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INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons that Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* deserves to be regarded as one of the classic and foundational texts of political philosophy is because it thoughtfully examines the extent to which politics and political life are amenable to reason, method, and knowledge. In the *Cyropaedia*, which is a philosophic novel about the life of the Persian Cyrus the Great that is loosely based on various historical accounts, Xenophon explores the extent to which central problems of politics, including especially the problems of legitimizing authority and preventing revolution, can be mitigated by human reason. By thinking through Cyrus’s life, his rule, and the massive Persian Empire that he founded, Xenophon claims to have unearthed a fundamental truth about politics. While his study of history and current events impressed on him that in almost all times and places political life precariously teeters on the brink of chaos, Xenophon saw in Cyrus a potentially wondrous alternative to the comparatively bleak view that political history is destined to be little more than one violent revolution followed by another, *ad infinitum*:

But when we reflected that there was Cyrus, a Persian, who acquired very many people, very many cities, and very many nations, all obedient to himself, we were thus compelled to change our mind 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 [epistamenôs]. (1.1.3)

By calling attention to the central theme of Cyrus’s knowledge and its potential to help consign revolution to the dustbin of history, Xenophon invites his readers to dialectically discern for themselves from his narrative what Cyrus and Cyrus alone knew so as to make human beings from
dozens of nationalities and across three continents submit to his rule. I have recently argued in these pages that part of Cyrus’s knowledge involved his remarkable ability to deceive others every step of the way in his meteoric rise to power (Whidden 2007, 130). Christopher Nadon’s outstanding study of the Cyropaedia argues that another facet of Cyrus’s knowledge was his recognition that by moving from republican to imperial rule he could remedy many of the tensions and defects of republican government and transcend them via the empire over which he presided (Nadon 2001, 163).

This brief study seeks to build on previous analyses of Cyrus’s knowledge of rule by suggesting that another important if unsettling part of his knowledge is his ability to strip his subjects of their humanity and make them into beasts. I give an account of the various ways in which Cyrus conceives of his subjects as animals and suggest that the models and images of hares, hounds, cattle, and bees play particularly important roles in the Cyropaedia. On this analysis, in forming the empire Cyrus sees his soldiers as dogs and his enemies as hares, while the empire under his rule alternately resembles a herd of cattle and a beehive, with Cyrus as the herdsman and the lead bee. My argument that Cyrus reduces many of his subjects to animals helps explain his unprecedented successes in making others submit to his rule and creating an empire the sheer size of which had never been seen. If, as Xenophon states in his prologue to the Cyropaedia, herds are “more willing to obey their keepers than are human beings their rulers,” then it would seem to follow that the secret to making humans obey is to make them into animals that will be wholly dependent on their keeper (1.1.2). Nonetheless, for all of Cyrus’s stunning achievements, in the course of showing how he frequently conceived of his fellow men as brutes that were less than human, Xenophon compels his readers to wonder whether Cyrus’s remarkably effective methods were in fact good and thereby helps cast some light on the bleak and notoriously enigmatic conclusion of the book.

HARES AND HOUNDS

Early in the Cyropaedia during the course of an extended conversation between Cyrus and his father Cambyses, the king of the small republic of Persia where Cyrus spent portions of his childhood and youth, Xenophon foreshadows that in the course of establishing the empire and as its ruler Cyrus will treat some of his enemies and subjects as hares and hounds. In the course of teaching Cyrus how to take advantage of enemies, Cambyses advises him to use the same tactics on his enemies that he once used to hunt animals:
But son, if you should do nothing more than apply against human beings the stratagems that you used to use even against very small animals, do you not think that you would go a long way in getting the advantage over your enemies? (1.6.39)

He continues:

Against the hare, because he grazes at night and runs away in the day, you used to raise dogs that would find him out by his scent. Because he used flee quickly when found, you had other dogs that had been trained to take him in pursuit. If he should escape even these, you learned their paths and to what places hares go when they run away, and you would spread out nets that are hard to see; and since he was frantic to escape, he would fall in them and himself entangle himself. So that he not escape even from here, you would station scouts of what would happen; and they, from close at hand, would be ready to set upon him quickly. And you yourself from the rear—but with a cry that did not lag far behind the hare—would by your shouting so startle him that he was senseless when taken. Yet teaching those in front to be silent, you would make them escape detection as they lay in ambush. So, as I said before, if you should be willing to contrive such things against human beings as well, I am inclined to think that that you would not come short of any enemy in the world. (1.6.40-41)

On Cambyses’ account, rulers should analogize the world into three distinct classes. They themselves as rulers are like hunters; their soldiers resemble hounds bred by them to seek gain; and enemies are like hares that are hunted by the hounds. Since Cambyses’ advice to conceive of soldiers as hounds and enemies as hares also requires that rulers be knowledgeable about hunting, it follows on this account that reducing human beings to animals, absent other requisite kinds of knowledge, is apparently not sufficient to guarantee success. This is to say that Cyrus’s reduction of his enemies and many of his subjects to animals is only a facet—albeit one of the most important—of his knowledge.

Cyrus wastes little time putting his father’s admonitions into practice on his campaign to defend Persia’s ally Media against the bellicose son of the Assyrian king. He takes some of his soldiers to the border between Media and Armenia under the pretext that he wishes to hunt, a ruse that is particularly plausible in light of the fact that he has often hunted there before (2.4.16). When his contingent arrives at the frontier, he takes care to hunt as advertised so as not to arouse the Armenian King’s suspicion (2.4.20). But after the hunt, Cyrus explains to his captains the true reason for their excursion. The Armenian King was formerly an ally and subject of Cyrus’s uncle Cyaxares, the
ruler of Media, but the Armenian had of late ceased to pay Cyaxares his tribute, because he thought that the Medes would be too preoccupied with the recent offensive waged by the son of the Assyrian (2.4.22). Cyrus thus reveals that the true nature of the foray into Armenia is to bring the Armenian under heel and concludes that the Armenian himself “is the game we have come to catch” (2.4.22). Formulating his plan and encouraging deception at every turn, he continues, “Remember, then, that the paths must be secured before the game is roused. And those stationed at the mouths [of the paths] must not be noticed, if the game approaching is not to turn away” (2.4.25). In successfully executing his plan, Cyrus follows his father’s advice to a tee.

If Cyrus views his soldiers as analogous to hounds and his enemies like hares in the course of establishing his empire, then as ruler of the empire he continues to view some of his subjects and even some of his closest associates as dogs. For example, when Cyrus honored those among his servants who merited commendation with fine food and delicacies, Xenophon notes that he took special care to have their food served from his own table, because he thought that this would inspire good-will in them, “just as it does with dogs” (8.2.4). Similarly, he believed that the eunuchs who served him were in need of a master, but contrary to the view of the many, he did not think that because of their condition eunuchs were necessarily destined to be weaklings. To the contrary, he saw that under the guidance of a master they could be useful for the same reason and in the same way that dogs that have been castrated are. Just like the eunuchs he surrounds himself with as bodyguards, “dogs, when castrated, stop running away from their masters, but are no less useful for watching or hunting” (7.5.62).

As all of these passages taken together suggest, from the beginning of his quest for empire and rise to power, Cyrus conceived of and treated his enemies and subjects like hares and hounds. Viewed in this light, the fact that many of his subjects become even less humane and virtuous after he dies (8.8.4, 8.8.27), far from being a surprising aberration inconsistent with the bulk of the Cyropaedia, as some have suggested (Tatum 1989, 216, 224, 235, 238), much less a spurious addition clumsily tacked on by a second-rate author (Hirsch 1985, 91-97), is actually the logical outcome of his policy of dehumanizing both his enemies and his subjects that he enacted from the beginning. Perhaps the only difference at the conclusion is that in the absence of their master after Cyrus’s death, the undisciplined and unsupervised hounds become somewhat less prone to attack hares and more likely to viciously turn on one another in the effort to become the new top dog (8.8.2).
Several passages in the *Cyropaedia* suggest that Cyrus saw some of his individual subjects as cows content to chew their cud and his empire as a whole as analogous to an enormous herd, over which he as its shepherd presided.

On one occasion, Cyrus is delighted with the account one of his captains provides regarding how he inculcates obedience, orderliness, and discipline in his troops, “in coming and going,” “by night and by day,” and by exercising both their bodies and their minds (2.3.22-23). Cyrus jokes that since the captain does everything “doubly,” it is only just to offer him a “double feast” as well (2.3.23). This sort of generous offer is par for the course for Cyrus, who throughout his life enjoyed sharing his provisions with others and ministering to their desires for food and drink that he himself by nature and because of his ascetic Persian education did not seem to feel very strongly (1.3.7, 8.2.7, 8.4.6). While Cyrus apparently believed that one of the quickest ways to gain a man’s loyalty is through his stomach (8.2.2), for his part the captain answers Cyrus’s jests with one of his own, stating that he must decline Cyrus’s generous offer to him and his soldiers, unless Cyrus “will furnish us with double stomachs as well” (2.3.24).

As is Xenophon’s penchant, the humorous and playful chit-chat between Cyrus and the captain has a few serious, albeit tacit, philosophic and theoretical subtexts. First, it is important to note that while the captain rejects Cyrus’s invitation, he does not do so entirely. Rather, he only declines to take part in lavish feasting twice a day, but apparently still agrees to come to Cyrus’s table daily (2.3.24). Insofar as he does not reject Cyrus’s offer *in toto*, the captain thus represents a somewhat tenuous and volatile midpoint between the disciplined moderation regarding food and drink that formed a key part of Cyrus’s childhood education in the little republic of Persia and the moral permissiveness and eventual decadence that begins to set in once Cyrus takes control of the Persian army, founds the empire, and especially once he dies. While we cannot be entirely certain about the captain’s nationality, it would seem that he is likely one of those Persians who, like Cyrus, were raised to believe that moderation is a virtue, but who nonetheless were attracted to Cyrus’s imperialistic enterprise, the goal of which from the very beginning was at least as much about material gain as it was defense of an ally (1.5.8-10). In this sense, the character of the captain illustrates that Cyrus’s corruption of his subjects was often partial and that it frequently took place slowly and methodically through various stages over time. The speech Cyrus gives in
praise of gain as the proper reward for virtue when he is chosen commander of the Persian army (1.5.8-10), the invitation to the captain and many others to feast with him along the way to Babylon (3.2.25-31, 8.4.6-27), and the custom of encouraging his subjects to adopt elaborate makeup and to don fine Median robes reminiscent of the Oriental despots of the day are all important stages on the way to the widespread unbridled decadence that ensues after his death (8.1.40-41, 8.8.2-27). Second, the captain’s figurative reference to the “double stomachs” he and his men would need in order to feast twice a day with Cyrus cannot help but cause the knowing reader to think of cows, which quite literally possess stomachs with multiple chambers. For all of the levity in their conversation, the captain nonetheless recognizes on some level that Cyrus is trying to corrupt him with a way of life more fit for a cow than a human being. Implicit in Cyrus’s invitation is the view that virtue is not its own reward and that discipline is instead little more than an enlightened means to increased future pleasures, a philosophy that Cyrus articulated to his companions as a young man and that he never abandoned (1.5.8-10, 2.3.23-24, 8.2.20). But once Cyrus’s revolutionary principle that virtue is but a useful means to pleasure catches on, what—other than the prospect of the ongoing gain to be had as country after country falls under his thumb—is to prevent his subjects from shirking their duties and decadently behaving as if they have “double stomachs”? As Xenophon notes, while even the disciplined captain was somewhat tempted by Cyrus’s offer to feast twice a day, many who heard about it were less ambivalent and were chomping at the bit to receive similar invitations by displaying their devotion to Cyrus (2.3.24). So long as Cyrus is alive, he can make sure that the upper class in the empire practices at least a modicum of virtue by rewarding them for it and holding out the promise of even greater gain in the future if they delay their gratification. But once he dies and there is no longer any real prospect of greater gain for his subjects, the game is up and they abandon any pretence to virtue, surrendering themselves to the pleasures of the moment. Enlightened hedonism under Cyrus degenerates into sheer decadence after his death. Xenophon thus suggests that public teachings like the one Cyrus promulgates that make virtue a means to increased pleasures are apt in the end to lead to widespread corruption and decline (Bruell 1969, 95, 125).

Along with leading his subjects down the road to immoderation and eventual decadence, Cyrus’s policy of distributing food and inviting his subjects to feasts also has the effect of diminishing their liberty and independence. Xenophon states that Cyrus intuitively recognized that his subjects’ bellies could be used to control them, and once again Cyrus took his cue directly from the animal kingdom:
It seemed to him that they were benefited by being fed together also in that they would be less willing to desert each other, because he saw that even animals that are fed together have a terrible yearning if someone separates them from each other. (2.1.28)

By encouraging his subjects to mess with one another, Cyrus helps ensure that like other animals he had observed they will never long for independence or wish to be separated from the herd without trembling and having a “terrible yearning” to remain with it always. As the Median commander Artabazus tells Cyrus, “And now, too, this is our feeling, so that with you we are not afraid even in the enemy’s land, while without you we are afraid even to return home” (5.1.26).

To the extent that Cyrus thought of most of his subjects as comprising a herd, there is also evidence he thought of himself as its shepherd:

People quote a remark of his to the effect that the duties of a good shepherd [nomeus] and of a good king were very much alike; a good shepherd ought, while deriving benefit from his flocks, to make them happy (so far as sheep can be said to have happiness), and in the same way a king ought to make his people and his cities happy, if he would derive benefits from them. (8.2.14)

In contrast to this more flattering account apparently still in vogue among the many even into Xenophon’s own time, Cyrus’s wise and prudent father Cambyses has a somewhat less generous characterization of his son’s rule. While the many believe that under Cyrus’s rule there was a mutually beneficial pact between subjects and king whereby the ruled were made happy and Cyrus in turn derived certain “benefits” for himself as their ruler, after Cyrus conquers Babylon Cambyses issues a warning to his son not to “attempt to govern the Persians as you do those other nations, with a view to self-aggrandizement” (8.5.24). He thus silently drops any reference to the conventional view that Cyrus beneficently ruled his subjects. Whereas the popular stories about Cyrus held that he made his subjects happy, Cambyses witnessed the style and effects of Cyrus’s rule firsthand and apparently concluded otherwise. Still, despite this difference, the competing accounts are similar to the extent that they both hold that Cyrus benefited himself, albeit to varying extents, by ruling.

In light of the popular characterization and especially Cambyses’ view of Cyrus, we are thus left to wonder: What benefits did Cyrus, who prided himself on giving many of his possessions away (1.3.7, 1.4.26, 5.1.28, 8.2.7-9, 8.4.31), derive from his flocks as their shepherd? A handful of passages shed some light on this question. First, in a rare moment of candor,
Cyrus admits to Croesus, the king of Lydia, that he cannot eradicate from himself “that passion for wealth which the gods have put into the human soul and by which they have made us all poor alike,” such that he himself is “as insatiate of wealth as other people are” (8.2.20). Cyrus also tells him “that if I make my friends rich I shall have treasures in them and at the same time more trusty watchers both of my person and our common fortunes than any hired guards I could put in charge” (8.2.19). In another passage, Xenophon states that Cyrus provided physicians and surgeons to care for his subjects, “in order to hold the first place in the affections of those by whom he wished to be beloved” (8.2.24-26). Finally, “Cyrus...endured all sorts of labor and faced all sorts of danger for the sake of praise” (1.2.1). In light of these passages, the answers to the question about what kind of benefits Cyrus derived from being the shepherd would seem to be that he thereby indulged his desires for preeminent wealth, security, affection, and honor.

The analogy between kings and shepherds is a common theme in classical political philosophy (Statesman, 264b-276e; Republic, 343a-344c, 345c-d; Memorabilia, 3.2.1). We can see the extent to which Cyrus’s understanding of the meaning of this analogy may be distinctive among the ancients by briefly comparing it with those suggested by Socrates’ interlocutor Thrasymachus in Plato’s Republic and by both Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates. In the Republic, in opposition to the rhetorician Thrasymachus’ argument that the shepherd’s art per se seeks to benefit the shepherd and exploit the sheep by fattening them for the slaughter, Socrates argues that in fact, strictly speaking, the shepherd’s art actually seeks to benefit his flocks (343a-344c, 345c-d). Similarly, in the course of examining the metaphor between kings and shepherds, Xenophon’s Socrates argues that the virtue of a good leader is nothing but “the making of whomever he leads happy” (Memorabilia, 3.2.1-4). Viewed in light of the disagreement between Thrasymachus on the one hand and both Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates on the other, Cyrus would seem to represent a kind of midpoint on the continuum between their more extreme views that rulers either seek to promote their own interests by ruthlessly exploiting their subjects, as Thrasymachus argues, or that rulers qua ruler are devoid of self-interest and seek only to benefit their subjects, as both Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates maintain. In a nimble balancing act, Cyrus alternately pursues both strategies, which is to say there are probably aspects of his rule Thrasymachus would applaud and other facets that Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates would sanction. Cyrus seeks to benefit his subjects by providing them with equality of opportunity, material gain, honors, security, and the chance to seek revenge and avenge
past wrongs; yet by ruling over the empire he also gratifies his own burning desires to be preeminently loved and honored throughout the world by his subjects. As he proves time and again, Cyrus has an uncanny knack for sizing up his subjects and deciphering what they want. As the conduit to their desires, all he asks in return from the upper classes in the empire is that they love, honor, and obey him as their shepherd, while the lower classes—including especially those unfortunates who happen to be the last to be conquered—must labor to serve his court and in return are from time to time permitted to content themselves by chewing their cud as if they were “beasts of burden” (8.1.44).

**The Hive**

Xenophon’s final metaphor for Cyrus’s empire is the hive, which Cyrus rules over as its leader or *hegemon*. The first allusion to bees in the *Cyropaedia* comes during a revolutionary speech where Cyrus suggests to his commanders that rewards in the army should be distributed according to merit and that those who are lazy should be “weeded out of the ranks” and replaced with others who are more willing to contribute, regardless of their countries of origin (2.2.23-26). Cyrus argues that “when people are bad...because of laziness and indolence, I believe that they, like drones, damage their associates...by the cost of their keeping” (2.2.25). He likens the least industrious among his soldiers to “drones,” which are male bees that have no sting and gather no honey for the hive. Both of these characteristics are significant for understanding the reasons behind Cyrus’s desire to reform his army with fresh recruits. To achieve his multinational empire, he needs soldiers who are willing and capable of harming enemies so as to achieve gain. For these tasks, “drones” who are unwilling to go on campaign and who are already content with their possessions and lot in life simply will not do. They are left behind, as Cyrus’s swarm migrates outward in search of more and more honey.

To the extent that Cyrus’s empire is similar to a hive, then Cyrus himself as its ruler is in some ways like the queen bee. As Artabazus tells his beloved Cyrus:

“But I, king,” he said, “for you seem to me to have been born a king by nature, no less than is the naturally born leader [hegemon] of the bees in the hive, for the bees obey him voluntarily. If he stays in a place, not one leaves it; and if he goes out somewhere, not one abandons him, so remarkably ardent is their innate love of being ruled by him. And human beings seem to me to be somewhat similarly disposed toward you....” (5.1.24-25)
Perhaps out of fear that he might offend Cyrus, Artabazus converts the feminine ‘queen bee’ to which he refers into the masculine *hegemon* or ‘leader’ (it should be noted that there are no king bees in nature). But leaving aside the slight infelicity of the metaphor given Cyrus’s sex, the comparison and indeed even its very limitations nonetheless work nicely on two different levels. First, Artabazus is quite correct that others are drawn to Cyrus as if by instinct. Many of Cyrus’s loyal subjects, including Artabazus himself, follow him almost literally to the ends of the earth and wish to be near him always (5.1.25-26). Second, on a deeper level, the limitations inherent in Artabazus’ metaphor actually presciently foreshadow the bleak conclusion of the *Cyropaedia* and help explain the rapid moral degeneration that occurs across the Persian Empire following Cyrus’s death. Whereas when the queen bee dies, nature promptly provides another for the hive, when Cyrus dies nature is apparently under no obligation to produce another leader with his prodigious talents (Glenn 1992, 155-56). After he dies, there is no one with his knowledge and vision to take his place. This is to say that the extent to which the analogy between Cyrus and the queen bee breaks down bodes very badly for the empire. In Xenophon’s estimation, while reforming human political life by following the model of bees in a hive may produce extraordinary short-term results, in the long term such a blueprint is imprudent and almost certainly destined to fail.

The empire is a shadow of itself without Cyrus because its entire way of life was dependent upon and centered around him. In the absence of law, Cyrus’s sovereign will and decrees became the guiding standard in the empire (1.1.5, 8.1.22, 8.8.1; Whidden 2007, 146; Phillips 2002, 158, 199; Glenn 1992, 153; Farber 1979, 503-4). He is the sole judge of merit and of what is owed to whom (8.1.20). In fact, a select minority of his more discerning subjects occasionally give voice to the futility of questioning or attempting to resist Cyrus’s hegemonic will, instead resigning themselves of necessity to simply always follow his judgment, for good or ill. As the Armenian crown-prince Tigranes tells Cyrus, “[N]ever be surprised when I fail to speak. For my mind has been disciplined not to offer counsel but to do what you command” (5.1.27).

By telling the story of Cyrus’s life and summarizing what came after it, Xenophon suggests that future generations would be wise to note the imprudence and long-term impracticability of basing an entire regime on a born leader such as Cyrus. For in practice, such supremely talented individuals are quite rare, and the possibility that nature will happen to give rise to one at
the necessary time to replace another is unlikely. In this sense, despite the two millennia that separate them, Xenophon very likely would have agreed with Madison’s argument in the Federalist that “It is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust…clashing interests and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.” If Xenophon and Madison are correct, then prudent founders and statesmen would do well to recognize that leaders of Cyrus’s caliber should be encouraged or if necessary forced to resist the temptation to try to use themselves and their talents as a foundation, model, or blueprint for their regimes, thereby creating a situation where they themselves become the sine qua non of their regimes’ ability to function. Born leaders will inevitably pass, and those who come after will almost certainly be unable to maintain their achievements without succumbing to decline, particularly if the right kinds of laws, institutions, and traditions are not there to guide them. Such was the case with Cyrus’s own sons. While the Persian Empire stubbornly persisted under their rule almost in spite of their incompetence, it was a shadow of what it had been under their father, just as they themselves were dim reflections of his greatness.

There is thus a puzzling yet delicious ambiguity at the heart of the Cyropaedia regarding how one should view nature and its relationship to humanity, one befitting an author like Xenophon who likes puzzles and is reluctant to solve every last one of them for his readers (Memorabilia, 1.1.1; Constitution of the Lacedaemonians, 1.1.1). To the extent that Cyrus improves his subjects’ lives, the fact that nature does not provide for another leader like him suggests that she is indifferent or powerless to help control man’s political fortunes. However, to the extent that Cyrus corrupted his subjects and treated some of them as if they were little more than animals and insects, by failing to replace him with another shepherd or hegemon nature would seem to support the human longing for freedom by decreeing that empires modeled on herds and hives contain the seeds of their own corruption and cannot last forever.

Conclusion

In the bleak conclusion to the Cyropaedia, Xenophon argues that immediately after Cyrus’s death “everything took a turn for the worse” (8.8.2). While after Cyrus’s death the Persian Empire would last for just over two centuries into Xenophon’s own time, in his judgment the empire he observed firsthand during his travels and adventures had become “more impious regarding gods, more irreverent regarding relatives, more unjust
regarding others, and more unmanly in what pertains to war than were their predecessors” (8.8.27). For Xenophon, the problem with the Persian Empire that Cyrus created was thus less its instability and more its overall degeneracy, a precondition of which was Cyrus’s ability to make many of his subjects into something less than human, combined with their startlingly frequent willingness to let him. The fact that some of the hounds that had once served Cyrus turn on one another when their shepherd is no longer watching over them, far from being surprising or shocking, is actually quite logical and even predictable.

