

Interpretation

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Tyranny: Ancient and Modern

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Among thoughtful political scientists, there is some agreement that modern political thought differs from premodern political thought, and the difference is identified in the moderns' rejections of the notion that political science rests on a teleological understanding of what human beings are fitted for. Modern political science takes many directions, but all of these cast aside the premodern belief that "the good" for humans is a standard independent of politics that is the measure of justice in political practice. Leo Strauss, for example, writes: "The classical situation supplies a standard by which to judge of any actual order. The modern solution eventually destroys the very idea of a standard that is independent of actual situations."¹ George Grant asks: "How, in modern thought, can we find positive answers to the questions: i) what is it about human beings that makes liberty and equality their due? ii) why is justice what we are fitted for, when it is not convenient? Why is it our good? The inability of contractual liberals (or indeed Marxists) to answer these questions is the terrifying darkness which has fallen upon modern justice."² Strauss and Grant, both powerful critics of modernity, attribute the worst excesses of contemporary politics to the collapse of faith and philosophy, and the consequent loss of a transcendent standard by which to judge historical phenomena.

While it is certainly true that modern political thought is separated from premodern political thought in its conspicuous elimination of the highest good as the measure of politics, this paper argues that it is not the absence of "a stable standard by which to judge of any actual order" that brings about the worst excesses of modernity, but the denigration of the honor-seeker that poses the greatest political threat in the modern world. It will be argued that Plato and Aristotle, and even Machiavelli, were well aware of this danger. In their awareness, they form a united front against the threat of tyranny, despite their differences with respect to consideration of the highest good.

Putting Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli in the same camp is not common among political philosophers, who tend to see Machiavelli as a destroyer of the ancients' teaching on virtue and a defender of tyrannical politics. Leo Strauss in particular has made a forceful argument along these lines. According to Strauss, Machiavelli "rejects classical political philosophy because of its orientation by the perfection of the nature of man. The abandonment of the contemplative ideal leads to a radical change in the character of wisdom: Machia-

vellian wisdom has no necessary connection with moderation” (*On Tyranny*, 197). In Strauss’s view, Machiavelli sets the agenda for modern politics by denying that there is any natural end, or good, toward which human beings naturally strive.

Comparing Machiavelli to Aristotle, for example, we might say that Machiavelli has an impoverished view of human capabilities. Aristotle held that human beings are by nature political and possessed of reason, and both these natural dispensations gravitate toward perfection. For both Plato and Aristotle, it is possible for us to hold in our imaginations an intimation of the good and the good political order, even though that good is never fully realized in our words or actions. Indeed, one might say that for Plato and Aristotle, one could not reason about anything, nor act meaningfully in the world, unless one had an understanding, however incomplete, of the end that makes our efforts worth while. All speech and action aim at some good, and goods are measured in light of *the good*. The city, or the political partnership, as Aristotle says in the *Politics*, “aims at the most authoritative good of all” (1252a5), and the authoritative good is apprehended by reason. Simply, we must know something about what is good if we are to act well and form decent human associations. The knowing is prior to, and always superior to, the acting. Contemplation of ends is the guiding star of political action. The reason that the hierarchical ordering of ends—contemplation above action—leads to moderation is that we realize that there is a limit to what we can hope to accomplish in politics. For one thing, our knowledge is incomplete, and therefore we should be hesitant in using it instrumentally to remake the world. Yet though our knowledge be incomplete, it is not empty: we know enough about the good, justice, and truth to aim for institutions and political order that respect these ends.

For Strauss, the moderation of the political philosopher consists in putting politics in its proper place, and that place is less than the most choiceworthy pursuit. Machiavelli’s specific error lay in his eclipse of reason, or contemplation, as the highest pursuit, and his elevation of politics, or the life actively engaged, to the highest place of honor. In abandoning the contemplation of the good as the standard by which politics is naturally humbled, Machiavelli celebrates the wanton pursuit of the lesser goods of security, money, and glory. Thomas Pangle expands Strauss’s argument as follows: “In Machiavelli’s new system, the “virtue” (*virtu*) exhibited by the greatest individuals is the excellence of men who have learned to harness their emotions and mental talents in ruthless competition for security, riches, dominion, and—rarest but most gratifying—the promise of lasting glory.”³ The ruthlessness of the Machiavellian quest contrasts sharply with the moderation of the contemplative man. Machiavelli is hubristic and bold; the philosopher is moderate and reflective.

