

INTRODUCTION

by
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It was Socrates who first summoned philosophy down from the heavens, settled it in the cities, introduced it into the homes of men, and forced it to make inquiry into life and morals and things evil and good. Such is the testimony of the Roman philosopher-statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero. As this claim suggests, the emergence of moral and political philosophy was not coeval with that of philosophy itself. Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and their successors had focused their attention more narrowly on the natural world. But if these pre-Socratics neglected the human things, it would be wrong to suppose that politics was of no pertinence to their concerns as philosophers.

To begin with, there is the question of philosophy's origins within the first self-governing civic polities known to man. It is revealing that the word *kosmos* and its cognates were used in the political realm well before they were appropriated by the philosophers. The army described in the Catalogue of Ships in the second book of Homer's *Iliad* was arranged in its appropriate ranks by a *kosmetor*; the annually elected magistrates of the city on Crete that appears to have pioneered constitutional forms were called *kosmoi*. Put simply, the ancient Greek city (*polis*) was configured as a *kosmos* before the philosophers adopted the pertinent term and used it to assert that the natural world is likewise an intelligible and ordered whole.

This coincidence is revealing because it points to and reflects something more fundamental. The presumption that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz much later dubbed the Principle of Sufficient Reason—the presumption that there is a fit between reason and the world such that the latter is intelligible to the former—was a political principle before it became the hypothesis underpinning philosophy. The republicanism of the ancient Greeks was predicated on the assumption that rational speech, which they called *logos*, is adequate to political reality; it was grounded on the conviction that by means of public deliberation human thinking can be refined

and made to comprehend the issues that arise in the conduct of political affairs. The philosophers merely extended this presumption to the natural world. In the process, they universalized and made explicit what their fellow citizens had tacitly assumed. With Leucippus of Abdera, they asserted that "no thing comes into being at random but all takes place in accord with *logos* and by necessity."

Phusis and Nomos

It was inevitable that philosophy's debt to politics be repaid. From speculation about the natural world one can all too easily draw conclusions about matters of more immediate concern to man. Aristotle intimates that Anaximander of Miletus and the first *phusiologoi*—"those exercising *logos* regarding nature"—espoused a species of monotheism; this was in keeping with their presumption that the natural world reflects a single ordering principle. In this spirit, Xenophanes of Colophon dismisses the Olympian gods outright. "One god there is," he contends, "greatest among gods and humankind, in no way like mortals in body or in the thought of his mind. In his entirety, he sees; in his entirety, he thinks; in his entirety, he hears. Always in the same place, he remains, moving not at all; it is not fitting that he should shift about now here and, then, elsewhere." But, holding aloof from toil, he sets all things aquiver with the thought of his mind.

Xenophanes knew perfectly well that "mortal men believe that gods are begotten, and that they have the dress, voice, and body of mortals." He was familiar with Hesiod's *Theogony*, a poetic treatment of the origin of the gods and the cosmos, and he knew something of the beliefs of the barbarians. But for the opinions of mankind he had little, if any, respect. "If oxen, horses, or lions had hands with which to sketch and fashion works of art as men do," he remarked, "then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, oxen like oxen, and they would each make their gods' bodies similar in frame to the bodies that they themselves possess." Indeed, he observed, "the Ethiopians claim that their gods are snub-nosed and black; the Thracians, that theirs are blue-eyed and red-headed." The critical element in Xenophanes' analysis is the supposition that the divine must conform to the dictates of Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason—that god can do only that which it is "fitting" that he do. In

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consequence, Xenophanes finds offensive the fact that "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything which is deemed shameful and blameworthy among humankind: theft, adultery, and deceiving one another." The god of the philosophers conforms to reason—if he is not, in fact, reason itself.

This posed a political problem. The philosophers' fellow citizens took it for granted that the fate of the community depended upon propitiating ancestral gods, who could be relied on to come to the defense of the people; so the philosophers' critique of the received religion as irrational and ethnocentric was not just unsettling but impious, and it seemed likely to provoke divine wrath. The Theban poet Pindar spoke for the cities when he charged the *phusiologoi* with "plucking wisdom's fruit unripe." The poets are said to have reviled philosophy as a "bitch yelping and baying at her master," to have charged her with "being great in the empty speech of fools," to have spoken of her disciples as a "mob of overly clever men holding sway," and to have dismissed these "subtle ponderers" on the grounds that they were, if truth be told, "very poor indeed."