One lesson that Xenophon seems to have arrived at by studying Cyrus’s life is that under knowledgeable leadership like that of Cyrus political stability is indeed possible, just as he promised in his prologue to the Cyropaedia he would try to show (1.1.3, 1.1.6). But part of what Xenophon came to recognize and part of what he hopes his readers will take away from the Cyropaedia is that political stability per se is not necessarily good. In Xenophon’s judgment, stability at any cost is imprudent and apt to become dehumanizing. Over the course of the Cyropaedia he illustrates that any sort of stability whose inauguration and perpetuation depend on man’s moral corruption is ill-advised and in the end repugnant, not because it will not work, but rather precisely because under the knowledgeable direction of a born leader like Cyrus it will. Those like Xenophon who are led to philosophize about what is and is not possible to achieve through politics can learn from the Cyropaedia that the sort of stability that requires man’s debasement is always a possibility under a born leader like Cyrus who understands that legions of people will be willing to part with their freedom and even their humanity in exchange for gain and security. But though such stability is possible, it is in Xenophon’s judgment not good.

In Cyrus’s estimation, the orderly empire he created was a thing of beauty, whereas for Xenophon it seems to have been a dubious enterprise from its inception and in the end unequivocally abhorrent. Cyrus’s lifelong tendency to reduce the noble to the useful ultimately results in an empire that, while it existed in deed and not simply in the mind or speculations of a philosopher “in speech,” was nonetheless in many ways rather low, base, and ignoble. But unlike Cyrus, Xenophon’s unwillingness to simply equate the noble and the useful gives him a standard or horizon outside the empire’s sheer size and existence by which to judge it. If some of those unfortunate souls who encountered Cyrus came to resemble beasts, as I have suggested, then those more fortunate readers who encounter Xenophon are reminded of their
humanity and its fragility in the face of those ambitious leaders like Cyrus who would use their knowledge to make themselves shepherds and the world their herd. In the course of reading the Cyropaedia, it is therefore Xenophon himself, not Cyrus, who emerges as the true wise man.

I wish to close with a speculation about Leo Strauss, whose monumental and pioneering book On Tyranny, an interpretation of Xenophon’s Hiero, will see its forty-fifth anniversary this year. Strauss taught his students and argued in his three seminal books on Xenophon that Xenophon was in some ways the most modern of the ancient political philosophers (1963, 24-25; 1970, 203-4; 1972, 57). I agree with Strauss’s claims and would only add that, despite Xenophon’s broad agreement with Plato, Xenophon also seems to me to be unique in one respect among Socrates’ students. While both Plato and Xenophon seem to have concluded that the polis will not listen to philosophers and that therefore in practice knowledge cannot solve the most pressing political problems, by studying the life of Cyrus and composing the Cyropaedia, Xenophon seems to have wondered whether the polis might be more amenable to a kind of non-philosophic knowledge more akin to method that does not aim as high as philosophy. The Cyropaedia suggests that lowering the bar makes knowledge more effectual in the short term, but ultimately renders it less beneficial for humankind. As Xenophon illustrates, political life is essentially tragic because the kind of methods like Cyrus’s to which the polis is amenable will not truly help or improve it, while the kind of higher philosophic wisdom that really would benefit it—the kind Xenophon portrays in his Recollections of Socrates—it rejects. Cyrus’s subjects prostrate themselves before him (4.4.13, 8.3.14), but the Athenians put Socrates to death. For Xenophon, that dichotomy would seem to illustrate the crux of the problem regarding the relationship between wisdom and political life, which he spent much of his life trying to understand. Because Xenophon agrees with Plato that the polis will not listen to philosophic wisdom, but especially because Xenophon’s contribution to classical political philosophy is unique in that he also explores the questions of whether the polis can be transformed by less philosophic methods like Cyrus’s and whether such methods would truly benefit the polis, the Cyropaedia and Republic repay being read in conjunction with one another and even form a kind of natural dialectical whole. Viewed in this light, perhaps we begin to get a sense for why no less a figure than Milton could with some justification praise “the divine volumes of Plato and his equal Xenophon” (Milton 1958, 70). And perhaps—though only perhaps—we get a small inkling of one possible reason that Strauss, who published his first article on Xenophon in 1939, came back to the subject of
Xenophon at the end of his remarkable life that had witnessed a century of horrors where various methods proved all-too-effective in transforming political life throughout the world, but woefully incapable of making it better.

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Translations from the Cyropaedia are my own, but throughout I have consulted Wayne Ambler’s translation (Ambler 2001).


Royal Monarchy: “Absolute” Sovereignty in Jean Bodin’s *Six Books of the Republic*

**JOHN F. WILSON**

**UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I AT MANOA**

*johnwils@hawaii.edu*

**INTRODUCTION: PARADIGMS OF THE STATE**

The misinterpretation of Jean Bodin’s political philosophy, habitually understood as both originating and advocating the (modern) state and sovereignty, results from tearing his thinking out of context. In part, the contexts in question are historical and intellectual; but these are the lesser violations. By far the most important context from which Bodin has been ripped is that of his own comprehensive thought. The ruthless, economizing habits of modernity have presented Bodin not in his own terms, but in those held to be usefully progressive. This partialization has served the immediate interests of modernizing statists, in the process defining Bodin as an “early” figure in the development of state theory and doctrine, specifically as the author of a “theory of absolutism” (Franklin 1973, 107). In plainer terms: *The Six Books of the Republic* has been largely ignored or, at best, very selectively read.

The purpose of this essay, however, is not only to help to right an intellectual-historical injustice. As well, it is to suggest the practical consequences entailed by a partial, selective reading of Bodin’s *Republic*. A careful examination of his doctrine of sovereignty reveals this paradox: sovereignty is “absolute” only in the most traditional, and therefore limiting, of circumstances. Conversely, circumstances which are most characteristically modern are those in which sovereignty is least complete and least strong. The suggestion that “the very notion of legal sovereignty,” and specifically Bodin’s political philosophy, “would have been unconceivable without the disintegration of the medieval framework of ideas and institutions” fails to appreciate the essential conservatism of Bodin’s “framework” (Stern 1995, 77-79). The practical implication is this—the doctrine that the state universally and categorically

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possesses absolute sovereignty presents a misleading, falsely flattering picture. Again in plain terms: it makes the state appear to be far more authoritative and independent than it actually is; and, as and when its true weaknesses and limitations are exposed practically, the doctrine of absolute sovereignty leads to widespread skepticism about states specifically and political life generally.

To begin to enter into Bodin’s philosophical context requires a paradigm shift or, more modestly, the establishing of some intellectual distance from the existing statist paradigm. The foundational premise of this paradigm is that states are the ultimate governing reality. This prideful supposition is completely strange and foreign to Bodin. He assumes the existence of a higher, active governing power, which he terms “that most mighty king.” The “state” of this king is the universe, understood as an object of caring. Understood thus, the king’s domain is a state of being, comprehending every aspect of existence from the spiritual and metaphysical to the material. It is the ordering of this comprehensive existence that constitutes governing, and that serves as a model for mortal kings, especially those termed “royal monarchs.” Their states, first of soul and understanding, then of political and material existences, are to approximate the comprehensive, universal state as fully as possible.

Bodin, then, thinks and writes within the paradigm of divine government. This government is less a theocracy, with its implication of priestly rule, than a theodicy. The existence of good and evil is taken for granted, as is the preponderance of good over evil. Since, for the most part, it is not necessary to establish good, and since it is not possible, and therefore not advisable, to (attempt to) eradicate evil, the work of governing is both placed in perspective and lightened. Since the human state is not ultimate, it is important but not finally decisive: Bodin agrees with Aristotle’s remark in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that “political science [poliike] or prudence [phronesis] is [not] the loftiest kind of knowledge, inasmuch as man is not the highest thing in the world [kosmos]” (Aristotle 1968, 343 [1141a21-22]). In other words: decision-making occurs within a state (of soul) subsequent to very thorough reflection on the comprehensive, enveloping order. Much of this reflection is “theological,” but in a specifically moral sense. The highest human understanding is expanded to include not only moral virtues, but also—and it is here that paradigms clash—a healthy or (some may say) unhealthy helping of faith.

**Containment**

The corrective to a false optimism and subsequent pessimism about the authority and power of the sovereign state is the fuller reading of
the Republic that places ordinary political life in Bodin’s comprehensive philosophical perspective. In general terms, this perspective is one of “containment.” The premise of containment is partiality; that is, the partiality of each thing, and each kind of thing, that comprises each whole. Further: until the final degree of wholeness and oneness is reached, each lesser whole is itself a part. Lesser wholes contain parts, and are themselves contained by greater wholes, until their final inclusion in the comprehensive whole. Given this premise, there is no (kind of) thing which is not contained. Whether or not, so to speak, “locally” acknowledged, containment limits. This limitation is not lateral or oppositional, but hierarchical: it is of the very essence of containment that each thing contained is lesser than that which contains it. “Lesser” may mean less extensive or numerous, but it is fundamentally an evaluation. The containing thing is greater in value than the contained thing. To take an obvious example: a family is greater and more containing than any one of its members. The authority of, say, a given parent is contained and limited by the familial framework which is the reason for its existence.

Taken in its own terms, Bodin’s treatment of “state” and “sovereignty” is intelligible only within the framework of containment. This means that state and sovereignty are not themselves comprehensive, final frameworks. However offensive this claim may be to Hobbesian-Hegelian state science, it is beginning to make good sense to us, in this era of globalization. Both the limits of the state, and its position of relative subordination, have begun to be practically apparent to students of international relations. Unfortunately, this empirical understanding of the state has not been steadily informed by a full reading of Bodin on “sovereignty” and “absoluteness” (Rudolph 2005, 16). The implication is clear enough: Bodin’s thinking is pre-modern. Further: this mode of thought has much in common with post-modern thinking. Each is aware of a multiplicity of perspectives, and of the limitations imposed by adopting any one of these perspectives. This multi-perspectivism induces an awareness of complexity. For Bodin, this awareness is qualified by containment, which grades perspectives according to their comprehensiveness. Post-modern thinkers may be uneasy with this evaluation; but the de-centering of the sovereign state provides a considerable area of agreement, and therefore a place from which to ponder the difficulties of modern, statist thinking.

Containment is a wonderfully inclusive philosophical perspective. At the most general level, that which is higher contains that which is lower. The psychological expression of this generality is that the understanding
contains all other mental and emotional faculties. The highest political expression of understanding is what Bodin terms “royal monarchy.” Royal monarchy, and only royal monarchy, expresses a state of sovereign understanding, the highest and only “absolute” kind of sovereignty. Other states are less truly sovereign, but in all political circumstances the state contains the government. As a limited, impermanent version of the state, the government contains partisan political activity, which itself restrains the political ambitions of individual persons. This descending scale is—when and as well ordered—harmonious: for Bodin, the inclusive form of justice is harmonic justice, containing the arithmetic (equalitarian) and geometric (proportional and therefore non-equalitarian) versions. It is the highest function of sovereign understanding, divinely and then royally, to provide harmonic justice.

The development of this scheme of containment, accompanied by the display of Bodin’s vast learning, requires many hundreds of thousands of words. Nowhere is it stated in anything like the succinct version just given: it is up to the reader either to understand it implicitly or to figure it out. My presentation of it, in its essential parts, will be necessarily brief. It is intended as an exercise in restoration, placing state and sovereignty back in what Bodin considers to be their proper place. But restoration is more than a replacing; it is also a reconditioning. The properly placed or positioned sovereign state is also the healthy sovereign state. It is Bodin’s deepest conviction that a healthy condition of a state depends upon a very high and rare kind of understanding. This makes any exercise in restoration first of all an exercise in understanding.

The single best statement of containment occurs in the final paragraph of the Sixth—and last—Book:

And so betwixt beasts and angels God hath placed man, who is in part mortall, and in part immortall: binding also this elementarie world, with the heavens or the celestiall world, by the aethereall region. And as a discord sometimes (as we said) giveth grace unto the sweetest Harmonie: so God hath here in this world mingled the bad with the good, and placed vertues in the middest of vices, bringing forth also certaine monsters in nature, and suffering the eclipses and defects of the celestiall lights: as also the Surd reasons in Geometricall demonstrations: to the end that thereof might arise the greater good, and that by such meanes the power and beautie of Gods works might be the better knowne, which might otherwise have beene hid and folded up in most thicke and obscure darkenesse.
Bodin then refers to God’s intention in “[harden[ing] Pharaoh] heart” toward the Hebrews:

> But there lieth hidden therein a more divine meaning than [a true report], concerning the great Pharaoh, the worker and father of all mischief, whome the sacred Scriptures declare by the name of Leviathan: and yet in this all the divines agree, this of all others the greatest enemie of God and man, to bee still by the becke, word, and power of God, kept in and restrained: and all the force and power of those mischieves and evils by him and his wrought (which we so much both fret and marvell at, and without which the power of the good should neither bee, neither yet be at all perceived) to be shut up within the bounds of this elementarie world: and above the same to be nothing but that which is holy and cleane from all filth and wickednesse; in such sort, as that that little staine of evils here shall much more profit than hurt. (Bodin 1962, 793)

Perhaps no proposition could be simpler, and yet more perplexing, than this: good contains evil. It means both that evil (or badness, or mischief) is a part of good; and that good, as greater, keeps in (or restrains, or shuts up) evil. It implies this: there is not an absolute qualitative difference between good and evil, but there is a quantitative difference. Unless there is greater good in the world than evil, existence would be an equiposed struggle between the two, rather than a situation of containment. This is consistent with Bodin’s argument that good is higher than evil, celestial rather than terrestrial or “elementarie.” Being greater in quantity, good is able to surround evil, and keep it in. The very act of enclosing, however, means that good cannot expel evil to some place of its own; and therefore that good will never be free of the sight of evil or, as Bodin states it, evil’s “little staine.” Further: good must do more than merely tolerate evil; it must understand and even appreciate it. In part, this understanding is necessary due to the absence of an absolute qualitative difference between good and evil: good acknowledges some evil in itself. Beyond this acknowledgment, good is able to know itself only through the recognition of evil, in itself.

The meaning of moral strength follows from containment. Good does not exactly struggle against evil, as its mortal enemy, any more than harmony struggles against discord, or geometry struggles against surds. Acknowledging that evil is a part of all existence, good shows its strength by not attempting to eliminate or expel evil. Finally, good is not afraid of evil, because good understands that evil should and must and will be contained. As will be seen shortly, there is an important element of faith in understanding. Good believes in itself and its strength, and therefore knows that evil has its
In subordinate place. This understanding allows good to restrain itself in its restraint of evil. In sum: the strength of goodness is the strength of self-restraint.

Bodin’s characterization of Leviathan as “the greatest enemy of God and man” both does and does not anticipate Thomas Hobbes’s identification of the state—understood now in modern terms, as a power formation—as “Leviathan.” For Bodin, the state is not per se evil, or the “greatest enemy” of goodness. Contained and in its place, the state is necessary, as are the ordinary practices of politics. But any doctrine of general absolute sovereignty, let alone Hobbes’s deification of the state as “that Mortall God,” violates containment (Hobbes 1968, 227). It removes the state from the constraints which limit its actions, in the process making the state the sole judge of its own behavior—that is, the sole authority on right and wrong, good and evil. In other words: to the extent to which the state is sovereign in the modern, Hobbesian sense of the term, to that extent the state becomes Leviathan as Bodin uses that word. The state contains the potential for evil; and the uncontained state releases this potential.

The condition for self-restraint, then, appears to be a certain kind of “monarchical” freedom; namely, freedom from enemies. An enemy is an ill-intentioned opposing equal. An enemy exists horizontally: its placement is, or aspires to be, equivalent to our placement. Enemies attempt to displace one another and, within a context of struggling for success, their conflict is unrestrained. This is the most natural and familiar perspective of and for states, considered as sovereign equals; and for statesmen, competing for greater or for supreme power. In this context, restraint is not to be expected. But this is not Bodin’s context: containment is. It follows that there must be someone within the framework of containment who is free from enemies, whose placement is vertical and not horizontal. There must be someone who is the equivalent of goodness in relation to evil. It will be seen that “absoluteness” is intimately related to this freedom.

Understanding

Some preliminary drawing together begins to become possible, as this sort of placement is considered. Understanding apprehends complexes of equivalents: this apprehension requires good faith—or, faith in goodness—as well as intellectual power. Harmony is the goal:

[T]he wise prince shall set his subjects in a most sweet quiet, bound together with an indissoluble bond one of them unto another,
together with himselfe, and the Commonweale. As is in the foure first numbers to bee seene: which God hath in Harmonicall proportion disposed to show unto us, that the Royal estate is Harmonicall, and also to be Harmonically governed. [These numbers are discussed.] Now the soveraigne prince is exalted above all his subjects, and exempt out of the ranke of them: whose majestie suffereth no more division than doth the unitie it selfe, which is not set or accounted among the numbers howbeit that they all from it take both their force and power. But the three estates stand orderly disposed as they are, and as they always have yet been in every well ordered Commonweale[.][The ecclesiastical, martial, and common orders are considered briefly.]

These estates are then related to the soul of the individual person:

Which is also declared, and in some sort figured even in the nature of man himselfe, being the verie true image of a well ordered Commonweale: and that not in his bodie only, which still hath but one head, and all the rest of the members aptly fitted thereunto; but even in his mind also, wherein Understanding holdeth the chiefe place, Reason the next, the Angrie Power desirous of revenge, the third, and brutish lust and desire the last. Whereof the mind or understanding like unto the unitie in numbers indivisible, pure, and simple, is of it selfe free from all concretion, and from all the other faculties of the soule apart separated and divided[.] [The equivalents of these faculties in the various estates of the political order are mentioned.]

The implications of these orderings for regimes are considered:

And as many men for lacke of understanding live like beasts, moved with that only which is present and before them, without mounting any higher unto the contemplation of things intellectual and divine, whom the sacred scriptures call also beasts: even so also the Aristocratique and popular Commonweales without understanding, that is to say, without a prince, are in some sort able to maintaine and defend themselves, though not long: being indeed about to become much more happie if they had a soveraigne prince, which with his authoritie and power might (as doth the understanding) reconcile all the parts, and so unite and bind them fast in happinesse together[.][Bodin 1962, 790-91]

Strictly in terms of equivalents, Bodin is arguing that the prince is unity is understanding is sovereignty is harmony is justice. Smoothed out a bit, this results: harmonical justice is the political unity provided by the understanding of the sovereign prince. Herein lies authority: authority orders according to (the) understanding. In other words: authority arranges. But this
is a very special kind of arranging. It is an arranging which is a reconciliation. The parts, the orders, the persons do not fit nicely together naturally. The authority that is sovereign understanding, understands this. This is more than a high sort of political skill: it is an understanding of the nature and character of each (kind of) thing that must be placed in proper relation to each other thing. In this sense, the sovereign prince must be a practical philosopher.

Something further is implied. The prince is a natural unity; but this unity contains parts. Somehow, the prince must discern the elements of, and differences among, persons and types of persons in himself. In this apprehension of human complexity, the prince is Everyman. The first unity to be fashioned by understanding is the unity of his individual person. For this to occur, an extraordinary kind and degree of perception and discipline is necessary. So, too, is tolerance, of the variety of human impulses which exists. The principle of containment dictates that these impulses be recognized; that they not be despised, or crushed; but neither that they be indulged without restraint. As Bodin suggests with his frequent references to the arts, above all music, the prince is a composer, first of all of his harmoniously arranged and integrated character.

Taken as a comprehending unity, understanding is a state of soul. Bodin’s extended contrast between a king and a tyrant begins thus:

Now, the greatest difference betwixt a king and a tyrant is, for that a king conformeth himselfe unto the lawes of nature, which the tyrant at his pleasure treadeth underfoot: the one of them respecteth religion, justice, and faith; whereas the other regardeth neither God, faith, nor law: the one of them referreth all his actions to the good of the Commonweale, and safetie of his subjects; whereas the other respecteth nothing more than his owne particular profit, revenge, or pleasure…

And ends—many hundreds of words later—thus:

Which so many and notable gifts; if they chaunce by the grace and goodnesse of God to bee given to any good prince: we then esteeme of him, as of a God, sent even down from heaven into the earth here amongst us. (Bodin 1962, 212-13)

Does the good king—the royal monarch—contain something of the tyrant? Bodin argues for this sort of inclusion in a passage identified marginally as “A True Paradox”:

Now they that praise the goodnes, bountie, and courtesie of a prince, without wisedom; are themselves unwise and ignorant in
matters of state, abusing therein both their praises and leasure: for asmuch as such simplicitie without wisdome is most dangerous and pernitious unto a king, and much more to be feared than is the great severitie of a cruell, covetous, and inaccessible prince. So that it seemeth our auntient fathers not without cause to have used this Proverbe, That of a craftie and subtell [Fr. meschant] man is made a good king... for by the too much sufferance and simplicitie of too good a king, it commeth to passe that flatterers, extorcioners, and men of most wicked disposition, without respect, injoy the principall honors, office, charges, benefits, and preferments of the Commonwealth, spoiling the revenues of the state: wherby the poore people are gnawne unto the verie bones, and cruelly made slaves unto the great: in somuch as that instead of one tirant, there is ten thousand. (Bodin 1962, 217)

The paradox is this: that which would be wicked and evil in a private person may be necessary and, on occasion, laudable in a king. This sounds Machiavellian; but, given Bodin’s sustained contrast between king and tyrant, it is the opposite. The tyrant, like the weak, simple, “too good” king, is a private person wielding—or, in the case of the unwise king, not yielding—public power. In both cases, “under such a prince the publique good is turned into particular” (Bodin 1962, 217). Neither the tyrant nor the weak king contains evil or weakness; as simple, as private, as particular, they are these things. The good king is not free from cruelty or weakness: but, given his gifts “by the grace and goodnesse of God,” the extremes of severity and weakness are contained by (the) understanding of their necessary, limited usages.

ROYAL MONARCHY AND BODIN’S GREAT DISCOVERY

The existence of this ordered, proportioned complexity in a single person is more than human. It cannot be accounted for except as a God-given gift. Bodin thinks that faith and respect for religion are included in this gift. This means that understanding is not solely an intellectual virtue: it is a composite, comprehensive, supervising state of soul. This “state” exists only in a “royal” monarch. It does not exist in a “lordly” monarchy, “where the prince is become lord of the goods and persons of his subjects, by law of armes and lawfull warre; governing them as the master of a familie doth his slaves”; and, of course, it does not exist in a tyranny (Bodin, 1962, 200). The lordly monarchy may be just, but it is a justice grounded in natural, largely physical, superiority. A confusion of the “dominion” exercised by the lordly monarch with the understanding caring provided by the royal monarch is one of the roots of generalizing “absolute sovereignty” and, in turn, discrediting and rejecting the monarchical form entirely (Franklin 1973, 26, 84). Given the
absence of harmonical justice, those under a lord are inferior “subjects,” not “enjoying their naturall liberty, and propertie of their goods” (Bodin 1962, 200). With ordered liberty provided, the harmony of the royal situation replicates the divinely given order of the comprehensive whole.

The supposition of a royal monarchy is profoundly consequential. That which is lower—natural superiority, power and force, violence, cruelty, selfishness—is contained by divinely endowed sovereign understanding. The latter may be rare, but it is the condition for harmony, the highest and best form of justice. It is also the condition for Bodin’s great discovery, and great contribution to political science:

Now Monarchie is divided into three forms: for he that hath the soveraigntie, is either lord of all: or else a king, or a tyrant, which maketh no diversitie of Commonweals, but proceedeth of the diversitie of the governour in the Monarchie. For there is great difference betwixt the state, and the government of the state: a rule in policie (to my knowledge) not before touched by any man: for the state may be in a Monarchie, and yet the government nevertheless popular; if the king do distribute all places of commaund, magistracie, offices, and preferments indifferently unto all men, without regard of their nobilitie, wealth, or vertue. But if the prince shall give all command, honors, and offices, unto the nobilitie onely, or to the rich, or to the valiant, or to the vertuous onely, it shall be a royall Monarchie, and that simple and pure, but yet tempered in maner of an Aristocracie. …[W]hich varietie of government hath deceived them which have made a mixture of Commonweals, and so made more sorts thereof then three, without having regard that the state of a Commonweal is different from the administration and government of the same[.] (Bodin 1962, 199-200)

The most fundamental question raised by this passage is the meaning of the term “state.” Leaving “diversitie” aside, three entities are in play—“government,” “state,” and “commonweal.” The first and last are, more or less, commonsensical. The government consists of officials who administer: the commonwealth is the country, in the natural and geographical senses, but especially the political sense. The commonwealth (or republic) has a government: but why does, or must, it also have a state? What “rule in policie” is it that Bodin has discovered that was “not before touched by any man?”

The answer to this question is philosophically and practically inseparable from the idea of a royal monarchy. As Bodin indicates, both the government and the state of a monarchy (or monarchical commonwealth) may vary. Concerning the latter: there is a very great difference between the
“states” of a royal monarchy and a tyranny. This difference is felt throughout the commonwealths of a good king and a tyrant, respectively. It is a difference in the moral atmosphere which is breathed, and the moral environment experienced. The state is neither officialdom nor territory, although it influences both. Instead, it is the temper and character and spirit of a given commonwealth. This moral quality—in more contemporary terms, this political culture—is imparted above all by the character of the ruler or rulers. It might be said that this quality is analogous to the soul of the ruler: but, given the likelihood of a sovereign monarch, good or bad, there is more than an analogy at work. The state of a commonwealth is, very often, its soul not metaphorically but personally. Sovereign understanding characterizes the (state of) soul of the royal monarch: Alexander Passerin D’Entrèves intimates something of this idea of “state” in his remark that “the word état retains in [Bodin’s] work its narrower meaning of condition or order” (D’Entrèves 1967, 32). This usage makes possible the argument that each commonwealth has a distinctive state, optimally a condition of harmonical justice. Further: it is the ordered unity of the soul of the royal monarch—a unity conspicuously absent in a tyrant, and less well-proportioned in a lordly monarch—that provides the comprehensive wholeness implicit in the idea of a “state.”

Is it, then, the state that contains all else in a given commonwealth? In other words: given that the state is not identical with the commonwealth, is the former nevertheless coterminous with the latter? It is again useful to think in terms of the sovereign understanding—the soul—of the royal monarch. This is the best case of the state in its truest and most profound meaning. Of course, the king is not physically coextensive with the commonwealth. Nevertheless, the king, who is the “person of state,” comprehends the commonwealth: the state of the commonwealth is incorporated in the royal monarch. If there is to be unity (and thus “sovereignty”), then its (the commonwealth’s) condition is his condition; and his condition is its condition. This incorporation is not possible for the lordly monarch, who, however just, is a conqueror; and of course not for the tyrant, who alternates terror with negligence. But neither is it possible for the aristocrat who, however public-spirited, will always have “horizontal” rivals and competitors. It is evident again that royal monarchy, the truest form of a state, is divinely granted. Only the royal monarch is in a position—elevated—to contain.

This understanding of “state” has become difficult to grasp, since it is intangible in relation to the physical senses. The state is a practical moral power, the more complete and comprehensive to the extent to which it is
a unification of distinct, complementary parts. Again, the motif is harmony, an overall coordination supervised by the sovereign understanding of a royal monarch. But the state is not mystical or mysterious, unless it is dogmatically assumed that human beings are reducible to merely physical beings. If human beings are understood as human, able to apprehend and respond to diverse moral atmospheres, then the state is rightly understood as the human condition of a given commonwealth. More simply: it is the permanent “state of affairs” of a commonwealth.

THE MEANING OF ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY

Bodin’s discovery of state and his contribution to political science rest on sustained reflection upon royal monarchy, in relation to other sorts of commonwealths. The state of royal monarchy contains the lower, more conflictive aspects of human behavior most fully. This fortunate monarch is in a position between the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the political. In a somewhat paradoxical way, absoluteness is a function of this intermediate position. A royal monarchy contains because it is contained; possesses “absolute” sovereignty because it is not highest, and superior to all things—that is, emphatically is not “the ultimate holder of power” (D’Entréves 1967, 102); and is the epitome of a state because it is not an ultimately independent power:

We have moreover said in our definition, that the subjects ought to be obedient unto the Royall Monarch, to show that in him alone lyeth the soveraigne majestie; [and] that the king ought to obey the lawes of nature: that is to say, to governe his subjects, and to guide his actions according unto naturall justice, whose luster was brighter than the light of the sunne it selfe. It is then the true marke of a Royall Monarchie, when the prince sheweth himselfe as obedient unto the lawes of nature, as he wisheth his subjects to be unto himselfe.

Although the royal monarch is not the government per se, in this state the monarchy is both governed and governing. It is governed by the laws of God and nature; and it governs through the translation of these laws into public regulations and policies. The intended result is “a most sweet harmony, which may with wonderfull pleasure and felicitie blesse [both subjects and prince]. This is that regall and lawfull Monarchie of one, which we seeke after…” (Bodin 1962, 205).

As Bodin understands the larger scheme of things, then, sovereignty is absolute only when it is contained. In categorical terms, only the
royal monarch can be an absolute sovereign. As indicated, the royal monarch—and the royal monarch alone—is at once free and bound. To a great extent, this king is free because others are free. There is not a subjugated population, both in need of constant, parent-like supervision and yet, because they have been conquered and suppressed, potentially a faction to be feared. As Bodin argues, “And if it so chaunce the Lordly Monarch having justly conquered his enemies countrey, to set them againe at libertie, with the proprietie of their goods; of a lord he becommeth a king, and chaunge the Lordly Monarchie, into a Monarchie Royall” (Bodin 1962, 204). All other states—that is, common practical moral situations—are situations of division, antagonism, fear, and danger:

But seditions, factions, and civill warre, are in a manner continuall: yea, sometimes greater for the attaining unto offices, in Aristocraticall and Popular commonweales, than for the state in a Monarchie; the which admits no sedition for offices, nor for the state, but after the death of the prince, and that very seldome. But the chiefe point of a commonweale, which is the right of soveraigntie, cannot be, nor subsist (to speake properly) but in a Monarchie: for none can be soveraigne in a commonweale but one alone; if they be two, or three, or more, no one is soveraigne, for that no one of them can give or take a law from his companion. And although we imagin a bodie of many lords, or of a whole people to hold the soveraigntie; yet hath it no true ground, nor support, if there bee not a head with absolute and soveraigne power, to unite them together: the which a simple magistrat without soveraigne authoritie cannot do. And if it chance that the lords, or the tribes of the people be divided (as it often falls out) then must they fall to armes one against another. (Bodin 1962, 715)

The meaning of “absolute” is evident from this passage. Simply and essentially, it means to be free. The specific freedom in question is freedom of human action, unencumbered by a superior or an equal. This is the freedom of unity, of a state not rendered less free by any divisions within or without one’s self. Of course external divisions exist; but these are at the level of government and officeholders, not of the state. The royal monarch is absolute because he is alone in a position, a situation, of acting freely.

One of the major advantages of Bodin’s state–government distinction is that much of the characteristic philosophical antipathy to politics is negated. To the extent to which any government follows from and therefore incorporates political divisions, a rational, apolitical administration is an impossibility. The philosophical predisposition for unity and order in govern-
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ing is bound to be frustrated, typically resulting in a flight to more rational endeavors. One consequence of the philosophical distaste for discord is to render it much easier to confuse “government” with “state,” especially by those (temporarily) holding political power. In this confused situation, the inevitable irrationalities of political activity are likely to be given much freer rein. Those who might be instructed to consider themselves situated and defined by a philosophically informed political science are let loose to think in terms first of “sovereignty,” and then of “absolute” sovereignty. In this mistaken orientation toward absoluteness, the royal and sovereign understanding of the inclusion of (political) discord in harmony is lost. There is an echo of this understanding in American constitutionalism. While Publius must reject the introduction of “a will independent of the society itself” in Federalist 51, constitutional arrangements anticipate that ordinary political conflict will be both included and contained (Hamilton et al. 1961, 325).

To be unencumbered (at the human level) is not to be uncontained. The royal monarch is in this uniquely “absolute” situation or state: he is freely bound. That is: the royal monarch is bound because he has freely chosen to be bound. The foundation of this choice is understanding; specifically, the understanding that the “state of the commonwealth” is contained by the laws of God and nature. These are the true superiors of the royal monarch. They rule this “absolute” ruler from above, even as the royal monarch stands above and rules his people. This is a gentle sort of rule, and as such contains possible dangers. That is: there are possible dangers implicit in this rule, dangers which may be contained provided that this rule is not overly mild and gentle. Bodin considers a probable advantage of the lordly monarch thus:

And the reason why the Lordly Monarchie is more durable than the royall, is for that it is more majesticall, and that the subjects hold not their lives, goods, and libertie, but of the soveraigne prince, who hath by just warre conquered them; which plucketh downe the courage of subjects, so that the slave acknowledging his condition, becommeth humble, abject, and having as they say a base and servile hart. Where to the contrary, men free borne, and lords of their owne goods in a royall Monarchie, if one would make them slaves, or take from them that theirs is, they would not take it, but easily rebell, bearing noble harts, nourished in libertie, and not abastardised with servitude. (Bodin 1962, 204)

Then: just as the royal monarch is freely bound by higher laws, so too are the free individuals in a royal monarchy subject to the king. Each is in a state of free submission, in possession of that which is rightly and properly his.
The idea of this “state of free submission” sheds some further light on the meaning of “absolute.” As mentioned, the essential meaning of “absolute” is “a condition of freedom.” Within a universe of containment, this condition is dependent upon the closely related notions of “being absolved” and of “absolution.” Before discussing the situation of the royal monarch in relation to a free people, the case of the absolution—and therefore the “absolute” status—of an individual subject will be considered. Bodin remarks that:

Some one subject may be dispensed withall, and absolved from all the laws, ordinances and customes of his Commonweale, and commaundement of the magistrat; and yet be neither prince, nor soveraigne. Example we have of Pompey the great, who was dispensed withall from the lawes for five yeres, by expresse decree of the people, published at the request of Gabinius the Tribune, at such time as extraordinarie power was given him to make warre against the pirats:...yet he that is so exempted from one law, or mo[r]e, or all lawes, is for all that alwaies in the subjection and obeysance of them which have the soveraigntie: yea although he bee for ever absolved from all the lawes of his countrey. (Bodin 1962, 90-91)

Were the relevant terminology to be used in this example, Pompey would be called an “absolute subject”; that is, a subject absolved (temporarily) from all legal restraints, but nonetheless still under the command of the sovereign (people).

The situation of the royal monarch is somewhat different from that of an absolved—and therefore “absolute”—subject. This situation is best understood by separating the terms “absolute” and “sovereign,” as Bodin does in this quite characteristic statement:

This so great a power given by the people unto the king, may wel be called absolute and soveraigne, for that it hath no condition annexed thereunto, other than is by the law of God and nature com-maunded. (Bodin 1962, 89)

The royal monarch is absolute in this precise sense: he has been absolved—that is, freed from—all positive human law. This is a reasonably full statement of the “absolute” status of a sovereign, in relation to divine, natural, and human law:

If then the soveraigne prince be exempted from the lawes of his predecessors, much lesse should he be bound unto the lawes and ordinances he maketh himselfe: for a man may well receive a law from another man, but impossible it is in nature for to give a law
unto himselfe, no more than it is to commaund a mans selfe in a matter depending of his owne will… And as the Pope can never bind his owne hands (as the Canonists say;) so neither can a soveraigne prince bind his owne hands, albeit that he would. Wee see also in the end of all edicts and lawes, these words, Quia sic nobis placuit, Because it hath so pleased us: to give us to understand, that the lawes of a soveraigne prince, although they be grounded upon good and lively reasons, depend nevertheless upon nothing but his meere and franke good will. But as for the lawes of God and nature, all princes and people of the world are unto them subject: neither is it in their power to impugne them, if will not be guiltie of high treason to the divine majestie, making warre against God; under the greatness of whome all monarckes of the world ought to beare the yoke, and to bow their heads in all feare and reverence. (Bodin 1962, 91-92)

The royal monarch is absolute, or in a state of absolution, as a condition of his sovereignty. This situation is a possibility only in a royal monarch. In any other “state of commonwealth” either power has been seized, justly or unjustly, by force; or two or more individuals consider themselves to be equals, so “that no one of them can give or take a law from his companion.” Again, the keynote or theme of the composition which is royal monarchy is free and willing submission:

If such absolute power bee given him purely and simply, without the name of a magistrat, governour, or lieutenant, or other forme of deputation; it is certaine that such a one is, and may call himselfe a Soveraigne Monarch: for so the people hath voluntarily disleised [Fr. delaisser] and disployed it selfe of the soveraigne power, to sease and invest another therein; having on him, and upon him transported all the power, authoritie, prerogatives, and soveraignties thereof: as if a man should by pure gift deliver unto another man the proprietie and possession that unto him belongeth: in which case such a perfect donation admitteth no conditions. In which sort the regall law is by the lawyer said to have bene made in these words, Cum Populus ei [et] in eum omnem potestatem contulit: when as the people conferred unto him, and on him all their power. (Bodin 1962, 88)

The absolute sovereignty of the royal monarch is well understood through the notions of “complete” and “complement,” two derivatives of the Latin verb complère, “to fill up.” The royal monarch and the people complement one another. The royal monarch, unencumbered by the restraints of the existing positive law, is free to rule: the people, believing in the political goodness of the royal monarch, submit freely to being ruled. Separately, each is
a part of a commonwealth: together, they complete it, and may reasonably be said to constitute the “state” of the commonwealth. In this sense, the state is what “fills up” the commonwealth; not with power or riches or people, but with a mutual regard or respect. This respect is characteristic of free persons who have chosen to recognize limits, and to live, contained, within them.

Royal Promises

It is the case, however, that the prince is freer than his subjects. In the moral universe of containment, this means that he is more bound. That is: the royal monarch is the exemplar, and the prime source, of establishing mutual respect. While the sovereign prince is not—and cannot be—bound by positive law, he is bound by his oaths to a higher, divine power; and also bound by any particular contracts which he may conclude. Bodin’s reasoning on this point is indicative of the practical moral status—the state—of royal monarchy:

… [W]e may draw another rule of estate, that is to wit, that the soveraigne prince is bound unto the contracts by him made, bee it with his subject, or with a straunger: for seeing he is the warrant to his subjects of the mutual conventions and obligations that they have one of them against another: of how much more reason is he the debter of justice in his own fact, and so bound to keep the faith and promises by himselfe given and made to others?...For that of his promise there is a double bond; the one for the naturall equitie thereof: for what can be more agreeing unto naturall equitie, than to have just promise kept? The other, for the honour of the prince himselfe, who is bound to keepe his promise, although it be unto his losse; for that he is the formall warrant to all his subjects, of the faith that they have amongst them; as also for that there is no more detestable crime in a prince, than to bee false of his oath and promise. And that is it for which the soveraigne prince ought alwaies in justice to bee lesse respected or releveed than his subjects, when question is of his promise. (Bodin 1962, 106)

In these practical, everyday situations, it is promises that contain, and especially contain the royal monarch. It is a matter of honor; but, more than this, it is serving as a living example of good faith, thus encouraging others to follow this example. For Bodin, the fidelity of the people depends heavily on the fidelity of the sovereign.

This would seem to make the taking of an oath of investiture or coronation unproblematic. However, it is anything but. Understandably, Bodin insists at length that the royal monarch should not and, in the logic of “absolute” sovereignty, cannot swear to uphold the existing laws. He is free
from, if not exactly “above,” these laws. Then, there is a the question of the honor of the monarch: “For the word of a prince ought to bee as an Oracle; which looseth his dignity, if his subjects have so evill an opinion of him, as not to beleewe him except he sweare…” (Bodin 1962, 93). The third objection to the oath follows from this assumption of the implicit honor and fidelity of the prince. Given that the prince is, as a (prospective) royal monarch, bound by the laws of God and nature to do justice and to act for the common good, it may well be argued that nothing is added to this duty by affirming that it exists and binds.

In a practical sense, the sum of these objections is this: the taking of an oath is misleading. It may seem to bind the sovereign prince in ways that he is not bound. Understanding, practical wisdom, and sound judgment are the essence of the state (of soul) of the royal monarch. Is it the case that taking or not taking an oath can either provide or disturb this state? Bodin does not address this question explicitly; but his implicit answer is “yes.” He gives a number of examples of royal oaths, which begin as follows: “I…, by the grace of God forthwith to become king…, on the day of my investing, do promise before God and his Saints…”; “I sweare by the name of the Almighty God, and promise well and duly to governe my subjects…”; “I…Sweare unto almighty God…” (Bodin 1962, 94). Bodin disapproves of the latter oath, not because it is sworn to God, but because it is too “precise,” promising to “keepe all the lawes, liberties, publick and privat priveleges…”; “But this forme of oath sauvoureth not of royall majestie, but the condition of a meaner prince, such an one as (amongst others) is chiefe in a Commonweale” (ibid., 94-95)

Bodin’s objection suggests this: the royal oath is an acknowledgment of the sovereign’s relationship to God. This relationship is one of subordination. The royal monarch is not one “amongst others”: he is one “between” all of his countrymen, and God. Not “lord of men” but “king of these men,” the royal monarch promises to obey the laws appropriate to one whose primary and conscious subordination is to God. These laws may not be breached without diminishing the status—the state—of the royal monarch. In other words: this subordination is the continuous testing of royal monarchy. It determines whether the prince possesses sovereign understanding, not in the details of ruling, but fundamentally and comprehensively. Taking the oath is the beginning of this testing. All of the panoply of monarchy aside, the manner of the prince’s participation in the investiture ceremony begins to reveal his understanding, or relative lack thereof. In sum: the oath is the point of departure for royal monarchy.
The oath, in its implications, sets a very high standard; or, in the terms germane to Bodin’s frame of reference, it suggests the granting of gifts “by the grace and goodnesse of God.” As stated earlier, if these gifts are given, “we then esteeme of [a good prince], as of a God, sent even down from heaven into the earth here amongst us.” This state is not ordinary government, carried on by those whose understanding is less. But the extraordinary status of royal monarchy is Bodin’s most essential point. Only given these gifts—gifts which are faithfully maintained and exercised by the monarch—can a sovereign be absolute. Far from the least of these gifts is the human environment provided to the royal monarch. As paradoxical as it may seem, only a free people largely capable of most aspects of self-government is able to receive and endorse a royal monarchy. In eschatological terms, heaven on earth—or some approximation of it—is not for scoundrels and sinners. As argued repeatedly, absoluteness is freedom; and freedom is for those, prince and people, who do not abuse it.

**Conclusion: “A Certaine Secure Care”**

Bodin ends the *Republic* with these words:

And so every good thing commanding over that which is worse, with a certaine combining of powers keepeth all things under most right and lawful commands. Wherefore what the unitie is in numbers, the understanding in the powers of the soule, and the center in a circle: so likewise in this world that most mightie king, in unitie simple, in nature indivisible, in puritie most holy, exalted farre above the Fabrike of the celestiall Spheres, joining this elementarie world with the celestiall and intelligible heavens; with a certaine secure care preserveth from distruccion this triple world, bound together with a most sweet and Harmonicall consent: unto the imitation of whome, every good prince which wisheth his Kingdome and Commonweale not in safetie onely, but even good and blessed also, is to frame and conform himselfe. (Bodin 1962, 794)

“Absolute,” “sovereign,” and “state,” terms that came to be run together with little regard either for their distinctive individual meaning or the extent of their combined coherence, in Bodin’s frame are intelligible only given consideration of “this triple world.” Those things that are both one and three—the deity, the universe, the soul, understanding, numbers, the monarch, the commonwealth—have the power to bind together “with a most sweet and Harmonicall consent”: the consent and justice envisioned are far richer and more positive than merely “eliminating conflict” as “ultimate function of the sovereign”
Of the seven elements mentioned, understanding is “the center in a circle.” Understanding cannot be better expressed than in Bodin’s words: it is that quality, that state, of soul which “with a certaine secure care preserveth from distruction this triple world.” This notion of understanding itself partakes of the tripleness. It is at once “elementarie,” that is, material and non-rational; “intelligible,” that is, replete with the rationality so distinctive of humanity when we define and distinguish ourselves; and “celestiall,” that is—in Bodin’s last words but for “Amen”—not “secular” but “in secula seculorum.” It is the distinctive quality of understanding to consider that which is evident and given not merely in itself, but in relation to all that may exist.

It is not, I think Bodin would insist, not given to human beings, not even to royal monarchs, to be able to understand in these terms. Thus, when the “good prince” endeavors “to frame and conform himselfe” to “that most mightie king,” it is only an imitation, a lesser and contained sort of conformity. It is a conformity founded in an understanding of imperfect understanding. The name of this sort of understanding is respectful, nay reverent, and intelligent humility. This royal understanding conditions, and ultimately contains, the “absolute sovereign state,” to the extent to which it is identifiable with, and only with, a royal monarchy. It renders “state” the triple combination of material, intelligent, and spiritual: it makes “absolute” a recognition of the freedom and dignity of every person who contributes to the well-being of the commonwealth: and, lastly, it understands “sovereign” to be a human being contained by “a certaine secure care” for that which has been entrusted, in secula seculorum.

This understanding of an “absolute sovereign state” is contextual: the context is containment. These terms hardly differ. Each indicates a situation in which understanding is relational. The ordinary meaning of a relation, a relative, is one’s kin. Somewhat surprisingly, “kin” and “king” are cognates. Perhaps this surprise is unwarranted, since their connection is—again within Bodin’s context—obvious. Each of us cares for our kin as a king cares for his people. In a royal monarchy, this care is reciprocal: “for the king is so united with his subjects, that they are still willing to spend their goods, their blood, and lives, for the defence of his estate, honour, and life; and cease not after his death to write, sing, and publish his prayses, amplifying them also in what they can” (Bodin 1962, 215).

Then: this makes the foundation of an absolute sovereign state (in its original meaning) a specific kind of love. It is the love which is caritas, the root of our “charity,” quite literally “kindness.” The sovereign is “of
a kind” with his people, a situation which makes lordly monarchy, let alone tyranny, impossible. Caring, charity, and kindness deepen the understanding of the greatest royal virtue:

So that nothing is more like unto a well governed Commonweale, than that most faire and fit comparison of the soule and the powers thereof, there being therein so established a most Harmonicall proportion of justice, which giveth to everie part of the soule that which unto it of right belongeth. The like whereof we may say also of the three estates of a Commonweale, guided by Wisdome, Fortitude, [and] Temperance: which three morall vertues united together, and with their king, that is to say, the intellectual and contemplative vertue, there is thereby established a most faire and Harmonicall form of a Commonweale. (Bodin 1962, 791)

Understanding is the king of the soul; and the soul of the king is the center of a harmonious commonwealth. To bind the orders, this soul must be bound together. The classical virtues—wisdom, courage, and moderation—are necessary for justice, to each part of the soul and the commonwealth. But more than justice is needed for harmony. The lordly monarch may be, and probably is, just: any given government may act justly, and yet leave the commonwealth incomplete.

It is not justice but the love of justice, not even harmony but the love of harmony that completes soul and commonwealth. Loving justice and harmony, one must care for these things, not only as greater than oneself, but as greater than justice and harmony themselves. The royal monarch is “royal,” finally, not classically but theologically. Faith, hope, and charity are virtues—that is, states of soul—that complete and thus fill up soul and commonwealth. They are not political or rational but, ultimately, divine. They place the (human) soul in relation to the power that binds the universe. Bodin’s frame of reference suggests very strongly that this power is love, again in the specific sense of “a certaine secure care.”

Because it is at once relational and complete, love contains. Alone and understood generally, love is not sufficient: royal monarchy could not subsist on sentimentality. This would be no more than “the too much suferrance and simplicitie of too good a king” that Bodin warns against. But the love that is a certain and secure caring follows and is a result of the other virtues, a purely “intellectual and contemplative” understanding included. This love is “of one’s kind”; for private individuals, of the “many families” that comprise the commonwealth; for the royal monarch, of his people (Bodin 1962, 1). As such, it is always particular. It is, Bodin agrees with the burden of
the political-philosophical tradition, given to us to love our own best. There is
a necessary practical limit on love and care, which directs and contains them.
The accomplishing of this practical caring completes our human existence, be
we only parents in a family or—both far less and far more contained—royal
monarchs.

A contained and limited caring, however, suggests (to the
understanding) something beyond itself. It is very likely that some approxima-
tion of an understanding of a more than human caring—a general and
universal caring—is possible only for a royal monarch. This mighty caring of,
in Bodin’s words, “that most mightie king” is unlikely to be even partially
understood except by a human being whose duty it has been to care for very
many for a long time. The royal monarch does not and cannot love all human-
ity, at least not equally. But his—or her—position is such that caring has been
less particular and limited. As royal, the monarch cannot be limited by family
or party or class; and it is very probably the case that the well-being of one’s
people is inconsistent with the conquest or destruction of one’s neighbors. The
royal monarch is in position to begin to understand the power that binds
together all things into a coherent, good whole. Very much of this understand-
ing is the full realization that he, in some ways the highest and best of men,
does not begin either to understand or to possess this power. In sum: ulti-
mately, an understanding caring contains.

This concludes a fairly brief presentation of Bodin’s frame of
reference and the central place of royal monarchy and (therefore) “absolute
sovereignty” within it. Without royal monarchy, absolute sovereignty is impos-
sible, since the necessary ruling unity and freedom of action does not exist. In
any other “state” (situation), the reality is division and competition; and claims
of unity and (therefore) absolute sovereignty are at best fictions, at worst bla-
tant falsehoods. It may seem to be in the interest of statists to assert these
fictions and falsehoods, but this is short sighted. The more absolute power is
claimed, the more actions that reveal its absence, and exacerbate empirical dif-
ferences and divisions, must be taken. These actions, which are always
debilitating and sometimes catastrophic, do more than practically weaken par-
ticular states: cumulatively, they have substantially discredited the state as a
political form.

Does this mean that the apparently fantastic project of
reviving royal monarchy should be attempted? A part of my concern has been
to elaborate Bodin’s understanding of the term “absolute.” As employed, this term is meaningless except in a situation—a state—of quite general freedom. Certainly, royal monarchy should not be confused with democracy. However, given Bodin’s epoch-making distinction between “government” and “state,” a royal monarchy may be governed quite popularly and democratically. But this formal distinction and categorization is not the more fundamental point. For Bodin, and given the possibility of royal monarchy, a “state” is most essentially a condition of soul.

This condition of soul is one of unity, integrity, and freedom: in a word, of harmony. The royal monarch, as the supervising, “absolute” ruler, displays and encourages this harmony (or, if not, ceases practically to be “royal”). These “ideals,” and especially the ideal of caring, are our ideals. Perhaps they are possible in states other than that of royal monarchy. If so, then they are, or would be, pure ideals generated and sustained solely by cogitation and rationality. Were Bodin’s notion of comprehensive understanding to be factored into this moral equation, then an entire society—in principle, a global society—of royal monarchs would have come into existence. This, perhaps, is our political ideal. In this situation—this state, but most emphatically (given a modern and contemporary frame of reference) this non-state, this anti-state—each person would be an absolute sovereign. Given this perfectly rational morality, there would be no need, and no place, for those whose duty it is to display extraordinarily comprehensive virtue. Thus universalized, royal monarchy would be rendered irrelevant. If, however, a caring understanding is—as Bodin argues—more than rational, then authoritative human models are not (yet) out of place.

However, the royal monarch is other, and more, than an ideal personified. In Bodin’s frame of reference, there can be one and only one universal monarch. All others, royal monarchs included, are subordinates, with the royal monarch an especially self-aware subordinate. This self-awareness is of being contained by a higher power, and thus functioning as an agent of containment. If royal monarchy as a state of soul is achieved, then completeness is achieved: the state is final and finished. This realization defines the place of the royal monarch, above and below. It empowers him in an almost negative sense, to seek no greater or further power. In this way, the human ideal or model of royal monarchy, known to and seen by all, serves dutifully as an agent of containment. In sum: royal monarchy is the complete state, instructing all in finiteness.
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The Human Good and the Problem of Bacon’s Intention

SVETOZAR MINKOV
ROOSEVELT UNIVERSITY
syminkov@gmail.com

“...I have as vast contemplative ends, as I have moderate civil ends, for I have taken all knowledge to be my province....I hope I should bring in...the best state of that province. This, whether it be curiosity, or vain-glory, or nature, or (if one take it favourably) philanthropia, is so fixed in my mind as it cannot be removed.” (Bacon, Letter to Lord Burghley [1592])

Francis Bacon rarely discusses the human good explicitly—the only obvious exception being a difficult and terse treatment in *The Advancement of Learning* (II.xx-xxii; or *De Augmentis Scientiarum* VII.1-3). As far as I understand it, that treatment, which at first seems to be a defense of the active life in the name of the common good, proves, upon closer inspection, to be a defense of the contemplative life in the name of the individual good (see Addendum 1). Yet this interpretation needs to be reconciled with Bacon’s great efforts on behalf of the conquest of nature—a good, if it is one, that can hardly be called purely contemplative—for the sake of the relief of man’s estate, a good that is certainly not merely individual. Moreover, an important step in Bacon’s argument about the human good is the assertion that there is one universal appetite that fundamentally characterizes all beings (including stones!). Together with other similar claims, this attempt to understand humans by referring to a “low,” universal tendency has led other scholars to argue that Bacon’s “method,” his “critical epistemology” or materialism, leaves no room for understanding human life (see Addendum 2).

These two difficulties with my suggested interpretation of Bacon’s chapters on the human good can further be seen as corresponding to the practical and the theoretical sides of Bacon’s famous project. It may be reasonable, then, in trying to gain access to Bacon’s ultimate judgments and their basis, to begin with the most obvious fact about him: his project to
conquer nature for the relief of man’s estate. And while that project may indeed be intertwined with a new understanding of science or philosophy, it must have been advanced in the light of his understanding of human life. Or at any rate, a project begun by a human being must have a human motive.

In making his argument for the new science, Bacon anticipates certain religious objections both to the theoretical and the practical aspects of his project. The new science could be seen as invading the realm of revelation and the new technology as to some extent replacing, or making unnecessary, the comforts of religion. At the same time, in promoting the new science, Bacon attempts to show the inadequacy of the ancient philosophy which his new science is meant to replace or at least supplement. Strikingly, however, to the extent that Bacon does not simply assert that Christianity heartily endorses modern science, which is a rhetorical strategy he sometimes employs, Bacon’s theoretical arguments against Christianity are remarkably (and self-consciously) unpersuasive. Similarly, Bacon’s refutation of the main principles of the classical tradition (the existence of final causes and of essences) is, on the face of it, inadequate. Instead, Bacon’s “refutation” of Christianity and of classical science appears to be pragmatic: he appears to reject these traditions because of their bad effects.

But even if a pragmatic standard is to be adopted, what is a bad effect and on what basis is it judged to be bad? To be sure, part of that judgment consists in focusing on the apparently uncontestable human goods, such as health, prosperity, and comfort. But even these goods were said, by the traditions Bacon seems to have been combating, to be subordinate to, and sometimes in conflict with, the higher goods of moral, intellectual or theological virtue. Aware of problematic features in the traditions, of the difficulty of establishing rationally their truth or falsity, Bacon set out to look for new and less problematic foundations for his own project. But the very act of setting out presupposes (if it is to be rational and not a careless experiment) the determination, if not of the end, then at least of the proper starting point, of Bacon’s own doings.

But is the question of the starting point much of a mystery? After all, Bacon does not conceal the fact that he accepts Machiavelli’s starting point. He agrees with Machiavelli that the philosophers of old “make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths,” and he writes that “we are much beholden to Machiavel and others, that write what men do, and not what they ought do” and that “one of the doctors of Italy, Nicholas Machiavel, had the confidence to put in writing, almost in plain terms, that ‘the Christian faith had
given up good men in prey to those that are tyrannical and unjust’’ (Advancement of Learning, II.xxi.9, II.xxiv.49; “Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature”). Machiavelli’s non-theoretical realism is a reasonable starting point (see Addendum 3). But does beginning from it necessarily lead us to conclude that the classical and Christian views of what humans really want is out of reach or even obscure; or that what humans really want is what the Baconian project promises, superficial as the promised goods may seem in light of the possibility of higher virtues? If not, then Bacon has not shown that his project is a good thing. At any rate, if Bacon did reach the conclusion that his project will provide humans with the “real goods,” it is unclear whether Bacon reached that conclusion in full compliance with his own call for a “gradual and continuous ascent” from “the senses and particulars,” for “not skim[ming] experience and particulars,” but “engaging properly and methodically with them” (Novum Organum I.19, 22, 24; see Addendum 4).

The suspicion that such “skimming” may have taken place is aroused by the appearance that Bacon’s thought is deeply informed by a forward-looking, revolutionary project. And if indeed Bacon’s thought is defined by an ambitious project, then we should consider the possibility that this ambitiousness reflects Bacon’s self-understanding and his understanding of human nature. For, even assuming that longevity and similar achievements are the real, or only available, goods, why should Bacon have concerned himself so much with bestowing those goods on others? There must have been, then, yet another good Bacon saw as important. It is on this basis that Timothy Paterson argues that Bacon has a fundamentally Machiavellian view of the ultimate motives of philosophers (and strong souls generally): immortal fame or glory is the highest human good (Paterson 1989, 477; see also “Daedalus” in the Wisdom of the Ancients, and Novum Organum I.129). In other words, it is possible that Bacon saw first science as a path to glory and then worked so as to adapt science and make it more glorifiable. According to that interpretation, the only modification by Bacon of Machiavelli is that Bacon thinks fame is best attained through science and technology rather than through politics (though one can see Bacon’s own actions in transforming the world as ultimately political), with science being merely the tool of a world-transforming project. But then did Bacon care about what he’s famous for? Would infamy have satisfied him just as well? That’s not the sense one gets of the goals of Bacon’s project. Bacon seems to prefer peace, health, prosperity, gentleness. But why? Was this a matter of mere taste? Moreover, did Bacon care whom he gets his fame from? Is glory as such the good if true glory is given only to the one who truly understands? There is a hierarchy of the various kinds of glory, and this
hierarchy must be based on a standard other than glory. That is, if, for example, Bacon cared most of all to get glory from philosophers for being wise, then he did not care so much for fame as he did for the (imagined or anticipated) assurance that he was wise (see Addendum 5).

But perhaps we can understand Bacon’s project as being at the core of his thought without attributing the launching of the project to the desire for glory. Perhaps Bacon’s fundamental motive is the result of the premium he placed on atheistic honesty and courage, as the best disposition(s)—best, in the first place, for the discovery of truth. In other words, and to connect this with the problem of Bacon’s response to Christianity, since we do not know whether God exists, it is better, in the sense of being more honest, for the most penetrating thinkers to accept that God does not exist. This might not seem to explain Bacon’s project unless of course he also wanted, by promoting a more atheistic society, to help other, future philosophers be more honest about their fundamental situation.

Yet I am struck again by the fact that Bacon seems to have devoted an enormous amount of effort to being a benefactor. Perhaps, then, even more fundamental than honesty is charity or care. According to Bacon’s own understanding, such dedication is a sign of religiosity: “you shall have of [atheists] that will suffer for atheism, and not recant; whereas if they did truly think that there were no such thing as God, why should they trouble themselves?” (“Of Atheism”). Therefore, according to his own self-understanding, if Bacon could not believe in a God, he could not have, self-consistently, devoted himself to a project whose fruits would lie in the distant future. (As an indication of Bacon’s unbelief, one might point not only or not so much to his explicit reflections on religion, but to his thoughts on important subjects such as the love of truth and fear of death—the subjects of the opening of two of Bacon’s Essays. In “Of Death,” for example, Bacon contrasts what he sees as the natural or philosophic view of death, which he adopts, with the religious view, a “mixture of vanity and superstition,” which misinterprets death as “the wages of sin” and a “passage to another world.”) The reflection on the unsound basis of charity as Bacon sees it would also present a problem for the idea of the apparently self-serving, long-term “political atheism” of modern political philosophers (see Strauss 1953, 169). —What we have seen, then, so far is that Bacon’s main motive for his project must not have been either glory or charity, or if one of the two were indeed his motive, his other indications of his understanding of the human good would not have been consistent with such a motive.
Yet these reflections simply follow the track of a hypothesis (and one by no means confirmed); namely, that the core of Bacon’s thought was characterized by a rushing-forward, by a daring project—that Bacon was in love with the project. But it is also possible that the project, however daring in appearance, was deployed as a means by Bacon—and was calculated, above all, to make philosophy (as distinguished from at least much of the project’s activity) more useful, more respected, and better protected and religion less so; while also making a supplementary contribution to his (or, more likely, others’) understanding of the nature of reality, as well as, more incidentally, to make life more comfortable for everyone. Let me, then, examine other possibilities as to what is the heart of Bacon’s thought (‘the heart’ of his thought, that is, as distinct, if not separable, from the motive for his project)—possibilities other than glory or charity.

In her interpretation of the myth of Prometheus in Bacon’s *Wisdom of the Ancients*, Heidi Studer argues that Bacon “expects us to deal with the problem [of guidance] in terms of properly ranking humans themselves.” Bacon’s “counsel seems closer to political philosophy than is normally acknowledged.” Studer’s conclusion is that the highest life for Bacon, against which all other lives should be measured, is a version of the philosophic life. I quote Studer:

> What is required for the enjoyment of the best human condition, therefore, is quite like the philosophic virtues described by the ancient philosophers, and even by some of the moderns. According to Bacon a special brand of courage is essential for achieving the best life. It is a courage that has been nurtured by wisdom and by reflection upon chance, and the vicissitudes of things. This courage will free the soul from perturbations, and the happy man will have foresight, wisdom, and courage, “having meditated on the inconstancy and waves of human life.” This higher soul, therefore, is the guide for man’s decisions about how to live. This man rises above the honor-lover, for “meditating on vicissitudes” clearly reveals the problem of honor.

Yet Studer also recognizes that she has yet to show how these insights apply “in human life so that we can finally see how courage must be combined with wisdom, and why ‘works of wisdom surpass works of courage,’ as ‘Orpheus’s labors surpass those of Hercules.’” Studer writes, “So far, Hercules’ virtue seems the best we have met. Bacon, however, endorses the philosopher, Orpheus” (Studer 2003, 231, 232). But the grounds of this
endorsement remain unrevealed. Elsewhere, modestly and soberly, Studer writes, “Bacon’s ‘strange whole’ may hold answers to fundamental philosophic questions, answers that have not yet been articulated by any scholar” (Studer 1997, 925).

Other commentators, such as Jerry Weinberger, have sometimes gone further in claiming that the grounds of Bacon’s argument for philosophy are indeed evident. For Weinberger these foundations are a Socratic-like political philosophy. And a similar line of thought, namely, the argument that for Bacon philosophy is the best way of life, is suggested by Howard White (1968), as well as by Adam Schulman (2000), Richard Kennington (1988), and Laurence Lampert (1995), though for the last three Bacon’s “philosophy” becomes respectively Epicurean (though also Socratic?), experimental-progressive (see Addendum 6), and Nietzschean.

If I may indicate the character of the approach underlying these arguments: it emphasizes Bacon’s own search for truth, in human and non-human matters; it stresses Bacon’s occasional statements about the superiority of contemplation; and it tends to explain Bacon’s promotion of modern science as subordinate to Bacon’s philosophizing. In the same vein, this general interpretation suggests that Bacon was not driven above all by ambition; or at least, as in Lampert’s view, that he was driven by a “philosophic” ambition, having interpreted philosophy to be rooted not in a natural desire to know but in the aggressive desire to dominate. Admittedly, the defenders of this approach to Bacon, even those other than Lampert, also see a modification of the traditional understanding of the philosophic life, a modification designed to make the philosophic life less vulnerable to Christianity (see Strauss 1995, introduction). This protection of philosophy from Christianity is presumably accomplished both by making philosophical talents less susceptible to the temptation of becoming theologians and making the philosophical activity more useful and more powerful. This modification of philosophy, however, cannot have been radical, it cannot have changed the very meaning of philosophy in the course of defending it, since, if that were the case, Bacon’s cure would be worse than the disease—unless, that is, the modification was called for not only by the political situation of Bacon’s time (Lerner 2002, 5-10) but by a new understanding of the nature of knowledge and of the nature of man, an understanding which denies the existence or the legitimacy of the longing for eternity, or, rather, by the necessities as Bacon saw them because of this new understanding (see Addendum 7).

However appealing these arguments may be, in the absence of
a sustained argument in Bacon for the superiority, or of a clear account of the proper meaning, of philosophy, there are difficulties with this “pro-philosophy” line of interpretation.

For one, Bacon seems to have spent an unreasonable amount of time and effort on a project if the project turns out not to have been his most cherished activity. This presents difficulties for at least the interpretation of Bacon as being an Epicurean: Bacon did not follow the Epicurean maxim, “Live in retirement.” But it also seems to me to present difficulties for any interpretation of Bacon as a philosopher. Would someone so serious about philosophy (assuming he has the ability and freedom to philosophize) spend more time, if he had a choice, safeguarding the conditions of philosophy rather than engaging more fully in the activity itself?

Secondly, what does Bacon understand by genuine philosophy or theory, if genuine philosophy is to be distinguished from technological science and from experimental-inductive theoretical science? To be sure, at the end of his Preparative Towards a Natural and Experimental History, Bacon declares, “I care little about the mechanical arts themselves: only about those things which they contribute to the equipment of philosophy” (Spedding et al. 1968, IV.271). And he also seems to think that an important part of philosophy consists in thinking through, and coming to terms with, the natural necessities imposed on human life. Indeed, he sometimes writes that the ancients were so invested in glorying in their false sobriety that they overeagerly embraced untrue limits to human life, or at any rate embraced limits which they did not know to be true (e.g., Advancement of Learning, II.XIII.4). Yet, as the fable of the Sphinx in the Wisdom of the Ancients, for one, suggests, theoretical philosophy outside of experimental and technological science is, for Bacon, a philosophy that delights in limitless doubt, variety, and open-endedness (see Addendum 8). In that fable, Oedipus, whom Bacon uses as his stand-in (they both had a limp, but more importantly Oedipus is presented as the theoretical type who wants to rule), is said to love thinking, and “the very doubting and variety” is said to give him “some entertainment and pleasure.” Bacon speaks of “some” entertainment; that is, a certain “savagery” or pain in the theoretical questions is experienced even or precisely by the most theoretical types. Now, Socrates might have said that there is a sting attached to the awareness of ignorance, but he would add that the pain from the sting is mixed with the pleasure of expectation in progress and is sometimes directly accompanied by the pleasure of progress. Bacon, however, speaks of doubt and delight in the variety of dazzling uncertainty, but not of progress. In fact, Bacon often says
that without variety human life would not be worth living (e.g., “Of Death,” “Of Travel,” and “Of Gardens”). Might it be that Socrates was more convinced of at least one kind of progress than Bacon was?

Thirdly, Bacon all but assumes the falsity of ancient science while seeming substantially uninterested in the genuinely exciting discoveries of modern science. Bacon’s distinctive theoretical principles seem to be that “the only objects of cognition are the human mind itself, and patterns or laws of action of matter in the visible-tangible world” (Paterson 1982, 253; on laws of action, see *Novum Organum* I.51; on the human mind, ibid., I.45-51). The discovery of the idols of the mind is Bacon’s version of Socratic self-knowledge, and it leads him to the conclusion that our minds are incurably deluded. The truth about the beings is therefore not accessible. Bacon appears to have despaired of the possibility of genuine knowledge (cf. Faulkner 2003).

Fourthly, one might also wonder whether Bacon’s plan to defend philosophy (above all, by protecting it in various ways against religion) could have worked or has worked. Perhaps Bacon is the first to do the job of organizing the world a certain way once and for all. The technological empire might be the kind of phenomenon that cannot be reversed. The change Bacon is introducing may be of a different order than all political empires. Perhaps science is here to stay and we will never lose our enchantment with it. True, it does not grant complete happiness, but it provides a kind of restless contentment through ever-more novelties. Yet precisely if science is splendidly successful, two dangers to philosophy lurk not far behind. The first danger is the diversion of the best minds away from philosophy and into a less fundamental science. This does not seem to be the more serious danger. Because modern science is constitutionally oblivious to the serious human questions, it is unlikely to satisfy the best and most inquiring minds. And there is, moreover, something unsatisfying in the admittedly hypothetical character of the foundations of modern science. The more serious danger to philosophy from the success of science is different. If religion is firmly on the way out and science on the way to turning us into Nietzsche’s “last men,” philosophy may yet prove to have become its own worst enemy through Bacon’s “defense” of it. Now according to Bacon, “atheism leaves a man to sense, to philosophy, to natural piety...” (“Of Superstition”). And this may be. But at least the initial ascent to philosophy requires an elevation from mundane and crude human concerns, an elevation (if an “elevation” which is, in a way, a lowering) accomplished best by religion. Bacon admits that “they that deny a God destroy man’s nobility; for certainly man is of kin to the beasts by his body; and, if he be not kin to God by
his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature. It destroys likewise magnanimity
and the raising of human nature” (“Of Atheism”). If philosophy is a kind of
“raising of human nature,” then it requires religion for its flourishing. Or to put
the point differently and more simply, the fundamental questions are found in
the Bible (see Addendum 9). Political philosophy as the theoretical justification
of the best way of life might, therefore, disappear as the world of technological
comforts lays waste to the soil out of which philosophy grows.

In light of these difficulties with the interpretation of Bacon
as advancing philosophy through the promotion of his science, one is tempted
to characterize the interpretation of Bacon’s project in this semi-playful way:
“So Bacon attempted to preserve something he didn’t care about by means that
won’t work! But he enjoyed himself on the way to this failure…”

Yet there appears to be an even more fundamental problem,
a problem with the coherence of Bacon’s thought. The argument is developed
in part by Richard Kennington: “at least as regards the question of the end,
the terms of Bacon’s justification show the superiority of the ancient to the
modern contemplation” (Kennington 1991, 251).

It is stated even more forcefully by Robert Faulkner. According to this argument, Bacon’s theoretical views undermine the intelligibility of human experience. This criticism of Bacon is not dependent on, in fact it may be inconsistent with, the assertion that Bacon’s science was a mere tool for his promotion of philosophy as distinguished from science. Faulkner shows that Bacon knows that the scientists must have a human chart: “the direction of natural science rests finally with moral and civil science” (Faulkner 2003, 215). It is not that Bacon wanted to guide his science by a human “clue” (say, a kind of Machiavellian, un-Christian charity—to use Clifford Orwin’s expression). The fact is, Bacon, or any and all promoters of science, have to be guided by human motives and human reasons. Faulkner’s approach aims to show us the diversionary character of Bacon’s praises of contemplation. But it also aims to show the untenability, on Bacon’s terms, of his realistic psychology: the “conquest of the natural moral consciousness,” “the most important conquest of nature and the key to the civil and moral science that is itself the peak of Baconian science” (Faulkner 1993, 137).

Given this necessity for the study of man as man and the
distinctively human needs, Faulkner’s questions are these: “whether Bacon’s
insistence on knowing through method is consistent with his reliance on a
pre-methodical psychology and a ‘universal philosophy’ of nature”; “whether [Bacon’s] doubts about knowing wholes permit him to speak of desire or wise desire, or even of man, nature, human nature, or ‘values’ altogether” (Faulkner 2003, 215). “The gravest difficulty is a reliance on notions of human quality that Bacon’s critical epistemology would exclude” (Faulkner 1993, 275).

This is a very penetrating criticism of Bacon. After all, in addressing this question in Novum Organum (I.127), Bacon writes, “It may also be asked, in doubt rather than criticism, whether I am speaking of natural philosophy only, or whether I mean that the other sciences—logic, ethics, politics—should also be carried on by my method. I would answer that I certainly do think my words have a universal application…. For I am compiling a history and table of discovery about anger, fear, shame, and the like, and also about political matters….” Bacon apparently did not see ethics or politics as a science capable of reaching important conclusions on its own, without the help of his new method. But we should note immediately, and this reveals the basis of Faulkner’s criticism of Bacon, an ambiguity in this regard. Earlier in the Novum Organum (I.80) Bacon writes, “there is reason why astronomy, optics, music, many of the mechanical arts, medicine itself and, more surprisingly, moral and political philosophy and the logical science all lack depth, and merely glide over the surface and variety of things.” (Emphasis added to both passages.) Here the project for a scientific study of the human things is evident (as against the naive acceptance of the surface and variety, instead of discovering the more fundamental “latent and occult” species-neutral homogeneity: ibid., I.88, II.1-4). In aphorism 80 “the logical science” comes after “moral and political philosophy,” but in the later passage logic has assumed its apparently rightful (for Bacon) first place. In fact, in a longer section in the Novum Organum (I.11-26) Bacon holds out the hope that his logic will lead to a substantive science. In the Plan to the Great Instauration Bacon calls his art, “the interpretation of nature,” logic. Bacon’s “logic” is one which believes that ideas or kinds such as man, dog, dove, hot, white, and blue “are not very misleading [!]” (I.16). They are human constructs and it is these constructs that dominate the psychology of moral and political life. Hence logic would be more fundamental than psychology. If so, Bacon’s philosophy would be ultimately “monistic” and blind to the distinctively human.

Yet Bacon makes apparently contradictory statements on the relation between the new science and moral philosophy (see Addendum 10). While he does say that it is only the new science that will put the study of morals on a firm footing, he also says, on the other hand, that moral matters
are already properly addressed by ancient dialectic (Great Instauration, preface, paragraph 10; contrast Novum Organum I.82), and he even says, thirdly, that moral science is not to be sought at all by human beings since it would be impious (Great Instauration, paragraph 13). There is some room to wonder, then, after all, whether Bacon might not understand his political or moral philosophy as both more fundamental and less hypothetical than his natural science. The disjunction between the human world of ends and the homogeneous, undirected natural world would come back.

The resolution of this issue may also depend on how seriously Bacon took his “critical epistemology.” We should consider, for example, Bacon’s saying, “The doctrine of Democritus concerning atoms is either true or useful for demonstration” (“Thoughts on the Nature of Things”) and “the most general principles in nature ought to be held positive … and cannot with truth be referred to a cause” (Novum Organum, I.48). As Kennington puts it, “Strictly speaking, Bacon is not a materialist, if that means that he knows and demonstrates that all that is derives from certain primordial bodies. He is rather the founder of what came to be called ‘corpuscularism,’ which holds that natural philosophy does not need to know the simples or the ultimates, but only those parts of compounds which are themselves compounds” (Kennington 2004, 39; cf. Novum Organum, II.2 with II.8). The recognition of compounds that behave differently from other compounds leaves open the possibility of considering the distinctive motions of the human compound.

If this is true, then the dualism between Bacon’s human philosophy and his natural science becomes, if it is preserved at all, less fundamental and more tenable. As to why Bacon would adopt this methodological materialism, perhaps part of the reason is rhetorical: Bacon wants to dispel certain notions of divine purpose (Novum Organum I.65). But it seems plausible to me, from the second book of Novum Organum, that Bacon also sees a purely theoretical purpose to the “materialism” he suggests. Perhaps Bacon recommends that when “torturing nature,” we should ignore matter’s natural tendencies or heterogeneities in order to discover other possibilities inherent in the nature of matter.

In concluding, let me note that even if one is able to resist Faulkner’s far-reaching criticism of the coherence of Bacon’s thought, and argue that Bacon simply believed that natural science cannot account for his understanding of the human good, but something else can, one is yet to make clear what that human good is and what that “something else” is. In other words, even if Bacon is able to treat “the human compound” qualitatively
differently from other compounds of nature, the question still remains why this “compound” would embrace one activity or project over another. In particular, what is Bacon’s deepest inclination, love of truth or a restless desire for variety or novelty, assuming glory and charity are reasonably rejected as his fundamental motives? And which inclination did Bacon himself see as the deepest in his nature in particular and in human nature generally? Both of these two main suggestions seem to resist being put together into a coherent whole with Bacon’s view of the best life, unifying the motive for his project and his understanding of the human good. Indeed, the problem of achieving such coherence may affect all of the founding philosophers of modernity (see Addenda 11 and 1).

ADDENDA

1. Bacon’s treatment is of high complexity. One premise of it is that the deepest human longing is for immortality. The sensed or anticipated thwarting of that longing directs us to try to leave behind “works” through which we will be remembered (indefinitely or for a very long time). But these works will not bring us pleasure, except the momentary pleasure of anticipation. Moreover, in setting up his discussion, Bacon had distinguished between two fundamental forms of the desire for continued being: the form that desire takes when embodied in a separate individual (and in the case of human beings, an individual aware of its separateness) and the form that desire takes or has when a being is primarily an integral part of a larger whole. And clearly, one’s continued life, through works and others’ use of them, corresponds to the latter, and therefore, it does not satisfy the individual as such, but absorbs something of the individual once he has disintegrated. Bacon attempts to uncover the strongest root of the preoccupation with an “active good.” The exposure of the root or the true motive of the active life would cast doubt on the superiority of that life (to the life of conservation and perfection). Far from being persuasive, the six arguments Bacon uses for the superiority of the active life are in fact, to some extent, arguments against that life and for the life of more or less passive understanding. But to what extent? Some help in understanding the relation of understanding to the active good is provided in the section in which Bacon considers the two kinds of passive individual good: preserving (or maintaining) and perfective (or improving). Bacon says the good of “perfecting is the highest; for to preserve a thing in its existing state is the less, to raise the same to a higher nature is the greater… For the assumption or approach of man to the Divine or Angelical nature is the perfection of his form.” But here Bacon issues a stern warning: “the false and preposterous
imitation of which is the very plague and stormy whirlwind of human life, which carries off and destroys everything” (emphasis added). The idea of a false and unattainable good is in fact the worst evil of human life. Bacon explains: “Those who are sick, and find no remedy” try to “get away from themselves and from the disease that is within them.” “So is it in ambition,” Bacon delivers his open indictment of the active life, “when men possessed by a false idea of exalting their nature obtain nothing else but an eminence and exaltation of place” (when “men upon the instinct of an advancement formal and essential are carried by a blind ambition to seek an advancement merely local”). Bacon is suggesting, I think, by speaking of “blind” ambition that the active life is an unself-aware and doomed attempt to attain healthy and perpetual preservation. Later in Book VII of De Augmentis Scientiarum, Bacon finishes the opening statement of his discussion of the proper approach to the cultivation of the mind that allows for good living by quoting an aphorism of Hippocrates: “That they who are sick and feel no pain are sick in their mind” and “need medicine not to assuage the disease, but to awake the sense.” Bacon is suggesting that one would have to have correctly identified our fundamental illnesses in order to be able properly to rank the various kinds of goods which are remedies for those illnesses. Only then will men be able to “procure serenity, as they destroy not magnanimity.”

2. Compare Strauss (1958) on Machiavelli (whom Bacon quotes with approval on fundamental matters more than a dozen times): “He does not give an account of how the stability of excellence, or the firmness of knowledge of ‘the world,’ of equanimity, of strength of will and of prudence [which qualities are NM’s sumnum bonum, 243] is compatible with the variability of all human things and of nature” (295). Even when Bacon expresses reservations about Machiavelli’s teaching, he does so in the context of an overall praise: it was “expounded ingeniously but corruptly by Machiavel, that it belongeth to the education and discipline of princes to know as well how to play the part of the lion in violence, and the fox in guile, as of the man in virtue and justice” (Advancement of Learning, II.iv.4); or: “…as Machiavel well noteth (though in an evil-favoured instance), there is no trusting to the force of nature nor to the bravery of words, except it be corroborate by custom” (“Of Custom and Education”).

Given the affinities between Machiavelli and Bacon, I refer, throughout these addenda, and with respect to the main issues in Bacon I consider, to the best commentator on Machiavelli I know of.
3. “Machiavelli’s analysis of morality will … begin with the observation of the self-contradictions inherent in what men generally and publicly praise.” That Machiavelli does not take his bearings from speech about virtue may be erroneously assumed since, “The order of that analysis must be distinguished from the order in which its results are presented” (Strauss 1958, 237; on the importance of beginning with “first statements,” see 231–33). Machiavelli thought that the explanation of biblical religion may be attempted in two ways: “one may try to understand Biblical religion by starting from the phenomena of human love [Boccaccio] or by starting from political phenomena [Machiavelli]” (ibid., 51). But see Addendum 10 below.

4. For an argument that Bacon did not “skim” any of the fundamental human phenomena, see Weinberger 2002 and 2005. Weinberger, moreover, argues that for Bacon understanding was a good itself, in addition to the “real goods,” such as health and longevity.

5. Consider Strauss on Machiavelli: the conclusion that there is no conversion to philosophy in Machiavelli is “not compatible with Machiavelli’s clear awareness of the delusions of glory and of the limitations of the political. Immortal glory is impossible, and what is called immortal glory depends on chance” (Strauss 1958, 289). At the same time, “for Machiavelli the pleasure deriving from honor is genuine and perhaps the highest pleasure” (291, emphasis added).

6. In an unpublished paper, “Final Causality and Modern Natural Right,” Kennington (1988) sees the core of Bacon’s project (and also thought) as directed at satisfying the native human “restlessness” rather than let it roam. The restlessness is related to the longing for “what man’s nature doth most aspire” to, “immortality or continuance” (17); it is also connected to the fact that our human purposes, while they “feel real,” “experientially,” are illusory (5). Kennington first argues that the restlessness cannot be tamed by commanding our destiny (by the practical side of the conquest of nature): we can’t really command our fate; only a mere postponement of oblivion is possible (18). He then argues that there are two modern answers to this problem: (a) “the desirable human life consists in flight from [hostile] nature” (22); yet this only reproduces the restlessness. He then stops to remind us (23–24) that Aristotle didn’t need a universal teleology for his “moral teleology” or for his “philosophical ones” (cf. 12–14): somehow within the human sphere itself, one can show that the moral life, but much more so, the philosophical one, is very good. And it is this the moderns overlooked, which led them to: (b) a belief in a historical teleology, in the intellectual progress of humanity over
time (25-26, and especially 27-28: “wisdom becomes the daughter of time”—the “theoretical,” historicized side of the conquest of nature). This also requires that religion be defeated and replaced by philosophy (26-27). But could Bacon have staked everything on this belief in intellectual progress in the “unknown future”? Answer (a), in fact, seems more adequate than (b). There is a “turn to history” in Bacon’s thought, but was it made in the spirit of such mysticism?

7. See also Strauss on Machiavelli: “If religion stems from weakness of mind and will and fosters such weakness, it cannot be simply necessary for the well-being of society” (Strauss 1958, 227).

8. Compare this statement by Strauss: “…Machiavelli finds the good life or the life according to nature in the alternation between gravity and levity: between the expectation of a satisfaction or a pleasure which is always and essentially in the future and the enjoyment of present pleasure” (Strauss 1958, 289; cf. 285, 294-95).

9. Contrast Strauss on Machiavelli: “That moral virtue is a qualified requirement of society is infinitely clearer to him than that it is a requirement of philosophy or the life of the mind. As a consequence he is unable to give a clear account of his own doing”; “wisdom is not a great theme for Machiavelli because justice is not a great theme for him” (Strauss 1958, 294-95; 1959, 55).

10. Perhaps Bacon, like Hobbes, exaggerated the comprehensiveness and unity of his homogenizing method in order to exclude revelation as a necessary source of knowledge (it is “more worthy…to believe than to know as we know now” [Advancement of Learning, II.xxv.2, emphasis added]). Bacon says that his project will restore the “commerce between the mind of man and the nature of things” to its “perfect and original condition,” or, at least, Bacon hastens to add, if that is not possible, “yet reduced to a better condition than that in which it now is” (Proemium of the Great Instauration). In fact, the disharmony between mind and nature is irreparable for him (cf. Strauss 1953, 175): while the human (and perhaps all) understanding cannot help but think in terms of ends or limits, “in nature nothing truly exists besides individual bodies producing pure individual acts according to law” (cf. Novum Organum I.48 with II.2). Hobbes was “forced to adopt” a “materialist-deterministic” metaphysics “because he saw no other possibility of escaping the ‘substantialist’ conception of mind and therefore ‘the kingdom of darkness’”; he only teaches a “monistic metaphysics”; his “methodic materialism” allowed “an attitude of neutrality or indifference toward the
secular conflict between materialism and spiritualism” (Strauss 1952, 168; 1953, 174).

11. Strauss found himself compelled to say that, for example, Hobbes could not “make up his mind” about the very basis of his political philosophy (Strauss 1952, 13): the status of the “vanity” of natural appetite (versus that appetite’s fearfulness and hence sobriety). And even or precisely concerning “the nerve” of his own thought Hobbes achieved clarity with great difficulty, if ever (Strauss 1959, 176n2): this difficulty, of determining whether humans are really free in tinkering with the purposes to which they can put their natural powers, is related to Hobbes’s oscillation between saying that man is evil and saying that man cannot be evil (since he is just another beast). Moreover, “Hobbes wavers not only between corporealism and what we may call constructionism; he is also uncertain whether the non-corporealist beginning has the character of arbitrary construction or of ‘data of consciousness’” (ibid., 182). Admittedly, all this concerns the theoretical basis of Hobbes’s thought rather than the motive for his project which is somewhat more easily identifiable (Strauss 1953, 198). But see Strauss’s remark relating to the motive of the very founder of modernity: even though we should distinguish between “the extreme consequences of Machiavelli’s action” and “Machiavelli himself,” “one is entitled to say that philosophy and its status is obfuscated not only in Machiavelli’s teaching but in his thought as well” (Strauss 1958, 298, 294); see Addendum 9 above.

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Translations from Bacon’s Latin works are based on Spedding’s edition of Bacon’s works (Spedding et al. 1968), with my own modifications. The original Latin texts can be found in the following volumes of Spedding’s edition: De Augmentis Scientiarum in vols. IV and V, Novum Organum and Preparative Towards a Natural and Experimental History in vol. IV, and Wisdom of the Ancients in vol. VI. The section references in the case of the Advancement of Learning are to G. W. Kitchin’s edition (2001). The best edition of the Essays is Michael Kiernan’s (2000).


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**PAUL J. DIDUCH**  
**UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS**  
pjd772003@yahoo.ca

Roslyn Weiss’s work on Plato is consistently insightful and frequently provocative. Her latest book, *The Socratic Paradox and Its Enemies*, continues boldly in similar fashion by challenging certain mainstays of the dominant approach to Socratic ethics and moral psychology. But Weiss’s effort here goes beyond critiquing the current orthodoxy. Building on her own substantial body of scholarship, *The Socratic Paradox* also includes what is arguably Weiss’s most defined portrait of Socrates to date: it is an engaging, at times vivid, reflection on how she understands the man, his methods, and his task—how Socrates’ self-understanding and his therapeutic philosophizing are informed by his larger moral mission.

According to Weiss, scholars have almost uniformly failed to understand Socrates’ moral psychology, a fact due in no small part to the elusive character of the Socratic paradoxes. The prevailing interpretation, the view Weiss confronts throughout, can be limned roughly as follows. Basing himself on the premise that virtue is knowledge, Socrates treats morality as an art, craft, or set of skills (*techne*); those who master the requisite knowledge, those who know truly what is right, will never err; as for those who do wrong, they are simply mistaken about their good—vice being a consequence of ignorance, and not voluntary choice. And while there are various refinements of this model, the general consensus is that Socrates is a eudaemonist, as well as a psychological and ethical egoist: he believes that happiness is our true end and that humans will always pursue, even ought to pursue, what they regard as being in their own self-interest.

Weiss, of course, does not reject this approach root and branch; by her own account, Socrates does believe that, at perhaps the deepest
level, all people want what is truly good, and, in a certain sense, when they choose to do wrong they do so unwillingly since virtue is essential to happiness. What she objects to, however, is the contention that this approach requires that Socrates deny *akrasia* (the experience of inner conflict where we seem to choose something against our better judgment). Believing Socrates to have a more ordinary understanding of moral responsibility, Weiss claims that, while the denial of *akrasia* seems consistent with the paradoxes, it does not hold up when Socrates’ remarks are properly contextualized and his reasons for making provocative and outrageous claims are understood.

For Weiss, these larger interpretive problems can, then, be traced to how Plato is read; and for her, to treat Socrates as a philosophy professor, as someone attempting to elaborate a straightforward teaching, is to misunderstand the nature of the dialogues. A key problem with trying to extract Socrates’ “doctrine” is that such efforts tend to overlook the extent to which his arguments are tied to their contexts; and often certain details and nuances are ignored which, if properly considered, might otherwise alter the meaning of the argument. Weiss, who is sensitive to the drama informing each dialogue, is surely correct to note that “not every Socratic utterance is a Socratic view, and not every Socratic utterance that is a Socratic view means what it seems to mean” (8). To read Plato effectively, then, one must understand the arguments in light of the action, and this, for Weiss, depends on having a proper sense of Socrates’ activity as a whole.

Weiss introduces her Socrates by way of describing what she thinks is the true nature of Socrates’ *elenchus* (his cross-examination of others’ views). To understand Socratic philosophy, she argues, one must see that Socrates, who is “agonistic to the core,” uses his thoroughly polemical, even deceptive form of argument in order to achieve ends that have to do more with moral therapy than with logical investigation or disinterested theorizing (1-6, especially 3-5; 76, 81, 88). Let me emphasize that this notion is central to Weiss’s position. Her Socrates is a true fighter, a philosophic warrior whose noble mission is to expose the “enemies of injustice” and help those he can to cleave to the path of virtue (1-6). Taking her bearings largely by her reading of *The Apology*, Weiss believes that Socrates’ god-given task is much as he describes it: to awaken the sluggish city to its moral failings and remind it of its proper goal—education to virtue. On her view, Socrates is especially frustrated with the malign influence Athens exerts over the young (209), and he blames the city for causing its citizens to believe that certain worldly goods are more important than the higher pursuits: “prudence, truth, and the best state of the
soul” (18). What is more, Athens’ problem with corruption is compounded by the presence of the “sophists”: itinerant teachers who, by offering “wisdom” sanctioning rank self-interest, fan the flames of desire already kindled by the city. According to Weiss, the sophists are the quintessential enemies of justice, and as such they are Socrates’ true foes. It is imperative, then, she tells us, to understand that Socrates is in perpetual conflict with these men and that the arguments he uses against them are best understood as “weapons”—a set of tools he wields to exploit and often expose the defects peculiar to each of his opponents.

Socrates’ three famous paradoxes, “virtue is knowledge,” “no one does wrong willingly,” and “all virtues are one” are, for Weiss, fully intelligible when seen against the backdrop of the enemies’ position—a general view that can be summarized as follows. Socrates’ enemies believe, perhaps most importantly, that no one is willingly just. For the sophist and his pupils, justice is illusory: it is something contrived by the weak to protect them from the strong, but is only really believed by the naïve. Most men, it seems to them, would abandon virtue for the sake of gain if their impunity could be guaranteed; and the sophists feel that this common hypocrisy shows that virtue has no real power in the world apart from convention. Consequently, they believe that their insights into the truth about law and virtue free them to gratify their desires without scruple.

In its most basic form, Weiss’s argument is that Socrates’ three paradoxes should be seen as counters to the main tenets of the enemies’ view. His claim that “no one does wrong willingly” is meant to oppose the sophists’ claim that no one is willingly just. “Virtue is knowledge” is a response to the notion that only fools are virtuous—these having been duped by the city. And lastly, “all virtues are one” is meant to oppose the belief that the real man can distinguish his virtues from the merely so-called virtues of the weak, his strengths being courage and intelligence as opposed to justice, moderation and piety (the last three being self-denying, and hence seen as naïve).

Tracing these themes in the Protagoras, Gorgias and Lesser Hippias, Weiss spends much of the book attempting to show how Socrates uses versions of his paradoxical arguments to confound his adversaries and expose their sham enlightenment. In each case his end is the same: to encourage his interlocutors to realize their ignorance and give up their pernicious opinions—this, she suggests, is the crucial first step Socrates takes toward arousing in them a genuine openness to virtue (212-13). It is important to emphasize that Socrates’ end is what truly defines his approach; for, as Weiss demonstrates, his
tactics are sometimes indistinguishable from sophistry. The paradoxes, then, are not simply examples of Socrates’ giving his foes a taste of their own medicine; when seen in light of his understanding of human well-being, these strange arguments actually reflect Socrates’ fundamental convictions.

According to Weiss, Socrates’ philosophic activity is grounded in his discovery of nature—more specifically, the good by nature or what amounts to the discovery of the best way of life for a human being. He has found that living virtuously is the sole basis for human happiness:

Socrates believes that there is a genuinely good condition for human beings to be in, a state in which their soul has attained an optimal fitness and orderliness. . . . This condition is justice, which is brought about by one’s refraining from injustice and which, once in place, works to keep one from committing injustice. (22-23; consider also 18-19)

This underlying principle of Socrates “teaching” is crucial for making sense of the paradoxes. Because living a just life is in our best interest, Weiss argues, “virtue is knowledge” means that those who choose to live justly choose wisely. “All virtues are one” means that a person must have all the virtues to live a life according to nature; that is, one must know that justice is choice-worthy, and one must have the courage and self-restraint to abide by this understanding. And finally, “no one does wrong willingly” means that people who fail to live justly fail to do what they truly want (208-10).

Weiss emphasizes throughout, however, that her interpretation of the paradoxes in no way commits her to the notion that Socrates denies akrasia. And it is with respect to the paradox “no one does wrong willingly”—the paradox she regards as central—that Weiss is especially concerned to make her views clear. Her general approach is twofold: on the one hand, she grants a rather straightforward reading of the paradox—when a person does wrong, he does so unwillingly and so has not done what he truly wants. But on the other hand, she also believes that granting a certain kind of unwillingness is compatible with the experience of akrasia. That is, the same unwilling person does experience a true inner conflict, a tension he is often aware of and has the power to control. For Weiss, to succumb to a desire that conflicts with one’s ordinary sense of the good is not a lapse in judgment or any kind of ignorance: when people do wrong they usually do so knowingly and are, as a consequence, responsible for their actions. Taken together, then, Weiss’s twofold approach implies that the same person is, simultaneously, both willing and unwilling to do wrong.
Now, holding these two positions together would seem rather problematic, but Weiss amasses a considerable amount of textual evidence to try to show that it is indeed the Platonic view. The essence of her argument, if I may oversimplify for present purposes, is contained in how she reads two sets of key terms found in the *Meno* and *Laws*.

In treating Plato’s *Meno*, Weiss tracks Socrates’ use of the words “desire” and “want” (*epithumein* and *boulesthai*), and notes that at a crucial moment in the argument he switches *epithumein* for *boulesthai* (77e-78b). This, she contends, is Socrates’ subtle way of distinguishing between the two terms, the upshot being that while Socrates thinks that no one *wants* bad things—no one wants to be wretched—he does believe that we can and do *desire* bad things against our better judgment (159-62, 165-67). This distinction, then, provides a way to make sense of the experience of *akrasia*: what we truly want is our good, which, if Socrates is correct, is to live a virtuous life; but we also experience temptation for things we have forbidden ourselves, and sometimes we choose to follow these temptations.

Weiss approaches *Laws* IX in a similar manner. Contrary to a number of scholars who believe that the Athenian Stranger challenges, if not wholly undermines the moral coherence of punitive justice, Weiss contends that the Stranger actually endorses a rather common understanding of moral responsibility. What tends to mislead most readers, she tells us, is the Stranger’s equivocal use of terms meaning “voluntary” and “involuntary” (the two sets of terms being *hekon* / *akon* and *boulemos* / *mé boulemos*; consider, for example, 860d, 862a; 187). Weiss insists, however, that a distinction ought to be made here, not according to a strict definition of the terms themselves, but according to the different senses of their usage. When the Stranger says that all injustice is involuntary, he means this in what Weiss calls the “Socratic sense,” but in other instances the statement is meant in its “ordinary sense” (187). The significance of this distinction can be seen in terms of the paradox “no one does wrong willingly.” In the Socratic sense, the paradox means the doer of injustice acts mistakenly against his true self-interest; he thus acts involuntarily or unwillingly. But in the ordinary sense the paradox is incoherent, inasmuch as the doer of injustice does wrong willingly—that is, knowingly—and it is in this sense, Weiss argues, that his act is voluntary (188).

Building on this distinction, Weiss suggests that while the doer of injustice is ignorant of his good in one sense—the Socratic sense—this ignorance is by no means exculpatory. In the ordinary sense, the sense that matters to legal authorities, the doer of injustice knows what he is doing—he is
fully aware he is choosing something bad—which means he can be held accountable. Weiss’s Stranger firmly believes that

People can and should control their passions and expel their false beliefs, and if they fail to do so, it is because they are not prepared to expend the requisite effort. . . . People are expected to prevent such emotional tyranny and are blameworthy when they succumb to it. (202, 204)

On her view, then,

All that is meant in the *Laws* by the involuntariness of injustice is that when a person is intentionally unjust and acts deliberately unjustly he renders himself and his life bad—a condition that no human beings can want for themselves. What is most certainly not meant by the involuntariness of injustice is that no one willfully chooses to act or live unjustly. (204; Weiss’s emphasis. I should add that, on these crucial points, Weiss’s Stranger and her Socrates are both in agreement; consider 22 and 209.)

Putting together what she says about the two dialogues gives us what appear to be two complementary distinctions: want / desire, and the two senses of voluntary / involuntary. In the Socratic sense, “no one does wrong willingly” means that when someone does wrong he does not do what he wants; but in the ordinary sense, this same person acts willingly because he does exactly what he desires. Even so, one of the problems with her approach, here, as Weiss herself points out, is that Socrates does not always maintain the distinction between desire and want (*epithumein* and *bouleusthai*). And when one looks to other dialogues, it is not clear that Socrates really believes that there is a strong enough difference in meaning to support Weiss’s claim (see, for example, *Republic* 437c-d, 439b; and also 178-79). But even if we allow the distinction to stand, can both sides of this formulation be equally true? Or is it not the case that one side will invariably be subordinated to the other—especially given their opposing moral implications? For Weiss, there is a seamless fit only, it seems, if the Socratic sense of the paradox is taken as a strained use of ordinary language: *loosely speaking*, when people act unjustly, they fail to do what they want, since no one wants to harm himself and injustice is a form of harm (20). But in the precise sense the paradox would have to be wrong, for it seems that people do want what is bad even when they know it is bad. Weiss’s Socrates, then, while holding a rather ordinary view of moral psychology (22, 209), exploits the deceptively unordinary meaning of his paradox only to confuse his enemies; given his emphasis on personal responsibility, Socrates’ true views are more consistent with the city’s morality and less in keeping with the
Socratic sense of the paradox.

Some readers may find that Weiss’s agonistic reading, despite its merits, is not wholly satisfying – that her approach, while stressing Socrates’ revolutionary insight and singular commitment to virtue, actually tends to soften what is radical and challenging about his investigations. Indeed, at times one struggles to see how Socrates, who asks so many difficult questions about the common moral perspective—questions that the dialogues often do not resolve in any obvious way—could possibly share these same ordinary moral views. To this Weiss might respond, and with good reason, that Socrates asks these questions to provoke people into becoming aware of the opinions that they hold most dearly (212). The problem with this, however, is that it is not clear that Socrates does this because he believes that being aware of our moral expectations will bring us any closer to satisfying them. In fact, the clarity we gain from reading the dialogues often consists of seeing how some of our more fundamental and cherished beliefs are in tension with one another. Admittedly, Weiss’s Socrates, while not a “moral expert,” is attractive precisely because of his confidence: his “human” wisdom gives him enough ground to wage war on the enemies of justice, and his victories seem to offer assurance that the virtuous life is the best life. But Weiss’s portrait, while appealing, is not exhaustive; and we are reminded that while Plato’s dialogues can be inspiring, they also show us how difficult the question of virtue is (Apology 21d4). If The Socratic Paradox has one major shortcoming, it is that some of Weiss’s conclusions tend to diminish the extent to which Plato presents virtue as a problem. Having said that, Weiss’s book is a serious effort to make sense of one of the more difficult aspects of the dialogues; it has something to offer all readers of Plato, and I commend it especially to those interested in the problem of akrasia in the so-called “early” dialogues.

**ANDREA L. KOWALCHUK**

UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

andi_kowalchuk@yahoo.ca

Robert Bartlett’s *Plato: “Protagoras” and “Meno”* is a significant contribution to Platonic scholarship. His thoughtful translations are literal without being awkward, and consistent regarding words of philosophic importance. Where there are problems with the manuscripts, discrepancies are indicated, and where there are words that can be variously translated, alternatives are supplied. Notes regarding context, background, definitions, people, and history are also helpful without being burdensome.

The interpretive essays are terse and brief, yet dense and full of penetrating questions, suggestions, and insights. Even for those who might disagree with Bartlett’s interpretations, these essays are valuable since they constitute a challenge to more generally accepted views of Platonic psychology, morality, and, ultimately, of the Platonic approach to philosophy simply. What emerges most prominently from Bartlett’s treatments of the two dialogues is the careful and consistent focus on the two title characters, in and through which we gain wonderful insight into the moral self-understanding (or lack thereof) of both Protagoras and Meno. Bartlett’s analysis brings to life, respectively, a sophist and a future criminal (and with less emphasis, a future accuser of Socrates in Anytus), by sifting through and illuminating the particular qualities of each character’s moral confusion, which he also shows to be connected with each man’s view of the cosmos. As the source or sources of their respective confusions come to sight, we are led further into the question of the philosopher’s relationship to virtue, and into the unifying question of the two dialogues: whether virtue can be taught—an “apparently epistemological question [that] is (also) a thoroughly political one” (138).
Bartlett identifies the theme of the *Protagoras* as “the sophist as educator, especially in his difference from the philosopher” (68), and it is this theme that guides his analysis as a whole. On his view, if Socrates’ critique of Protagoras is to be convincing, “it must not merely stymie or embarrass the sophist but also demonstrate the soundness of the standard or goal to which it looks in doing so” (67-68). The task of Bartlett’s essay is significant, and he does not disappoint; even where answers are not always arrived at, lights are thrown ahead.

He begins from a consideration of Socrates’ motives for engaging in his conversation with Protagoras and, in so doing, raises and affirms possibilities that, at first sight and from a certain line of interpretation, call into question whether there is indeed any difference between the self-interested sophist and the philosopher. The Socrates who seeks primarily his own advantage, that is, who seeks to learn something from the conversation “in the guise of concern for the moral education of Hippocrates,” a would-be student of Protagoras (69), bears an uncomfortable resemblance to Protagoras himself. Protagoras, who is open about the fact that he teaches but not what he teaches, may not explicitly claim to teach civic virtue, but even so he is willing to let others assume that he does. As Bartlett shows us, however, beginning with Protagoras’ myth (*Protagoras*, 320c7ff.), he is little concerned with political virtue. He is a teacher of injustice and believes that justice is someone else’s good. Laws compel such justice (or political virtue generally), and belief in the gods reinforces it; but for those who can escape this “habituation to unthinking obedience” (75), a little toughness or endurance in sticking with that which Protagoras’ wisdom reveals is all that is required. The aspiring ruler who seeks to benefit from Protagoras’ teaching would merely have to feign a commitment to justice and the common advantage for the sake of attaining a self-interested end.

Bartlett’s presentation of what is common between the two men, then, raises a crucial question: If Socrates too is primarily, even solely concerned with his own advantage, is he also willing to exploit the common good for his own benefit? Taken broadly, this question is of course related to whether or not Socrates corrupts the youth, that is, whether (and in what way) philosophy is in permanent tension with political virtue. Socrates himself puts the question to Protagoras as follows (329c2ff.): Are all of the individual virtues parts of the same whole? In response, Protagoras agrees that the individual virtues are related to the whole of virtue as the nose, ears, and eyes are related to the whole that is the face. He agrees, however, not because he
understands virtue to be a genuine unity, but rather because the image of the face (more than gold, Socrates’ other image) permits a distinction among the virtues—between justice, moderation, and piety on the one hand, and wisdom and courage on the other. As Protagoras admits, the courageous man can be unjust and the just man unwise (329e5-6). Protagoras’ qualified agreement as to the unity of virtue raises the question of whether virtue can be understood with recourse to one principle, or even two compatible principles (something like duty and personal fulfillment of desire or wish), and serves to highlight what is perhaps an unresolved multiplicity within virtue itself. When cornered by Socrates and compelled to agree on the near equivalence of justice, piety, moderation, and wisdom, Protagoras relents only so as to avoid affirming the alternative view—that piety is unjust and justice impious. Together, his grudging agreement and the above considerations concerning Protagoras as a teacher of injustice lead Bartlett to reformulate Socrates’ original question regarding the unity of virtue more sharply: Is it possible, as Protagoras seems to believe, that the wise man is as such unjust?

This question becomes increasingly complicated by the fact that Socrates already appears no different than a sophist to certain men (314d3). He also shows no moral scruples about using underhanded tactics, evincing as he does all the skills of a clever speaker; nor does he consistently concern himself with harming the business prospects of the sophists (357e2-9); finally, he denies that political virtue can be taught. From observations like these, Bartlett indicates that political virtue cannot be the standard by which Socrates criticizes Protagoras. Adding still more complexity to the issue is the further fact that Protagoras, who views justice as someone else’s good, subtly charges Socrates with masking a similar opinion (consider 339d7-8 in light of 316d7). As Bartlett interprets it, Protagoras’ appeal to Simonides (338e6-347a5) is a veiled warning to Socrates to cease his aggressive cross-examination regarding matters the two men agree upon, and Socrates’ wooziness is evidence that he has felt and understood the blow.

And yet, if Socrates does not differ from the sophist, how is it that Bartlett at the end of his essays can emphasize the compatibility of Socrates’ pursuits with generosity and care? Where Protagoras sees a similarity of thought between himself and Socrates, Bartlett argues, Socrates sees a crucial difference. The philosopher’s response to Protagoras, wholly inadequate as it is to serve the ostensible argument, veils nothing short of a returned attack: “the sophist who is concerned with wisdom for the sake of honor and who seeks to gain victory over a wise man is not himself wise because he is inconsistent on a matter of fundamental importance” (79). It is this inconsistency or
confusion that finally distinguishes Protagoras from Socrates as an educator. Moreover, it is this confusion, Bartlett argues, that prevents Protagoras from seeing the true end of human activities—the end in light of which virtue is virtue (and in light of which Socrates pursues the conversation) and according to which Socrates judges the sophist.

Bartlett addresses Protagoras’ confusion about what constitutes the true good for man most explicitly in his analysis of Socrates’ abrupt turn to hedonism (351b3ff.). He tentatively suggests that although Protagoras wishes to reject hedonism in the name of noble pursuits, such a rejection is inconsistent with Protagoras’ view that all men who know the good will necessarily pursue it. This point, Bartlett argues, is better understood in light of the view of “the wise.” Reminding us that according to the wise, “being deprived of knowledge alone constitutes bad action or faring badly,” Bartlett infers that “acquiring or retaining knowledge alone constitutes good action or faring well” (84). It follows from this view, he notes, that the possession of knowledge is the proper end of human life, and “all that contributes to this end is virtue and all that detracts from it vice” (84). Furthermore, “if knowledge of the most important things comes at the price of our initial and perhaps dearest expectations of the world, it would to that extent be profoundly unpleasant or painful and hence would require some capacity in addition to great intellect not only to grasp it but also to live in accord with it” (84-85). One would thus require some kind of toughness or endurance to pursue the life seen as the distinctly human end. Protagoras’ view, alternatively, holds that men who know the good necessarily pursue it. But if so, “the toughness indicated would be unnecessary,” because knowledge or wisdom would be “a pleasure untainted by pain” (85).

If Protagoras is to maintain that knowledge alone is sufficient to guide men aright, Bartlett argues, then he ought to maintain that the good is pleasure, and this he is ultimately compelled to do, though not before he is shown to be thoroughly confused. The full extent of his confusion comes to sight in the fallout from his acceptance of hedonism, which “proves to be an element of his undoing” (85). Socrates has the other men present agree, first, that all noble deeds are both good and advantageous, and second, that “no one willingly advances toward or does things he supposes to be bad” (86). If all men necessarily advance towards what they perceive to be good, and the good is pleasure as Protagoras has agreed, then there is nothing to distinguish cowardly from courageous men except that which they find pleasant. This implies that there is nothing truly heroic about their deeds. Having stripped
courage of precisely that which elicits Protagoras’ (and our) admiration—the self-sacrificing part—Socrates concludes by stating that if there were something truly frightening to face in battle, the courageous man would do the sensible thing and flee.

This reduction of the noble to the good, Bartlett concludes, does not sit well with Protagoras, who proves incapable of sticking by what he has agreed to. “What Protagoras seeks to exploit in the case of justice, he admires in the case of courage, namely the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of a good greater than one’s own” (87), which means that he “admires a nobility not reducible to one’s own good, to say nothing of one’s own pleasure” (87). And so, whereas Protagoras had initially held the view that nobility is reducible to the good for oneself, he ultimately reveals himself “to believe that some things are noble and hence choice-worthy despite the fact that—or precisely if—they are bad or disadvantageous for oneself” (87). Given such confusion, Bartlett concludes, one could hardly expect success from him as a teacher.

Meno is similarly confused about the character of virtue, and in this respect (as well as in others) the two interpretive essays are complementary. Like Protagoras, Bartlett explains, Meno believes that virtue is advantageous for the individual, but also that it demands the sacrifice of one’s own good; and each of his first two definitions of virtue is an attempt to satisfy the demands of one of these two conflicting principles. Central to his first definition (Meno, 71e1-72a5) is the “task” (ergon) assigned to each member of a community (men, women, slaves and freemen), with the demands of the task determining the specific content of virtue in each case. According to this definition, the unity of the class of virtue derives from the unity of the goal to which the tasks all directly or indirectly contribute: the well-being of the city. But as this thoroughly political definition is silent about the extent to which virtue is also good for the virtuous themselves, or is the necessary means to our becoming good not only as husbands and wives, elders and children but as human beings, Meno’s second definition (73c9-d1) attempts to fulfill this promise more directly. “Virtue, [Meno] contends, is the capacity to rule human beings, ruling being a very great good for those who do so” (140-41). This definition, however, is soon abandoned when Socrates raises the question of whether a slave who rules would remain a slave. Rather than conceding that “a “virtuous” (i.e., dutiful) slave is not a “virtuous” (i.e., good) human being” (141), Meno resists separating the two principles informing these distinct views of virtue. His third attempt at a definition—ruling others is virtue, and
justice is virtue (77b1-4)—is meant to reconcile the two principles, but does little more than clarify the tension. As the discussion unfolds, what is revealed is that underlying Meno’s willingness to sacrifice his own advantage in the name of nobility or justice is a desire to be benefited by precisely that sacrifice. Thus, while Protagoras wrongly thought he was free from the limitations demanded by political virtue, Meno mistakenly believes himself to submit to such demands at the expense of his own good.

According to Bartlett, Meno’s confusion about what he had believed to be the self-evident character of virtue leads him to an extreme conclusion: not only does he begin to doubt the possibility of defining virtue, but also he begins to despair of the possibility of rational inquiry altogether (79e5-80d8). And since Meno cannot move beyond his confusion, Bartlett contends, Socrates has recourse to an experiment: the promised rewards of Persephone offer inducement to behave justly in the here and now. In this respect the combination of Meno’s despair and his submerged desire to benefit from sacrificial behavior is what shapes the character of Socrates’ famous presentation of both the theory of recollection and the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (81a5-81e2). Accordingly, Bartlett argues that Socrates’ presentation is less a demonstration than it is a rhetorical act of persuasion.

Socrates’ account of the speech of men and women wise in divine matters (81a5-81e2) is to be distinguished from an alternative view of virtue that is more closely tied to knowledge. Both these views of virtue find counterparts in Meno’s own definitions and in the conflicting principles that underlie his view, and in order to illustrate these alternative views Bartlett refers to Socrates’ consideration of virtue which occurs immediately prior to the arrival of Anytus (87b2-89e8). During that interval, Socrates begins by discussing a kind of virtue that Bartlett identifies as either a part or the whole of prudence, which is in principle teachable because it is rational; but Socrates then concludes by referring to a thoroughly political kind of virtue like that present in Meno’s first definition, a kind of virtue notable for its usefulness to the city. And while Socrates had begun by emphasizing the teachability of virtue, now this premise is retracted (89c5ff.). This last point Bartlett takes as an indication that while there may indeed be a kind of virtue that is teachable, political virtue by itself (that exemplified by the hostile Anytus’ unquestioning commitment to the correct opinions of his city) cannot be taught.

According to Bartlett, Meno’s failures illumine a path for those capable to sift through and examine the mixture consisting of their own true and false (and correct) opinions. This path comes to sight in part when
Socrates introduces a puzzle regarding our knowledge of virtue (81c5-d1). Even if, Bartlett argues, we were to grant Socrates’ arguments about the immortality of the soul and its ability to recollect, we would still have to acknowledge that “we not only—somehow—forget the knowledge we have learned but also take in its stead false opinions” (146). Bartlett’s point is that not only is there an ignorance that accompanies our current existence—in this case ignorance regarding virtue, including whether and in what way virtue or political virtue is intelligible and good for us—but also there must be a learning that itself cannot be an example of recollection. To greatly oversimplify Bartlett’s presentation: through the kind of questioning demonstrated throughout the dialogue, those with suitable natures can be led in two ways. To begin with, they may be drawn from ignorance to knowledge of ignorance; and then, given that all opinion is a mixture of true and false, they may be drawn from true opinion to knowledge. Generally speaking, one can be led from one’s second nature—the one shaped by the political community within which we live, most especially by laws and the institutions and beliefs that support those laws—to one’s first nature. Such a process includes or consists in the careful disentanglement of the conflicting principles within virtue and constitutes a process of transforming true opinions into knowledge, while those opinions that are merely correct are abandoned in the process.

Overall, Bartlett’s treatments are incisive and complex, and his close textual analyses present compelling portraits of the main interlocutors of each dialogue. By following the dramatic action of the dialogue so closely, they also offer inroads into some very difficult interpretive questions. Even where the brevity of the essays preclude a sustained discussion of certain relevant themes—for example, the consequences of Socrates’ freedom from confusion regarding virtue—the reader is made aware of the existence of questions that he may and must himself pursue. Moreover, Bartlett’s obvious capacity for moving beyond the page to a fuller consideration of certain psychological phenomena is a sign of how the dialogues are meant to encourage and facilitate genuine thought through self-knowledge. Together, Bartlett’s attentiveness to Socratic arguments and his ability to bring his own experience and insight to bear on his work constitute an admirable model for any serious philosophic scholarship.
Michael Chan would bring Aristotle and Alexander Hamilton closer together than most previous scholars have done. Without “claiming that Hamilton was an Aristotelian,” he wants to show that Aristotle esteem commerce more than many Aristotelians say, and that Hamilton “endeavored to harness commerce not only for the narrower ends of prosperity and national defense, but also for the wider—indeed classical—ends of forming the character of citizens, especially harmony and justice, and pursuing national greatness” (8). Both find in prudence the essence of statesmanship.

Chan devotes the first quarter of his argument to Aristotle’s treatment of economy and of what later writers would call ‘political economy.’ “The practice of virtue requires equipment,” and “furnishing the equipment of virtue constitutes one of the most necessary and difficult tasks of statesmanship” (13). Whereas the first two chapters of the Politics seem rather sternly to subordinate acquisition to economy proper—that is, the right use of the things acquired—chapters four, five, and six unbend a bit, “giv[ing] commerce ‘two cheers’ of praise” (13).

Chan distinguishes Aristotle from Francis Bacon; “Aristotle does not pursue the possibility of improving the arts and sciences for the sake of the relief of man’s estate” (15). Human life by nature aims at action more than production; “man is better understood as a political animal than a tool-making animal” (15). Production is always instrumental, aiming at an end beyond itself, whereas the distinctly human virtues manifest themselves in activity. Mere production of possessions might succeed too well, clogging our lives with too many things, the sheer amount of which “becomes a hindrance
rather than a help to the practice of virtue” (16). More, the spirit of production is a spirit of innovation, potentially injurious to the steady rule of law, which requires habituation and reverence; steadiness of soul in turn inclines one toward prudence, the virtue that “concerns itself with the whole rather than the partial human good”—unlike any production can do (17).

This notwithstanding, Chan observes, Aristotle stands closer to Bacon than he does to Rousseau, who attacks the cultivation of the arts tout court. In Politics VII.11 Aristotle “relaxes some of his strictures against technological innovation because of certain economic, political, and moral considerations which no actual (and even the best) regime can ignore,” such as “military necessity” (20). A statesman who ignored the need for fortifications in the face of such current innovations as missiles and siege machines fails in prudence, fails to adapt to new circumstances, clings to old-fashioned ways of life at the expense of the well-being of his polis. “[T]echnology can and does affect the conditions for the practice of virtue, which is among the reasons why all natural right is changeable” (20). It is to be noted, however, that this example commends only a prudential response to innovation, not a spirit of technological innovation itself, a stance not necessarily so Hamiltonian.

Chan argues that Aristotle questions “nature’s beneficence” (25). If piracy—that is, theft—is among the natural forms of acquisition, how beneficent can nature really be? And he praises Carthage more than Sparta—that is, the regime of commerce more than the regime of war. He therefore claims that the argument in Books I and II of the Politics for the natural limits of acquisition amounts to edifying rhetoric. In so arguing, he does not consider that if war is a form of acquisition, then Sparta is more, not less violently acquisitive than Carthage.

Chan devotes the beginning of his second and final chapter on Aristotle to Book II’s discussion of the ‘best regime’ as envisioned by philosophers and political reformers. Chan cites Aristotle’s commendation of private property as the indispensable precondition for liberality. He rightly notices Aristotle’s criticisms of Phaleas of Chalcedon, that resolute egalitarian who ignores the honor-loving dimension of the human soul and can therefore imagine a faction-less polis of merely economic equality. A regime animated by liberal property-holders will more likely cohere than a regime of economic equals set free to quarrel over a straw when honor’s at the stake.

On precisely this issue of faction, and returning to the real regimes of Sparta and Carthage, Chan refers to Aristotle’s account of Carthage
as a regime with neither serious factionalism nor tyranny, in contrast to the Spartan regime wracked by periodic slave revolts. Carthage “provide[s] for its people while maintaining harmony by sending out a part of them to subject cities where they are able to become wealthy” (49), unlike democratic but non-commercial Athens, threatened by poverty-stricken urban mobs. An economy of commerce, of deal-making give-and-take, lends itself better to politics—the activity of ruling and being ruled, reciprocally. Carthage is commercial but it is no oligarchy, the regime animated by “the political opinion that wealth ought to be the title to rule” (51). In fact, Carthaginians love honor; Aristotle classifies Carthage as a timocracy.

Sparta and Carthage are similar in the most important way: both are aristocratic polities. Yet for the most part, they represent polar opposites, which can be attributed to their different modes of acquisition. At one extreme is Sparta: agrarian, rooted, homogeneous, prone to slave revolts, and warlike. At the other extreme is Carthage: commercial, seafaring, heterogeneous, harmonious, and less warlike. In creating a kind of continuum of modes of acquisition for cities, Aristotle seems to be expanding the options of statesmen so that they may choose the mode(s) of acquisition that best fits their particular circumstances...though he warns them that their regime’s mode of acquisition will be prone to characteristic excesses. In this way, the best regime need not hinder statesmen from establishing good regimes. (52-53)

Aristotle’s “ultimate aim” is “to deflect narrow economic ends toward the more comprehensive and higher ends of harmony, justice, moral virtue, and cultivated leisure” (53). Thus in the end Chan does preserve the distinction Aristotle insists upon in Books I and II of the Politics, namely, the superiority of use over acquisition. Chan’s Aristotle is less a modern liberal than Montesquieu, more a modern liberal than Rousseau.

So is his Hamilton. While not claiming that “Aristotle influenced Hamilton directly,” Chan rather “mean[s] to show that Hamilton recognized a need for ancient as well as modern prudence in the practice of politics” (55). By “modern” prudence he means a practical wisdom that does not seek so much to improve men intrinsically but to channel “their opinions, passions, and interests through institutions so as to make them serve the common good” (55). “Ancient” prudence “seeks to make men as they ought to be by directly educating and forming their opinions, passions, and interests” so as to enhance their ability to “deliberat[e] well about the best thing to be done under the circumstances in light of what is good and just for man” (55-56). Hamilton learned examples of such prudential statesmanship from Plutarch.
The “three major components” of such ancient prudence are close attention to particulars, the direct formation of public opinion, and guidance by “considerations of morality and virtue” (57). “Hamilton chose not to follow the path of Machiavelli” but justified his economic policies in accordance with a hierarchy of five goods, ranging from “the lower to the higher: prosperity, national defense, cementing Union, commercial virtue, and national greatness” (63). Chan devotes a chapter to each of these.

Chan understands that Machiavelli propounded a politics of acquisition, which the ‘liberal’ wing of the Machiavellian movement—its most extreme representative being Bernard Mandeville—transformed into “economism” (66). Under contemporary conditions, the middle-class regimes Aristotle favored could no longer adhere to the stern frugality commended by many of Hamilton’s contemporaries who advocated regimes of liberty animated by an austere refusal of commerce and luxury and by suspicion of any but the most local government. The prudential statesman in modernity must recognize that such virtuous poverty and political modesty will fall to the opulent, militarily powerful statist monarchs. Within this constricted circumstance, however, Hamilton continues to insist that virtue, not Machiavellian virtu, remains “the only unmixed good which is permitted to [man’s] temporal condition” (Hamilton, quoted p. 79).

With respect to the second good, national defense, Hamilton similarly conceded that “America would have to emulate much of British military and industrial policy if it was to remain free and secure” (80). Standing, professional armies and navies are indispensable to survival in the modern world; ‘ancient’ citizen militias simply will not do. Indeed, the ancient militias rested on the social foundation of slavery, which alone allowed the citizens of the polis the leisure to engage in serious military training. In this, Chan observes, Hamilton concurred with the judgment of no less a critic of modern statism than Adam Smith (87). Only a country with such modern systems of finance and manufacturing could fund modern militaries, and in this he departed from the Scottish philosopher, who, with Hamilton’s bitter rival Thomas Jefferson, advocated the rapid retirement of modest war debts. To such thinkers Hamilton replied that not modern economics but “man’s domineering passions” were the true “cause of wars” (97). Chan rightly remarks that Treasury Secretary Hamilton’s 1791 Report on Manufactures urges its well-known policies not primarily for political-economic purposes but in order to strengthen American military (and therefore political) independence from foreign suppliers. For this purpose, mere commercial
agrarianism would fail, first of all in economic terms, as the vagaries of crop yields and European policy would incur poverty and debt in a predominantly agricultural New World. *Contra* Jefferson and Smith, manufacturing—really the economic locus of the technological inventiveness of the human mind and the industriousness of the human spirit—would generate the true wealth of nations.

Strengthening the American constitutional union, Hamilton’s third good, required a commercial economy in which citizens saw that agricultural and commercial interests formed “part of a whole with a common aim” or aims, namely, civil-social peace and justice. Strong nationwide commerce would not only incline the American states less to war with one another; manufacturing and urbanization would reduce the number of poor citizens, another source of faction. Hamilton’s program for the assumption of the states’ war debts by the national government aimed at satisfying both the citizens of the most heavily indebted states and their creditors. He saw that the threat to American republicanism arose not only from ‘democracy,’ the many who were poor whom Daniel Shays exemplified, but also from the few who were rich, from creditor-oligarchs, who might enjoy “greater success” than poor Shays, “since public creditors tended to be men of superior talent and ability” (132). Against both of these revolutionary prospects, federal debt assumption “would unite the interest of public creditors and tie them to the federal government” while relieving the states and the many poor citizens now bearing the financial brunt of the Revolutionary War (137).

By commercial virtue, his fourth good, Hamilton referred to a character and way of life animated by constant and regular work, self-help, and opportunities for diverse talents and inclinations to make their way; a commercial manufacturing political economy will “call into activity the whole vigor” of each citizen’s “nature” (152). It will also call into activity each part of the individual soul—most obviously the appetitive part, but also the spirited, enterprising part and the reasoning, inventive part. The “true politician,” Hamilton wrote, will “favor all those institutions and plans which tend to make men happy according to their natural bent, which multiply the sources of individual enjoyment and increase those of national resource and strength” (154). A political economy that did not deploy government support to spur manufacturing in an agrarian society such as America would fail to take account of the decidedly unfree markets in all other countries. Its statesmen would depend too much upon what’s now called ‘rational choice theory,’ which at least in its more ‘economistic’ manifestations assumes that human beings
will nicely calculate actions for material advantage in abstraction from timidity and ingrained habits. Not only rational calculation to satisfy appetites but spirited ambition to dare to invest and innovate must begin to overcome agrarian ‘rootedness.’ Even a seemingly trivial thing like the introduction of circulation coin would “accustom the poor and middling elements to handling [money], inducing them to become ever-more industrious and sagacious” (159). A large-scale commercial society requires more laws, too, and at least gives statesmen the opportunity to inculcate a greater respect for law, and therefore greater reasonableness among citizens (182).

Chan associates Hamilton’s final good, national greatness, with the Aristotelian virtues of liberality and magnanimity. Chan argues Hamilton eschews Machiavelli’s (as it were) mean-spirited liberality, the Florentine’s advice to be liberal with other people’s money. The “liberal or enlarged plans of public good” envisaged by Hamilton (189) included federal assumption of state war debts, compensated emancipation of slaves, and endowments for a military academy and a national university. Such uses of taxpayer-derived revenues avoid Machiavelli’s illiberal liberality because they depend upon a principle of republicanism, namely, the consent of the governed. Further, in an important sense such liberality excels the liberality of the ancients, grounded as it is on free commerce and industry rather than on slavery and plunder.

Beyond liberality, Hamilton approaches magnanimity or greatness of soul. Although he does not seem to know Paul Eidelberg’s similar argument in his 1974 study A Discourse on Statesmanship, Chan offers much the same assessment: “Hamilton, by way of Hume, seems to have synthesized the active political virtue of the moderns and the magnanimous virtue of the ancients in his concept of ‘the love of fame,’ which is the ‘ruling passion of the noblest minds,’ and which prompts statesmen ‘to undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit’” (191). Politically, Hamilton needed to find ways to reconcile magnanimity with the republican consent. For this effort the project of emancipating slaves with compensation to their owners afforded a wide field for the exhibition of political courage and the other soul-strengthening and soul-enlarging activities conducive to a genuinely magnanimous statecraft. One might add that Hamilton had before him the example of Washington, a great-souled man if ever there was one, and a man who did in fact emancipate his slaves—with compensation to them—in his Last Will and Testament.

If, as Aristotle contends, all natural right is changeable—a
matter of prudent and morally sound adjustment to circumstances—and not a set of permanent laws, that is commands, then Hamilton might be thought of as a kind of Aristotelian statesman acting in a Machiavellian world of commerce and statism. Chan concludes his study by observing that the owners of American slave plantations, by arguing for the positive good of slavery, depart from Aristotle quite sharply; Hamilton, that proponent of commerce and industry in part as counters to the slave economy, comes closer to the Aristotelian standard of justice. This is particularly true in view of the character of prominent members of the mercantile class in Hamilton’s day; Robert Morris was no Philadelphia equivalent of an ancient Athenian fig peddler. The great financial and commercial men of the new America were statesmen in their own right, and often (as in Morris’s case) statesmen simply. This is not to claim that the commercial way of life seen in America and supported by Hamilton would produce a way of life conducive to liberality and magnanimity in the Aristotelian sense. “Hamilton wished to carve out a sphere in which a few choice spirits like himself could take full advantage of virtue’s equipment to pursue magnanimous enterprises for the public good, but America’s devotion to equality guarantees that such choice spirits have to swim against the tide of American politics” (216). Then again, as a later statesman of republicanism observed, character is “the virtue of difficult times.”
What Macaulay said of Thackeray’s *William Pitt* suits Jan Blits’s collection: “Though several years have elapsed since the publication of this work, it is still, we believe, a new publication to most of our readers.” This collection of four essays will be helpful for those interested in Roman history, Shakespeare studies, or political philosophy. The volume is well written and has the added attraction of brevity, as each piece numbers roughly twenty pages.

The first two essays deal with Rome’s political decay. They highlight the maladies immanent in the Roman understanding of human excellence and ably reveal Shakespeare’s diagnosis. The latter two essays show how the themes of political decay elucidated in the first half express themselves in the two main characters of the play, Brutus and Caesar.

The book begins with an examination of the dangers of manliness by juxtaposing it with friendship. In Rome, emphatically “a man’s world,” manliness is equated with human excellence *tout court*. Always vying for pre-eminence, the Roman citizen attempts to overshadow and outdo all external and internal rivals. Yet the very virtue that maintains Rome’s martial expansion distances the guardians of the Republic from each other as they combat among themselves for honor and nobility. In this combat love itself becomes a dividable good, jealously sought after and begrudgingly given, until finally “love is not an end in itself, but rather a means to win victory in the defeat and shame of a friend” (8-9). Thus friendship falls prey to the manly drive for distinction. In order to avoid the destruction of friendship the Romans attempt to ally it with manliness. But Blits contends that this manly friendship makes love “spirited, not affectionate. It does not aim at collapsing
the distance between men into intimacy but rather at expanding that distance to the point where friendship finally becomes impossible, as Caesar himself most vividly demonstrates” (9). The manly Roman, himself a professed votary of republican equality, in fact wants inequality, in the form of dominance over others. Thereby Roman manliness has a dangerously self-serving and anti-republican core that elevates the honor-seeking individual above the collective good. The love of distinction separates men from each other, and ultimately, from Rome. By depreciating the softer virtues in favor of manliness, the Roman virtue that produced so much glory was ultimately its downfall.

In the second essay Blits shows how Shakespeare’s diagnosis of Roman political decay is embedded in the words and actions of the very first scene, making the effort to restore and maintain the Republic truly a tragic enterprise. He mentions five symptoms of decline: “the liberation of the Personal or the Private,” “the ascendancy of personal loyalty,” “the resolution of ‘ancient malice,’” “the neglect of republican tradition,” and “the end of public oratory and republican freedom.” These sickly symptoms are contrasted throughout with the healthier impulses of the characters in Coriolanus, the republican standard by which Blits measures Julius Caesar. Extrapolating from the first scene, Blits cogently suggests that the Republic could not have been salvaged even if the many imperfections of the leading conspirators were accounted for. Caesar’s death is an “outgrowth of the regime…necessarily the end, not the salvation, of republican Rome” (22). Whatever the imperfection of Cassius and Brutus, the first scene of the play reveals that the malignant cancer had spread too widely throughout the Roman body politic to be overcome.

The first two essays form a coherent presentation of the deficiencies of Roman virtue and the limitations they imposed on the late Republic. They provide the general panorama against which the individual characters of the play can be judged. The final two essays examine the two central personalities of the play: Brutus and Caesar.

Showing little susceptibility to Brutus’s charms, in the third essay Blits maintains that Shakespeare subtly dispels the illusion that Brutus was nothing but a selfless patriot, courageous warrior, and prudent statesman, in short, “the perfect idea of Roman virtue” (41). “Whereas a more traditional Roman would seek honor for his beneficial actions,” Blits explains, “Brutus seeks fame and glory for his honorable motives” (48). His faults issue from a single font: what Blits calls his ethics of intention, understood as the idea that “the actor’s motives are…the sole standard for judging the justice of an action”
Garnering further support for this thesis, Blits adeptly shows how “Shakespeare reworks his source materials so that Brutus’ concern for pure intentions becomes the decisive cause of the conspirators’ major errors and defeat” (40). In addition to an ethics of intention, Brutus displays “an anti-republican disdain for the success of his own political cause and even for the welfare of his country” (43). To prove this latter point Blits closely examines Act II, scene 1, where Brutus refuses to swear an oath with the conspirators, objects to including Cicero, and persuades the others not to kill Antony; he also spends some time explaining the bestial or brutish side of Brutus that stems, in part, from the rise of the Empire and thereby the destruction of a political life that permitted the ennoblement of self-interest. These are certainly daring interpretations of the text, but Blits makes a strong case. Anyone who admires Brutus should take a hard look at what he has to say.

Whereas the third essay explains the failures of Brutus, the fourth essay underscores Caesar’s success. At first blush Caesar’s character seems contradictory: he claims he is fearless but submits to fears, and he declares he is above flattery yet allows himself to be flattered. Blits persuasively argues that these contradictions disappear once one understands Caesar as attempting to become a god (63-64). Blits examines in detail Caesar’s refusal of the crown at Lupercal and his decision to go to the Senate on the day of his murder in order to prove that Caesar masterfully planned and executed his own murder in order to be apotheosized. To do so Blits musters many resources: Shakespeare’s use of language and especially proper names, modifications of his ancient source material, and his insertion of fictitious events to stress broader motifs. Also packed with interesting minor themes, such as the rise of Christianity and the enervating effects of an apolitical universal empire, this essay places Caesar’s orchestrated death within the broader context of Shakespeare’s understanding of the movement from republicanism to empire. Blits ends with a sober, critical appraisal of Caesar’s legacy and some possible failures in his political judgment.

Blits’ work owes much to that of Allan Bloom, and to a lesser extent that of Paul Cantor. However, whereas Bloom emphasizes the role of individual men, Blits highlights how individuals and their actions are circumscribed and limited by larger circumstances. For example, while Bloom suggests a more muscular, fiercer conspiracy could have proven more successful, Blits argues that the conspiracy was bound to fail because the conspirators themselves were not exempt from the corruptions endemic to late republican Rome. The final essay of Blits’s book is also nicely complemented by the more
recent work of David Lowenthal (*Shakespeare and the Good Life*, Rowman & Littlefield, 1997). Both Blits and Lowenthal explicitly attempt to more adequately prove undeveloped themes in Bloom’s interpretation of Caesar’s desire to be a god. Both reveal how Caesar’s apparent blunders are in fact astute political calculations, how at the time of Caesar’s ascension the Republic was dead in everything but name, and how Caesar exemplified notable failings or important philosophical inconsistencies (see Lowenthal, 128-32 and 142-46).

Though one would have liked a lengthier introduction that more fully presented the leitmotifs of the volume as a whole, Blits’s short compilation is well worth reading for its many provocative and well-supported arguments about the nature of Roman decline, as a fine example of how Shakespeare can be read as a political philosopher, and for its helpful concision.
MAUREEN FEDER-MARCUS  
SUNY COLLEGE AT OLD WESTBURY  
marcusm@oldwestbury.edu

Simply put, this is a superb collection. As we would expect, the scholarship is meticulous throughout but without sacrificing liveliness and accessibility, and there are additional virtues that we don’t always find in this kind of volume. Masterful editing by Christopher Rowe (Professor of Greek, University of Durham) and Malcolm Schofield (Professor of Ancient Philosophy, Cambridge) gives us a collection of 31 essays by 25 authors that has internal coherence and direction. Individual essays are insightful and some are compelling—elegantly written and argued. Each essay offers a comprehensive distillation of core texts and thinkers so that the intelligent general reader can enter the conversation, but each essay also offers the engaged scholar nuanced and, in some cases, provocative interpretations and critical readings. Essays are uniformly well paced, polished, and, on occasion, dramatic in their rendering of the issues and contexts shaping this history. Patterns of development are clearly discernible, yet there is no programmatic agenda. We just have a sense of pitch-perfect judgment in the choices of contributors, topics and approaches, and stylistic considerations, resulting in an outstanding volume.

The essays are arranged chronologically, with a division between Archaic and Classical Greece and the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Each section has an excellent introductory essay giving us the historical and intellectual context for the period. And it is worth noting here Rowe’s objectives for the contributors as he lays them out in his general introduction to the volume: “Their brief was to address their particular topic or theme in a way appropriate for any intelligent reader, reflecting what seemed to them the best available scholarship, while at the same time offering new thoughts and
suggesting future lines of investigation. Where there is controversy, this is marked, at least by means of reference to rival views; the aim is to advance discussion, not to close it off” (4). All of the essays succeed admirably in this. With a bibliography that highlights the most important modern and contemporary scholarship, this collection is really a definitive one-volume guide to Greek and Roman political thought for the serious generalist and a superb resource for those working in the field.

Perhaps the most fruitful approach in reviewing a collection of this caliber is to give a sense of its extraordinary scope and some of its highlights. In his introduction Rowe touches on the general intellectual contours of the period but it might have been useful here, given the scope of the volume, to provide a fuller overview of the central themes of this history as well, particularly since the organization of the essays is strictly chronological. Also of importance for the general reader would be a fuller discussion of the notion of an ongoing tradition and its continuing relevance in shaping the language, categories, and frameworks of modern political thought. Rowe addresses the editors’ understanding of what is defining for the period, citing Aristotle’s formula “according to which human beings are by nature ‘political animals,’ i.e. creatures designed—as it were—for life in a polis.” Given that, Rowe tells us, “‘things political’ (ta politika) will not only include, but actually turn on, the central ethical question about the best life for human beings, insofar as that life must not only be lived in the polis, but will be shaped by it” (5). It is this irrevocable intertwining of the political and the ethical that Rowe sees as the animating ethos of the whole period, but he then draws two implications that need to be adumbrated more fully in this introduction, given the volume’s intention to serve a more general readership.

The first point has already been mentioned, namely, the relationship of this whole period to the subsequent history of political thought. To what degree is there a coherent tradition that continues to shape political thinking? What, if anything, continues to be relevant? Rowe says that there is a tension evident in the essays between historians and philosophers, the latter being more concerned with the connections of the ancient material with modern (or perennial) concerns, noting Marxist, Straussian, and communitarian agendas in a footnote. Yet while he seems to frame this as a disciplinary distinction, the relativizing and historicizing of thought, particularly in the context of political thinking, cuts across disciplines and should be considered more explicitly. Certainly the notion that the political has some relationship to our understanding of the good life is not just a historical artifact but remains a
fundamental fault line in current discourse. For Rowe to say that “the conception of ‘the political’ reflected in large parts of this volume is likely to seem, and actually is, foreign” (5), referring here to the modern conception of the political as “the institutional (and economic) management of society without restriction to any particular communal organization,” a view, he further tells us, which “tends to banish ethical concerns to the sphere of the private” (5-6), seems puzzling. Readers from across the political spectrum are quite used to the confluence, if not conflation, of political and ethical issues, and one wonders why Rowe has ceded so much to a rather technocratic understanding. Readers will naturally come to a volume like this not just for reference but to refresh their thinking and to enlarge the frameworks and scope of current debate. Had issues of continuity and discontinuity been adumbrated more fully, the possibilities for an intellectual “recovery” of broader perspectives would be enlarged. The volume is a resource for thinking about a range of fundamental concepts and themes, but Rowe’s introduction predisposes the reader to view this period as a closed book, and that is counterproductive. Indeed focusing more explicitly on central themes would also have the advantage of drawing attention to the more striking lacunae in Greek and Roman political thought, perhaps most dramatically for us, the lack of a coherent theory of democracy from those who gave rise to that form of political life.

In fact, another important issue, this one concerning the movement from the classical period to the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, arises from Rowe’s initial characterization of this whole period. Most of us come with the historical/intellectual narrative of a “sea-change” from the Greek to the Hellenistic world, but Rowe explicitly rejects this view, telling us that the shift from the Aristotelian perspective that sees ethics as part of politics, to politics as part of ethics, is “from a wider perspective…no more than a minor, and essentially technical, shift of emphasis” (5). Following M. T. Griffin (1996), Rowe tells us that “differences in the size and the nature of the units into which society happens to be, or might be, organized simply add to the complexity of the demands on the study of political theory,” and citing Griffin directly, the move from ‘Classical’ to Hellenistic theory is no more than “an enlargement of the pool of concepts in which political thinking can be done.” (5). As it turns out, however, the essays included in the volume, both individually and collectively, give a rather different view. Perhaps greater thematic elaboration would have led to a more nuanced discussion of the shift from polis to empire, an issue of enduring interest for political theory and current thought.

Turning now to the essays themselves, we should begin with
the disclaimer that they all deserve highlight and mention. The rough principle of choice becomes, not surprisingly, the centrality of texts and thinkers to the overall development of this history, or, to use the editors’ words, we need to look at “where the action is,” those points along the trajectory that bring the period’s achievements into greatest relief.

The first two essays, “Greek political thought: The historical context” by Paul Cartledge and “Poets, lawgivers, and the beginnings of political reflection in archaic Greece” by Kurt Raaflaub, offer richly delineated discussions of the historical context for the development of Greek thought and the earliest literary traditions in which thinking about things political takes shape and form. Cartledge takes us through the emergence of such key concepts and distinctions as the ‘private/public,’ oikos and polis, nomos, isonomia, freedom and slavery, as well as the role of religion and impact of gender relations in this early period. Using a brief comparison with Benjamin Constant, he gives us some sense of the essentially politicized and, for us, peculiar notion of liberty that marked the earliest Greek thinking and its radical dependence on slavery both in practice and in an emerging political and theoretical consciousness. Discussions of the city-republic as the typical form of the polis, i.e., a shared community, the origins of the notion of isonomia and its implications for justice, the problem of stasis and its relation to the development of the “mixed” constitution, and a comparison of the Greeks and moderns on factions are excellent. His final point is the framing idea for much of the discussion to follow, namely, that political theory as an abstract enterprise would not have been possible without politics in the strong sense, that is, as performative contest and competition in a ‘civic space,’ and there would be no politics, in this sense, without the polis.

Raaflaub’s essay gives us the framework for a rich rethinking of the emergence of Greek notions of community, justice, political order, hierarchy and authority, elite leadership and the subsequent rejection of the aristocracy, and citizen participation, through the works of the early poets. At the center of all this early work is, again, the reality of the polis as a shared community (47). Clearly from these first two essays, we come to understand that the polis was not something that needed to be developed by more abstract thought but was the root structure within which political thought itself develops. Raaflaub gives us a vivid sense of the democratic roots of the polis, historically, functionally, and at the level of ethos and values, situating the emergence of a more self-reflective political thought within the earliest poetic traditions. The poets thus function here as the source of a philosophical
anthropology that grounds later conceptual developments.

A third essay in this opening series under the section heading *The Beginnings*, Simon Goldhill’s “Greek drama and political theory,” continues the pattern of masterful distillations of both interpretive scholarship and historical trends and transitions. Goldhill argues for the intensely political nature of the institution of theater, seeing it as the ritual of the “city on display” (63). Both ritual form and dramatic content project the “idea and ideal of citizen participation in the state” and the glory of Athens. His claims that tragedy interrogates the categories of citizenship and works out, conceptualizes, the relationship of the individual to the collective are perceptive and sophisticated, bringing additional perspective to this interpretive vein. In particular, his discussion of tragic discourse in which tragedy displays language’s failures and violences (73) uses more contemporary approaches and scholarship to illuminate additional dimensions of tragedy’s political scope. And while we may not agree with his characterization of tragedy as a spectacle of contested thought representing “the remarkable process of the developing city putting its developing structures of thought at risk and under scrutiny in the public arena of a civic festival” (74), it is a provocative and stimulating approach. Indeed we find an analogous interpretive framework in Josiah Ober’s “The orators,” as he sets his account within the growing tensions of the unsystematized political notions of ordinary citizens and the increasingly high-stakes game of Athenian politics, a game in which the cost of erroneous public decisions becomes increasingly dramatic. In situating the political and ethical tensions of Plato’s thought in their historical setting, Ober helps us recover the importance of the rhetor and his highly contradictory position “in a regime predicated upon speech and action” (140).

As we would expect, the volume devotes two major sections to Plato and Aristotle. Seven essays on Plato provide a comprehensive introduction and more, giving us the fruitful interplay of historical and philosophical approaches Rowe speaks to in his general introduction. The “Sitz im Leben” as Schofield uses the phrase, various interpretive perspectives and surrounding controversies, and central thematic trajectories are lucidly presented and accessible. The essays provide the “conceptual machinery” (another of Schofield’s useful phrases) for an informed reading and encounter with the full range of Plato’s work. And the section also contains a real surprise, Andre Laks’ essay on the *Laws* in which Laks does the nearly impossible, not only organizing this most difficult of dialogues but making it compelling and dramatic as well.
The group of essays begins with Melissa Lange, “Socrates and Plato: An introduction,” giving an overview of approaches to Platonic interpretation and the Socratic problem. She lays out neatly the issues involved in trying to disentangle the historical Socrates from Plato’s philosopher. She underscores what is at stake here philosophically, namely the movement from the Socratic intellectualism of the earlier dialogues to the philosophical psychology of the Republic, and takes us through the traditional interpretive strategies for dealing with these two fundamentally different views. Her discussion of the various versions of the developmentalist vs. unitarian debate and their offshoot, stylometrical studies, is quite useful. Her conclusion, that the attempt to establish a separate ‘Socratic’ presence must rest primarily on identifying a coherent moral and methodological position, leads directly to Terry Penner’s task in the next selection, as she herself points out.

Penner’s essay, “Socrates,” is a nuanced exploration of the continuities and discontinuities between Socratic intellectualism and the moral psychology of the Republic. Focusing on the nature of desire, the ‘good,’ belief and knowledge, and the means-end structure of actions, Penner argues that the class distinctions of the Republic allow for at least a partial reconciliation given that there are two distinct tasks with regard to the education of the Guardians: the education of character as demanded by the irrational parts of the soul, and the education in knowledge as well. And there is a further elaboration of the continuities in Plato’s moral psychology through the exploration of two additional themes, the centrality of the question ‘Can virtue be taught?’ and the idealization of knowledge which Penner attributes to Socrates himself. Penner’s final position, worked out through an examination of three dialogues, the Protagoras, Apology, and Crito, is suggestive, leading him to view the mature Plato as one with Socrates on the question of ascertaining the truth of the ‘good’ although seeing the philosophers diverge in its implementation, i.e., conveying virtue to the citizens as a whole. His discussions of the three dialogues are quite useful and, while his view of the centrality of persuasion in Plato’s analysis of the moral obligations of a citizen in the Crito may bring Socrates a bit too close to the discourse ethics of Habermas, the discussions here allow the non-professional in philosophy to engage with these texts on a very sophisticated level. In fact, this essay exemplifies one of the great strengths of all the selections, the effortless interweaving of different levels of analysis as dialectical “summaries” and foundational issues are laid out within the framework of original insights and fresh critical readings.

The centerpiece of this group is Malcolm Schofield’s
“Approaching the Republic,” which begins with a discussion of key dramatic and dialectical encounters between Socrates and a number of his most significant interlocutors. These encounters resonate with the political tensions of late fifth century Athenian politics, in particular, Schofield tells us, the underlying crisis in the “moral and intellectual foundations of aristocratic and particularly democratic ideology” (192). The focus here is on the Charmides, Meno, Gorgias, and its companion piece, Menexenus. In just a few pages Schofield provides a perceptive characterization of the dramatic and philosophical core of these dialogues and a sharply delineated frame for the dramatic encounters of the Republic. The Gorgias section is particularly good, with footnotes that give the reader an understanding of the major strands of philosophical interpretation and debate around this dialogue.

The core of Schofield’s essay is a “lightly annotated account” (203) of the Republic focusing on the central challenge to Socrates by his two young companions. Schofield is a lucid and sophisticated guide, here, laying out the theoretical scaffolding while doing justice to the philosophical and literary drama as it unfolds. With footnotes to indicate major issues all along the interpretive spectrum from Popper to Strauss, readers can easily situate the major Platonic controversies and interpretive agendas. Schofield also stakes out his own position clearly, rejecting the notion that the dialogue is a profoundly conservative work (202). Though “anti-democratic through and through” and even “regressive” in its closed, controlled, and hierarchical view of human society (202), “What Plato proposes in order to achieve an appropriate blend of virtues in the soul is a radical and thoroughgoing reform of every aspect of Greek culture” (216). Arguing against Bloom and Hyland (following Strauss here), that Plato’s political proposals are designed to be risible, Schofield presents strong arguments that the political proposals of Books III–V are assigned to do some real philosophical work both formally and substantively, yielding “a model for thinking with, rather than a blueprint designed to be exactly reproduced” (224). But for Schofield “thinking with’ does not exclude ‘acting upon,”’ and thus the dialogue’s theoretical discussion of justice points to the conclusion expressed on the last page of Book X that “we should practise it with understanding in every way we can.” (224). In Schofield’s reading, Plato drafts his account of the perfect unity of the harmonious city to supply a basis for guidelines which are to inform—in whatever approximations to the ideal—the work of legislators and makers of constitutions, i.e., as Schofield tells us in a footnote, the Republic already looks forward to the Laws. Indeed, the passionate and visionary” Books V–VII are designed to communicate, for Schofield, an infectious optimism underscoring
his view that it is the notion of possibility and not fantasy that motivates even
the most radical of Plato’s proposals (228). We really could not ask for a better
introduction to the Republic in a volume like this, one which distills the
extraordinary range of themes and the interpretive history that have come to
define the core of the Western philosophical tradition.

Other essays in this group round out Plato’s thought with dis-
cussions of the Politicus, the Timaeus-Critias (which Rowe treats as a
hyphenated unity), “Plato and practical politics,” again by Schofield, and Rowe
on the Cleitophon and Minos. As indicated earlier, however, one other essay
needs to be singled out, namely, Andre Laks on the Laws. In his opening pages,
Laks is unsparing in his characterization of the difficulties of the dialogue for
the reader, “The length of the work seems excessive, the material arid, and the
style torturous. Most off-putting of all is its organization, a tangle which seems
to defy understanding” (259). But this just underscores his own achievement.
Summing up his initial discussion of the structure and content of the dialogue,
Laks writes: “In any case, the most striking moments of the work are undeni-
able those when the immensity of the task undertaken is abruptly placed under
the perspective of the ultimate questions about man and the meaning of his
existence. Flashes of sublimity thus illuminate a work otherwise so densely tex-
tured as to have been censured as ‘frigid’ even in antiquity” (267).

This statement begins to give us a sense of the extraordinary
depth and interpretive insight that mark Laks’ essay. While he makes a very bold
claim at the beginning that one can certainly take issue with, namely that the
Laws can be considered the first work of genuine political philosophy, the
Republic being only a sketch, Laks has the intellectual power to argue such a
claim. His piece is both analytically brilliant and philosophically compelling,
even dramatic. For Laks places his whole discussion within the framework of a
philosophical anthropology, “Man and god: The anthropology of the Laws”
(section 4 of his essay), providing a context that raises the dialogue to the
heights of the Republic. Sections on political institutions and on forms of politi-
cal speech continue to place the seemingly sterile details of the dialogue within a
vital dramatic and ethical context. And pointing to the unique centrality of ‘god’
in the conduct of human affairs, and more generally the role of piety in the
legislative program of the dialogue, Laks makes a final claim that not only is the
work the first genuine political philosophy but also the first theologico-political
treatise as well. Clearly we are being treated here to a commentary of the first
rank, creative, exciting, and deep. And that the essay on the Laws turns out to be
a page-turner only underscores the superb nature of this collection.
While the Aristotle section may not hold the same sort of stunning surprise that Laks adds to the Plato essays, the five pieces here (counting Schofield’s short but incisive introduction and Rowe’s epilogue, “The Peripatos after Aristotle”) are highly polished discussions that do an excellent job laying out and analyzing the philosophical and political lexicon that, through Aristotle, informs the entire tradition of Western political thought. We see the taxonomies, categories, and models emerge that will shape the discourse of political philosophy as a more “empirical” political science. Yet the essays also remind us that while Aristotle identifies the true politician with the architectonic lawgiver (315) he continues to maintain the more “therapeutic” project of the statesman for whom “the ultimate object of legislation is the moral education of the citizens” (315). Schofield’s introductory commentary of the Aristotelian model of the polis reinforces the multilayered analysis that marks Greek political thought as a whole and that remains essential for producing a theoretically sophisticated and humanly satisfying political understanding. We are reminded that functionalism is just not enough. Yet Schofield also speaks to the contemporary sensibility with a concluding observation: “No wonder Aristotle’s political philosophy both attracts and repels, combining as it does penetrating insight into both first principles and the dynamics of political struggle with proposals born of crude class interest” (320). The essays in the volume offer a number of such perceptive evaluations giving us an exceptionally thoughtful and experientially grounded guide to the thinkers under consideration.

The next two selections are also masterful and reflect intelligent thematic choices, Fred Miller Jr., “Naturalism,” and Jean Roberts, “Justice and the polis.” Again, these essays pay careful attention to foundational concepts and larger philosophical frameworks, with Miller taking on the task of analyzing the naturalism underlying Aristotle’s thinking as a whole. He lays out six clearly delineated senses of ‘nature’ in Aristotle, a task mandated by the fact that such an understanding is fundamental to Aristotle’s central claims that the polis exists by nature, and that the human being is, by nature, a political animal. Embedded in this analysis is a discussion of Aristotle on slavery. The overall thrust of the essay is to show that Aristotle’s political naturalism does presuppose his philosophy of nature, his physics and biology. The understanding that the polis resembles an organism in some significant respects frames the discussion of the next two chapters as well, where the polis, in a natural or unnatural condition, grounds Roberts’ discussion of political justice and Rowe’s “Aristotelian constitutions.”
It is worthwhile here to mention two thematically central aspects of Robert’s discussion that have implications for the continuing history of political thought, namely the coincidence of individual virtue and the virtues of a citizen, leading to a further discussion of the tensions in Aristotle’s analysis of justice. Tension arises here because different constitutions, and hence regimes, require different virtues of their citizens, but, given Aristotle’s naturalism, there is only one set of virtues for a good individual. The difficulties entailed by this disjunction are thoughtfully considered, leading to Roberts’ final claim that Aristotle had “a coherent and original conception of political justice” (364). This conception, he tells us, centers on the notion that the honor of political office “be given to those who deserve it” and that Aristotle provides “a reasoned criterion for determining desert,” a criterion that grounds justice on fairness to individual citizens and not solely on the smooth functioning of the city as a whole (364-65). This enduring tension between a more individualistic and a collectivist notion of distributive justice adds another important dimension to thinking about the continuing relevance of Aristotle. Just one additional point that may have been useful here—more discussion of the notion of phronesis, since this term retains currency in debates about the very nature of political judgment and understanding.

Structural anomalies in the Politics as a text help frame Rowe’s discussion as he continues to develop a number of issues raised in the previous essays, including the problem of a taxonomy of ‘best constitutions’ and their deviant forms. A central idea, here, “that of mixture as a solution to political problems” (379) is discussed, as are a range of issues flowing from these taxonomies of health and deviance. Concepts that are foundational for both a theoretical understanding of the nature of the ‘polity’ and practical politics as well, namely, the relationship between the ‘absolutely best’ and the practically best, the relationship of justice to the natural gradations in various constitutional forms, the implications for an external standard of political judgment, justice as distribution by virtue as opposed to the need for stability and the unity of the citizen body, rule for common advantage vs. rule for the most virtuous life, are all highlighted. Rowe also leaves us with an understanding of the great shortcoming of the work, that political justice for Aristotle leaves in place the necessary role of non-citizens. But his own position that it is easy to skirt these issues and construct an alternative, more inclusive model of an ‘Aristotelian’ political community, invites us to think through this possibility for ourselves.

The short epilogue to this section by Rowe is the segue into
the second half of the volume, as the integration of the polis into the “wider world of the Hellenistic kingship” (392) begins and the major shift to the political reality that was Rome takes place. In his introduction to this section, Peter Garnsey gives us a balanced and nuanced overview of this next period, centering on the ongoing intellectual and political dialectic that marks at least the early centuries of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. That dialectic is marked by two poles: as the standard work in political philosophy in the Hellenistic period becomes the treatise on kingship, the issue of the continuance of Roman civic life and actual political engagement remains central to the lives of Roman political thinkers. Garnsey’s view that the Hellenistic age was a creative period in moral and not political philosophy is also an important counterpoint to Rowe’s somewhat different emphasis in his general introduction. Indeed the essays that follow allow us to see in some detail the hollowing out of political philosophy as the corruption of empire sets in, and the movement into the aristocracy of men whose “ideal was obedience rather than liberty” accelerates (410). But we are also reminded of a ‘tradition’ being central to genuine thinking and that it is able to sustain thinkers even during dark times. Garnsey gives us an excellent sketch of the political contours of the whole period including the issues of slavery, class, the rise and fall of specific political institutions, in particular, the Senate, and the evolving status of the emperor until the advent of Christianity. The story of the continuing engagement of the early Church fathers with Classical philosophy completes this concise and accessible overview.

After equally fine chapters on the Cynics by John Moles, and by Schofield on Epicurean and Stoic political thought, David Hahm returns us to more explicitly political concepts in “Kings and constitutions: Hellenistic theories.” An initial point that frames his discussion is that as the executive components of the free city-state strengthen, the distinction between democracy and aristocracy or oligarchy as a central defining concept of the polis disappears. The significant difference becomes that between a city with a high degree of self-rule and one administered by an agent of one of the Hellenistic kings. Within this context we have an excellent discussion of constitutional theory, in particular, the work of Polybius. Affirming the basic assumptions of Hellenistic democracy, “namely, formal popular sovereignty with executive power in the hands of civic-minded magistrates” (465), Polybius’ influential metaphor of ‘checks and balances’ is put forward, but, again, in the context of a philosophical psychology and theory of human nature so that the operative mechanisms of political organization remain rooted in a substantive analysis. And Polybius’ analysis of the Roman constitution as the most stable contains,
at least descriptively, serious attention to institutional factors as they reflect a balance of political power among different socio-economic groups. Thus Hahm’s essay speaks to the sophisticated interweaving of theory and historical compilation that mark Polybius’ influential work.

Two other highlights from this section of the volume are E. M. Atkins, “Cicero,” and an essay by David Johnston on the Roman jurists. Atkins’ major thrust is to show that Cicero’s political philosophy was genuinely creative, contrary to the prevailing view held since the late nineteenth century of its essentially derivative nature. To this end Atkins highlights, even if it is not his primary project, what it means to think within a tradition, the creative appropriations and transformations that are made and conditioned by the singular problems of a later age. For the modern reader conditioned to fear the conservative, even archaizing tendency of tradition, this is a valuable exercise, as we see the vitality of Greek thought reappropriated by Cicero. Atkins also succeeds admirably in conveying the drama of Cicero’s work as we move from the Republic of thought to the Republic of Rome. As he gives us an expertly guided tour through Cicero’s major works, we are also provided an overview of the moral vocabulary of the Roman Republic’s elite and insight into the lasting influence of that vocabulary on thought and action. In *De Oratore*, we see Cicero revisit the antagonism of rhetoric and philosophy, but an additional distinction deepens the debate: the view that the orator is indispensable to political life but that he can operate responsibly within the context of aristocratic leadership is explicitly laid out. The proposed strategy is simple, namely, that the orator can persuade the wise, as institutionalized in the Senate, by understanding his subject as well as his audience’s psychology. This mature understanding of practical politics is still most welcome.

In leading us through the companion work, *De Re Publica*, Atkins mines two central Platonic themes, the necessity of stability and the education of leaders for the flourishing of the city. He again underscores Cicero’s self-conscious, critical appropriation of Plato. And in Cicero’s response to Polybius’ language of checks and balances, his Platonic sympathies emerge yet again as he refers to the ‘mixing’ and ‘tempering’ of musical harmony with respect to the three elements of political forms, *consilium*, *libertas*, and *imperium*. Atkins’ discussion of the mechanisms of republican governance is framed by Cicero’s view that the preservation of the system depends on the political ethics of the statesman because authority, not power, is the most important element of political life. And another central insight of Cicero’s, that right reason and accumulated experience ought to deliver the same conclusion,
points to the more Stoic underpinnings of his work in *De Legibus*, in particular, the coincidence of natural law and political justice. A detailed analysis of justice and the duties of a statesman in *De Officiis* is set against the dramatic events of the final years of the Republic and Cicero’s life and is, again, masterly.

Other essays cover Seneca and Pliny, Philo, Plutarch, Josephus, and the Stoic writers of the imperial era, and all are enlightening. There is a particularly interesting chapter, David Johnston on the jurists, which continues to reveal much about the ongoing trajectory of Roman thought, covering the period from the late Republic to the early third century. We see the marginalization of the concept of natural law as ‘right reason’ for jurists, practitioners for whom “theory meant little and practical results meant everything” (621), with Johnston reminding us that it was not until AD 1140 in Gratian that we see the notion of natural law set down again as a normative standard for positive law. There are interesting discussions of the history of public vs. private law and of two areas that garnered the attention of the jurists, jurisdiction of magistrates and the powers of office. These latter discussions laid down fundamental understandings of exercising an office according to law and of how an office defines and delimits powers—what is inherent in the office itself and what by legislation of some sort. And at the end of his section on “Constitution and powers” (section 3.2), Johnston draws out the rather significant implications of this work, namely, the emergence of the recognizable idea of the constitutional state and “the emergence here, perhaps for the first time, of a recognizably modern conception of the state” itself, although this development, he reminds us, happens paradoxically “within a system of the most unrestrained absolutism” (630).

The last two essays in the volume bring us to the beginnings of Christianity, the political tensions preceding its embrace by Constantine and the immediate aftermath of that defining event. Frances Young traces the two opposing tendencies of the new movement, i.e., its challenge to political authority and the political status quo, and its simultaneous sacralizing of hierarchical social orders. Clearly the alliance of monotheism and monarchy wins, but it is important to be reminded of the roots of a tension that has continued to mark the history of Christian thought. And in his elegant epilogue, Schofield chooses two “intriguing” figures, Julian and Augustine, to underscore the degree to which even this late theorizing takes place within the recognizable frameworks of Greek and Roman thought. In particular, he turns his attention to the complex dialectic by which Augustine turns Cicero on his head by rejecting his paradigm of the healthy society as Scipionic or
pre-Scipionic Rome. This argument, in turn, becomes central to Augustine’s view of the Heavenly City as essentially ahistorical in nature. Also discussed is Augustine’s redefinition of *populus* as he rejects Cicero’s more functional view and grounds his understanding in human motivation, the loves and desires that motivate and drive the behaviors characteristic of a society’s members. And Schofield sums up the rich connections of this pivotal discussion to the thinkers of the past: “And if Cicero’s approach to political philosophy is roughly speaking, Aristotelian, Augustine’s fascination with sociopathology recalls Plato’s in the *Republic*” (671).

So it is a bit surprising, when we read the concluding sentence of this essay and thus of the whole volume, to meet once again the same ambiguity we saw in Rowe’s general introduction. Namely, as Schofield sums up: “For some at least of the declining number of authors who were aware of it, whether in the West, the East, or the Arab world, Classical Greek and Roman political theory would remain good to think with or against for some time to come” (671; italics mine). Certainly the scope and range, the depth of insight and analysis that mark this volume’s essays speak to something else—the continuing role of ‘tradition’ in nourishing historically relevant thought and practice. Indeed, one of the great successes of this volume is that it reminds us throughout that we marginalize the tradition of Western political thought at our own risk.
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