The contrast drawn by Strauss and Pangle between the ancient understanding of virtue and Machiavellian *virtu* seems right in a strong sense. Certainly Machiavelli seems to dismiss the contemplative pursuit as both futile and destruc-

tive to the things he wants to elevate, glory being chief among them, as Pangle states. In a famous declaration in *The Prince*, Machiavelli asserts his views on the futility of dwelling on the good. "Many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity."⁴

Glory is, as Pangle states, Machiavelli's supreme good. The object of virtue, whether in principalities or republics, is glory. Machiavelli disdains the contemplative or pious life for its indifference to glory, claiming that the Christian religion has praised "the humble and contemplative men."⁵ The principles of Christian faith "have made men feeble and caused them to become an easy prey to evil-minded men, who can control them more securely, seeing that the great body of men, for the sake of gaining Paradise, are more disposed to endure injuries than to avenge them."⁶

If we accept that Machiavelli's political writing disregards contemplation of the good as a worthy goal, or at least as a goal that is required for the proper assessment of politics, does this mean that Machiavelli is thereby a teacher of evil? Strauss thinks so. He thinks that Machiavelli defends the basest of political ambitions because he substituted recognition, fame, and glory for contemplation of the truth as the most worthy human activity. Strauss's position is made clear in his essays on tyranny. According to Strauss, ancient political thought and practice, exemplified in Socrates, was sustained by the moderation of the philosopher and the pious man, respectively, who shared an orientation toward something beyond the flux of the historical arena. Modern political thought and practice, exemplified by Machiavelli, is restrained by nothing except the tyrannical desires of men who pursue their own glory and worldly recognition. Machiavelli is described by Strauss as the rightful heir to the tyrant Hiero, portrayed in Xenophon's dialogue of the same name. "By confronting the teaching of *The Prince* with that transmitted through the *Hiero*, one can grasp most clearly the subtlest and indeed the decisive difference between Socratic political science and Machiavellian political science" (*On Tyranny*, 23–24).

Socratic political science teaches us that "the wise man is as self-sufficient as is humanly possible," although the wise man, while not seeking honor or recognition, may nevertheless enjoy honor as a "tribute to his perfection" (93). "Socrates is not at all concerned with being admired or praised by others" (105). Contrarily, according to Strauss, the tyrant is concerned exclusively with being recognized by others. He is "blinded by passion," and if we ask of what sort, Strauss replies that "the most charitable answer is that he is blinded by the

desire for honor or prestige” (204–5). Honor is the charitable answer for Strauss, because a tyrant presumably cannot tell the difference between real honor and flattery. What the tyrant is after is recognition of all, or any, sorts.

More important for our pursuit here than the contrast that Strauss draws between the self-sufficient wise man and the recognition-seeking tyrant is the fact that, for Strauss, the tyrant is just the outside extreme of the ordinary political actor. All political actors seek recognition, but not all pursue it with the passion of the tyrant. “The difference between the tyrant and the non-tyrannical ruler is ultimately not a simple opposition, but rather that in the case of the tyrant certain elements of the character of the ruler are more strongly developed or less easily hidden than in the case of the nontyrannical ruler” (94). What this means is that, for Strauss, *all* political activity inclines toward a dubious goal: one can call it variously love, recognition, acclaim, honor. Machiavelli did not create this inclination, but he did give full vent to political ambition by removing any possible means of restraining it. Politics without philosophy is immoderate, and ultimately tyrannical.⁷ For Strauss, politics without the restraint of philosophy or religion is the source of great evil in the world because such a politics seeks sanction from the realm of opinion, and opinions about worthiness are arbitrary unless they are anchored by the love of wisdom. Strauss says that the distrust of the wise, which is so much a part of Machiavelli’s and Hiero’s outlook, is “characteristic of the vulgar, of tyrants and non-tyrants alike” (42). Machiavelli, according to this view, merely takes one side in an old contest depicted in the *Apology*, in which Socrates confronts the *demos* (tyrants and potential tyrants). Machiavelli takes the side of the vulgar against Socrates, or indeed, any wise man. If Machiavelli makes any original contribution to this contest, it is his raising of the recognition-seeking, sophistic type of human being to dizzying heights of praise.

The distrust that may exist between the truth-loving philosopher and the recognition-seeking political man can be threatening to the philosopher. One thinks immediately of the *Apology*, where Socrates confronts his accusers, and it is plain in the dialogue that the political men—chief among them Meletus—are concerned with cultivating public attitudes favorable to themselves and are not concerned with the truth. Socrates tells his accusers that he has been convicted because he will not say the things that they want to hear from him; he has never feared bad reputation and he does not even fear death. He would prefer to die than to shame himself by ingratiating himself with those he knows to be inferior. Socrates explicitly opposes his pursuits, prudence and truth, to the baser ends of money, reputation, and honor.⁸

But what ensues in the *Apology* is not proof that Socrates thought the reputation-seeking politician to be the greatest source of evil, nor even the greatest enemy of the philosopher. I would argue that honor-seekers, or sophistic types, were not the greatest threat for Socrates. The desire for recognition is not the most dangerous element in political life, though it may under certain circum-

stances be perverted by the influence of tyrants. It is true that the desire for honor and recognition is at the root of all politics and at the root of sophistry, but this desire does not explain tyranny nor does it explain the greatest source of evil. Furthermore, I would argue that the quintessential political desire—the desire for honor—actually is a buffer against the worst excesses in political life, and that there is evidence in Socrates and Aristotle to support this claim. Strauss argues that there is a simple opposition between the philosopher, or the wise man, and all other human beings; I want to argue that there is a simple opposition between the tyrannical psyche and all other human beings.