These attacks might have been more easily deflected had the early philosophers managed to articulate an account of politics that made sense of the convictions of ordinary men concerning justice and the common good. In fact, however, Xenophanes and his successors seem only to have cast doubt on these convictions. Their subversion of inherited norms was not without consequence. The result is starkly visible in the speeches given by various Athenians in the period of the Peloponnesian War and reported by the historian Thucydides. These provide evidence for the influence of the sophists and of the distinction that they drew between nature (*phusis*) and convention, custom, or law (*nomos*). The "realism" that the Athenians consistently display when they articulate the relationship between justice and self-interest or necessity is grounded in the conviction that man is by nature erotic, that his *eros* finds its fulfillment in the pursuit of self-interest and everlasting fame, and that *nomos* can never for long hold *phusis* in check.

The same themes dominate in the comedy *The Clouds*, which Aristophanes wrote and saw produced in the midst of Thucydides' great war. The play turns on the problems of its protagonist Strepsiades, who is unable to pay the debts he incurred while indulging his son Pheidippides' taste for horses. For help, he turns to

Socrates, who is represented as being devoted to the study of natural science and who is said to be able to teach the rhetorical skills that a man needs if he is to win his case in court when, in fact, he has the weaker argument. Strepsiades is old, uneducated, and obtuse (except with regard to his own material interests), and he proves to be unable to learn the winning argument. In his place, he enlists his spirited young son Pheidippides, whose innate love of victory renders him more capable of learning. To entice the initially reluctant Pheidippides, Socrates stages a rollicking debate between a pious, conventional defender of justice and a philosophical opponent. The upshot of their exchange is that convention, custom, and law (*nomos*) are contrary to nature (*phusis*), which dictates erotic self-indulgence; that they cannot be sustained against nature's demands; and that only a fool or a weakling would prefer a life lived in accord with *nomos* to the pleasures associated with *phusis* unleashed. Predictably, the Pheidippides who returns from Socrates' school no longer defers to his elders; in fact, to his father's horror and dismay, he is willing to contemplate thrashing not just his father but his mother as well. To Strepsiades, then, poetic justice is done—but not to him alone. For Socrates is also hoisted by his own petard; at the end of the play, an enraged Strepsiades burns the philosopher's school to the ground.

None of this would be of philosophical interest were it not for the fact that the debate between the defender of justice and the philosophical libertine is restaged between Strepsiades and his son at the end of the play. The first time that this debate is presented, the just or better argument is forced by his antagonist the unjust argument to concede that *eros* is irresistible when he himself and everyone in the audience is proven to be a pederast. When it is restaged, Pheidippides justifies beating his father by making an appeal to nature. "Consider the chickens and the other beasts," he suggests. "They defend themselves against their fathers. Yet how do they differ from us, except that they do not write decrees?" Strepsiades then blurts out a reply: "Why, then, since you imitate the chickens in everything, won't you eat dung and sleep on a perch?" This response gains comic force from the fact that Socrates first appears in the play seated on a perch, purporting to tread on air and look down on the sun in the manner of a god, and from the fact that he is said by a disciple to have been caught unawares, gawking at the heavens, by a lizard who defecated into his mouth. Pheidippides does not grasp

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the force of Strepsiades' retort any more than his father does, but he is reduced to a pathetic appeal to authority nonetheless. "It's not the same," he tells his father, "and it wouldn't seem so to Socrates either."

This comic and vulgar exchange between father and son charts philosophy's political turn, for Strepsiades' unwitting refutation of the unjust argument in the form advanced by his son points out the path followed by the Socrates we encounter when reading Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, which contains his memories of his teacher, and the dialogues authored by Plato. Like Strepsiades, this Socrates enlists *phusis* in defense of *nomos* by reflecting on what is revealed by the fact that human beings are by nature quite different from chickens and the other animals; like Strepsiades, he concludes that this crucial difference consists in the fact that human beings know shame and possess a sense of what is fitting, that they write decrees and adopt laws, that they impose on themselves customs and conventions, and that these reflect a conviction on their part that a life of mere self-indulgence is not just ignoble but ultimately repulsive as well.

Whether Aristophanes' comic depiction of Socrates as a natural philosopher and a sophist did him a grave injustice we cannot say. But both Xenophon and Plato affirm that Socrates turned away from the natural science that had engaged him in his youth and that he brought philosophy down from its contemplation of the heavens, caused it to enter into the cities and houses of men, and made it concern itself with human things. On the available evidence, we must assume that Socrates did so under the persuasion that Aristophanes had exposed a chink in all prior philosophy's armor—its inability to account for the qualities within human beings that made philosophy's pursuit possible in the first place. If Socrates adopted self-knowledge as his goal, it was because he had come to recognize that the philosopher had hitherto been inclined to forget himself.

Plato

Such is the Socrates whom we meet when we read the Platonic dialogues. He is not a dogmatist; he is in the grips of wonder, which, in the *Theaetetus*, he calls "a very philosophical passion." He begins his inquiries with the opinions entertained by ordinary men or by those

whom they think wise; though he nearly always finds these opinions wanting, he presumes that they are the appropriate starting point for philosophical reflection because they contain an intimation of the truth. This Socrates is characteristically distinguished from his interlocutors by an awareness of his own ignorance; generally the dialogues end with an admission on his part that the process of critical examination has left him at a loss. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude from this that there is nothing to the Socratic disposition other than an unbridled and destructive skepticism. As we can infer from the image of the divided line that Socrates offers for our contemplation in Plato's *Republic*, he is no René Descartes, he is convinced that knowledge begins with trust.

One cannot claim to be aware of one's own ignorance, as Socrates does, if one is persuaded that there is nothing to know; indeed, one cannot so be aware unless one has a sufficient inkling of the truth to be able to discern what is false. Like the Ionian philosophers, Socrates takes as a given the Principle of Sufficient Reason; unlike them, he has reflected on the preconditions of their shared presumption that knowledge is possible. His conclusions in this regard are most clearly presented in his discussion of *eros* in the *Symposium*—for whereas Aristophanes, in the speech given him in that dialogue by Plato, treats *eros* as the desire for completion and wholeness, Socrates counters that man's sense of his own incompleteness is rooted in his desire for the beautiful and ultimately the good.

Eros, as Socrates depicts it, is like a philosopher; if the latter were wise, he would not long for wisdom; if he were so ignorant as to be unaware of the degree of his ignorance, he would not long for wisdom. Reason and *eros* are treated as inseparable. The ordinary human desire for beautiful bodies, for offspring, for immortal fame; the admiration that men feel for the beautiful and the noble; their eagerness to secure for themselves that which is good and to accomplish that which is worthy—these "lesser mysteries of *eros*" point beyond themselves to the greater mystery: what is the nature of the beautiful and the good? If philosophy cannot achieve the detachment from human concerns sought by the Socrates of *The Clouds*, it is because, properly understood, the longing for wisdom is ordinary human *eros* followed through to its end. If it is worthwhile for the philosopher to examine the opinions widely held by ordinary men or espoused by those reput-

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ed to be wise, it is because, confused though it may be, ordinary human desire points in the direction of the truth concerning that which is. The fact that we can sometimes recognize our errors as such reflects the fact that we all have an inkling of what is true.

This, the starting point for his reflection, enables Socrates to articulate a critique of injustice. In the *Gorgias*, he is quickly able to dispose of the sophist Gorgias and his assistant Polus—for their professional pride in benefiting their students renders these two teachers of rhetoric vulnerable to shame. Kallikles (Callicles), the Athenian who seeks to learn rhetoric from them, is in this particular invulnerable, and he restates the unjust argument of Aristophanes' *Clouds* with great force, contending that the laws are a conspiracy of the weak to contain the strong, that natural justice dictates that the strong get the better of the weak, and that it would be ignoble for a man of real strength to be deterred by *nomos* and the conventional understanding of justice and moderation from a ruthless pursuit of the pleasures pointed out by *phusis*. To dissuade him, Socrates must demonstrate that even if he is entirely successful in his project, even if he becomes a tyrant and his command of rhetoric enables him to escape punishment for the harm he does his fellow man, he will be miserable. This he achieves by meeting Kallikles on his own ground: he shows him that he has misunderstood the dictates of nature; that the conventional understanding of justice and moderation, for all its limitations, better reflects nature's dictates; and that the pleasures associated with a life of self-indulgence are nothing if not preceded by an equivalent pain. The key to this argument is that there is a hierarchy of pleasures corresponding to the erotic hierarchy sketched out in the *Symposium* and that satisfying the baser desires is no more pleasant and no more noble than scratching an itch.

The same themes reappear in Plato's greatest dialogue, the *Republic*. Socrates' defeat of the sophist Thrasymachus early on corresponds with his silencing of Gorgias and Polus. The speech that Plato's older brother Glaucon delivers after expressing reservations about Socrates' refutation of Thrasymachus is an elaboration of Kallikles' restatement of the unjust argument. Socrates' reply to the challenge leveled by Glaucon and seconded by Plato's other older brother Adeimantus ultimately takes the form of a demonstration that the life of the philosopher is superior in both dignity and pleasure to the life of the successful tyrant, and this demonstration is

grounded in an account of the erotic hierarchy within the human soul. The two dialogues differ chiefly in the fact that, in the interval between Glaucon's challenge and his own reply, Socrates explores at length with Plato's brothers just what would be required if one were to establish a truly well ordered city.

Given that human beings are restless, ambitious, and unlikely to be satisfied with rustic simplicity, they conclude that the city that they are constructing in speech will require policing and defense. Given that the Guardians entrusted with this responsibility will themselves be a threat to its well-being, they will need to be educated in public spiritedness. For this to be effective, not only will they have to be thoroughly indoctrinated, but they will have to be deprived of property and family lest private concerns lead them to neglect the common good. At every turn, the demands become more radical, and the prospect that such a city could actually be established becomes less plausible—until Socrates sets the most preposterous precondition of all, contending that there will be “no respite from evils for the cities . . . nor for mankind nor will the polity we have now described in speech ever emerge from nature” until “the philosophers rule as kings.”

This claim provokes Adeimantus, the more conventional of the two brothers, to restate Aristophanes' and Kallikles' critique of philosophy, and this in turn forces Socrates to come to its defense. Socrates begins by distinguishing philosophy from sophistry, then he articulates what philosophy is and what causes it unjustly to be condemned in ordinary cities, and finally he intimates that philosophy is of greater dignity than the city itself. It is as a consequence of his need to clarify what philosophy is and to indicate the education that must be provided if philosopher-kings are to be produced that Socrates then elaborates the images of the sun, line, and cave. What began as a dialogue concerning justice becomes a discussion of education and ultimately an account of philosophy and its pursuit of the good. In the end, two conclusions emerge: first, that just rule is unlikely unless the rulers are as indifferent to the rewards on offer to rulers as are the philosophers described by Socrates; and second, that the political community is to be judged for its contribution to philosophy and not vice versa.

By means of the last of the three images, that of the cave, Socrates articulates the limits of politics. The cave is the city itself; the chains

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that bind its inhabitants are the more or less arbitrary customs and laws of the community; and the puppet-handlers are the poets, the sophists, and the demagogues who fashion its governing illusions. Most of what the citizens take to be true is inference from the shadows cast by these artifacts on the wall of the cave. The discovery that all of this is illusory is at first quite painful. But, according to Socrates, the initial shock of liberation opens the way for an exceptionally gifted individual's emergence from the cave, for his gradual habituation to the light, and for his discovery of that which truly is. The process by which this takes place is the education of a philosopher.

There is no suggestion here that the city itself can be enlightened. Those whom Socrates calls "the true Guardians" are, in fact, to be distinguished from those he now describes as mere Auxiliaries—Guardians who are subjected to the initial indoctrination but do not receive the higher education. As for the multitude, he contends that it can never become philosophic. The cave then represents the human condition; only the handful blessed with a divine, philosophical disposition can ever hope to escape. If the city is to be well governed, those who have made their escape must eventually be forced to return to the cave and to put their wisdom to use. In the ordinary city, however, which has not seen to their education, Socrates argues that philosophers have no such obligation.

Plato's *Republic* is not a blueprint for utopia. It exploits the political idealism of the young, represented by Plato's brothers, for the sake of an exploration of the limits of politics, the nature of the human soul, and the superiority of the philosophical life. Its implausibility as an actual project owes less to the unlikelihood that one can indoctrinate a class of Auxiliaries and deny them property and family ties than to the requirement that wisdom rule. Plato's Socrates never claims that he is himself wise—only that he has encountered no one wiser than himself. The wisdom that he attributes to the philosopher in the *Republic* is possessed by no one he knows—and arguably for good reason. To apprehend the Idea of the Good as such is to understand the whole as a whole; the attempt to do so is comparable, as Socrates suggests, to looking directly at the sun. But as he himself remarked elsewhere, according to both Xenophon and Plato, looking directly at the sun produces only blindness.

Aristotle

Like his teacher Plato, Aristotle published dialogues. While these have not survived, we do have a collection of writings more like lecture notes than formal treatises, which were apparently intended for use within the school that Aristotle founded. Nowhere in these works does Aristotle provide us with an elaborate argument concerning human *eros*; nowhere does he give us an extended critique of the baser pleasures. But there can be no doubt that the arguments he advances presuppose something of the sort. That there is a human good which men in their confusion pursue he does not doubt, and he is in no way hesitant to argue the superiority of the philosophical life.

There is, however, one crucial difference between Aristotle's account and Plato's: the former is prepared to concede considerable dignity to ordinary human life. This concession has two, closely related dimensions. On the one hand, Aristotle asserts what Plato tacitly denies: that man is by nature a political animal. On the other, where Plato had spoken of political or demotic and of philosophical virtue, Aristotle contends that there is also such a thing as moral virtue.

Aristotle acknowledges that the political community owes its existence to private concerns—to the need for common defense against attack and to the desire for economic cooperation. But he is too respectful of the convictions of ordinary men to be willing to suppose that such an account of the origins of the city would explain its true nature. If the desire for mere life brought the *polis* into being, he observes, it is the desire to live nobly and well that sustains it. Thus, when he describes man as a political animal, he is not simply asserting that human beings are gregarious. Such a claim would fail to distinguish mankind from the ants and the bees. He is contending, instead, that ordinarily it is in and through the life of the *polis* that gregarious beings of this sort "have a share in the good life."

To understand what Aristotle means by the good life, we must take careful note of those faculties that distinguish man from the beasts. In Aristotle's view, human beings are set apart from the other animals by their capacity for rational speech (*logos*). This capacity enables the human being to perform as no other animal can; it makes it possible for him to perceive and make clear to others through reasoned discourse the difference between what is advantageous and what is harmful, between what is just and what is unjust, and between what is

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good and what is evil. It is the sharing of these things, Aristotle insists, that constitutes the household and the *polis* each as a community.

This analysis of human nature explains why Aristotle singles out as mankind's greatest benefactor the human being who first organized the *polis*, and it accounts as well for his assertion that someone who, by nature, belongs outside the political community must be either a god or a hunted animal alone and at war with the world. It matters little whether the individual lives in solitude, in slavery, as a resident alien, or under the rule of a tyrant or king. Human beings (other than philosophers) are rendered servile and virtually subhuman by the circumstances or fully conscious choices that deny them participation in the political life. They are rendered servile and virtually subhuman because they are prevented from developing fully those faculties of rational argument (*logos*) and cooperative action (*praxis*) that men possess and the other nonpolitical animals lack entirely. We exclude slaves from the political community, Aristotle explains, because some men lack the capacity for prudential deliberation regarding the advantageous, the just, and the good; we exclude women, though they possess this capacity, because it has no authority over them; and we exclude children because they possess it in incomplete form. For all but the handful of men capable of that quasi-divine existence devoted to philosophy, the fully human life is a life of *praxis* conducted in accord with the dictates of *logos*.

Aristotle's account of moral virtue follows from this understanding of human nature. The political and demotic virtue mentioned by Plato is purely instrumental; it is the excellence of the citizen, not that of man, and it requires a sacrifice of that which is best in humankind. In the *Republic* it is fully possessed by those among the Guardians who come to be called Auxiliaries as opposed to true Guardians and philosophers—men who give up not just property and family but all freedom of thought for the sake of serving a communal good that they do not themselves enjoy. For Plato, human excellence is philosophical virtue—the rare set of qualities that enables a man to leave the confines of the cave and see things as they are in the light of the sun. In contrast, Aristotle's account of moral virtue presupposes the existence of a class of human beings who are neither fully outside nor simply confined to the cave, and who pursue a way of life that is both admirable and, on balance, pleasurable: the class of gentlemen, who may dabble in philosophy; the exemplars in every age of taste, decorum, and

public spiritedness; the mainstay of every decent polity. Aristotle's description of the great-souled or high-minded man suggests that there is something vaguely comic about the gentleman, but that he is worthy and estimable we need not doubt.

Challenge and Response

Plato and Aristotle were by no means the only political philosophers who appeared in antiquity, but that they towered over Socrates' Stoic and Epicurean disciples no one need doubt. It was, in any case, their arguments concerning politics and morality, especially those of Aristotle, that were reshaped in Latin for an audience of Roman gentlemen and given a Stoic tone by Cicero and that remained thereafter the common possession of educated men until very near to our own time. Moreover, in late antiquity, Plato was baptized by Augustine: philosophy was subordinated to theology and reason to revelation; the Christian God was substituted for the Idea of the Good; and Plato's erotic hierarchy was now said to end in the beatific vision. Thomas Aquinas eventually did something of the same sort for Aristotle, and the latter's moral and political thinking directly informed Christian political and moral theology from the thirteenth century on.

It was not until the second decade of the sixteenth century that a challenge emerged to the Platonic-Aristotelian consensus. The Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli's assault on the moral teachings of the classical philosophers and their Christian successors was grounded in a straightforward rejection of their claim that ordinary human desire points beyond its immediate objects to the Idea of the Good or even to God—that human *eros* is by nature directed to a definable, discoverable, and ultimately satisfying end. "All the things of men are in motion," he wrote. "They cannot remain fixed." By this, he meant to convey something closely akin to what Thomas Hobbes would have in mind when he subsequently asserted that reason is the slave of the passions. As Machiavelli put it in *The Prince* by way of explanation, "the human appetites" are "insatiable"; "by nature" human beings "desire everything" while "by fortune they are allowed to secure little"; and since "nature has created men in such a fashion" that they are "able to desire everything" but not "to secure everything," their "desire is always greater than the power of acquisition."

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As a consequence of accepting this doctrine, the Florentine dismissed as utopian the moral and political teachings advanced by his classical and Christian predecessors; under its guidance, he rejected the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, arguing that the pursuit of moderation is a species of folly and contending that in a world in constant flux there simply is not and cannot be "a middle road." One must take one's political bearings, he asserted, from a fact putatively admitted by "all who reason concerning civic life": that anyone intent on setting up a republic and ordaining its laws must "presuppose that all men are wicked and that they will make use of the malignity of their spirit whenever they are free and have occasion to do so." Machiavelli does, of course, trace "good examples" to "good education." But that education is not, as it was for Aristotle, a process of moral training and habituation, and it is in no way aimed at liberating men from the dominion of their passions. Its goal is to shape, direct, and fortify the spirited passions, and it arises from "good laws"—such as those, spawned in early Rome by the strife between the Senate and the people and "those tumults that many inconsiderately condemn." These tumults had enabled "the people to vent their ambition" and had thereby given rise to the predatory *virtù* that impelled that city to conquer the world.

In the *Republic*, Plato had linked his analysis of the different political regimes with his account of the erotic hierarchy of the soul, suggesting that a different passion and, therefore, a different kind of man are dominant in each. In the *Politics*, Aristotle had combined structural and moral analysis, acknowledging the validity of the traditional division between polities dominated by the one, the few, and the many; further distinguishing kingship from tyranny, aristocracy from oligarchy, and well-ordered popular government from democracy; and articulating these juxtapositions chiefly with an eye to the moral character of the ruling individual or group. Machiavelli dismisses all such moral distinctions as illusory and speaks of principalities and republics only, while intimating that the difference between the two is negligible since, directly or indirectly, princes rule both.

The reasoning that underpins this rejection of the received moral and political teaching, Machiavelli outlines in the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince*, where he parodies the discussion of moral virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, explicitly devoting his attention, as

Aristotle had, to "qualities for which human beings . . . are generally praised or condemned," and then producing, again in imitation of the Peripatetic, an eleven-member catalog of juxtaposed virtues and vices. He adds only, in that chapter's title, that he has in mind the praise and blame awarded "princes in particular," and in his catalog he so confuses the qualities listed that one is left wondering which is a virtue, which a vice, and even whether there is an intrinsic distinction between the two. Before confronting his readers with this quandary, however, Machiavelli explicitly repudiates the manner in which Plato, Aristotle, and their many Christian admirers had approached the apportioning of praise and blame.

In preparing the ground for the shocking conclusion to this chapter—his suggestion that virtue and vice have to be distinguished solely with an eye to "security and well-being"—Machiavelli outlines a critique of the moral imagination. His intention of writing "a thing useful for him who understands it" renders it "more profitable," he asserts, for him "to go behind to the effectual truth of the matter rather than to that matter as represented in the imagination." With this as his premise, he dismisses as worthless the efforts of the "many," such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, who "have imagined republics and principalities which have been seen never and are not known in truth to exist." There is, he explains, so great "a distance between how one lives and how," one is taught, "one ought to live" that "he who leaves aside that which is done in favor of that which ought to be done studies rather his ruin than his preservation." He therefore concludes that "it is necessary for a prince, if he would maintain himself, to study to be able to be not good," as that term is conventionally understood, "and to use this knowledge or not as necessity demands." Such are "the modes and governance" that are appropriate for dealing not just with enemies but "with subjects" and "friends."

At first glance, Machiavelli's attack on morality looks like a restatement of the argument of Kallikles. It differs from it, however, in one particular: Machiavelli claims to be public spirited; his aim is to liberate mankind from the tyranny of a priestcraft that requires as its underpinning a utopian moral teaching of the sort first sketched by Plato and Aristotle; and he points the way to a positive moral and political teaching grounded on the unjust argument of Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

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In the mid-seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes rose to the challenge—seeking, in the midst of the great civil war that shook Christendom in the wake of the Reformation, to refute Machiavelli's republican defense of popular tumults by making explicit the Florentine's denial that reason is itself erotic and by tracing out the consequence of its being a mere instrument of what Plato and Aristotle had considered the baser passions. Hobbes traces the moral, political, and theological cacophony of his own day to a failure on the part of the multitudes in thrall to the classical philosophers and their Christian admirers to recognize the imbecility of moral reason and the moral imagination.

There is a lust of mind that distinguishes Hobbesian man from the beasts, but it is not the idle curiosity of the contemplative; like the longing for riches and honor, this lust "may be reduced to . . . Desire of Power." Moreover, because human consciousness is above all else the awareness of consequences, man quite naturally conceives of himself first and foremost as the cause of future effects, as a creature endowed with power. In fact, for him, "all conception of future, is conception of power able to produce something." In short, his subjectivity is itself constituted by a "perpetuall solicitude of the time to come. . . . So that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by feare of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep."

The absence of a *summum bonum*, a definable and final good for man, adds a further complication: because the human being is insatiable and human felicity is a haphazard progress of desire from one more or less whimsically selected object to another, as a hunter of causes and consequences, man longs first and foremost not for any particular end, but rather for the means "to assure for ever, the way of his future desire." In short, he experiences a "perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power." The resulting quest for power eventually brings him face-to-face with his fellow human beings. Inevitably, given the incapacity of *logos* to provide a foundation for community, he treats these men, like everything else he encounters, simply as instruments for dominating nature. Just as inevitably, they treat him likewise. The consequence is a struggle in which "felicity" loses its close connection with bodily need and comes to be a species of progressive conquest in which each individual strives "continually

to out-go the next before." Vanity is unleashed, and all the passions of man come to be reduced to feelings of *relative* power and powerlessness. Since "every man looketh that his companion should value him, at the same rate he sets upon himself," men squabble, come to blows, and then kill one another not only or even primarily because their material interests clash but "for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue."

The only escape from this perpetual self-destructive war of all against all is an abandonment of all moral principles, all speculative opinions, and all grounds of quarrel and a submission to the dictates of a sovereign and representative prince or assembly authorized to impose peace, empowered to settle all disputes, entrusted with the determination of principles, and thereby made strong enough to enforce its every command. In this fashion, Hobbes explained to men in general and to rulers in particular the "dictates of Reason" concerning morals and politics, which turn out to be nothing other than "Conclusions, or Theoremes concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves." For Hobbes and for the many who adopted and adapted his teaching, morality is material self-interest rightly understood.

Liberalism and Its Enemies

In the aftermath of the English civil war, Hobbes's preference for absolute monarchy had a certain vogue in circles not overly given to piety. When, however, it was discovered that Charles II and his heir apparent James, the duke of York, were exponents of the species of priestcraft exposed by Machiavelli, figures such as John Locke turned back to the Florentine and embraced his defense of tumults. Like Machiavelli and Hobbes, the author of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* believes "that the Philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether *summum bonum* consisted in Riches, or bodily Delights, or Virtue, or Contemplation," observing that "they might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best Relish were to be found in Apples, Plumbs, or Nuts; and have divided themselves into Sects upon it." It is all, he suggests, a matter of taste. What men have in common is not an erotic orientation toward the good defined in any concrete way but "a constant succession of *uneasinesses*" such that

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“very little part of our life is so vacant from these *uneasinesses*, as to leave us free to the attraction of remoter absent good.”

The predominance of uneasiness gives rise to the desire for the means to relieve that uneasiness—which for most men most of the time is not political power but labor and the property it produces, and it is on Locke’s analysis of the origin of property in human labor and ingenuity that his correction of Hobbes turns. Like Hobbes, who had served Sir Francis Bacon, Locke was a proponent of scientific and technological progress; he was distinctive, however, in his insistence that such progress was contingent on the security of property rights—for men would only improve that which they could securely own. The centerpiece of the argument that he presents in his *Two Treatises of Government* is, in fact, his claim that “God gave the World . . . to the use of the Industrious and Rational, (and *Labour* was to be *his Title* to it;) not to the Fancy or Covetousness of the Quarrelsome and Contentious.” It was by portraying man as what Benjamin Franklin later dubbed “a tool-making animal” that Locke sought to make sense of the emergence and development of civil society as an association for the protection of the laboring man’s right to the fruits of his own labor.

Locke was perfectly prepared to acknowledge the horrors of anarchy, but he doubted very much that they so exceeded those of tyranny that human beings could be persuaded to give up the right to organized self-defense. A well-ordered government would include a monarchical executive armed with a prerogative enabling him to execute the laws, defend the realm, and respond to emergencies; it would include a representative assembly empowered to lay taxes, make laws, and examine the conduct of the executive’s ministers. But it would rest ultimately on an enlightened citizenry prepared, in the face of executive and legislative abuse, to take up arms in defense of the right to life, liberty, and property.

Locke’s argument laid the foundations for the kind of society that we now live in—one oriented not toward the pursuit of honor and glory or the saving of souls, but toward a provision of basic human wants through the marriage of commerce and technology. Many embraced this project, and figures of real stature, such as Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, Adam Smith, the baron de Montesquieu, and James Madison, refined Locke’s arguments. But there were others on what came to be called the left and the right who came to regard

commercial society as repulsive. The first and most influential of these was an expatriate from Geneva named Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau embraces Machiavelli's critique of the classical understanding of human desire; like them as well, he grounds his account of politics and morality in a conjectural history of man's emergence from the state of human nature. He differs from his predecessors in insisting, in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, that man's natural state was not, at first, a state of war and in suggesting that human nature underwent a transformation both within the state of nature and in leaving it. Rousseau's point is that the destructive passions attributed to man by Hobbes and Locke are acquired. In the beginning, man exhibited only pity and an instinct for self-preservation; he was distinguished from the other animals only by his perfectibility—the tool-making capacity, so celebrated by Locke, that enabled him to bring his needs and resources back into equilibrium when accidents upset it. In the beginning, because his needs and desires were circumscribed and he was able to provide for his preservation without doing harm to others, pity for the most part dictated his relations with his fellows, for he was in this sense by nature good, and he was both free from dependence on others and content with his lot. There was a stage in man's development, Rousseau suggests, when this set of qualities provided the underpinning for a primitive, prepolitical society.

In time, however, the equilibrium broke down and scarcity of food emerged. Organized agriculture was then invented as a response, and with it, as Locke had pointed out, came private property and the division of labor. This in turn, Rousseau adds, dictated a fatal dependence of the weak and dull on the talented and strong and gave rise to an inequality in wealth and status that was in no way just. Civil society was a tool subsequently devised by the rich; it originated in a contract to end the suicidal war of all against all that erupted when the poor rebelled against their subjection, but it did nothing to alleviate the injustice that had given rise to that war in the first place.

There is no hint in Rousseau's argument that man can or should return to his natural state. He suggests, instead, a reform of civil society. In his estimation, apart from outright despotism, the worst form of human association is the commercial or bourgeois society envisaged by Locke, for the cutthroat competition that it engenders and the intensification of the division of labor occasioned by the technological progress that it encourages serve only to magnify in

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rich and poor alike the very propensity for comparing oneself with others that had bedeviled man ever since the origins of the division of labor. This disposition, which Hobbes had called vanity and Rousseau calls *amour propre*, inspires much in the way of human accomplishment but is incompatible with the happiness of man.

For the political problem posed by inequality, Rousseau suggests, in *The Social Contract*, a political solution, exemplified by ancient Sparta and Rome. These republics effected a further transformation of human nature by educating their citizens in such a manner as to reshape *amour propre* into a virtue—constituted by patriotism, public spiritedness, and a love of equality—which gives rise to a political consensus that Rousseau dubbed “the general will.” Short of the creation of such a community, the only relief for man within civil society would be a moral education designed to liberate the individual from *amour propre* and to render him happy as well as just and good—an education of just the sort sketched out by Rousseau in his *Emile*.

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Rousseau was the last great philosopher to ground his moral and political philosophy in an appeal to nature. Even Immanuel Kant, who was otherwise one of Rousseau’s fiercest admirers, refrained from following him in this particular. Kant was far more impressed by the doctrine of “the general will,” and he elected to dislodge it from its political context—and thus, by means of what he called “the categorical imperative,” to liberate ethics from its traditional subordination to the dictates of political prudence. Where Hobbes and Locke had, in effect, reduced the good to the useful, Kant not only reasserted the centrality of the noble and beautiful but cut it loose from the good. If one adopts as a principle “to act only in such a way that one can also will that one’s maxim should become a universal law,” he contended, one will have put duty before interest in a manner revelatory of the dignity and freedom possessed by rational beings endowed with a capacity to legislate for themselves.

Rousseau’s conjectural history and his suggestion that human nature is plastic were, in the long run, even more influential than his doctrine of “the general will.” They led Kant to reflect on the question whether, within civil society, there is a logic of development, compa-

rable to that discerned by Rousseau in man's prepolitical state, leading in the fullness of time to the emergence of a league of liberal democracies. They inspired Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to treat all of human history as the unfolding of such a logic—so that particular moral codes and particular political systems are seen not only to be linked to particular times but to succeed one another in a natural progression; his own time and the political forms and moral outlook distinctive of it he regarded as history's completion. In similar fashion, Rousseau's thinking in these two regards enabled Karl Marx to envisage technological progress and its revolutionizing of the means of production as a motor driving the series of changes in class structure and in ideological outlook that constitute human history, and it encouraged him to imagine a time when scarcity would end, when the subjection engendered by the division of labor would dissolve, and when men would be restored to a sociability not unlike that achieved by man in Rousseau's prepolitical state—while nonetheless enjoying all of the material advantages awarded by modern technology.

The historicist propensity exemplified by Hegel and Marx elicited another response from Friedrich Nietzsche, who was skeptical about their claim to have discovered in history the unfolding of an inexorable logic. Nietzsche suggested, instead, that since it was recognized that man had repeatedly refashioned himself in the course of past history, he could and should now do so again—in full consciousness of what he was about. Nietzsche's elaboration of his doctrine of the Will to Power, as well as his attempt to make sense of man's past history and future prospects on this basis, was arguably the last great attempt by a philosopher to provide moral and political guidance on the basis of an appeal to the things that are.

Philosophy's End

The modern project began as an attempt to establish philosophical rule. