, and creates a decadent empire that in the end can neither defend nor perpetuate itself. If, contrary to Deborah Gera’s interpretation but as Nadon correctly argues, Cyrus’s deathbed scene shows that he did not trouble himself until his final moments to provide his sons who were the heirs to the throne with a moral education (Gera 1993, 125; Nadon 2001, 135), then Cyrus’s speech to the peers and commoners shows that he self-consciously sought to deny and minimize the importance of moral education from the very beginning of his rise to power. On the one hand, it is part and parcel of Cyrus’s genius that he grasped entirely the way in which the traditional Persian moral education was antithetical to his imperial enterprise. On the other hand, judged by his own criteria that it is a greater achievement to preserve an empire than to merely acquire one (7.5.76), Cyrus’s temporary willingness to minimize the importance of moral education, only in the end to attempt to hastily return to something like it once he founds the empire, seems to have been a somewhat shortsighted gambit that, as judged by Cyrus’s own criteria, failed. As the life of Cyrus shows, no matter how gifted the ruler, one cannot in Xenophon’s estimation hope to suddenly and spontaneously create a virtuous citizenry on top of an empire whose very foundation was immoderation.
At times, Cyrus deceives not so much by saying different things in front of different audiences, as in the previous example, but by trying to appear more traditional and conservative than he actually is so as to mask some of the more questionable facets of his revolutionary actions. For example, after his impressive victory over the allied Phrygians, Assyrians, and Arabians, Cyrus makes a speech exhorting the victorious Persians to practice moderation, but without stressing the point he subtly alters the traditional Persian understanding of moderation so as to suit his own imperial ends. Whereas the Persians prior to Cyrus practiced moderation as a means to helping them preserve their way of life, Cyrus attempts to make moderation into a means to greater gain (Ray 1992, 231; Bruell 1969, 95), which is to say that he renders it little more than an enlightened and calculated means to immoderation. In essence, Cyrus promotes delayed gratification, which bears a passing, outward, and behavioral resemblance to genuine moderation, as a means to increased future pleasures (4.2.39, 42-45; 8.1.32). For this reason, despite his outwardly moderate behavior, he is—as incidentally his uncle Cyaxares correctly discerns and Cyrus himself admits—in fact a hedonist (8.2.20). For example, when Cyrus recommends to the Persians that they entrust the division of the treasure to their allies, he notes that “seizing the advantage now would provide us with wealth that is short lived,” whereas if they allowed their allies a share of the spoil, they would thus acquire “that from which wealth naturally springs…the power of providing ageless riches to us and ours” (4.3.44). By acting “moderately” and allowing the allies to have their proper share of the loot despite the fact that the Persians could take it all, Cyrus promises the Persians that they will cement their bond with their current allies and will gain the allegiance of valuable additional allies that will help them ensure even greater gain in the future. By subtly altering the meaning of moderation, Cyrus shrewdly gains for himself the advantages of having an outwardly moderate army, which helps promote discipline and secure allies, even as he channels his subjects’ “moderation” and puts it in the service of the endless pursuit of gain. At the end of the Cyropaedia when the empire has been established and there is little chance of securing further gain, the game is up and the Persians’ moderate veneer cracks to reveal the hedonism present just below the seemingly virtuous exterior, as the Persians abandon any pretence to virtue (8.8.2-27).

Once Cyrus establishes the empire, he lays additional stress on the need for something like the traditional Persian education in virtue, but when he tells the Persians that his prescribed educational regimen constitutes “nothing new,” he deceives them yet again (7.5.85). Cyrus argues that just as in
old Persia the peers spent their time at the government buildings, so too must the newly reformed and reconstituted upper class (entimos) likewise “practice the very things we did there…practicing what is noble and good” (7.5.85). But as Cyrus surely knows, his argument that the new education in the empire in no way alters the traditional Persian education and even constitutes a return to it is not entirely true. While there are certainly similarities between the two curricula, there is one crucial difference that reflects the monumental difference between old Persia and the empire under Cyrus. Whereas in old Persia the government buildings that Cyrus mentions were places where the young were instructed in justice, which for the Persians meant adherence to law (nomos) and knowledge about how to prudentially apply the laws to specific cases (1.2.6, 1.3.16-17), under Cyrus there are no laws. In the absence of laws, the empire is governed solely by adherence to Cyrus’s absolute will (1.1.5; 8.1.22, 8.8.1) (Phillips 2002, 158, 199; Glenn 1992, 153; Farber 1979, 503-4). Similarly, while Cyrus correctly stresses a similarity between old Persia and the empire when he explains that in both cases the men were to serve as virtuous examples to the boys (7.5.86), he fails to mention that in old Persia the boys were to be formed not only by imitating their elders, but also by following the law (3.3.53). Under Cyrus the old virtue of justice defined as adherence to the law gets replaced by the new virtue of obedience, not to law, which no longer exists, but to Cyrus’s omnipotent will.

If the moral of Cyrus’s speech is that the leaders under him must continue to practice virtue as in old Persia, it must be said that the virtues Cyrus endeavors to conflate are in fact different and even somewhat antithetical insofar as Persian republicanism is at odds with Cyrus’s despotism, however benevolent. While Cyrus seems to hope that the Persian denizens of his empire will remember their old education and be able to return to something reminiscent of it, in the interim Cyrus’s subjects have grown accustomed to always following Cyrus’s will, so much so that many of them forget how to think for themselves. The bleak conclusion of the Cyropaedia that documents the degenerative decline of the empire after Cyrus’s death cannot be understood apart the novel education that Cyrus instituted under the guise of the ancestral. Without Cyrus’s will to guide them, and no longer with laws to look to for guidance, Cyrus’s subjects spiral downward into the depths of vice once Cyrus dies, in a way that has lead some commentators to conclude that Cyrus’s successors—not Cyrus himself—are responsible for the empire’s collapse (Mueller-Goldingen 1995, 264-65). While it is certainly true that Cyrus’s successors were incompetent, once one grasps the key difference between the old Persian education and the new education under Cyrus, as well
as the radically new kinds of “virtue” Cyrus introduces under the guise of the ancestral, one sees that far from absolving Cyrus for what came after him, in fact the conclusion of the Cyropaedia follows directly from the reforms Cyrus institutes on his march to empire.

Along with the revolutionary nature of the education the peers are to receive under Cyrus, Cyrus also deceives his subjects about what he repeatedly characterizes as the defensive nature of their imperialistic enterprise. He repeatedly tells them that they are engaged in a defensive war of necessity that they did not themselves choose but that they must fight to the end, confident that they will prevail because both justice and the gods are on their side (4.3.12; 7.5.73, 77). Cyrus employs this line of argument in part to help banish the vestigial fears of the Persian peers who must surely sense on some level that the imperialistic enterprise of which they are a part is not wholly just and who likely fear divine retribution. Though Cyrus’s reassurances are remarkably successful in mitigating their fears, it must nonetheless be said that in truth Cyrus’s argument that the Persians are in no way guilty of injustice since they are not the aggressors and are fighting a purely defensive battle is not entirely persuasive.

At one point at which Cyrus argues that the Persians, Medes, and their allies are fighting a defensive war (4.3.12), the Persians have entered into Assyria so as to continue the heavy fighting on the enemy’s soil. At this point in the narrative, Cyrus’s argument that the Persians are fighting defensively rings only halfway true. On the one hand, though the Persians decided not to wait and to instead preemptively attack the Assyrians by marching against them, they do so only once it is abundantly clear that the Assyrians were preparing to launch a major offensive against them (1.5.2-3; 3.3.24). On the other hand, for many soldiers the initial decision to preemptively attack the Assyrians stemmed less from fear than from the fact that they were “desirous” (erōtikos) of the enterprise (3.3.12). The term erōtikos implies that, far from embarking on the campaign begrudgingly, merely out of a sense of duty, or as a last resort, some of the soldiers were positively attracted to the spoil that would await them should they prove victorious.

When Cyrus later makes similar arguments justifying the Persians’ ever-deeper advance into Assyria toward Babylon, these speeches are even more dubious in light of the deliberation that occurs between Cyrus and the allies regarding whether or not to continue the campaign after having inflicted substantial losses on the Assyrians (6.1.6-19). The various speeches by Cyrus and his chief aides all express vehement support for continuing on with
the campaign and for not disbanding the army. But a few of the arguments reveal that some of the allies see themselves as fighting offensively insofar as they are trying to seize the Assyrian’s wealth. For example, the Mede Artabazus notes that his new life in Assyria is better than his old life in Media, in part because he sees the campaign as a “holiday” and a “festive gathering,” one in which he can drink and feast on what belongs to the enemy (6.1.9-10). By advocating war in the name of gain, Artabazus simply reiterates and perhaps makes somewhat more explicit a principle that motivated many of Cyrus’s followers from the beginning (1.5.7-14), which is to say that Cyrus’s characterization of the Persians’ campaign as purely defensive is from the outset of the campaign somewhat dubious. At every stage of the conflict, for every one of Cyrus’s subjects who legitimately fears the reprisals that the Assyrian might visit upon them in the future if he is permitted to rearm and regroup (6.1.11), there are others who are motivated not so much by fear or even the desire to avenge past wrongs, but primarily by the desire for wealth (3.3.8; 4.2.46). Along with his subjects, and despite his talk of fighting defensively, Cyrus himself has ulterior motives centered on his desires for gain and especially for preeminence in honor, both of which have nothing to do with fear of the enemy and fighting defensively (1.2.1; 3.2.31, 3.3.32; 4.1.20; 5.5.46). Because many of his allies and Cyrus himself wish to continue the campaign not so much out of necessity but in order to seek gain, his speeches testifying to the defensive nature of their enterprise are far from wholly persuasive.

In contrast to the previous examples, the final way in which Cyrus deceives his subjects is not by actively deceiving them with his own words but by failing to disagree and correct some of them when he knows they err, so long as their mistakes help contribute to the establishment of his empire. When he deems it personally advantageous, Cyrus allows his subjects to remain ignorant even when he knows their erroneous beliefs will likely result in harm to themselves or to others. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon can be seen by comparing Cyrus’s full endorsement of a speech the Persian captain Chrysantas makes in support of Cyrus’s proposition that the Persians acquire a cavalry (4.3.4-14) with the caution he urges the passionate Mede Araspas to heed (5.1.2-17). Because it suits his purposes, Cyrus responds very differently to the two men, despite the fact that their beliefs are at bottom very similar.

Chrysantas states that he is most eager to learn horsemanship because he fancies that he will become “a winged human being” (4.3.15). As he explains, the creature that he envies most is the centaur, whose advantageous
combination of man and beast he believes he will be able to approximate by becoming a horseman (4.3.17). In fact, he argues that he will be superior to a centaur, because he will be able to separate himself from his horse in a way that centaurs cannot and will thus become “a centaur that can be divided and put together again” (4.3.20). As his speech suggests, Chrysantas admires neither man nor beast so much as a combination of the two natures that can easily shift back and forth between them. Implicit in Chrysantas’s view that he will be able to alternate between the human and beastly natures is the premise that man’s primal and animalistic passions are like a switch that one can rather easily turn on or off. On his view, it would be advantageous to be able to transform himself into a beast so long as at the end of the day he could return to being a man, which calls to mind Machiavelli’s argument that it is necessary for a prince (especially a new prince) to know how to use the natures of both beast and man (Prince, ch. 18).

When the other captains voice their approval of Chrysantas’s speech, Cyrus adds his own (4.3.21-22). In fact, he proposes making it shameful for those Persians who possess a horse “to be noticed going on foot,” such that “human beings may think that we really are centaurs” (4.3.22). The metaphor of the Persians as centaurs nicely foreshadows the decadence and rapid decline of the Persian Empire. For the Greeks, centaurs were considered oversexed and prone to drunkenness, which calls to mind the debauchery that ensues among Cyrus’s subjects following his death. Moreover, centaurs were thought to have problems reproducing insofar as they had the desire to be with human beings despite the fact that they possessed a horse’s equipment, which implies that to the extent that the Persians become centaurs, they will not be able to sustain and reproduce their empire. The centaur is thus an apt metaphor for the Persians under Cyrus.

While Cyrus certainly agrees at the level of policy with Chrysantas’s proposal for the creation of a cavalry that will prove useful in battle, there is evidence that Cyrus held his tongue regarding his doubts about the deeper theoretical issues concerning man’s ability to alternately indulge and hold his bestial passions in check raised by Chrysantas’s enthusiasm for the centaur. For example, Chrysantas’s excitement at the prospect of riding horses is reminiscent of Cyrus’s youthful elation in Media when he first felt the thrill of reckless abandon of riding into combat upon a horse (1.4.8, 20-21). In these encounters, Xenophon implies that had Cyrus not been so lucky and had he met a more disciplined foe, he could potentially have met a very bad end (1.4.21-23), which is to say that Cyrus himself knows full well and from
personal experience how exhilarating riding horses into combat can be and how easy it is to be overcome by the moment and to lose one’s head when fused to the awesome power of a horse. If Cyrus, who almost always strives to appear to others as a model of moderation, could so easily abandon his reason and be overcome by his passions as a horseman rushing into the heat of battle, what chance will his subjects like Chrysantas have to retain their rationality and judgment when fused to such awesome power? To take another example, when Cyrus petitions his allies to provide him with horses he restates Chrysantas’s argument as if it were his own, arguing that if and when he and the Persian horsemen needed to become foot soldiers again, it would always be “open to us to dismount” (4.5.49). Taken literally, Cyrus’s claim is of course quite true, insofar as riders who encounter the need to be on foot can simply dismount from their horses. However, while Cyrus seems to wholly endorse Chrysantas’s argument, he elsewhere firmly and unequivocally rejects the deeper level of Chrysantas’s account, according to which the passions can quite easily and intermittently be indulged and then controlled. Speaking with Araspas, a lifelong friend from Media to whom Cyrus had as a youth given his beautiful Median robe prior to returning home to Persia (1.4.26), Cyrus entrusts the beautiful prisoner Panthea,—whose name literally means “wholly divine” (Newell 1988, 119)—to him for safekeeping, until such time as Cyrus should take her for himself or until “this woman could become something quite opportune” (5.1.3, 17). Given Cyrus’s apparent interest in Panthea, it must come as quite a surprise to Araspas to learn that Cyrus has never actually seen (heōrakas) her and knows of her beauty only through the testimony of others (5.1.4). Flabbergasted to learn that Cyrus has not availed himself of the opportunity to behold her beauty, Araspas offers to take Cyrus to her, but Cyrus declines, citing his fear that in the future when he had no time to spare he would be compelled against his will to “sit gazing [theamai] at her, neglecting what I need to do” (5.1.7–8). Though Araspas attempts to persuade Cyrus that desire is a matter of free will, Cyrus does not agree, for he has witnessed “people enslaved to those they love…bound by some necessity [enanagkē] stronger than if they had been bound by iron” (5.1.9–12). When Araspas tries again to persuade Cyrus to come see Panthea by arguing that perfect gentlemen (kaloi kagathoi) like themselves have the power to faithfully execute their duties and to refrain from touching beautiful individuals in a way that is not just (to dikaion), Cyrus responds that Araspas simply did not allow himself sufficient time to become ensnared by Panthea’s charms, similar to the way in which wood does not immediately burst into flames when initially brought into contact with fire (5.1.13–16). Cyrus rather cautiously concludes by advis-
ing Araspas not to allow himself to gaze at beautiful individuals, while Araspas resolutely promises Cyrus that Panthea’s beauty could never overwhelm him so as to make him do anything improper (5.1.17). Of course, it need hardly be said that shortly thereafter the naïve Araspas assaults Panthea and tries to force himself on her, thus falling prey to everything Cyrus warned him he would if he continued to permit himself to gaze at the beautiful woman.

As evidenced by his own experience of riding horses and especially his discussion with Araspas—and contrary to his non-responsive silence regarding the main premise of Chrysantas’s argument, according to which one can turn the passions on and off like a switch—Cyrus believes that one cannot long endure living a divided life spent intermittently indulging one’s passions, without eventually being overcome by them, shirking one’s duty, and becoming a slave to oneself. For Cyrus, allowing one’s desires to become enflamed without being satisfied is a bit like playing with fire, which eventually totally consumes everything in its path the way Araspas’s desire for Panthea quickly consumes him. While Araspas haughtily boasts that Panthea’s beauty could never cause him to commit any action unworthy of a kaloi kagathos like himself, Cyrus more realistically and prudently recognizes that he himself would probably not be any more capable of resisting Panthea’s beauty and charms than Araspas turns out to be, which is why he does not permit himself to look at her. If eros passionately inclines one toward specific individuals in the way that Araspas focuses his attention on Panthea, then someone like Cyrus who sought to bring entire nations under his universal dominion would of necessity need to suppress his erotic attraction to particular individuals. Cyrus, who is wholly focused on ruling and being honored and loved by the whole human species, has no time to be distracted even by the most beautiful of individual human beings. One of the keys to his success is that he does not permit himself to be divided or tempted from his single-minded devotion to duty in the way that others like Araspas do. Cyrus, whose every waking moment is spent plotting how to gain an empire, refuses to allow himself to be diverted by the erotic activities to which most men inevitably succumb (Gera 1993, 280). His remarkable capacity to sublimate his own desire for particular individuals in favor of establishing a universal empire enables and apparently requires him to duplicitously use others’ desires as weapons against them by making them into slaves who are ensnared by their own passions.

The fact that Cyrus warns Araspas about the dangers of his passions but says nothing to Chrysantas, despite the fact that the two individuals express very similar ideas regarding how easy it is to alternately indulge and
control one’s passions, shows the sense in which Cyrus is willing to deceive and scheme in order to promote his imperial ends. Since on a practical level Chrysantas’s argument helps Cyrus obtain the cavalry he needs in order to establish his empire, he does not bother to point out the potentially dangerous theoretical shortcomings of Chrysantas’s argument that the best life for a human being is one that alternates between the human and the beastly. In contrast, Cyrus does take the time to warn Araspas precisely because he knows full well that Araspas is not about to heed his advice. Despite his “misgivings,” Cyrus still sees fit to put him in charge of guarding Panthea—not so much to teach him a lesson, but rather primarily to put Araspas under his thumb and render him a slave who will be forever indebted to his master. After Araspas assaults Panthea, whom he mistakenly believes to be Cyrus’s future bride, he is willing to do whatever Cyrus asks to make amends. By warning Araspas in advance even though he knows his words will fall on deaf ears, Cyrus thereby maximizes the guilt that Araspas feels when he assaults Panthea, such that Araspas is willing to do anything so as to receive Cyrus’s absolution (Rubin 1989, 402). Upon learning of Araspas’s assault on Panthea, Cyrus concocts a plot whereby he feigns anger (initially he actually finds Araspas’s attack quite humorous) and pretends to banish Araspas so that the young man will have a pretext for taking “refuge” with the Assyrians and spying on them. When Araspas returns from his “exile,” to the surprise of those who were watching he and Cyrus embrace (6.3.14-17). Cyrus explains to the bewildered onlookers that he was never truly angry with Araspas, who has in fact served him well. While the embrace shows Cyrus’s subjects that far from being enemies he and Araspas were actually in cahoots all along, it no doubt creates the mistaken impression that they also contrived the story about Araspas attacking Panthea. Strictly speaking, the assault on Panthea goes unpunished, as the spying mission Cyrus sends Araspas on is really more for Cyrus’s advantage than to punish Araspas, much less to avenge Panthea. If Cyrus truly cared for Araspas, to say nothing of Panthea, he never would have placed the naïve and hot-blooded man in charge of her and in a position to harm her. But in point of fact, as he himself said, Cyrus knew all along that Panthea would someday prove useful to him. The opportunity that her capture created came to fruition when Cyrus quite deliberately allowed Araspas to fall under her spell.

While we have noted the way in which the metaphorical resemblance between the Persians and centaurs foreshadows the debauchery and collapse of the empire at the end of the Cyropaedia, we must note in closing how Cyrus’s policy of turning the Persians into centaurs both furthers his imperial ambitions and contributes to the overall unity of the Cyropaedia. What
exactly does Cyrus hope to gain by turning the Persians into animals? The answer may be found in the prologue to the book, where Xenophon notes: “It is easier, given his nature [phusis], for a human being to rule all the other kinds of animals than to rule human beings” (1.1.3). Recognizing this problem, Cyrus’s solution is quite elegantly ruthless—he turns men into beasts. This is the deepest and most important reason why Cyrus does not bother to point out to Chrysantas that it is not as easy to alternate between man and beast as he believes, without losing his humanity. If Chrysantas is content to go down a path that will gradually render him less and less human, then Cyrus is perfectly content to let him. Unlike most of his possessions that he is happy to give away, Cyrus keeps this most subterranean aspect of his knowledge to himself.

**Conclusion**

Insofar as Cyrus misleads others every step of the way in his march toward empire, Machiavelli quite correctly offers him as an example of the principle “that is necessary for a prince who wishes to do great things to learn to deceive” (Discourses, 2.13.1). Machiavelli’s recognition that Xenophon saw fit to have his Cyrus deceive others at every turn surely helps explain why Machiavelli speaks more—and more highly—of Xenophon than he does of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero combined (Strauss 1958, 291). But despite their fundamental agreement about the need for princes to deceive, by comparing the manner in which Xenophon and Machiavelli make their respective arguments about the need for deception, one can begin to gauge the differences, both rhetorically and in principle, that separate them.

Whereas Machiavelli boldly proclaims in his own name that princes who wish to do great things must deceive their subjects (Prince, chs. 18-19), Xenophon’s fictional narrative very quietly and obliquely points to the need for princes to deceive without wishing to stress or belabor the point, apparently least of all in his own name. If Machiavelli helped initiate the facet of modernity that culminates with Nietzsche and that boldly throws caution to the wind through rhetorical pyrotechnics, then Xenophon is particularly representative of the classical view regarding the need for prudence and delicacy when conveying certain potentially dangerous truths. If from Machiavelli’s point of view many of Xenophon’s central conclusions regarding what a prince needs to do to be successful—including the need for deception—are correct, even though his delicate and rather quiet style makes it far too unlikely that most princes could actually unearth and implement the deepest facets of Cyrus’s knowledge for themselves, from Xenophon’s point of view Machiavelli would appear on a practical level to be somewhat reckless.
and imprudent, however theoretically sound his arguments and historical
illustrations regarding the need for deception. Machiavelli apparently believed
that he needed to be comparatively upfront and straightforward with at least
his practically minded readers and, unlike Xenophon, leave little to their imag-
inations, if he was going to arm them with the kind of knowledge that could
potentially help expel the barbarian French, Swiss, German, and other invaders
from his fatherland of Florence and perhaps lead to the reunification and
restoration of order in Italy. To see what from Xenophon’s point of view can
only appear as a bit of latent idealism running beneath the surface of
Machiavelli’s narrative in the Prince, consider that whereas the Prince ends
with a passionate and rousing call to arms, the Cyropaedia ends with a sober
depiction of the dissolution of the Persian Empire and the reemergence of
the problem of political rule, which Cyrus was supposed to have solved. In
contrast to Machiavelli’s more practically minded Prince, Xenophon’s
Cyropaedia is less a practical treatise than a theoretical exploration, one
designed less to change the world than to help a few discerning individuals
grasp intellectually the necessities, possibilities, limits, and alternatives to
political rule, which for Xenophon include the need for deception, the
dazzling prospect of empire, the fleeting nature of imperial rule, and the
resigned serenity of intellectual life, respectively. Since Socrates is not one
of the characters in the Cyropaedia (though a Socrates-like figure is mentioned
in passing) and since philosophy does not play an extensive role in the book
(though it too is mentioned in passing), within the Cyropaedia the most
profound alternative and rival to Cyrus’s imperial ambitions that culminated
in the Persian Empire is Xenophon’s own desire for wisdom, the product of
which is the Cyropaedia itself.

Having noted a few differences between Xenophon and
Machiavelli, we wish to close by raising a question, our answer to which indi-
cates a point of agreement regarding their view of Cyrus. One question that we
believe no one who studies the Xenophon-Machiavelli connection can avoid is
this: Given that Machiavelli is a republican (Discourses, 1.58.1-4), and given
that Cyrus was the great subverter of the Persian republic, why does
Machiavelli praise and speak so highly of Cyrus? But this question rests on a
premise that, while not false, is still somewhat misleading. As Nadon correctly
argues, some of Machiavelli’s most favorable references to Cyrus are actually to
Herodotus’s Cyrus, not to Xenophon’s Cyrus (Nadon 2001, 14). Moreover,
though Machiavelli praises Xenophon’s Cyrus (Prince, ch. 16), he also finds
fault with him, at least indirectly. For example, in his comparison of the
Roman captains Manlius Torquatus and Valerius Corvinus, Machiavelli favors
Manlius, which is important for our purposes insofar as Machiavelli twice mentions that many of Valerius’s qualities were identical to those of Xenophon's Cyrus (Discourses, 3.22.4-5). To take another example, Machiavelli writes, “And whoever reads the life of Cyrus written by Xenophon will then recognize in the life of Scipio how little [quanto] glory that imitation brought him” (Prince, ch. 14). Machiavelli finds fault with Scipio for being—like Xenophon's Cyrus—too merciful (Prince, chs. 14, 17). While a more nuanced study of Machiavelli’s view of Cyrus is beyond the scope of this study, it seems fair to conclude that Machiavelli’s overall view of Xenophon's Cyrus was at least somewhat ambivalent. But if that is correct, then our question becomes, Why would the republican Machiavelli harbor even ambivalence for Xenophon’s Cyrus, rather than outright scorn and condemnation? The answer, we believe, is that Machiavelli is ambivalent about Cyrus because Cyrus has Machiavellian characteristics, including an impressive capacity to deceive, but employs his talents in the service of decidedly non-Machiavellian ends, including the subversion of the Persian republic and the effeminatization of his subjects in the Persian Empire. We maintain that Xenophon and Machiavelli are both ambivalent about Cyrus, and for very similar reasons; for all of his impressive qualities, Cyrus destroyed a virtuous republican regime and replaced it with a comparatively effeminate empire, one that quickly fell into disorder and ruin. The world, as Xenophon endeavors to illustrate, is both dark and chaotic. If he is right, even the most gifted of princes cannot make the world less chaotic for more than a brief moment in time without employing deception at every turn and thereby making a dark world darker still.

References

I would like to extend my appreciation to the anonymous referee for his or her thoughtful questions and suggestions.


**The Case for Public Morality**

**Fred Baumann**

Kenyon College

baumann@kenyon.edu

Harry Clor’s mature reflections on the question of public morality were published in 1996. That *Interpretation* is reviewing it now may not seem such an anomaly, but in fact the book should have received a lot more attention than it did when it came out. Why it deserved it and why it didn’t get it is much of the theme of this review. I should start with a personal disclaimer: I am anything but neutral or objective about either the book or the author. Harry Clor was my colleague until his retirement, my mentor at Kenyon College, and remains a close friend. I am proud to have been mentioned in the acknowledgements and, as it says there, I read the book in draft. I greatly admire Harry Clor as a teacher, a scholar and a wise man.

The epigraph of the book is a citation from Tocqueville which speaks of “certain doctrines and tastes” that “the social and political constitution of a people” inclines them to. It concludes, “[t]he whole art of the legislator is correctly to discern beforehand these natural inclinations of communities of men, in order to know whether they should be fostered, or whether it may not be necessary to check them.” The “natural inclination” of Americans towards what Tocqueville called “individualism” and we today call “libertarianism” and the kind of morality it produces is the occasion of this book. Yet, as the epigraph suggests, libertarianism does not just present a particular kind of public morality. At one level it rejects the very idea of a public morality, because, at a deeper level, it unthoughtfully rejects the public and political almost altogether. Tocqueville’s sentence about “the whole art of
the legislator” is not only anathema to libertarian thought, it is—and this is why Clor’s book really matters—incomprehensible to it. Thus, at one level, Clor takes on the moral–political question, asking whether the current tendencies towards a default libertarian public morality made up of the sum of private moralities is maintainable or good for us. At another level, however, he uses this debate, normally understood as the “communitarian–libertarian” argument, to illuminate the deeper question of the necessary character of the political, even in a liberal society which is founded on a powerful devaluation of the public and political in the name of rights.

Clor operates within a philosophic and rhetorical tradition which presents itself in these matters as not very theoretical. Like his model, Aristotle’s Ethics, this book is aimed at “thoughtful citizens as well as professional scholars,” i.e., the policymakers, public officials, and the politically conscious intelligentsia who are today’s rough equivalent of the “gentlemen” of an ancient city. This of course doesn’t mean that Clor himself lacks theoretical understanding. To the contrary, the very choice of his common-sense rhetoric is itself a product of theory, namely the theory of the relation of theory and practice. His confrontations with contemporary theorists follow a pattern wherein Clor spells out in detail the practical consequences of the founding abstractions of his interlocutors. He thus constantly makes the implicit case for a forgotten theory of prudence, by showing the failings of practice understood as a mere application of theory. Yet in an age where the “gentlemen” too have been educated in the clichés of a host of abstract theories, Clor’s genuine theoretical superiority tends to fly particularly low under the radar. His book thus presents a test case of philosophical rhetoric: how can the corrective wisdom of ancient thought be made comprehensible to contemporaries? Finally, it also presents a test case of how much room liberal thought can find for public concerns, once ordinary desiring abetted by “radical” thinking has used up the inherited restraints on private will inherited from the pre-modern world.

The essays that comprise the book are united by a common theme—the question of public morality or the proper relation of virtue to liberty in contemporary America. They are directed against the libertarian tendency to think that the cure for all problems of liberal democracy is the extension of individual rights. Clor does not mount a ringing polemic against this tendency. Instead he accepts the liberal premises of the regime, and tries to show that on its own grounds it has some, even if perhaps insufficient, room for a public morality that suitably limits the extension of rights. “Moderation”
is the real watchword of these essays; Clor usually attacks only the extreme consequences of a position in order to get the interlocutor (or his substitute, the reader with libertarian sympathies) to admit at least the principle that a line has to be drawn somewhere. Given the recent arguments about whether Leo Strauss was a subversive enemy of liberal democracy or, as his defenders urge, an honest critic and therein a true friend, these essays, written by a student of Strauss, show to perfection what such honest, and truly friendly, criticism looks like.

The first essay treats the problem of public morality as such, largely in terms of the already familiar debate among such figures as Rawls, Nozick and MacIntyre. There is, Clor claims, an existent American public morality, which he describes as an “ethic of decency or civility,” but it is threatened by the views of theorists like Sanford Levinson—who is “fundamentally dubious of the existence of a shared moral reality”—or Lawrence Friedman—who is happy to live in what he calls “the republic of choice,” a world in which “expression is favored over self-control”—with the consequences that some like Robert Bellah already have warned against.

“The Case for Public Morality,” the second essay, ascends from the first. There are two cases for it, one based on the needs of the community, the other on the needs of the souls of the individuals who make it up. Where contemporary communitarians care mostly about the former, Clor, following Aristotle, is more interested in the latter, though by no means disrespectful of the former. Clor takes up the famous Hart–Devlin debate and intervenes to strengthen Devlin’s hand. As he moves towards an Aristotelian understanding he has already to face the problem of how compatible “statecraft as soulcraft,” (as George Will put it some years ago) is with a liberal regime founded on Lockean principles. The crux of the argument turns out to be the moral purpose of the law, and here Clor undertakes an initial confrontation with Mill’s On Liberty from which the ungrounded optimism of the latter already begins to emerge.

The debate with Mill continues in the third essay, “The Offensive, the Harmful, and the Good,” on the subject of the alleged duty of the state to be neutral towards lifestyle choices. Here Clor demonstrates not only the bias of the “neutral” viewpoint, in that it bans all non-neutral ones but, more importantly, how the neutralist view necessarily radicalizes itself, from Hart’s common-sense openness to laws against public indecency to the contemporary writer Joel Feinberg, who has concluded that moral corruption can’t be said to harm anyone unless “he has an antecedent interest in being
good.” (There is a particularly nice passage here on Clifford Geertz, who preaches cultural relativism so as to save us from provincialism, but cannot say what is wrong with provincialism.)

The fourth essay, “Choice, Equality, and Dignity: Contemporary Liberal Perspectives,” takes on both the directly libertarian and the egalitarian–libertarian cases against public morality. Here Clor takes on Mill’s most interesting arguments in On Liberty, namely those that describe his understanding of a high morality and a noble character under the rubric of autonomy and spontaneity. Again, Clor doesn’t dismiss the value of self-determination, but he asks if it can be treated in isolation as the sole good and if it does not ultimately depend, paradoxically, on a traditional public morality. Mill does not foresee the Sartrean radicalization of his principle of autonomy, but, Clor suggests, even Sartre, in his famous choice between staying home to protect one’s mother and going away to fight for France, would not have thought much of the young man “who collaborates with the Nazis to get special privileges for his mother.” After Mill comes Hayek who, again, ends up living, with excessive optimism, on the social capital of a pre-existing public morality. On the egalitarian side, Ronald Dworkin’s rather vacuous standard of “equal concern and respect” (made even emptier, I would add, though Clor does not, by its complete ineffectuality before a state engaged in racial discrimination when it comes to “affirmative” state action that Dworkin happens to like), gets disposed of as a way of getting to the more serious target, John Rawls. Once more the abstraction of contemporary theory is brought before the standard of actual human psychology and practice, and Clor draws the appropriate lessons from Rawls’s more recent flight from a teaching of nature to an admitted conventionalism. Locke is recalled as a kind of liberal sobriety test, and Clor concludes with Stephen Macedo’s interesting argument for tolerance as the characteristic and ruling liberal virtue. Macedo’s abstractions too prove insufficient in dealing with real cases, especially when they are likely to be all the more extreme because there is nothing stronger than the mere principle of tolerance to keep them from arising.

The last essay, on pornography, arises out of Clor’s own earlier work on the subject where it was the initial vehicle for his scholarly concern with public morality. Many of the essays feature examples from that realm. Here his interest is particular, and perhaps dated, since he seeks to make something like the Aristotelian case for good character within the terms of the “rights” debate of the 1980’s between libertarians and the Catharine MacKinnon–inspired feminists who persuaded the city of Indianapolis to ban
It is in the middle three essays that the contrast between political and apolitical political theory becomes the most clear and interesting. The abstractness of Hart’s or Macedo’s enunciation of the primacy of tolerance comes up against detailed, specific difficulties. Can Hart really distinguish between injury and merely moral, i.e. harmless, harm if, as he does, he counts prostitution and bestialism as injurious? Conversely, does he really want to tell a father that the pimp who enticed his daughter into prostitution did her no harm? Similarly, Macedo is asked to look specifically at the kind of social unity whose only unifying principle is respect for everyone’s autonomy. Would such people make sacrifices for each other if that were really all that held them together? Similarly, Clor shows the abstracting and partial character of both the scientific (Kinseyan) and the romantic (authenticity-lauding) accounts of sexuality. Repeatedly, we see how some transcendent belief—in Mill’s case a kind of quasi-Hegelian historical theory of progress, in Hayek’s a commitment to liberty that nonetheless presumes a perpetually functioning positive social environment) cuts the link between theory and practice, makes it impossible in particular for the theorists to consider the practical effect of the success of their own theories, and makes them see only the defective present and the ideal future and not the process by which the theories would interact with public opinion and ultimately with law. To that extent, the charge made against ancient and early modern theory in the last two centuries can be made validly against this sort of theorizing: it is profoundly unhistorical.

When it comes to Dworkin and Rawls, however, abstraction is joined with a kind of Humpty Dumpty willfulness. Thus, in a strangely quasi-Kantian move, for Dworkin human dignity gets identified rather arbitrarily with the capacity to make choices, entirely unrelated to the choices themselves. Where for Kant human dignity was famously found in the capacity to overcome the “merely empirical” realm, not only of desire but even of the attainment of happiness, now it is found in the right not to suffer disadvantages even if fellow citizens think one’s views or actions are ignoble or wrong, indeed even if one’s fellows are right about those views and actions. Why, Clor asks, does dignity simply reside in the power of choice? And what, he asks, is dignified about it, what is worthy of respect in it, where that power chooses consistently what is itself undignified and not worthy of respect?

The power of this line of argument should be evident. For anyone who understands what Tocqueville means in the epigraph, Clor’s overall argument is decisive. Of course, in the real world people are not

pornography as an assault on the rights of women.
bloodless collections of opinions or “values,” but desirous, spirited beings who are necessarily short-sighted, confused and powerfully driven by irrational tendencies that are “rationalized” into opinions. If one doesn’t want to accede wholly to the outcome of those passions, whatever it may be, whether materialist consumerism or vindictive religiosity or murderous utopianism, political and philosophical reason will have to accept the need to work in terms of what is on hand: human beings as we find them and not as they “ought” simply to be. Indeed, it seems to me once more that the charge against ancient philosophy brought by the moderns, namely of utopianism and dogmatism (as Hobbes says: “their Morall Philosophy is but a description of their own Passions,” because “they make the Rules of Good and Bad by their own Liking and Disliking”), applies far more aptly to these contemporary theorists.

On the other hand, for those, and above all for academics, for whom even the highly theorized common sense of the “cave beneath the cave” is insufficiently “theoretical,” Clor’s argument, and above all, his deceptively untheoretical, commonsensical way of arguing it, may not have the desired effect. It shows them, but it doesn’t show them they’ve been shown. Precisely what works with policymakers, namely the appeal to their own practical understanding, may, I think, lead academic specialists to dismiss these essays as “naïve.” (Thus, Clor’s question to Dworkin, cited above, will likely sound, to a lover of abstraction, as though he perhaps did not understand the uniquely human, uniquely important, uniquely grand status of choice itself in Dworkin’s argument. Of course Clor understands it; only he shows what is absurd about taking the highly emotively and positively charged word “dignity” and employing it in such a narrow, abstract and above all ad hoc way.) In fact what is naïve is the kind of primitive, magical thinking which believes that depth is to be found in abstraction. And it is that naivete which allows such arbitrary and ultimately ideological grand theorizing to appear as serious philosophizing. It is naïve, even though and however much it is combined with the half-unserious and not all that sophisticated relativism to which Rawls and Dworkin, like so many others, swiftly flee when challenged on the phenomena.

There is also a problem with invoking extreme cases and imaginary horribles. Over time some of them become less imaginary and less horrible—for instance, gay marriage. And then there is the fact that so many of Clor’s examples come from the realm of pornography where, for a number of reasons, parts of his intended audience feel almost a moral obligation to stop listening. Where, as sometimes happens, Clor’s defense of public morality
crosses an already existent and largely libertarian American public morality, some might say what “Baron Corvo” wrote of Machiavelli’s fictive dispatches from the Boer War: “If only he were less logical, one could agree with him more often.”

But because they are so careful, attentive to particulars and so moderately and fair-mindedly presented, it is a great shame that these essays have not received more attention. Read reflectively, they offer a concrete case for the superiority of the ancient understanding of the relation of theory to practice to the contemporary one, even, and perhaps especially, when considering modern regimes. Where the modern tendency was to make practical necessities the ultimate ruler over a theory that in turn then ruled practice, often with a despotic hand, the ancients’ willingness to leave the two at best loosely yoked meant that their theory tended to leave more room for the exigencies of practice. These essays make a powerful case for that willingness, and as powerful a demonstration of how thoughtless about practice the heirs of the moderns have become. This book should be read by professors and taught by them to their students.


Learning from Aristotle

WILL MORRISEY
HILLSDALE COLLEGE
will.morrisey@hillsdale.edu

In his 1961 book The City and Man, Leo Strauss urged his readers to turn “toward the political thought of classical antiquity” with “passionate interest” and an “unqualified willingness to learn.” He urged them to do so out of the need felt by thoughtful men to address “the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West” (1).

Strauss pointed to the transformation of modern political philosophy into “ideology” as the “core” of that crisis (2). The West had declined, relatively, inasmuch as the East, still dominated by the regimes founded by Lenin and Mao, rivaled the West in scientific prowess but remained despotic, politically un-‘Western.’ The stubbornness of despotism among otherwise ‘modernized’ peoples defied the universality of the modern Western project, making the West “uncertain of its purpose”; “a society which was accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose, cannot lose faith in that purpose without becoming completely bewildered” (3).

The purpose of the modern West had been to put “philosophy or science” at “the service of the relief of man’s estate” by enabling man “to

©2007 Interpretation, Inc.
become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.” Such knowing mastery would entail “progress toward greater prosperity,” and therefore the chance for every person to preserve himself and “to develop all his faculties fully in concert with everyone else’s doing the same”: as the young president of the United States would say, around the same time, a rising tide lifts all the boats. The political consequence of humanity’s “greater freedom and justice”—both conceived in terms of equality—would be “the universal society or the universal state,” a world made “safe for the Western democracies” (4).

Communist tyranny made it “clearer than it had been for some time that no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man”—thus challenging progressivist egalitarianism—proving that “there cannot be a society which does not have to employ coercive restraint”—thus challenging progressivist libertarianism (5). The political problem remained: Who rules? “The situation resembles the one which existed during the centuries in which Christianity and Islam each raised its universal claim but had to be satisfied with uneasily coexisting with its antagonist” (6).

Yet the modern scientific project could not answer the question Who rules? in any rational way, having lost its confidence in the ability of reason to set purposes for human beings. At best social science might discover “universal laws of political behavior,” thereby contributing to “the comprehensive enterprise called universal history”—history, which finally would supply the answer to the question of rule (8). But to understand history, one needs to understand the thought of the men of the past, whose efforts at philosophizing moderns, looking back, now take to be mere ideologies, relative to the times and places in which they were framed. “Solid knowledge” of the ideologies of the past “consists primarily in understanding the teachings of the political philosophers as they themselves meant them” (9). One cannot know an ideology as an ideology if he hasn’t “grasp[ed] the original teaching as such”; particularly, one cannot understand classical political philosophy if he holds “a dogmatic assumption whose hidden basis is the belief in human progress or in the rationality of the historical process” (11). Nor should the inquirer make the reverse mistake, imagining that “a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today’s use.” The “relative success of modern political philosophy has brought into being a kind of society wholly unknown to the classics,” a society to which the principles of the classics “are not immediately applicable” (11). That is, the cure for modern ideology cannot be to transform the principles of ancient political philosophy into another ideology or set of ideologies.
As Benjamin Constant had argued in “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared With That of the Moderns,” Strauss writes that ideologies had distorted the lens through which political thinkers looked at politics, obscuring “the political things as they are experienced by the citizen or statesman,” the pre-scientific or common-sense understanding upon which any scientific understanding “remains dependent” (11). To gain such understanding, Strauss suggests, the modern student should read Aristotle’s *Politics*, which presents politics without the presuppositions of modern natural science. Like Constant, Strauss never loses sight of the fact that the existence of the modern state—centralized, with administrative networks extending into local communities—had transformed the political circumstances of life by partly shifting the mental ‘location’ of one’s citizenship from village and Church to nation and capital. Aristotle, always mindful of the moral weight of circumstances, would expect no less from his students.

Ancient observers of politics distinguished nature from convention, the latter consisting of things that exist only because men *hold* them to be, agree upon so holding them. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Aristotle regarded politics itself as natural for human beings, deriving from the natural human capacity for speech and reasoning. This capacity alone opens the possibility of discovering together common-sense ways of associating with one another. Political *philosophy* is the highest example of that quest, “the quest for that political order which is best according to nature everywhere and, we may add [glancing at historical relativism] always” (17). A political philosopher “acts directly as the teacher of indefinitely many legislators or statesmen,” but his pedagogy consists not, absurdly, in attempting to lay down the law to such hard-headed practical men. Instead, he “guid[es], in conversation, one or two men who seek the best political order or are about to legislate for a definite community”; “the most fundamental discussion of the *Politics* includes what is almost a dialogue between the oligarch and the democrat”—representing two principal claimants for political authority, namely, the few and the many (21). What the political philosopher has to say might interest such men because in general all seek not the traditional but the good, and the philosopher has made it his business to seek the good in gazing at the traditional, and thinking about it.

In so gazing and thinking, Aristotle noticed that lawgivers must act cautiously. Law needs obedience, and among real, often impassioned men obedience requires firm habit at least as much as reasoning; reasoning itself will not happen often if the soul has habituated itself to heed its passions.
Progress in the arts requires breaking with habit, but improvement in the laws requires continued stability. Strauss refers his reader to the passage in the *Politics* in which Aristotle remarks, “In general, all seek not the traditional but the good” (1269a2-3); simple traditionalism would have left humanity at the level of its first ancestors, “similar to average or even simpleminded persons” of Aristotle’s time (1269a6). But “the easy alteration of existing laws in favor of new and different ones weakens the power of law itself” (1269a23). As Strauss elucidates with a reference to the *Metaphysics*, the laws embody and reinforce “ancestral opinions,” codify a civil theology. Whereas the earliest tradition allegedly says that “the divine encloses the whole of nature,” in the ancestral opinions of the many this teaching has been made concrete by the teaching that the divine consists of gods who have taken the forms of men or “other animals” (*Metaphysics* 1074b 1-14). Or, in Strauss’s words, “the principle of the whole both wishes and does not wish to be called Zeus,” inasmuch as “the city as a whole is characterized by a specific recalcitrance to reason,” that is, the prevalence of the passions (23). The times are always out of joint because we are.

None of this should encourage the modern project, the openly progressive reform of law and custom guided by an art-science or *technology*. The problem of slavery illustrates the difficulty of any Enlightenment-like undertaking. A rational person wants to know: who is a natural slave, a person justly enslaved, and who is not? This question isn’t easy to answer in practice, inasmuch as a slavish soul might dwell inside a strong body and a virtuous soul inside a sickly body. (Looking back on his baseball career, Dizzy Dean once said, “The good Lord blessed me with a strong arm and a weak mind,” complicating the matter still further.) Such lack of ‘transparency’ will make precise rational judgments impossible. Might does not make right, but neither does right make might. To maintain itself in a passionate and warlike world, right must be blended with might, and that is no act of technocracy but of political prudence, not to say divine wisdom.

“Laws are a form of the legislative art, but the legislative art”—itself the highest or architectonic art—“is the highest form of practical wisdom or prudence, the prudence concerned with the common good of a political society, as distinguished from prudence in the primary sense which is concerned with a man’s own good” (24). Like the laws ‘it’ makes, prudence sets limits on human passions and on the arts men devise to satisfy their passions. “To be prudent means to live a good life, and to lead a good life means that one deserves to be one’s own master or that one makes one’s own decisions well”; prudence “is that kind of knowledge which is inseparable from ‘moral virtue,’
i.e. goodness of character,” the “habit of choosing” (24). With perhaps a touch of prudent exaggeration intended to fend off the danger of the wrong kind of fusion of theory with practice seen in historicist doctrines, Strauss maintains that “the sphere ruled by prudence is closed since the principles of prudence—the ends in the light of which prudence guides man—are known independently of theoretical science” (25). Prudential knowledge, knowledge of ‘what to do,’ ranks beneath theoretical knowledge, knowledge of ‘what is’: in a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* cited by Strauss, Aristotle urges that prudence should support theoretical wisdom but not claim superiority over it (1145a7-12).

Theoretical wisdom will be needed because an ungentlemanly but intelligent man might ask, ‘Why be decent?’ Such men will require a theoretical argument showing “that the practice of the moral virtues is the end of man by nature,” an argument obviously requiring “knowledge of the human soul” (26). But Aristotle generally prefers not to tread this Platonic path, probably seeing that such a theoretical understanding might be reached by an intellectually powerful man lacking in moral character, and above all lacking in prudence—a higher-level reprise of the ‘natural slave’ problem. As Plato’s Socrates himself teaches, between reason and passions in the human soul, spiritedness or thumos lies; in the city, between the philosopher and the people lies the politician (or, as those living in modernity almost necessarily say, the statesman). The politician, like the philosopher, had better get the theological-political question right, and to teach that politician in a way that will increase the chance of getting it right, the philosopher needs to present “the moral-political sphere” as independent from but “not unqualifiedly closed to theoretical science” (28). In a long series of references drawn from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, Strauss points to Aristotle’s suggestion that true opinion in the city underlies citizens’ moderation. Framing laws that reinforce true opinion requires practical experience coupled with the study of the several political regimes or ways of life seen in cities; law is “intellect without appetite” if understood in light of such study, experience, opinion, and moderation (28 n. 38).

These thoughts established, in the central paragraphs of his essay Strauss turns to the difference between the ancient city or polis and the modern state. Strauss uses ‘city’ for polis because “the city as Aristotle understands it is essentially an urban society; the core of the city is not the tillers of the soil.” The references to the *Politics* that Strauss cites give a somewhat different picture: the physical core of the polis is ‘in town,’ to be sure, but
a polis with a democratic regime needs to integrate the outlying farmers. They have no time for frequent assembly meetings and so do not so easily succumb to the rhetoric of demagogic agitators who play to urban mobs. The health of democratic politics, at least, depends on the limitations upon political life set by citizens who are not one hundred percent ‘politicized.’ Strauss captures some of this in writing that the city should “combine civilization with freedom” (30).

In the mind of the modern citizen the equivalent of city is ‘country,’ in the sense of ‘My country, right or wrong.’ But for “the theoretical man” of modernity country means “the unity of state and society.” The modern country distinguishes its ‘state’ from its ‘civil society’ because the West saw a sharp and dangerous controversy arise concerning the purpose of political life, a controversy that eventually drove prudent men to work for a separation of state and society. Looking at the ancient city, Aristotle saw no reason to worry that the ultimate purpose of human life, living well or happiness, would provoke serious disagreement “among sufficiently thoughtful people.” But later—presumably as Christianity spread and then factionalized in Europe—no such consensus seemed possible. As the theological-political problem changed, political philosophers invented the state, eventually giving it the more modest and more readily agreeable task of guaranteeing the “conditions of happiness,” assigning the higher reaches of the quest for happiness itself to civil society, where rival religious claims could compete without doing injury to one another (30-31). (Some twenty years ago a Muslim man listened as a Roman Catholic acquaintance of mine deplored the secularization of the American public square, and then chided, “You Americans have privatized religion.”) Strauss observes that “Aristotle knew and rejected a view of the city which seems to foreshadow the modern view of political society and hence the distinction between state and society,” the view that “the purpose of the city is to enable its members to exchange goods and services by protecting them against violence among themselves and from foreigners, without its being concerned at all with the moral character of its members” (32), a city that concerned itself primarily with what moderns call political economy. Strauss also clearly hints that Aristotle did not find the pursuit of the truest happiness as dangerous as it would become, although the example of Socrates reminded him that that pursuit did have its dangers.

Strauss associates the modern ‘country’ with social egalitarianism, as Tocqueville famously does. In our egalitarian countries we nonetheless adopt rulers or ‘authority figures,’ looking up to those men who
display extraordinary abilities while “devot[ing] themselves to the service of the common man” (35). This understandably leads Strauss to say that he “must” write “a few words about Aristotle’s alleged anti-democratic prejudice.” Partisans of democratic regimes in antiquity staked their claim to authority not on natural rights but on their status as freemen, men legally entitled to live as they like. For practical purposes democracy therefore required election to office by lot instead of by voting, as voting would entail “considerations other than whether the candidate is a free man—especially merit.” Voting brings a sort of aristocracy in with it; “modern democracy would have to be described with a view to its intention from Aristotle’s point of view as a mixture of democracy and aristocracy” (Strauss 1961, 35). (See Paul Eidelberg, The Philosophy of the American Constitution and A Discourse on Statesmanship: The Design and Transformation of the American Polity, for an elaboration of Strauss’s argument. The question as illuminated by Eidelberg becomes this: is a regime in which citizens vote for their representatives a mixed regime, or is it a democracy with a dash of moderating aristocracy in it?) No division of state and society need apply, as ancient democracy was “passionately and comprehensively political,” with democrats taking turns ruling and being ruled with no felt need for imposing the restriction on government that modern liberalism prizes (36).

Aristotle knows that “the city tends to be democratic,” given the long-term political advantages the sheer weight of numbers affords. But because ‘the many’ often regard both philosophers and gentlemen with suspicion, and also because Aristotle does not share the modern faith in a “universal enlightenment” harmonizing philosophy and the people, Aristotle looks for ways to mix gentlemen into the regime (36-37). Such careful differentiation mimics nature itself, “an ordered whole consist[ing] of beings of different rank”; “there is a natural harmony between the whole and the human mind” (38, 41). The times are always in joint, too, because we are. A well-ordered regime, product of the prudence of political men who understand their activity as architectonic, reflects a sound understanding of human nature and its place within nature as a whole. “It is not sufficient to say that the theme of the Politics is not the Greek city-state but the polis (the city): the theme of the Politics is the politeia (the regime), the ‘form’ of a city,” the human components of which form the citizens (collectively, the politeuma) (45). The regime of the city is higher than the components or citizens themselves because the form is higher than the matter; the form is higher than the matter because it is directly connected with the purpose of the polis. Every kind of regime has its own “legitimating principle,” its own “public or political
morality” consisting of what the citizens consider just. What justice really is is, of course, the theme of political theory as such: “the guiding question of Aristotle’s Politics is the question of the best regime,” a question Strauss defers to “another occasion” (48-49). (In the next chapter of The City and Man, Strauss turns to Plato’s Republic.) If modern liberalism liberates human beings by freeing them from spiritual despotism—separating state from society, limiting that state to preservation of life, liberty, and property—and by intellectual democratization or enlightenment along with social democratization, Aristotle’s liberalism liberates by freeing the life of the best minds from political ambition, while insisting that those minds remain attentive to the political conditions of the life of the mind. “In asserting that man transcends the city, Aristotle agrees with the liberalism of the modern age. Yet he differs from that liberalism by limiting this transcendence only to the highest in man. Man transcends the city only by pursuing true happiness, not by pursuing happiness however understood,” that is, conventionally understood (49). By ‘immanentizing’ or democratizing the life of the mind, attempting fully to integrate life into politics, as seen particularly in the group of doctrines Strauss calls ‘historicist,’ moderns threw their solution to the theological-political question into crisis. And this circumstance induced Strauss to commend Aristotle and other older writers to the professorial class that had to some extent replaced the classical gentlemen as those most likely to entertain philosophic considerations.

In 1961 few political scientists would have turned toward the political thought of classical antiquity for any other reason than historical curiosity. Nearly a half a century later, this remains largely true. (A few years ago, I gave a talk that was attended by a prominent political scientist. I wrote the names of Aristotle’s six regimes on the board, and he stared at them for the next fifteen minutes, quite sensibly paying little attention to what I had to say. A few months later, he saw me again: “I read Aristotle’s Politics this summer. It’s really good!” he said, with a look of pleased surprise.) But such complaisant inattention no longer characterizes students of political philosophy, who have turned more and more to Aristotle as they consider the condition of modern liberalism and liberalism’s several rivals. The authors whose books I review here share in this thoughtful trend, and deepen it.

◆ ◆ ◆

As the student of one or more of Strauss’s students, Mary P. Nichols came to the study of Aristotle not in an attempt to recover philosophy from ideology but as part of the philosophic quest itself. Strauss had cleared
the way for her. And Strauss’s great student, Harry V. Jaffa, had published his seminal essay on Aristotle in the Strauss-Cropsey History of Political Philosophy, a magisterial overview to which Nichols often refers. (Nichols recalls her first experience of philosophic wonder in Joseph Cropsey’s classroom at the University of Chicago; her earlier, political instruction in the virtues of the ‘mixed regime’ or ‘polity’ in Paul Eidelberg’s classroom at Sweet Briar College has not been forgotten, either, as her presentation of Aristotle will reveal.) Having studied Plato and his “serene resignation” in the face of politics, she turned to Aristotle to see whether philosophy might become political in a more constructive way “by engaging in a kind of statesmanship in an attempt to improve political life,” and also to see if philosophers might benefit philosophically from such activity, learn something from it. She found that the philosopher learns from politics “the limits and potentials of human nature,” that the relationship “between the philosopher and the city is a version of that between statesmen and citizens, as they rule and are ruled in turn.” Philosophers learn from politics what it means to say “that human beings are by nature political animals” (vii-viii).

Nichols mentions two responses to the crisis of modern liberalism: one democratic, calling for freedom not through limitation of state power but through political participation, ‘civic republicanism’—a stance she associates with Hannah Arendt, among others; the other aristocratic, praising the moral virtue of elite rule, a stance she associates with Strauss. Whereas civic republican writers call attention to citizens, Straussians call attention to statesmen. Although Straussians praise statesmen they finally see politics “less as a fulfillment of human nature than as a means of fostering the conditions in which the philosophic—and hence apolitical—virtue of the few can flourish” (4). Nichols (and this will prove characteristic) seeks to blend democracy and aristocracy, as it were to marry Arendt and Strauss; her book instantiates in word what (presumably) her classroom teaching instantiates in deed: a mixed regime. (It might be added that both writing and teaching presuppose a certain propensity for monarchy, kingly and/or despotic, but that I trust only adds to the richness of the mixture.) The philosopher-teacher learns from politics by practicing it as well as by thinking about it, “sifting through and modifying the various opinions that human beings might hold” concerning rule, divine and human, and nature, human and cosmic. The city the philosopher studies and contributes to ruling orients itself to body and mind, both in their juncture and their disjuncture; “statesmen must become fully cognizant of the dual origins of the city so that by steering politics between the despotism of body and the despotism of mind they can preserve the political
rule without which cities return to their origins and collapse into prepolitical forms”—into beings “who act as if they are beasts and gods” (10). The dualities Nichols identifies and considers throughout her book resolve themselves not in some simple unity or synthesis but in complex union or marriage, partnerships whose principals rule and are ruled in equilibrium and tension, a condition often in need of attentive care.

“Indispensable to Aristotle’s elaboration of statesmanship is the fact that nature rules humanity politically rather than despotically”; in Aristotle no deep-down core of fatum finally rules because nature itself amounts to a mixed regime. The very lack of a world state, an ‘end of history,’ bespeaks no “defect in nature” but rather “nature’s gift to humanity of the opportunity for statesmanship and all that it entails” (11)—a thought Charles de Gaulle expressed with more austere, masculine language in praising a statesman of the Ancien Regime: “he realized all the possible in taking his part in the inevitable” (La France et son armeé, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1938, 57). “It was to prevent the despotism of community”—pure democracy—“and virtue”—untrammeled priestly and social aristocracy—“that liberalism was first proposed and invented. In spite of its deficiencies, liberalism may yet prove superior to its critics unless they understand—and accept—the mutual dependence of citizens and statesmen” (12).

Nichols proves a genial, sharp-eyed companion in a stroll through political life understood Peripatetically. The first two books of the Politics show what the duality “political animal” means—the blend or mixture of animal survival, necessity, and divine speech, the good life, freedom. In book I Aristotle points from the origins of the city in biological necessity toward “the freedom implied in politics”; in book II he points from the freedom of philosophic speculation (what moderns might call utopian idealism) back toward necessity, which human beings forget “only at their peril” (14-15). These necessities themselves present in dual forms in the elemental parts of the city, the family: male and female, parents and children, master and slaves. Families do not ‘grow’ serenely into cities. Families left to themselves might veer toward “unholy and savage deeds with regard to food and sex,” cannibalism and incest (17). For cities to develop, deliberation and choice must occur; “humanity’s overcoming of nature in one sense”—bodily violence—“is thus a means for fulfilling its nature in another”—the affirmation of speech and reason. “Nature in both senses is at the heart of political life,” and this is possible because the human soul “is not a substance separate from the body, but the organization of matter so that the parts of a
living being form a whole, and so that it acts in a certain way characteristic of a species” (18, 20). It is also possible because the family has one ‘political’ relationship within it, the partnership of husband and wife. That is to say that the most necessitous of all natural relationships, at least when it comes to maintaining the species, in humans also features the potential for freedom. Lovers also talk, even after marrying. Their talk can bring political rule with it, liberating the family, giving liberating form to brute necessity—articulating nature.

Husbands and wives properly rule and are ruled by one another. “Political rule is partial rule in that it recognizes that the ruled is a free and independent being” (29). Political rule can mean rule ‘by turns’ or rule ‘in part’—the Greek en merei itself being ambiguous or ‘mixed.’ Men dare to begin things, and to acquire; women preserve, nurture. Together they can serve “virtue or excellence” in the household, and their “difference is the ground for independence” (29, 32). Nichols puts scholarship in her debt by discovering how Aristotle’s sly references to traditional Greek stories illustrate the prudent limitations womanly thought suggests to male aspiration. As deployed by the prudential, statesmanlike philosopher, addressing his male audience of future politicians, the tradition lays out what Aristotle need only hint at:

Women can teach men a respect for their own, a respect for the given, a respect necessary for the male activity of acquiring and ruling, which must build on what is given rather than destroy it. Women must teach that life itself is good, not merely its activities. Men, on the other hand, can teach women the value of going beyond the given, the joy of bringing something new into being, something necessary for women to experience if their own nurturing is to be successful, since nurturing fosters change when it fosters growth. Men must teach what the goodness of life owes to human activity. (32-33)

Aristotle the biologist knows very well that women do bring new things into being, but also knows that they experience this as pain. As members of the household, men transform the meaning of childbirth, making it something more than an excruciating physical necessity. The family provides “the natural foundation” for politics precisely because “each has something to gain from the other, because each can help to make the other’s perspective more complete,” as Aristotle demonstrates by encompassing both perspectives. “The particular perspectives that men and women manifest are embodied in Aristotelian statesmanship; the statesman’s recognition of the integrity of the ruled is a kind of feminine preservation, while his contribution to the political
community—his very formation of a political whole—is a kind of masculine acquisition” (33). Childbirth rightly understood implies the other principal function of the family, the education of the children the parents rule. This leads Aristotle to the topics of his second chapter.

Book II moves from book I’s presentation of the sub-political elements of politics that nonetheless make the city possible, to “the origins of cities in human thought” (35). In the structure of the Politics, books I and II represent a mated pair—book II being the manly one. Book II is a second beginning, one originating in choice, in the opinions human beings form regarding the best way to live, the best regime. “The city is an association of human beings rather than of slaves or animals because its members share lives lived ‘according to choice’” (36). The three ‘utopian’ thinkers Aristotle discusses all set down their ideas of the best regime. Human families do not achieve self-sufficiency (autarchia, literally ‘self-rule’) by themselves, but neither can human families survive the relentless ‘publicity’ of a community of women and children. Communism exemplifies the danger of thought “when it attempts to simplify a complex association like the city,” and the complex beings who comprise the city, beings consisting of bodies and souls, maleness or femaleness (37). In his apparent communism, Socrates “acts as if reason were free from experience,” makes practice follow reason in its soaring transcendence of the given (40). “Unlike Plato,” that ironist of human possibility, Aristotle can show not only the limits of politics but also “provide a guide to action” (40). Unlike the reformer Hippodamus, who writes like a Socrates free of any irony, hoping that mathematic formulae can perfect real cities, Aristotle knows that law requires the reverence human beings reserve for the old and settled, while avoiding the rigidity of unthinking traditionalism. He shows this concretely by examining three actual cities—Sparta, Crete, and Carthage—identifying their strengths and defects and enabling potential legislators to consider possible reforms.

After this study of pairs, Nichols’s second chapter is the only one devoted to a single chapter of the Politics, book III, which forms “the core of [Aristotle’s] political science,” his consideration of citizens, regimes, the rule of law, and the various claims to rule made by would-be lawgivers. But duality immediately returns as the duality of the city. The duality of the city is the one and the many; “the city must make citizens” of both, “just as it is rooted in both body and soul and aims at both living and living well.” In such a ‘blended’ regime, the many contribute more than their bodies, “for their rule can be justified on the basis of their moral and political virtue.” But “democracy is
amorphous” and defines freedom badly, as doing as one likes. The one contributes unity and discipline of thought, firm direction, but tends to forget the body (53, 58). Thus the ‘polity’ or politeia, the only regime called by the generic word ‘regime,’ may be “in some sense the only regime” (63) of the six regimes Aristotle identifies. The regime called polity best reflects the nature of the city itself, “a heterogeneous whole” rightly founded on the principle of justice: equality for equals and inequality for those not equals. All claimants to rule, to the right to set the laws, share “in the different elements that constitute a city” (65). True politicians or rulers of the city plan and direct the “potluck supper” of various human types, a supper that might otherwise be disgusting, indigestibly random (66, 195 n. 20). “The task of statesmanship is to protect the city from the worst side of the many while harnessing their positive contributions” (68). Statesmanlike men will also avoid the rule of the pambasileia, the absolute king whose wise rule would nonetheless effectively destroy the city by making it into a household in which the children never grew up. (Even Zeus divided authority over the cosmos with his brothers Poseidon and Hades; perhaps only a Creator-God could so thoroughly know His creation as to dare to rule it as King of kings, and even that God, the Bible teaches, allows His highest creatures the independence of free will, of limited self-government.) A human Great King “forgets his own vulnerability” (76) as the God of the New Testament does not, being supremely vulnerable and invulnerable at the same time.

In order to balance the untrammeled rule of the many or of the one in earthly cities, prudent founders institute the rule of law. While political rule, lawgiving, acts vigorously, the rule of law restrains actions; they “belong together.” In the well-ordered city “action occurs within the restraints provided by law, although action can modify those restraints from time to time,” providing “flexibility without mere flux.” Unwritten law or custom, “more authoritative” than written law, also remains in its very unwrittenness perhaps “more open to interpretation and change” (78-79). Both the many and the few seek unrestrained rule, the one swearing by the god, the others claiming to be gods among men. Ruling without the other, each would destroy the city and themselves. “If they fully saw their resemblance, they might no longer act as beasts and gods” (81). Human beings are homogeneous qua humans; they all need the city to rule them, need government. Human beings are heterogeneous qua individuals, needing to participate in the rule of the city, not just government but self-government. As individuals, however, they lack autarchia—self-rule or self-sufficiency, a fact that ties them back to the city, wherein they can rule themselves together, as a union.
Because “human beings are not self-sufficient” as individuals, families, tribes, or even social classes, “regimes must be polities” (120). Nichols titles the third and central chapter of her book, “Turning Regimes Into Polities,” discussing books IV, V, and VI of the Politics. Here Aristotle “shows statesmen how to reform their regimes, how to replace despotism with politics” (85). In this, Aristotle diverges from the Socratic account in the Republic, where regime changes seem inevitable. The practical purpose of studying the several regimes is to see how “each regime can be transformed by degrees into a version” of the best practicable regime, the polity, “the regime that recognizes the heterogeneity of human life, the regime that most incorporates the ends of the various elements of the community”; “polity is a potential of all regimes” (88). The polity or ‘regime of all regimes’ will not hum harmoniously to itself, once founded. “Life is characterized by conflict” not harmony, “and the natural and intellectual virtues emerge in the course of the conflict” (91). Both soldierly courage and the judge’s justice require distancing oneself from conflict even as one engages in it because both require prudent deliberation before decision and action. Further, in a full life one citizen might be both soldier and judge; rejecting the Socratic-communist principle of ‘one man, one job,’ Aristotle recommends a variety of tasks for everyone, again blending different ‘natures’ into one life’s work.

Especially when discussing oligarchies and democracies, Aristotle avoids making sharp regime distinctions, blending them into the ‘polity,’ the regime that mixes the rule of the few and the many (95; Politics 1293b 32-34). The class of citizens who are neither rich nor poor balance the extremes by blending “certain characteristics that are a virtuous mean between the vices of the rich and poor,” avoiding the despotism of each extreme class, sharing rule and friendship. The ‘polity’ transforms the largest class, the many who are poor, as under it Aristotle need no longer emphasize “the military virtue possessed by the many that was essential to the regime as he first presented it in Book III” but rather its (new-founded) moderation, the virtue of peace (97-98). “Reflecting the complex character of human nature itself, Aristotle recommends that mixtures permeate not simply the whole, but the different parts of the whole” (100). Similarly, even tyranny can be reformed, if the tyrant considers his own best interests.

Nature in Aristotle’s view operates on chance, not necessity. “Chance allows human beings to act, necessity does not. The openness of nature that acts as a limit on knowledge permits choice and statesmanship. For Aristotle, the decline of regimes in a single direction is not inevitable or
necessary,” as it seems in Plato’s *Republic* (112). The fortuitous or chance-ruled nature of nature gives human nature its opening to avoid lives of mere randomness. “Human beings overcome the chaos of chance through the deliberative choices of those options that give permanence to their lives. This is the teaching of Aristotle’s *Politics*” (119). Human beings “very choice of political rule, which shows that nature is not despotic, is the choice to imitate nature itself, for through this choice human beings allow to others the participation that nature allows to themselves” (123).

It makes sense, then, to think that political life itself has limits, a theme to which Nichols turns in the fourth chapter, on the last two books of the *Politics*. If politics falls under the rule of fate, as the Platonic regime-change story implies, then philosophy, in ascending from the cave that is the city, must culminate in solitary noesis, an apolitical freedom beyond the reach of false opinion. Socrates has no friends—only inferiors in dialectical struggle, and the rare and silent auditor, Plato. But if nature itself is political, and political life not ‘fated,’ then the philosopher might enjoy genuine friendships. “The give and take essential to politic rule finds its model in friendship, just as the various regimes Aristotle describes are reflections of different kinds of friendships” (127).

Aristotle sees the danger of political life: courageous, honor-loving souls might serve the city, but they might veer off into war-loving despotism. If politics were simply masked despotism, the anti-political and a-political philosophers would be right. They aren’t: “Proponents of a theoretical life can remind political advocates that there is a servitude implied in the despotic rule of others. Political advocates, on the other hand, can teach the proponents of theory about the importance of action to happiness” (130). Those sentences parallel the sentences Nichols wrote about men and women, and make the same point, and one should notice that the place of ‘women’ in the first formulation finds its echo not in the theoreticians but in the politicians.

Nichols also observes that the parallel between political life and the philosophic life breaks down if one considers the relations among cities. Foreign relations are not friendly; “where neighboring peoples are present, the concerns of war intrude into a city’s life” (132), and even if a city won all its wars it would become a universal despot. The philosopher might resemble rather an isolated and self-sufficient city, or the cosmos, except that such an isolato “will not understand himself.” “Political activity provides the opportunity for the self-knowledge that these individuals lack,” teaching “the constraints or limits upon human action and therefore the extent to which the
political actor depends on others and the community that all share.” The philosopher’s “contemplation is of his own thoughts and activities, built upon the contributions of others and requiring others for their completion”—rather as Strauss found students (among many others) in Joseph Cropsey and Paul Eidelberg, and they in turn found students (among many others) in Nichols. The activity of thought “cannot be separated from the deeds of life, no more than argument itself can be separated from ‘what happens,’ or literally, ‘the deeds.’” Or, as Strauss puts it in one of his book titles, one must consider both the argument and the action of Plato’s Laws (134-35).

These considerations animate Aristotle’s treatment of ‘the best regime.’ Like a philosopher, the best city has a port, an opening to the world, but the port is not central to its being; neither the philosopher nor the best city is a being of mere flux. Like a philosopher, the best city has a foreign policy, but it consists of hegemony or leadership over other cities, not imperialist despotism. Like a philosopher, the best city won’t work too hard; unlike the best democracy, it does not require farmers. The best city prays, guided by retired statesmen, but “only for the possible” (148). Priests who have been soldiers and citizens in their earlier years incline neither toward fatalism nor fanaticism. And if those persons who are inclined toward fatalism and/or fanaticism learn just enough from philosophers to invent new weapons and tactics, then “it is the task of philosophy, Aristotle says, to investigate new military defenses when new offensive ones are discovered” (149). The best city needs ports and walls, but even more the best city needs the citizen virtues that provide for both commerce and security.

Aristotle thus concludes the Politics with an account of education, whereby citizen virtues are nurtured. Recognizing the many dualities of human nature and life, education “should foster the habits of freedom,” and both political and philosophic freedom develop best under conditions of ruling and being ruled, of deliberation consisting of the play of many opinions, and not under conditions when either rule or theoretical wisdom seem reachable by slipping out of the bonds of down-to-earth life. Put another way, both communism and mathematics “override the diversity of which a city is composed” (156). The model of education is music, wherein a theme does not reduce to a single beat. “Politike is both the means to self-knowledge and the activity that best expresses it (167). But it remains dangerous—lives lost, no perfect justice.

Nichols returns to the crisis of modern thought in her brief final chapter. Early modern thought tends toward fatalism—the materialism
Review essay: Learning from Aristotle

of Hobbes, for example—whereas late modern thought tends toward fanaticism—Kantian voluntarism gone mad, so to speak. Strauss might add, modern thought has mixed fatalism and fanaticism to yield ideology—an unnatural blending of deterministic theory and fanatical practice. Modern thought seems political but is not. “In its complexity Aristotle’s political theory resembles the mixed regime, or the polity, that is its political goal” (175).

Clifford Angell Bates, Jr. draws his reader’s attention to the very peak of Aristotle’s political philosophy, the best regime, and does so ‘up front,’ so to speak, in his book’s very title. He calls attention to the angelic heights right away, in a manly and aspiring retort to Nichols, among others.

In the very spirit of spiritedness, he dedicates the book to his University of Dallas mentor, the late M. E. Bradford, that most courtly of neo-Confederate gentlemen, “a true defender of the Republic and its Constitution.” Beneath the dedication to Professor Bradford he quotes Allen Tate’s poem, “To the Lacedemonians”—the Confederate war veterans whom Tate knew as a boy and young man in the South—whose regime lost to the Yankees and whose survivors now live in “the country of the damned”—a land of motorcars and trade, of “Life grown sullen and immense” that “lusts after immunity to pain”—having fought for the “flimsy shell” of Union “like swine argue for a rind” (v). Bates thus honors the teachings of the Southern wing of the contemporary American political grouping that proudly calls itself the ‘paleoconservatives,’ who call their countrymen away from the life of cities and of governmental centralization, back to agrarianism and local self-government—thereby distinguishing themselves from ‘neoconservatives,’ who have made a sort of peace with many of the characteristic features of modernity.

In commending Aristotle (traditionally called ‘The Philosopher’) to citizens of paleoconservative convictions, Bates does something that Strauss would find intriguing. Bates commends philosophy to men and women who often regard philosophy with suspicion. Philosophy, in paleoconservative thought, often looms as a menace. Like Strauss, paleoconservatives condemn ideology, but unlike him they often fail to distinguish between it and philosophy. Paleoconservatives, not unlike Aristophanes, locate authority in tradition, longstanding custom. The highest tradition centers itself in the words of the Bible. The Bible locates the highest authority in a Person. But philosophers often locate the highest authority in the impersonal—in nature,
in ideas, or, as paleoconservatives often abominate it, ‘Rousseauian abstraction.’ Insofar as paleoconservatives have countenanced philosophy, they have most typically admired Edmund Burke, Rousseau’s critic, in whom Strauss finds the beginnings of historicism, the beginnings of the final stage of the crisis of the West. By directing paleoconservatives not so much to the historicist Burke but to the indisputably philosophic Aristotle, Bates asks paleoconservatives to reflect upon their convictions in a way to which many are unaccustomed, a way that does not reject a certain kind of reasoning about tradition and therefore does not necessarily subsume human thought within historical narrative.

In so doing, Bates himself breaks with at least one tradition, the scholarly tradition that finds in Aristotle a critic, even if a friendly critic, of democracy. Bates treats the ‘polity’ or ‘mixed regime’ as a myth at least as far as Aristotle’s philosophy is concerned, arguing further that Aristotle regards democracy under the rule of law as the best regime. Bates does students of Aristotle the service of insisting that they examine Aristotle’s regime theory with new eyes, lest the attempt to understand a philosopher ossify into a misleading tradition. Bates breaks with one tradition while upholding tradition and leading traditionalists to reason about tradition. With Strauss, Bates declares himself against the historical relativists who regard Aristotle as irrelevant to modern politics. On the contrary, “his teaching speaks directly to our lives and our political problems,” specifically, the “crisis of self-understanding” of “liberal democracy” (7).

Bates appeals to paleoconservatives by rejecting Strauss—often associated with neoconservatives—on the question of the literary genre of the Politics. Strauss is mistaken to classify the Politics as a treatise; Voegelin, the conservative historicist, is right to consider it “a series of logoi,” a dialogic work—really “a mixture of two genres,” treatise and dialogue (8). Later, Bates will acknowledge that Strauss finds a dialogue between an oligarch and a democrat to be central to the Politics, so in fact Bates concurs with Strauss’s judgment, but that point comes later on, and could go unnoticed by careless readers. Bates sees Strauss’s argument concerning philosophic exotericism, finds such exotericism in Aristotle, and may even deploy it himself from time to time.

Bates remarks a three-part structure in the Politics, and accordingly divides his own book into three parts. He does not, however, structure his own book thematically in accordance with Aristotle’s three parts, but rather concentrates on the third part. The Politics has “three beginnings”: “the account of the origins of the city” in book I; “the historical account of the best regimes in theory and practice” in book II; “the regime model” in book III.
The first two accounts he judges “failures,” and so finds book III thematically central to the *Politics*, “the logical center of the whole.” “[L]ike the hub of a wheel…the regime holds together Aristotle’s *Politics.*” Book III is also “the most theoretical or philosophic of all,” a “highly dialectical book,” a book that allows the reader to “figure out which arguments are better argued and hence persuasive and which are not.” He divides his book into sections addressing “three questions: What is the regime? Which regime is the most choiceworthy? and Should law or man have ultimate authority?” (12-14).

The first section consists of three chapters, one each on the city, the citizen, and the regime, respectively. Bates distinguishes the polis from the modern state. The state is an artifact; its sovereign power derives from the social compact, the “abstracted will” of those who contracted with one another to form a “body politic.” Having once been abstracted or generalized from all the individual wills of the contracting individuals, that unified will takes on a life of its own, so to speak, no longer “the articulated will of any specific ruler.” ‘The state’ becomes ‘sovereign,’ independent of, and often ruling over, the persons who live within the ‘civil society’ beneath it (18-19). The polis, however, or political community, means “a unity of political organization” ruled by a person or persons, in no way abstracted from society (21). Bates disputes Strauss’s claim that the Greek word ‘polis’ adequately corresponds to the English word ‘city’; such a translation would interfere with Bates’s agrarian-democratic stance. Bates thus tips the scales toward considering the quintessential polis to be the best form of democracy in his definition of the polis itself, a position he will argue for later on. He rightly points to Aristotle’s emphasis on the *regime* as the primary determinant of the identity, the character, of the polis: “A city is defined by the form it takes to reach its preferred end, or telos, and this [form] is understood to be its regime” (26).

The regime defines the citizen, from one polis to another. A citizen participates in a ruling office, but the number and structure of ruling offices depend upon the regime. Thus the regime determines who the citizen is, in any given polis. The polis is “the multitude [plethos] of such persons that is adequate with a view to a self-sufficient [autarchic, literally ‘self-governing’] life” (Aristotle quoted in 32). Citizen excellence gets its definition from the regime, but ‘excellence’ or arête is not Aristotle’s word, here: spoudaios or ‘serious’ is. Aristotle distinguishes between a serious citizen and the excellence or arête in accordance with which one is a serious man (*andros*, not *anthropos* or human being). A regime change or revolution means a change in the identity of the body of citizens or rulers, and a consequent change in the
definition of citizen ‘seriousness’—a change in “the perfect model of a citizen” (42-43, 45).

Bates turns, with Aristotle, to a fuller and more precise definition of ‘regime.’ “[T]he regime is that which gives form (eidos) to the particular political community,” and “implies a different telos, or end which that regime will hold as its authoritative way of life”; “the form a regime will have will structure the authoritative body within that given political community,” reinforcing “the way of life of those who have authority.” The ends and means of political life involve the “differing understandings of justice” from one regime to another (62). For purposes of clarification, one might say that this definition obviously associates several different but closely related terms with the idea of ‘regime.’ Politeia refers to the structure of ruling offices in the polis; politeuma, often translated as ‘ruling body,’ refers to the persons occupying those offices; bios tis, literally ‘sort of life’ or ‘kind of life,’ usually translated as ‘way of life’ of the polis, rounds out the definition (see Politics 1295b1). Aristotle explicitly links the politeuma and the bios tis with the politeia, and this makes sense; the few rich will want and need a different set of ruling offices than the many poor; the structure of ruling offices will lend itself to a particular kind of life in the polis, overall, function following form. Bates observes that no politeuma or ruling body “perfectly expresses the will of the whole political community,” in Aristotle’s view, because Aristotle does not take the polis to be a ‘state,’ allegedly embodying the general or abstract will of the whole population (63). “Responsibility is direct in Aristotle, the ruling body is responsible” (65). The modern state too easily evades such responsibility.

Political life, of whatever kind or way, comes naturally to human beings because they alone perceive not only pleasure and pain but the just and the unjust. Human beings desire not only to live but to live “a complete and self-sufficient [or self-governing] life,” aiming at eudaimonia or well-living and not at mere (Hobbesian) peace or survival (68). Life naturally is not solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, or short, but sweet, and the good life sweeter still. Political life strictly speaking resembles the mutual rule seen in marriage.

Bates departs from most accounts of Aristotle’s regime classification: good and bad forms of the rule of the one, of the few, and of the many. Bates regards this twofold (‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’) description as only a preliminary scheme, a scheme that “deconstructs or falls apart both logically and rhetorically” in preparation to a better account (80). At this point, Bates raises the following question about the two regimes called the rule of the multitude. The good regime in which the politeuma is a multitude is
the “regime called regime” (as Bates translates it): literally, “Whenever the multitude [plethos] moves toward the common/shared advantage, it called by the name common to all regimes, regime [politeia].” Although it may be hard to see how the multitude could have excellence or virtue as the one or the few might have, they can have military virtue. Bates wonders, “How can the many rule when the military element is authoritative? Clearly, this issue leads to a question concerning the regime called regime.’ If it is a regime in which the military element is authoritative, then how could it be a form of the rule of the many?” (86). The answer may be seen in two ways. First, the multitude or plethos may or may not be simply identical to the many or hoi polloi. A plethos might include groups in addition to hoi polloi, without ceasing to be classifiable as a regime in which hoi polloi predominate. Second, even if the multitude or the many are not to be distinguished, they might bear arms well, as seen shown by citizens’ militias in many places, at many times. There is no reason to suppose that “the military element” need be the few; even if it were, the few could be blended with the many to form a multitude. A multitude might well be even larger in size than the many. Alternatively, if the distinction between the multitude and the many is finally a distinction without a difference, it would remain true that the many can bear arms while engaging in a morally serious way of life.

Bates rightly observes that the determining feature of an oligarchy is not number or ‘fewness’ but wealth; a regime in which the majority were rich would still be an oligarchy. Democracy is pre-eminently the rule of the poor. Bates also sees, of course, that in most times and places, particularly the ancient world, the rich were almost always few, the many poor, so the association with number is less arbitrary in practice than in principle (89). He further argues that the ‘qualitative’ side of the regime classification shifts from ruling according to the common advantage to ruling with a view toward justice, which rulers then define in a partial way, not in terms of “the whole of justice in its authoritative sense” (Politics 12809-11). All regimes, including the bad ones, make “some limited appeal to justice in their claims to rule”—that is, the ‘good’/’bad’ dichotomy is not as sharp as it initially seems. This strikes me as accurate, although it does not contradict the earlier formulation but rather qualifies it, in a rather Nichols-like way: the good regimes would partake more fully of justice, and thus rule more nearly to the common advantage, than the bad ones. “[T]he remainder of Book 3 is the search for the best regime,” that is, the one most fully just. There are several contenders.

Bates’s section II concerns the “first peak” uncovered by this
search for the best regime, namely, “popular rule.” The frontispiece quotes the preamble of the United States Constitution, beginning, “We the People....”

In the fourth chapter Bates considers aristocracy’s claim to being the best regime: is the rule of the best the best regime? Political life has limits, namely, “the limits of how the best can be applied to accommodate the inherent variability of all those living in a regime” (99). Specifically, does aristocracy mean the rule of the best persons or the rule of those who do what is best for the polis? And although it is said to be the rule of the few, ‘the best’ might not be the few, and doing what is best for the polis might not need be done by the few. “[A]ny regime that rules best can legitimately be called an aristocracy,” so the idea of aristocracy is “no longer useful as a regime type.” If so, this “will make us examine the other regimes” (100-101). This treatment clears aristocracy off the table, summarily, and hurries the reader to the popularly based candidates for ‘best regime,’ the ones Bates prefers to discuss.

The first of these is “the regime called regime,” more often translated “polity.” Bates cites Patrick Coby’s description of “the problem of understanding ‘polity.’” Polity is defined in four ways: the correct form of rule by the many; a regime where the people possess military virtue; a democratic regime under law; a ‘mixed regime’ including the rich, the poor, and also the middle class if such a class exists in the polis in question. The actual quote from Politics III.7.4 (the text misprints this as III.17.4) is not a democratic regime under law but “a military multitude.” Bates says that some of these definitions “contradict one another,” and that Aristotle “nowhere clearly presents a final definition for the regime called ‘polity’” (105-6). But if a polity is not a democratic regime under law but a military multitude there are no contradictions in this set of definitions or features. As for there being no “final definition” of polity, that makes sense in view of its ‘mixed’ or ‘blended’ character. Customarily speaking, the mixed or blended regime tends more toward democracy than it does toward democracy, whereas such regimes that lean more toward oligarchy are called aristocracies (Politics 1293b34-37). Both the best democracy and the best oligarchy enjoy the rule of law.

On Aristotle’s theme of blending disparate elements, Bates rightly points out that a good regime could only come from two defective regimes (namely, oligarchy and democracy) if those regimes had some good elements; that they “are not merely defective but are only inclined to be defective” (106). He also rightly observes that Aristotle recommends this ‘blending’ strategy to politicians of every regime. He goes too far, in my opinion, in claiming that there is really no such regime as the polity or
mixed regime at all in Aristotle. A regime is “the authoritative view of a city concerning the best way of life,” he observes. “The idea that a regime can hold as authoritative two opposing views of the best way of life would suggest to the serious student of Aristotle that such a regime would be schizophrenic…and thus undesirable and/or practically impossible” (108-9). He rightly says that “throughout the whole of the Politics the only regime that is consistently described as the rule of the many is called democracy, not ‘the regime called regime,’” but consistency does not rule out exceptions (110; see also 133).

Logically, it makes no sense for Aristotle to use the phrase “regime called regime” unless he means a particular regime. Otherwise, he would only need to say “regime.” On the question of contradiction and blending or mixture, no real epistemological quandary exists. To maintain that black is not white or that round is not square is to affirm the principle of non-contradiction. I cannot show you the shade ‘blackwhite’ or a ‘roundsquare’ shape; I cannot even conceive of such things. But this does not mean that I cannot mix black and white, getting shades of gray, or combine round and square shapes into a coherent architectural whole. Similarly, a political architect might combine the claims about justice made by the many poor with the claims of about justice made by the few rich—particularly, as Bates has seen, if these views do not so much contradict one another logically as they reflect partial view of justice. Even if no real polis can reflect the whole of justice, this does not preclude its inclusion of much justice—at least, more than either oligarchs or democrats would descry, on their own. To see how this might work ‘operationally,’ to use the jargon of our social-science contemporaries, one must look to the regime as politeia, as an arrangement of ruling offices or institutions, and not so much to the regime as politeuma, a ruling body of persons. Aristotle goes to some lengths to show how political men can arrange institutions and modes of selection of persons to staff those institutions in ways designed to direct oligarchs and democrats into commonly-agreed-upon and moderate policies. A simple example of this (as Strauss observes) is voting. A true democracy does not really select ruling officers at all, but elevates them at random, by lot. Aristotle writes that voting for one or several among a variety of candidates is undemocratic because it brings in questions of merit. Thus a ‘polity’ or ‘blended’ regime might see the many poor voting for candidates who rank among the few rich, or some other such device. This will yield a way or kind of life that blends principles of justice that might otherwise clash and cause civil war. As Nichols and Eidelberg argue, the cosmos itself features a ‘mixed regime,’ thanks to the existence of form. Form both makes contradiction possible and chaos impossible; if one treats
one, few, and many as ideas only they will contradict one another in theory and in practice, leading to civil war. But you don’t need to do that.

Bates concludes his chapter on “the regime called regime” with an insightful treatment of the idea of the mixed regime in subsequent political thinkers. He cites Polybius as the first writer truly to discuss the mixed regime or “mixed constitution.” The Roman Empire exemplified the ancient empire as distinguished from the polis. Ancient empires extended over territories as large, and often larger, than those of modern states. An empire that tried to act like a real regime, “shaping the character” of the subjects, would “require massive force and eliminate the diversity of views about the best way of life”—would be, in a word, a tyranny. “Practical political men, I suggest, during this time understood this well and did not attempt to shape the character of all the subjects under the Empire”; rather, “they kept the peace” among the various conquered peoples while “the local authorities continued to form the character of the subjects” so long as those authorities did nothing to “threaten the peace or challenge the Empire’s hegemony” (117). Although it should be noticed that the Roman Empire did have its own regimes, changing from republic to kingship and at times to tyranny, Bates accurately describes the non-statist character of ancient imperialism.

He further argues, with respect to the United States regime, that the anti-Federalists were right in the long run. They understood that genuine character-forming regimes could only be local, and that the larger entity ought to have been the sort of loose federal structure seen in the Articles of Confederation. “[G]iven the centralizing character of American political life that occurred after the Civil War and has lasted until the present, the concerns expressed by the anti-Federalists have hit home all too well.” This affirms part of the M. E. Bradford/neo-Confederate paleoconservative teaching, while also gently correcting “contemporary conservative-libertarian thought, whose theory of limited government cannot fundamentally distinguish between federal and local governments’ roles in regulating one’s life” (121). Limited government, Bates means to say, ought to prevail in all large-scale political entities, ancient and modern; limited government is not necessary in small-scale political entities because they can be genuinely self-governing—which, as the sixth chapter argues, means democratic in a certain way. “Aristotle presents a teaching not of limited government but of local government, one that aims at unifying a community toward some expressible notion of public happiness understood in terms of the good life for those who live together in the political community” (121). (One might instructively compare Bates’s account with
that of Joseph Cropsey, “The United States as Regime and the Sources of the American Way of Life.” The trouble with saying that the United States has a regime in the Aristotelian sense seems to derive from features of the modern state, which is neither a polis nor an empire. The separation of state from civil society allows a certain incoherence to enter into the latter, and sometimes into the former, making it harder to talk about regimes. This, one should note, does not make it impossible to do so, inasmuch as most people easily distinguish American republicanism from, say, Nazi tyranny.

Having rejected aristocracy and polity as contenders for the title ‘best regime,’ Bates argues that Aristotle “makes the suggestion that democracy may legitimately be understood as the best regime” (122). “[I]t is not so evident that the actions of the majority against the minority would surely harm or destroy the polis, but it is clear that the actions of a minority against the majority surely would. For who makes up the polis? Is it not the many? Are they not, by definition, the majority?” (136). The answer to these points, based on Aristotle’s account and Bates’s own analysis of it, are: (1) insofar as injustice harms the polis, the poor can harm the polis by committing the injustice of “distributing [the things of the wealthy] among themselves” (Politics 1281a15-16); (2) the multitude, consisting mostly of the many who are usually poor, makes up most of the polis; (3) the multitude are indeed by definition the majority in the polis. Therefore, the multitude, particularly if dominated by the many when poor, might well harm the polis.

In Bates’s paraphrase, “while individually [the many] may be inferior to a serious man (spoudaios), together they are better than he” (138). Aristotle himself presents this point less definitively, saying that there is “perhaps… some truth” in it (Politics 1281a41). Oddly, although Bates treats many Aristotelian arguments with due caution, he does not remark the obvious here: while the many might collectively be better than a serious man, they must also and simultaneously be worse than he, and that the first observation in no way contradicts the second. Similarly, while the many collectively pay more to contribute to the needs of the polis than the few, they collectively benefit more from those contributions, and benefit disproportionately as individuals. Finally, if the many deliberate better collectively better than the few, this only holds if the people are “unified” (140-41, 145). But clearly the people are seldom unified, except perhaps when it comes to ‘soaking the rich,’ or, as seen in Thucydides, embarking on ventures of imperial conquest—that is, in committing injustice.
Aristotle could not openly praise democracy,” given his audience of experienced, mature, and moderate men (155). Addressing modern democrats, perhaps Bates cannot openly dispraise democracy. In the brief seventh chapter, concluding section II, Bates writes, “Democracy is the least vicious of all regimes, not merely the least vicious of the deviant regimes”; “since all the actual regimes must fall short in some way of the pure form (eidos) of the regime, this is indeed high praise” (162). But if men are political animals, being the least vicious regime does not seem high praise for politics, or for the human nature it expresses. Bates will turn to the consideration of original sin in the epilogue.

But first he considers the final claimant to the title of best regime, the universal kingship or pambasileia. Section III begins with a quotation from the first book of Samuel, chapter 8, in which the Lord tells his prophet that the Israelites want a king because they have rejected the rule of the Lord. In Bates’s view, the universal human king would supplant the law-ruled people. Further, still considering the claims concerning the polity or mixed regime, “I interpret the dispute between the pambasileia and the argument for the mixed regime as an important textual clue for concluding that the interpretation that argues that the ‘mixed regime’ is the best regime is false” (167).

Aristotle asks if it is more advantageous to be ruled by the best man or by the best laws. The dialogic partisan of the best man argues that laws speak generally and therefore cannot address the “particular circumstances” of any actual polis; the partisan of the laws replies that the laws are dispassionate, unlike human beings, and therefore the rule of laws is more reasonable. The partisan of the laws silently concedes the argument of the partisan of the best man, but recurs to the origin of the rule of democratic law in the opinion of the many, who not only judge better than any one man can do but are less corruptible than the best man. In this case, however, the claim of the unity of the many also drops to the side; on the contrary, the very lack of unity of the many makes it hard for them to make an impassioned mistake all at the same time, as long as the many are free and law-abiding, careful not to act beyond the law unless the law is silent (173).

On balance, a good multitude—shifting now from ‘the many’—seems more likely than a single preeminently good man. A good multitude would be an aristocracy in the same sense that a rich multitude would be an oligarchy. Such a multitude in fact arose after the multitude ousted the ancient kings, establishing political rule in place of masterly rule. “The emergence of political rule results from moving away from the rule of the
father in the household, which is the model for kingship, to the rule of equals ruling in turn. The emergence of the regime results from the creation of politic rule out of kingship” (178). For “regime,” Aristotle actually says “polis,” but more interestingly Bates contends that this “equalization (a leveling out) of excellence” or virtue results from the advance of the arts or technology. It is not clear what the arts have to do with virtue, however. Bates summarizes: “acquisition and the prominence of self-interest promote the creation of democracies. Civilization tends toward the development of democracies and nothing but democracies” (179). What Aristotle says is rather more critical and less deterministic: not merely self-interest but “the base longing for profit” makes it “difficult for a regime other than democracy to arise” (Politics 1286b19-21). And the first regime after kingship is not democracy but oligarchy, followed by tyranny. The very lack of inevitability makes statesman-like institution-building feasible; the base origins of truly political life make such statesmanship more attractive. The possibility and desirability of political architectonics do not sit well, however, with paleoconservative traditionalism. Paleoconservatives associate political architectonics with modern ‘social engineering’ and understandably prefer humane tradition to that.

“The prudence of the office holder is to make up for the defect of the laws; however, the office holder’s authority comes from the laws themselves” (184). (But where do the laws come from, if not the regime—in this case the democracy?) The “laws themselves provide solutions” to the admitted “weaknesses” of the laws in three ways. The laws will have “servants and guardians” to judge in the particular cases that arise; “the laws provide for experience”—and thus for prudence in judgment—“in that they are the collective wisdom of a people spread over time”; rule by laws “bids the good of the intellect to rule rather than human passions” (186). Aristotle, however, does not claim collective wisdom for the unwritten laws or customs. He says rather that unwritten laws are more authoritative than written laws and deal with more authoritative matters—presumably, the gods (as Bates soon acknowledges, 189-90). Further, and crucially, Aristotle says of law, “in general, men seek not the traditional but the good” (Politics 1269a2-3), an observation he makes in the middle of his critique of reformers who would change the laws too readily. What is more, custom is also at odds with technology, the ‘progressivism’ of art, which Bates earlier claimed as the origin of social equality and hence political life.

The partisan of the laws additionally argues quite sensibly that “no man can oversee many things” easily. But the many have “many eyes.”
They have “more of the qualities needed for a good judge than individual has. But the image of a many-handed, many-eyed, many-earred, many-footed being is that of a monster. Yet is this not also the characterization of the powers of a god, a being that is omnipotent?” (191). Indeed so: but beasts and gods (to say nothing of monsters) are not political animals. Where does this leave the argument for democratic politics? Bates’s reader would be rash in assuming that Bates does not see this, as he artfully tests their souls for any latent philosophic content.

The search for the best multitude continues, with urgency. A “political multitude” arises from “a military multitude capable of ruling and being ruled in accordance with a law distributing offices on the basis of merit to those who are well off” (Politics 1288a15-17, quoted in 197). It is finally not technical expertise or even prudence that entitles the multitude to rule but “a persuasion by nature” (205). The rule of the superior man cannot achieve the self-evident persuasiveness needed for effective rule. If so, is the rule of the gods, which seems to underlie the rule of unwritten law, naturally persuasive? It seems rather to be persuasive only to the many who admit its supernatural character, and to the few who find in it a higher order of nature than that immediately visible. If both a god and a law is intellect without passion, then the people must be sure of the divine origin of their unwritten laws for them to obey them. In line with the divinity of the unwritten laws and the superior prudence and moderation of the multitude, Bates claims that “Democrats and democratic regimes tend to have a greater tolerance of philosophers and philosophy—in spite of a democratic regime’s having executed Socrates—than do regimes ruled by the so-called gentlemen” (211 n. 11). He offers no evidence of this, but it does follow from his overall argument, exoterically considered.

In the epilogue—decorated with an excerpt from a Robert Frost poem, “A Case for Jefferson,” complaining of a man for whom “the love of country means/Blowing it all to smithereens/And having it all made over new”—Bates emphasizes that it is not the natural law of the philosophers that Aristotle means by the law that should rule in democracies, or any “transpolitical law,” but “democratic law” (213). Thomas Jefferson, that famous defender of natural rights, famously defended the French Revolution on the grounds that even the destructive Terror would leave a France made new and better than it had been under the Old Regime. Bates evidently doubts that, and it is no foolish doubt. Jefferson also argued that natural law or more precisely unalienable rights deserve protection by any regime and its laws, including the
(somewhat attenuated) regime of an extended commercial republic, but although Bates quotes the United States Constitution he does not quote the Declaration of Independence.

Bates rather argues that the law that should rule democracies, originating in popular customs, owes its justice not to natural excellence, and perhaps not even to the divinity or divinities its partisans hold up, but to natural fallenness. In this Bates resembles Algernon Sidney, that diagnostician of human fallenness (although no traditionalist, and not entirely pious). Earlier, he had cited Sidney, along with Hobbes, as philosophers who asserted the underlying democratic character of Aristotelian regime theory. Here he does not invoke Sidney, much less Hobbes, but the straightforwardly Christian C. S. Lewis. “Lewis and Aristotle favor democracy rather than the absolute rule of one man, regardless of how wise he may be, because nature does not clearly distinguish who should rule and who should be ruled. Or, to paraphrase Lewis, no man is evidently fit to rule other men simply by nature” (215). In linking Aristotle to a writer loved by paleoconservatives, Bates does Aristotle his final service. A careful reading of his book by paleoconservatives or anyone else, a reading that tracks his interpretation alongside Aristotle’s argument, should serve both philosophy and politics, well.

Susan Collins confronts a world in which the crisis of modernity has taken a turn, with a forceful reminder of the virtues of citizenship. The fissure in the modern world having narrowed with the end of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the modern project saw a new challenger. Certain Muslims combining determinism and fanaticism in a mostly religious but partly modern ideology—call it ‘Islamism’—attacked the city of all American cities, New York. (In most scholarly writings ‘Islamism’ refers to what is also called political Islam—an Islam that abandons life under some modern state for active engagement in its governance. Recently, commentators have been using ‘Islamism’ to refer specifically to the most radical forms of ‘political Islam.’ I prefer this usage for the sake of simplicity and because it does not make it seem that political engagement is something new to Islam.) Collins recalls a journalist who had imagined himself a cosmopolitan Manhattanite now calling himself a citizen of the city. What for Strauss in 1961 had seemed mostly a thing of the past, at least in the West—the confrontation with Islam—had resurfaced so violently that dreams of avoiding citizenship, of world citizenship, and of subject status under a state that protected individual rights (the dreams of Rousseau, Kant,
and Hobbes, respectively) vanished in a renewed appreciation for physical and civic courage. As it happened, an ongoing “remarkable renaissance” of Aristotelian thought among Western political theorists opened the possibility of thinking about the new crisis of the West in a sober way.

Unfortunately, that renaissance has thus far been vitiated by attempts “to marry liberal principles of equality and individual freedom with a more or less Aristotelian sense of community”—not a mixed regime but a mixed-up set of theories. Aristotle’s account of citizenship provides “a source of insight for us precisely because it does not begin from liberal presuppositions” (2). Muslims generally and Islamists particularly see that “the question of the highest human good” remains very much a point of political contention; a reconsideration of Aristotle without the distorting lens of modern liberalism can help us think about that. Moreover, despite the grim prospects ahead, Collins agrees with Nichols that Aristotle’s political philosophy encompasses “a comic vision in the highest sense: a vision, in short, that appreciates both the nobility and the limits of human striving and that in no way desairs of wisdom about human affairs” (5). We may need some of that.

Aristotle recommends approaching politics through the publicly expressed opinions prominent in debates among citizens. In her first chapter Collins discusses the features and limitations of recent attempts to appropriate Aristotle by such contemporary theorists as John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, Stephen Macedo, Michael Sandel, and William Galston. She finds some of them engaged in unsuccessful attempts to accept the social condition of ideological diversity while striving for a public order that can hold together. Others recognize the need for civic virtue, but risk sacrificing liberalism in any recognizable modern sense. Liberalism, it seems, can neither do without virtue nor abide it. She catches one scholar writing, “It seems ridiculous to be asked to choose among Jesus, Da Vinci, Caesar, and Socrates,” politely replying that several of these worthies “represent ways of life that reject one another’s fundamental claims” (38). Aristotle provides a better starting point for such inquiry than liberalism does because he acknowledges “the political community’s authoritative and architectonic power as educator” as a fact, and then takes the argument from there. “[M]oral virtue is a matter of intense concern for both the political community and the individual because the happiness of each is at stake,” and these two forms of happiness entwine irrevocably (41). While “most present-day Aristotelians begin by establishing either the political principles in accord with which they define the virtues of a good citizen or the overarching principle of the good
from which they derive the virtues of human ‘flourishing,’” Aristotle eschews such abstractions for a consideration of the actual opinions citizens hold, opinions that partake both of the sentiments of individual persons and the claims held up for their belief by the regime of the city, particularly in its laws (42-44).

While Nichols addresses citizens and statesmen primarily, and Bates primarily addresses the regime, Collins comes to Aristotle through the moral claims of, and on, citizenship. As a result, she begins not with the Politics but with the Nicomachean Ethics. There, Aristotle discusses eleven moral virtues, “the peaks of which are two complete virtues, magnanimity and justice”; Collins devotes the next two chapters to their examination (45). The moral-political virtues ultimately fail “to resolve the tension between virtue’s orientation toward the common good and its independence as an end in its own right”—the problem of the city and man, to coin a phrase. But to think about things that ultimately fail is not itself to fail, a lesson American citizens took away from the Islamist attacks of September 2001, and doubtless will have occasion to re-learn as the war continues.

The set of virtues that culminate in magnanimity have to do with ‘the noble.’ They are courage, moderation, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity itself, and ambition (this last Collins’s term for an unnamed virtue that consists of reaching out for honor in a way that is neither excessive nor deficient). Although historians often contend that these virtues simply reflect the conventional moral preoccupations of Greek antiquity (and of course Aristotle concedes this at the outset by saying that he begins with opinions), the actual discussion of these virtues often puts him at odds with the conventions of his time and place. For example, piety doesn’t make the list, but the Greeks cared for it so much that the legend of the pious Aeneas reverberated all the way to Rome.

The noble virtues are uncommon; although commended by the laws, they center in the individual soul and impel that soul to transcend the city and its laws in the pursuit of virtue “as an independent end and good,” as “worthy of pursuit for its own sake.” The noble man need not be a happy man. The “link between virtue and the longing for the noble is frequently overlooked by students of the Ethics, yet it is crucial in understanding both the elevation of virtue to its place as an independent end and the tensions within the moral life that result” (52).

Courage, “the portal through which we enter” into the life animated by the quest for nobility, “pertains to fear and confidence,”
particularly in regard to the risk of dying, the greatest of fearful things. Fear and confidence arise most acutely when a man risks dying deliberately, as in war; in war, also, one risks death for no small thing but for the city, the well-being of which is nobler and more divine than that of any individual. In one sense, then, the courageous man appears to be selfless; however, “such an individual is willing to suffer death only in an action in which he exercises his own virtue.” The courageous man ultimately devotes himself not to the good of the city but “to virtue itself” (52-54). One might say that the culmination of courage in war shows the tendency of the noble to break the bounds of the city. The city needs warriors in order to defend its independence, its autarchia. But war sends the warrior outside the city, threatens the survival of the city in defeat and even in victory, inasmuch as an all-conquering city would no longer be a polis but a universal empire.

The city inculcates courage by holding out honor to those who act courageously and shame to the cowardly. Nonetheless, the true hero—Aristotle mentions Hector most prominently—takes as his end not the opinions of his fellow citizens but the exercise of the virtue that they esteem but cannot reach themselves. Military and political courage, located between the ignoble extremes of fearfulness and rashness, finally transcends the army and city that honor it.

The next noble virtue, moderation, owes much of its nobility to serving as instrumental to liberality. Like courage, liberality sacrifices one’s own, though not fatally. Unlike courage, liberality sacrifices things that one is not simply born with; even a man of inherited wealth does not come into the world gold-plated. If the goods required for the exercise of liberality need acquiring, the means of their acquisition raise the question of an unlisted virtue, justice. The same goes for the more spectacular sacrifice of one’s own external goods, magnificence.

Counting justice, then, magnanimity or greatness of soul sits squarely in the middle of the eleven moral virtues—“a central place in Aristotle’s treatment of the morally serious life.” “Like the great works of magnificence, the honor that the magnanimous man assigns to his own nobility and goodness (kalogathia) makes magnanimity the ornament (or crown, kosmos) of the virtues” (61). Unlike courage, which puts the body at risk, and unlike liberality and magnificence that sacrifice other material things, magnanimity remains thoroughly a matter of the soul alone, the supreme expression of autarchia and beneficence. Magnanimity “represents the fullest expression of virtue as an independent end.” But as such it finds no example in
one great man; Aristotle instead points to Zeus and to the Athenians, suggesting that the magnanimous man might be “in part a fiction rather than a representation of an actual human being.” What shall such a man do, except contemplate “his own great virtue”? Such contemplation occurs, however, entirely in absence of wonder, inasmuch as nothing to the great-souled man is great, aside from himself, whom he already knows (63). (One might ask, does he really know himself at all? Does he know himself if the kosmos in which he lives seems to him less than the kosmos of his own virtue?) Collins again finds, even in this most elevated and comprehensive form of nobility, a lack of concern for justice. The noble man finds himself “in a terrible quandary.” “Obtaining the conditions of his own activity will require deviations from virtue that he could never make up for later.” Even magnanimity “is in part a fiction because it wishes for a self-sufficiency [autarchia] and superiority that abstracts from the demands and concerns of justice” (65).

In the individual, justice may mean either lawfulness or fairness. Justice as lawfulness means “the sum of all the virtues directed toward the good of another”; justice as fairness means “the proper disposition concerning the good things—security, money, and honor—in which all who belong to the political community must share” (68). This confirms the distinction and tension between justice and magnanimity, or self-perfection, which pulls away from the common, the principle of equality upon which citizenship rests. Similarly, justice as lawfulness seeks “both another’s good and our true perfection” (70).

Controversy dogs justice because partisans of different regimes disagree on “what constitutes desert or merit in the distribution of the common goods,” with democrats looking to freedom, oligarchs wealth, aristocrats virtue, and so on (73). ‘Equality’ among citizens will differ from regime to regime because poor and rich, for example, diverge with respect with what is to be distributed equally. While it is true that the specifically political goods, ruling offices, are the same ‘conceptually’ from one regime to another, the number and kind of such offices will differ considerably, and this depends upon the answer a given regime gives to the question of what merit is. Justice “can never be wholly separated from compulsion” because tension must arise between the good of the individual and the good as defined by the regime” (79). A “tension within moral virtue,” seen in “the difference between education with a view to the political community and the education of the good man simply,” will never disappear within the horizon of morality (79-80).
The moral and civic education of a serious man requires the reinforcement provided by the laws, animated by right reason, to which the laws give voice. “It is as the representative of right reason that the law is comprehensive and that Aristotle makes the sweeping claim, so foreign to modern liberal ears, that ‘what the law does not command, it forbids’” (81). Regimes so ordered aim at self-sufficiency or self-rule, not mere living but living well: “the law seeks to preserve the political community, therefore, by preserving the regime, including both the principle of equality underlying the regime and the good life its members hold in common,” and in this the rule of law usually excels the rule of one man, however virtuous (82).

If political life is natural to man, and a good political life typically requires the rule of law, but law in its generality (a consequence of its conventionality?) cannot fully achieve justice as fairness in all circumstances, what then? Aristotle here introduces “the equitable” as a supplement for and correction of legal justice. Equity means those judgments the lawgiver would have rendered had he been present (87).

But this leaves unanswered the question of what justice is simply and universally, inasmuch as to be natural and not conventional, human nature must be everywhere the same. What is “right reason,” this thing that animates the lawgiver? Collins turns to this question midway in her argument.

“Prudence, the Good Citizen, and the Good Life”: the title of the fourth chapter identifies three dimensions of right reason with respect to justice. Prudence comes into the picture most obviously with the need for equity, inasmuch as prudence is what we need to figure out the right thing to do in any circumstance (92). If law alone covered all circumstances, right human conduct would resemble a computer printout. But neither will prudence suffice; it does not say what the purpose of our actions should be. “[T]he highest good necessarily includes, if it is not wholly constituted by, wisdom (sophia),” which “has authority” (even) “over moral virtue” (92-93). “[T]he law and moral virtue have been shown to seek a self-sufficiency that they cannot fully attain” (94). The political community answers “the question of the human good” (95), but cannot answer it fully because any political community pretends to a universality that it does not really have. For example, no matter what regime, no matter what political community we belong to, human beings seek friends. The well-known and in some respects deservedly notorious aphorism, ‘If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I’d have the guts to betray my country,’ points to the universality of friendship as a human good, even if it hardly merits any
more than the most heavily qualified assent. While the political community remains “the home of the human good” because human beings are naturally political, and membership in some political community therefore constitutes part of their telos, the limitations of all such communities require us to look beyond them in seeking the good for human beings as such (97).

Here Collins arrives at Bates’s principal topic, the regime—finally the best regime. The best regime might satisfy both the universal good for human beings as such, which includes friendship, and the political goods. In the best regime I should never need to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend.

Given the freedom of human beings, inherent in their capacity for speech/reason, the best regime and indeed any regime will not ‘just grow’—whatever traditionalists and also libertarians may say. Political communities and the regimes that give them their distinctive shapes and purposes must be constituted, both prudentially and with regard to some end, preferably an end discovered philosophically—that is, by a soul animated by the love of theoretical or universal wisdom, in this case the human good as such. What is the best, most choiceworthy, human life? Collins examines Aristotle’s comparison of the masterful way of life, the political way of life, and the philosophic way of life—the ‘regimes’ individuals choose for themselves. She agrees with Nichols in taking Aristotle to mean that the way of life of the best regime “is neither wholly political nor wholly philosophic—neither wholly devoted to the city nor separated from it,” but “redirect[s] those most ambitious with regard to virtue to higher and more self-sufficient actions than those to which the political community on its own terms would point,” actions that are first and foremost actions of the mind, dialogues with wisdom-seeking friends (116-17).

Left there, the best regime would remain vague. But regimes, being forms, by definition give definition to the political community and to the persons who rule that community. In the best regime all those who should be citizens, are. But even in the best regime the good citizen and the good man are not quite identical, Collins argues, contra most scholars. The good man has complete virtue; the morally serious citizen has only a portion of that virtue because some virtues aim at things beyond the city, even the best city. The virtues of a ruler are “defined by their usefulness to the regime,” the common advantage, necessarily a limited thing if still a good thing (128). Partisans of each type of regime make claims to rule based on partial ideas of justice, but no one of these claims can attain “the city’s highest and finest end, which is not
living but living well” (135). The “correct principle of distribution of ruling offices” must finally be virtue, the aristocrats’ claim (136). But virtue is not the only claim—freedom, wealth, and other desiderata also amount to just claims to rule, if not the most nearly just claims. The political community’s “composite nature” makes the rule of law attractive as the means by which the various partially just claims might be arranged; “the inadequacy of this solution, however, is evident in the fact that the law itself is derivative of the regime” (137). Although practically speaking the rule of the many and the rule of the laws can form a safe regime—one that does not make enemies of the many—“no regime can accommodate the common advantage in the full sense: the advantage of the whole city—of every member who contributes to its existence and end—and the advantage of those who, as citizens, merit ruling and being ruled in turn” (141).

As for the pambasileia, “absolute kingship, in which one person has complete authority to act in accord with his own wish, is against nature among those who are equal and similar,” and human beings almost always share too many virtues to make such rule just. And in those places where such a man, and such a people, actually existed? “Aristotle’s ‘kingly’ man, who is a law unto himself, is something of a mystery, but about him we can say at least this much: he is not captured or captured fully within the framework of citizen virtue” (145). As for the philosopher, his life provides a just alternative to the would-be tyrant’s longing for a pleasure without pain, but Aristotle does not suggest that he can rule in practice.

The noble virtues tend to press beyond the boundaries of the city in a thoughtless way. The good life understood as the philosophic life presses beyond those boundaries precisely through thoughtfulness. A life devoted to thoughtfulness can see politics whole, in all its strengths and limitations, but either it can rule or it cannot. To rule with universal/theoretical wisdom, one needs to be a god. To have a portion of the two wisdoms and to dedicate oneself always to striving for more of both precludes one from ruling the city in any direct way. Both philosopher and city need to find some middle ground, without trying to become that middle ground.

Between the political and theoretical lives Aristotle finds the one “who respects and obeys law yet is not simply in awe of it” (146), citizens whose moral strengths tend less toward the noble and more toward the social virtues—gentleness, friendliness, truthfulness, and wittiness. Praotes or gentleness actually seems more like righteous indignation, a reasonable anger aroused at the sight of real injustice but ready to forgive. Friendliness
looks rather like what Benjamin Franklin calls affability. It differs from friendship, actuated by love; “the friendly person is pleasant and approving of others insofar as he does not bring discredit or harm upon himself or his associates; when necessary, he will express his disapproval, even though to do so many cause pain” (149). In the man of gentleness and friendliness we see most clearly the difference between the gentleman and the noble man, that harsher and higher-soaring virtuoso. The truthful or plain-dealing man, the Harry Truman, “claims to be nothing more or less than he is”; in him we see most clearly the difference between the gentleman and the philosopher, that ironist who often claims to be less than he is (150). As for the wit, he must take care to attend to his audience and to the unwritten laws of the political community, both of whom he might easily offend. “The law must protect its authority against the power of comedy to mock it.” As even today’s comedians sometimes learn, “the witty human being,” in acting like a pambasileia of the underworld, a law unto himself, might find himself censured or at least censured by his fellow citizens (158). The wit can do some good, nonetheless, by setting limits to the more extravagant claims of the noble, particularly the magnificent and the magnanimous men. The play and rest associated with wittiness “tends away from the full devotion to moral virtue and political life that is the mark of the serious human being,” and also from the laws, which never laugh (160). Such a liberation can prepare the soul for philosophy, and constitutes “a part of moral virtue that points beyond the political life,” distancing the soul from “the high seriousness that political matters, in all their nobility and greatness, demand for themselves” (163). Witty, sociable comedy “comprehends both the nobility and the limits of human striving,” sustaining “the quest for wisdom about human affairs” (165).

Thus refreshed, in her conclusion Collins returns to the crisis of modern liberalism. Because liberalism has now abandoned “the self-evident truths” of the American founding, including “the orthodoxy that the individual is prior to the community,” the “older Aristotelian view that human beings are political animals” might receive a fair hearing from liberals today (167). Collins aims to get Aristotle that hearing, first by observing that liberalism in fact does not evade the problem of virtue. The toleration esteemed by liberals requires certain virtues in practice; the civil and international peace esteemed by liberals also does. Now as always, “the public elevation of particular virtues infuses them with the weight of community opinion and actively informs the individual’s understanding of a good human being and good action” (171). Such aims as toleration and peace also require justification: why prefer toleration to intolerance, peace to war?
Aristotle also denies that one can account for all human action in terms of self-interest. Aristotle sees the distinction between the noble and the good, and distinction among the many goods. Rational-choice utility maximizers cannot say why Socrates unsatisfied is better than a pig satisfied, as John Stuart Mill saw; Aristotle can help on that. “Aristotle gives full due to the nobility and greatness of the political life, but he also illuminates the tensions within it, the necessities underpinning the law, the dispute over distributive justice that informs every regime, the limits that this dispute places on the political community’s highest end, and the significance of these limits for both the community and the individual” (177).

Proponents of the various ideologies intend to contribute to the overall modern project as conceived and elaborated by philosophers beginning with Machiavelli. Machiavelli famously instructs the most ambitious men to redirect their gaze from God and nature in order to gain control over things nearer to hand—things previous philosophers had thought beyond human mastery, things Machiavelli invites us to visualize in the figure of Fortuna. Machiavellian philosophy finds its most characteristic latter-day expression in historicism, which contents that the very mastery of Fortuna works itself out as a force immanent in the actions of Fortuna. Strauss wrote a book titled The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws; historicists maintain that action and argument fuse in a ‘lawful’ or regular way, discernible by social scientists and by statesmen called leaders, who know the way the action/argument is going, and bid us follow them to its destination.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair serves as an honorable and appealing example of such opinion.

To me, the most remarkable thing about the Koran is how progressive it is. I write with great humility as a member of another faith. As an outsider, the Koran strikes me as a reforming book, trying to return Judaism and Christianity to their origins, much as reformers attempted to do with the Christian church centuries later. The Koran is inclusive. It extols science and knowledge and abhors superstition. It is practical and far ahead of its time in attitudes toward marriage, women, and governance.

Under its guidance, the spread of Islam and its dominance over previously Christian or pagan lands were breathtaking. Over centuries, Islam founded an empire and led the world in discovery, art, and culture. The standard-bearers of tolerance in the early Middle Ages were far more likely to be found in Muslim lands than in Christian ones. (“A Battle for Global Values,” Foreign Affairs, January/February 2007, 79-90)
Islam then found itself superseded by the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment movements of the West; historical progress passed it by, leaving it “uncertain, insecure, and on the defensive.” In reaction, some contemporary Muslims have developed “an ideology,” a “reactionary” ideology using terrorism as its instrument. “This is ultimately a battle about modernity”; “we have to show that our values are not Western, still less American or Anglo-Saxon, but values in the common ownership of humanity, universal values that should be the right of the global citizen.” To win this battle, the West must engage it on all fronts, but especially in the realm of values, which “represent humanity’s progress through the ages.” “Idealism becomes realpolitik.” The return to the real Islam actually betokens a return to progressivism against the new, reactionary Islamism.

Modernity, progress, values, democracy, the synthesis of ideal and real: Woodrow Wilson might have spoken the same way as Blair, had he lived to see Islamism as a major force in the world.

Strauss’s recovery of Aristotelian political philosophy has helped to make such talk somewhat less prevalent among academic political theorists. As the authors of these three books show, Aristotle requires the student of politics to look at the life of any country as a struggle between claimants for rule, their claims advanced in terms of certain opinions held to be rightly authoritative for the political community. ‘Freedom is good’; ‘the gods are good’; ‘wealth is good’—and therefore the many who are free, those who are godly, the few who are wealthy deserve to rule. Aristotle helps students of politics see that ideologies, including progressivism, really amount to claims to rule; ideology may be novel, an effect of modern philosophy, but in its political function it differs not at all from the disputes of Byzantium, Rome, Athens, Jerusalem. This means that in a crucial sense there has been no progress.

There has also been no return. The prophetic and messianic religions anticipate the direct rule of God over man, again, but under a new heaven and on a new earth. On the philosophic side, Burke was right; the glory of Europe really is gone forever, at least in terms of the old, aristocratic regimes. Nor can any Aristotelian really re-invent the polis; we operate within and among the states invented by Machiavelli. Proponents of free-market ‘globalization’ and exponents of a worldwide Muslim empire both seek to undermine states, but neither group displays much political sense. Both would like to dispense with politics, even as they so obviously make political claims and take actions that aim at ruling. Aristotle would find them dubious, directing those ambitious to engage in the study and practice of politics to greater sobriety and wit.
New Subscription Order Form
(not to be used for renewals—current subscribers will be billed annually)

YES! Please send me Interpretation

Name ____________________________________________________________

Address ___________________________________________________________________

City ___________________ State _____ Zip ____________________________

Country (if outside U.S.) ___________________________________________________________________

Gift Subscription Order Form

YES! Please send a gift subscription of Interpretation to:

Name ____________________________________________________________

Address ___________________________________________________________________

City ___________________ State _____ Zip ____________________________

Gift from: ___________________________________________________________________

Address ___________________________________________________________________

City ___________________ State _____ Zip ____________________________

Recommendation to the Library

I recommend that our library subscribe to Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy [ISSN 0020–9635] at the institutional rate of $48 per year (3 issues per volume)

Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Name ____________________________________________________________

Title _____________________________________________________________

Interpretation, Queens College, Flushing, New York 11367–1597, U.S.A.