The desire for truth (the philosopher's desire) and the desire for recognition or honor (the political actor's and the sophist's desire) are unlikely ever to be completely compatible. The world is full of many mistaken and illfounded opinions, and the recognition-seeker, for whom public acclaim is a primary goal, will have to make his way to success amid these half-truths and prejudices. The philosopher will almost certainly never get the acclaim of the political actor or the sophist because he will not tolerate half-truths and unreflective opinions. He will not flatter fools. From the philosopher's point of view, the honor-seeker has a less-than-virtuous motive behind his actions, but what is important here is that the less-than-virtuous motives are not necessarily vicious ones. The political actor wants reputation and glory, ends that are not tempered by the love of truth, yet these ends depend upon his capacity to realize some good, some justice for those he is ruling, even if that good is as simple as wealth and security for the community. The desire for honor can only be gratified by earning the respect of the people, and the people want justice (however imperfect their vision of justice may be). There is some continuity among the kind of justice demanded by ordinary citizens, the honor sought by the politician, and the justice of the philosopher.

Socrates' strongest criticisms in the *Apology* are not of politicians, the people, or even sophists, but of poets. He says to the men of Athens that they dishonor themselves and their city by putting him to death, and that they are mistaken about their enemies. The one who deserves conviction is not Socrates, but he who "makes the city ridiculous" (35b), and this is the poet. Socrates suggests of course that the city cannot tell the difference between the philosopher, who reminds it of how far it is from realizing justice, and the poet, who ridicules and diminishes the honor of the city. But the city, according to Socrates, is duped, not vicious. It is foolish, not demonic. It is confused, not actively evil. Its ordinary sense of honor, we might say, has been corrupted by wizards.

If the city cannot tell the difference between those who benefit it and those who ridicule it, one might say that the city is indifferent to, or oblivious to, evil. I think this is the core of Strauss's indictment of the city. The things and people honored by the city are without substantive good, and the honor-seeker (the political man and the sophist) is aided by this ignorance in pursuing his

own self-interest. Yet the desire for honor and the desire for truth may be linked more firmly than Strauss suggests. It may take a particularly insidious kind of corruption to unlink the two, the kind of corruption that involves the proliferation of poets of a certain kind (what Socrates calls the “winged drones” in the *Republic*) and the destabilizing of the arena in which contests for honor and recognition take place. The tyrant, the “winged drone,” and the bad poet are not sophists or politicians or the people. Neither are they philosophers. They resemble philosophers superficially though, in that they are self-sufficient and immune to the judgment of the many. The uncomfortable similarity between the tyrant and the philosopher, and the obvious opposition between the tyrant and the honor-seeker, is laid out clearly in Book VIII of the *Republic*.

In Book VIII Socrates discusses five arrangements of cities, the superior one being ruled by good and just men.⁹ This is a regime and an order of the soul that serves as the measure of all existing regimes, and it is the city within the philosopher’s soul. The order of decline proceeds through timocracy (the regime that loves honor), oligarchy (the regime that loves wealth), democracy (the regime that loves freedom), and tyranny (the regime that desires desire itself). Of the tyrannical soul, Socrates says that “love lives like a tyrant within him in all anarchy and lawlessness” (575a). The timocratic, or honor-loving man, is conspicuous in Socrates’ account for standing between the best regime and all the rest. The regime of the honor-loving soul is “mixed” (548c), that is to say, drawn to virtue and justice on the one hand, but towards the pleasures of victory and money on the other. The spiritedness of the honor-lover, while being less than virtue, nonetheless moderates him in his pursuit of money and pleasure. Socrates makes it clear that the honor-seeker finds the virtuous, philosophic life unattractive, because it is without external reward, but he does not find it contemptible, threatening, or dangerous. On the contrary, the timocratic regime and the timocratic man rank highest in the order of defective (existing) regimes, because at least in them there is some equivocation, some openness to truth. The honor-lover is a long way from the tyrant in Socrates’ characterizations.

The tyrant does not love honor or recognition, or even money. The tyrannical soul has no shame or prudence (571d) and is certainly not governed by what others think of him. Love in a tyrant is a “great winged drone” (572e) that “takes madness for its armed guard.” Most important, “the man who is mad and deranged undertakes and expects to be able to rule not only over human beings but gods, too” (573c). The tyrannical type of human being is not necessarily a political figure. He is more like a criminal. The range and enormity of his crimes will depend upon the circumstances in which he finds himself. If the tyrannical type is a rare phenomenon in an otherwise healthy community, he will be a petty criminal, stealing and dominating in petty ways; if he is a sycophant, he may well try to use the deceit of words to get his way (575b); if he is a political ruler, he will undoubtedly wreak much greater havoc than he could as a petty criminal in private life. The tyrannical type and the philosopher

are uncomfortably alike in one respect: neither depends upon the opinions of others to substantiate or justify his activity, and both have desires that are unaffected by interaction with other people. Demonic desire, or madness, and the love of truth are both antipolitical in this sense. They are also poles apart from one another, in that the philosopher's immunity to opinion comes from his love of the good, whereas the tyrant's singularity of purpose comes from his narcissistic envelopment in his own desires. The philosopher never wreaks havoc on the world; at best, he is a luminary, at worst, ineffectual. The tyrant always wreaks havoc on the world since his desires are such that he wants to rule men and gods. It is not recognition that the tyrant seeks, but domination. Aristotle is instructive on this point, and his account of desire further illuminates Socrates' portrait of tyranny.

Aristotle says in the *Politics* that there are three reasons why people commit injustices: (1) because of the necessary things (for example, to avoid hunger and cold), (2) because of a desire "beyond the necessary things" (here, Aristotle does not give an example but we think the desire for honor is appropriate as one), and (3) because of a desire for "the enjoyment that comes with pleasures unaccompanied by pains."¹⁰ For these three types of injustice, there are three corresponding remedies: (1) a minimum of property and work (so the need to commit injustice is eliminated), (2) moderation (to curb unnecessary desires), and "as for the third, if certain persons should want enjoyment through themselves alone, they should not seek a remedy except in connection with philosophy; for the other [pleasures] require human beings" (1267a10). The third kind of desire mentioned by Aristotle—the desire to experience pleasure with no pain—and its remedy—philosophy—is of particular interest to us. Why should the desire to experience pleasure with no accompanying pain be the source of injustice? And why does Aristotle distinguish this desire from the desire for unnecessary things? I suggest that the desire to experience pleasure with no pain, the desire to seek enjoyment through oneself alone, is actually the tyrannical desire to be something other than human. It is the desire to be a God, self-sufficient and without suffering.

Another way of putting this is to say that the tyrant wants to rid himself of desire itself. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes that "Naturally ardent people . . . are always requiring a cure, since their constitution causes their body turmoil, and they are always having intense desires. A pain is drawn out by the contrary pleasure, indeed by any pleasure at all that is strong enough, and this is why such people become intemperate and base."¹¹ Naturally ardent people want to rid themselves of the pain of desire, but this is an unhuman longing that leads to inhuman acts. As Aristotle tells us, "the god always enjoys one simple pleasure (without change)" (1154a25). But gods have a simple nature, and human beings do not. The only possible remedy for the longing of the tyrannical man is the conversion to philosophy, not because philosophy will eradicate his longing and lead him to "one simple pleasure"—it will not, be-

cause philosophy does not make men gods—but because it will teach him to live with desire.

The tyrant's obsession with eliminating pain and desire is also discussed by Socrates in the *Republic*. After comparing the happiness of the truth-lover, the honor-lover, and the wealth-lover, and finding the life engaged in the search for truth to be the happiest, Socrates turns to a comparison of the truth-lover with the tyrant. The tyrant's life is the "greatest and most sovereign of the falls" from justice, says Socrates (538b), and to prove his point he engages in a discussion about pain and pleasure.

People say that there is a "repose of the soul" (583c) that is thought to exist between pain and pleasure, but Socrates suggests that what is neither joy nor pain cannot be both. Repose of the soul then—being affected by neither pain nor joy—seems to be impossible. In fact, the pleasant and the painful are both a "sort of motion" (583e), and it is an error (perhaps a common one) to measure pleasure by the absence of pain or pain by the absence of pleasure. A sick person, for example, may well see the absence of pain as pleasure, and one who has enjoyed an intense pleasure may experience its waning as pain. Pain and pleasure from these standpoints may appear to be "relative" to one's circumstances and experiences. It is perhaps an ordinary human tendency to measure pleasure as the absence of pain: "of the so-called pleasures stretched through the body to the soul, just about most, and the greatest ones, belong to this form: they are kinds of reliefs from pains" (584c). Yet prudence and virtue instruct us that pain and pleasure are not "relative" to one's subjective experience. "When all the soul follows the philosophic" (586e), it is possible to grasp what real pleasure is, not simply in contrast to pain, but in itself. What is truly pleasant is not stasis of the soul (feeling neither pain nor pleasure), nor is it simply the absence of pain: it is the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue and prudence.

The tyrant makes neither the common errors (understanding the "good" state as standing between pain and pleasure, or understanding pleasure as the absence of pain), nor does he embrace the philosophic understanding of pleasure. His case is different from any of these. Like the soul that does not follow the philosophic, the tyrant does not know what real pleasure or happiness is, but unlike the ordinary but unphilosophic man, the tyrant cannot stand his inability to conquer pain. The fact that he experiences pain reminds him of his impotence: he wants to control his pleasure in such a way that he will never have to measure it against pain, and he wants to make himself invulnerable. The philosophic soul learns what happiness is *in spite* of the pain that he inevitably will confront as a human being. This is what sets the philosophic soul apart from most others; unphilosophic souls tend to be overwhelmed by pain and suffering, hence seeing pleasure only as relief. The tyrant moves far beyond the unphilosophic response to pain: he actually tries to expunge all pain from exis-

tence and to fill the vacuum with pure pleasure. Such a quest is impossible and inhuman and inevitably leads to domination.

The tyrant's injustice far exceeds that of any other type of human being. Of all the pleasures that Socrates has identified—the genuine one (the love of truth) and the “bastard ones” (love of honor and love of wealth) (587b–c)—the tyrant shares in none. He goes out even “beyond the bastard ones” and the extent of his inferiority to all other human beings is enormous.

The tyrannical desire is in fact the greatest source of injustice because it leads, as Socrates says in the *Republic*, to a kind of madness that rails against the human condition itself. The desire to rule men and gods is the essence of tyranny, as Socrates has said, and this amounts to a wish to be completely self-sufficient. The corrective for this mad desire is philosophy, because philosophy satisfies the desire to find pleasure in oneself, but it satisfies this desire in contemplation rather than in domination. The tyrannical soul that is converted to philosophy abandons his frenzied quest for independence from humans and gods and comes to see thinking, rather than dominating, as the mark of his autonomy.

Aristotle may be right in saying that a tyrannical soul can only be “cured” by the conversion to philosophy, but there is no guarantee that tyrants will seek out such conversion. It is possible, though, that tyrants can be marginalized in a healthy political order, and it is not philosophy that keeps tyrants on the periphery where they are relatively harmless. It is the respect for honor, and the honor-seeker. Aristotle himself suggests that a tyrant in power can be moderated by drawing himself, unwittingly, into the contest for honor by moving from tyrannical tactics to kingly ones.

Tyranny is described by Aristotle, as it is by Socrates, as the worst kind of rule. Although the regime of tyranny has many features, there are three essential ones: (1) “the ruled have only modest thoughts”; they are unambitious and “small-souled”; (2) there is no trust among the ruled; and (3) there is an “incapacity for activity,” bred by the most complete kind of domination (1314a15–25). In other words, Aristotle points to the destabilizing of the community and the breakdown of human relations as essential conditions for the flourishing of tyrannical rule. Conspicuously, there is no opportunity or desire for honor in such a regime. The citizens are unambitious, suspicious, inactive, and cowering. What is also made clear by Aristotle is that the continued rule of a tyrant demands that subjects be maintained in this condition, and this requires an enormous amount of surveillance and coercion. The tyrant must ensure that his subjects do not become active and start organizing themselves into some kind of resistance. He must guard against honor-seekers. Vigilance over subjects in a tyranny is a tiring and all-consuming task. Aristotle suggests that a tyrant might more easily ensure the longevity of his rule by making his rule more “kingly,” rather than by dominating his people (1314a35). The key to this is to

persuade one's subjects to cooperate in one's rule, and this can be done only by earning their respect. The tyrant becomes an honor-seeker. To effect this change, Aristotle says that the tyrant should appear to benefit those he rules by concerning himself with military virtue, staying away from indulging his sexual appetites, appearing to be pious, and distributing honors among his subjects as they merit them. "He should appear to the ruled not as a tyrannical sort but as a manager and a kingly sort" (1315a40).

Aristotle assumes that, in embarking on this new path, the desires of the tyrant have not changed: he still has in mind the single goal of maintaining his power. The tyrant does not exchange his desire for power for the separate desire of honor and recognition, but rather pursues honor merely as a means to his tyrannical ends. What Aristotle says, however, is that in spite of his intentions to remain a tyrant, he cannot help being transformed by his having engaged in the struggle for honor. The aim may have been to *appear* to be a manager and a kingly sort, but the effect is that the tyrant *actually* becomes more of a manager and a kingly sort. By employing kingly tactics of rule, "in terms of character, he will either be in a state that is fine in relation to virtue or he will be half-decent, not vicious but half-vicious" (1315b5–10). The implication is that a tyrant cannot seek honor and recognition in political life without being led to nobler, more virtuous character, by doing so. Seeking honor as an end in itself is a route to virtue, even if not a conscious one, and is radically opposed to tyrannical desire that is embedded in its own private hell of insatiable desire, paranoia, and domination.

Plato and Aristotle seem to understand that while aiming for the good, and the practice of virtue, is the highest human capacity, its incarnation in politics is tenuous. The political world is one of manifold appearances: a mixture of truth and opinion, action and rhetoric, ambition and deception of all kinds. But it is not without coherence, and it is not completely removed from the human pursuit of virtue. To the extent that one desires honor or recognition in the public arena, one is moving toward virtue. This can only be because human beings generally are more inclined toward good and justice than they are toward injustice or evil, and they will honor those who provide them with the sort of rule that embraces some vision of justice and good. An honored ruler is one who is perceived as a benefactor of those he rules. It is possible, and even probable, that most people want less than completely virtuous things out of life—money, peace, security, for example, rather than the best understanding of truth—and hence will tend to honor those rulers who provide them with these goods. But we should not be so contemptuous of these desires. After all, wealth, security, and peace are important foundations of any political community, and the person who bids for the respect of the people by providing these things is achieving a substantive good. That the ruler actively seeks honor for having provided such goods, and is not content with simply enjoying them as a subject, makes him more virtuous than those he rules. The desire for honor is

higher in the hierarchy of virtues than the desire for wealth or security. The timocrat is more virtuous than the oligarch or the democrat. Honor—earning the esteem of one's fellow citizens—is what we might call a political virtue, in fact, the highest political virtue. Those who pursue it cannot help being, if not decent, at least half-decent, as Aristotle says.

It is the love of honor, and not the love of truth, that keeps the worst excesses at bay in political life. Strauss, as we saw earlier, identifies tyranny as the extreme degeneration of political rule. The tyrant is distinguished from other rulers by his immoderate love of reputation. In this, Strauss seems to be in agreement with Alexandre Kojeve, when the latter writes that “the desire to be ‘recognized’ in one’s reality and in one’s eminent human dignity (by those whom one ‘recognizes in return’) is actually, as I believe, the ultimate motive of all *emulation* among men and hence of all political *struggle*, including that which leads to tyranny.”¹² The difference between Strauss and Kojeve is Strauss’s exemption of the philosopher from this struggle. Since the philosopher does not care about recognition or praise from others, he is different from all others. I am in agreement with Strauss on this point that philosophers do not seek recognition, but would exempt the tyrant as well as the philosopher from this struggle. Tyranny is not the extreme degeneration of political rule; tyrannical desire is as removed from the desire for recognition as is philosophical desire, though for different reasons. It has been argued, from Aristotle’s analysis, that once a tyrant makes a bid for recognition and honor, he is transformed into a different sort of man, and this transformation has been effected without any conscious pursuit of virtue. The reform in the soul of the tyrant seems to have been brought about by his catering to the opinions of those he rules. By stepping outside his base desires and taking into account the desires of those he rules in order to earn their recognition, the tyrant is made better.

The message is obvious. The elevation of honor-seeking in politics to a high level of esteem is a buffer against tyranny. Tyrants use subterfuge, secrecy, silence, and brutality to satisfy their desires, whether those desires are satiated in petty crimes or massive state ones. Even Machiavelli knew the difference between a politics based on glory-seeking and a politics based on criminality. Machiavelli’s new definition of virtue in a political leader is nothing like moral virtue in the classical sense, but is instead, as Harvey Mansfield sums it up, “a combination of courage and prudence in the service of acquisition, visible to all so that it may be admired by all” (*Prince*, 6, n. 6). A successful prince is a visible and admired one. While Strauss sees Machiavellian virtue as the manifestation of tyrannical desire, Machiavelli himself distinguishes between princes and tyrants. Speaking of the reign of Agathocles, Machiavelli describes the cruelty and dishonor of his rule. Agathocles “kept to a life of crime at every stage of his career” and committed cruel acts on his way to acquiring power. According to Machiavelli, Agathocles cannot be termed a man of virtue, even in Machiavelli’s understanding of the word, because “one cannot call it virtue to

kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion." All these characteristics can help one gain power, and they obviously did in Agathocles' case, but they cannot earn one glory (35). Agathocles exhibited such a "savage cruelty and inhumanity" that he cannot be counted among the "most excellent men."

Machiavelli elsewhere of course endorses acts of cruelty and inhumanity, yet in these cases he does so because he deemed such actions necessary means to the end of honor and glory. Cruelty pursued as an end in itself is despicable to him: "those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated" (38). A "virtuous" prince knows when cruelty is necessary and uses it unhesitatingly under those conditions, but he does not enjoy cruelty, nor does he pursue brute domination as an absolute end. An unvirtuous prince, or tyrant, would seem to Machiavelli to be one who behaves as a criminal, using his power not to get glory, but to exercise domination and cruelty. Machiavelli cautions prospective princes against incurring hatred, brought about by wanton cruelty and indulgence in excessive desires. A prudent prince will seek to be feared rather than loved, for fear, backed up by the threat of punishment, is a more reliable motive for obedience than love; but though a prince may breed fear in his subjects, he will avoid instilling hatred. The line between being feared and being hated can be maintained "if he abstains from the property of his citizens and his subjects, and from their women; and if he also needs to proceed against someone's life he must do it when there is suitable justification and manifest cause for it" (57). Again, the point seems to be that a good prince is "moderated" by his singular aim: glory or honor. If he wants to achieve this end, he must not violate the ordinary man's sense of justice by stealing his property and his women, he must refrain from indulging his excessive desires, and he must not kill indiscriminately. One might well object, of course, that cruelty and killing are never justified, even as a means to a good end, but even so, there is a big divide between him who employs cruelty as a means and him who embraces it as an end. The public execution of traitors and suspected insurgents is not the same as the secret murder and dismemberment of a person in the privacy of one's home. Machiavelli repeatedly insists that the indulgence of base desires brings ruin and defamity on a ruler. A prince cannot achieve glory unless he makes his people and his country great, and he cannot do this unless he provides for them the things they hold as good: wealth, strength, and peace. The honor-loving prince necessarily benefits his people by pursuing his own glory. His ambition serves their good. By contrast, a tyrant oppresses and brutalizes his people, bringing dishonor on himself and his subjects.

Machiavelli shares with Plato and Aristotle the view that the honor-seeker embodies political virtue—a kind of virtue that is less worthy than the virtue of the philosopher or the pious believer, but one that is much more worthy than the ends pursued by the tyrannical soul. Machiavelli holds that the pursuit of

honor and glory as an end in itself necessarily has beneficial consequences for the ruled, since successful and honored rulers must be perceived as benefactors of their subjects. We are reminded here of Aristotle's counsel: a ruler who seeks to be honored cannot help doing honorable things.

Honor-seeking in politics crowds out the tyrannical types and prevents them from getting into positions of political power, precisely because the honor-seeker always has the power of the people on his side and the visibility of the public realm to judge him. His rhetoric and his actions, even if they are calculated to benefit himself, are always tested by consequences. He is compelled to think about the good, however limited, of those he rules. The worst excesses of political life are not, as Strauss suggests, occasioned by giving the quest for honor and recognition the highest place among human ends, but by discrediting the honor-seeker in politics. When the pursuit of honor is denigrated in politics, and the ambition to rule is thwarted by praise of the fulfilment of private desires, the great and insatiable desires of tyrannical types meet with little resistance. When the desire to rule is condemned as "unethical," the worst and most devious of men come easily to power.

Socrates speaks of the generation of the tyranny, not out of timocracy, but out of the decay of democracy. Democracy is fertile ground for tyranny, because democracy is a regime "without rulers" (558c), where the aspiration to rule is held in contempt by all. The ambition to rule is quelled in a democracy because this regime dispenses "a certain equality to equals and unequals alike," and the desire to rule others is looked upon as a threat to this equality. It is, however, in just such a regime—democracy—that the "drones" flourish, for there is nothing to curb their growth. All ways of life and all desires are permitted in a democracy, except those that would openly express the wish to rule other people. The desires of the tyrant are not easily recognized as politically threatening or hostile to equality because tyrants operate in stealth (unlike honor-seekers who require public display for the satisfaction of their desires). The people in a democracy are suspicious of any kind of ambition for inequality, or unequal (ruling) status, but what they do not realize is that the lawless desires of the tyrannical type are a much greater threat to them than the ambition for distinction. By the time they see tyranny for what it really is, "the people in fleeing the smoke of enslavement to free men would have fallen into the fire of being under the mastery of slaves" (569c).

The tyranny described by Socrates in the *Republic* is a great danger in the contemporary world. A society that is contemptuous of honor-seekers makes space for the proliferation of "winged drones." John Locke may be far more expressive of the dangers of modernity than Machiavelli. Locke is often praised as a political thinker because of his endorsement of peace and prosperity as the goals of commonwealth. He is seen as a friend of the people and of the philosopher because his political theory strikes at the ambitious honor-seeker. There is no ordained place for such a person or type in Locke's commonwealth. As

Thomas Pangle puts it, “‘Civility’ is the new star in the Lockean moral firmament—and this means that the well-educated Lockean man is *morally* reluctant to assume a posture of spiritual independence or aristocratic pride that might oppose the momentum of egalitarian conformism” (*The Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 227). Locke’s project was to provide a safe world for the peaceful, both those who seek the peaceful activities of amassing wealth and those who engage in the peaceful activity of philosophizing. “Locke seems satisfied that a philosophical existence like his own will be less threatened in the future, prosaic society of equality and individualism than it was in the poetic, prideful and hierarchical societies of the past” (271).

Pangle thinks, however, that while Locke substituted civility and egalitarianism for both aristocratic pride and spiritual independence as measures of a good regime he was not entirely successful in his efforts, for the desire for recognition still pervades Lockean man.¹³ The residual pride and desire for honor in Locke’s moral firmament thwart Locke’s plan to provide a comfortable friendship between the civil gentleman and the philosopher. For Pangle, it is a serious flaw in Locke’s thinking that he leaves in abeyance the question of a possibly radical discontinuity between the philosopher and all other human beings. Locke does not consider seriously enough that there may be a “profound break—perhaps even a shattering liberation—that separates the philosopher, morally as well as intellectually, from all other non-philosophers” (266).

My argument throughout this paper has been that if there is any profound break among human beings, it is between the tyrant and all others, not between the philosopher and all others. The profound break is between radical injustice and justice, not between recognition-seeking and autonomy. It has been argued that repression of the honor-seeker and contempt for the ambition for glory actually create a bigger space for the exercise of tyranny. Locke thought that the ambitious person posed the greatest threat to the contemplative man, and that the subduing of this ambition, even the prohibition of it by constitutional means, would make the world safe for the highest pursuits (philosophy) as well as the lowest (wealth). But there are much baser pursuits than that of wealth and property that Locke failed to account for, and allowing these baser pursuits to flourish means that the world cannot be safe for anybody, philosopher or other. To the extent that Pangle is right in saying that the desire for honor still pervades Lockean man, we have reason to be hopeful about liberal democracy. To the extent that Lockean privacy has succeeded in becoming the self-understanding of actual citizens in modern democracy, we have good reason to despair.

As Socrates points out in his characterization of democracy, the securing of private pursuits as the mandate of the regime, without any attempt at judgment among them, makes space for tyrants to preponderate. The soul inclined toward tyranny is given full endorsement by democracy, which refuses to judge and condemn him. Democracies will protect tyrants just as well as they will protect

philosophers; they are in fact indifferent to both the highest and the lowest of human pursuits. They are hostile though, as has been pointed out, to the one pursuit that is a check on tyranny. The honor-seeker, and the provision for the kind of society that welcomes him, contributes to virtue by placing a high esteem on public encounter and public display. The man who wants honor from the opinionated (the many) must provide some benefit to those he rules, and he must prove himself constantly by word and deed. It is only under extraordinary circumstances (the circumstances of a degenerating democracy), where the competition for honor is disdained, that he who is least fit to rule becomes master. The tyrant comes to rule by insidious and conspiratorial means.

Hannah Arendt has much to tell us about tyranny in the modern world. Writing about totalitarian regimes, she shows that the real rulers in such regimes do not exhibit the hubristic tendencies of honor-seekers. While the desire for recognition could certainly be identified in some figures in the totalitarian state, Arendt pointed to the secrecy of power as the demarcating feature of this regime. "The only rule of which everybody in a totalitarian state may be sure is that the more visible government agencies are, the less power they carry, and the less is known of the existence of an institution, the more powerful it will ultimately turn out to be. . . . Real power begins where secrecy begins."¹⁴ Totalitarian regimes are characterized by secret power, mass killing (conducted in the concentration camp sealed from public view), terrorism, and impotence and silence in those who are ruled.

There is far too little analysis today about the kind of desire for power that is separate from the desire for recognition. Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, however, thought extensively about precisely this kind of power. There are people, as Socrates says, who desire to rule over men and gods, or as Aristotle puts it, who desire to eliminate every kind of pain known to human beings. These are people who want to master nature itself. Armed with science and technology, the modern tyrant may have more capacity than at any other time in history to fulfil his quest. Arendt states, "What totalitarian ideologies . . . aim at is the transformation of nature itself" (458). Totalitarians care nothing for recognition, or glory, or adulation: their satisfaction comes from their capacity to create and destroy.

The lesson in all of this is that we ought to be vigilant in democratic societies, not of politicians who play the familiar game of jockeying interests for the sake of winning honor and public status for themselves, but of those who wield power in secrecy and whose aim it is to transform human nature. As Socrates says, a society that defends autonomy and privacy above all things is a society in which tyrants proliferate. Tyrants grow bold in democracies because "the city as a whole defends the individual private man" (*Republic* 578d), no matter how mad his pursuits. We miss the mark when we stand guard over aspiring "princes" and regard as harmless the eugenics researchers. The tyrant is *not* an essentially political man. As a person of mad desire, he will satisfy

that desire in any forum that fosters it. Bureaucracies and science laboratories may be far more hospitable terrain for the tyrant than a publicly scrutinized political arena.

We began our discussion of tyranny by suggesting that Socrates, in the *Apology*, indicts the poet as enemy of the city, and that in doing so, he actually portrays the poet in this case as a tyrant. Echoing this association between poetry and tyranny, Stanley Rosen writes that the tyrant is one who “desires to become, not merely the master and possessor of nature, but the producer of nature. He wishes to transform nature into an artifact or a poem.”¹⁵ While it seems obvious to me that he who wants to transform nature into an artifact can only be corrected from this madness by a conversion to philosophy, it seems equally obvious to me that the temptation to divinize the world will always be among us as one of the possible deformations of the psyche. Politically, it is most important that these types be prevented from gaining positions of power and influence, and the most effective way of doing this is to encourage the natural desire of the rulers to pursue public honor and the equally natural desire of the ruled to respect this pursuit. In actively discouraging these natural desires, democracies make room for the cultivation of unnatural desires that lead to far greater injustices than a political community would normally imagine. When we get to the point where citizens no longer know how, or why, they should curtail scientists from growing human beings in glass dishes for experimental purposes, I suggest that we, like the citizens of ancient Athens, have lost our political moorings and are incapable of judging our worst enemies.

NOTES

1. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 225.
2. George Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1985), 86.
3. Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 62–63.
4. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 61.
5. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses*, trans. Max Lerner (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 285.
6. Ibid. There is of course substantial difference between the classical Greek and Biblical conceptions of virtue. Yet, as Pangle says, the differences should not “obscure the broad common ground shared by the classical and biblical traditions, in contrast to the notion of virtue we find emerging in the modern period” (*The Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, 61).
7. Pangle contrasts the ancient with the modern Republican tradition (the latter represented by Machiavelli and his spiritual heirs, the American Founders) by saying: “Wherever the genuine classical republican tradition still lives, there is some kind of agreement as to the supreme value of the intellectual virtues, and of a life spent in leisured meditation on the nature of justice, the soul, and divinity” (61).
8. Plato, *Apology*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, in Thomas G. West, *Four Texts on Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 29d.
9. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 544e.

10. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1267a5.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1154b 10–20.

12. Alexandre Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 151.

13. “We are reminded of how profoundly the Lockean gentleman is oriented toward winning the approval of others, and of how far Locke goes in blurring the distinction between rationality and the appearance of rationality, between the desire to be rational and the desire or ‘love to be treated as Rational,’” between the desire men might have to be truly free and the desire “to show that they are free” (264–65).

14. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1973), 403.

15. Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 13.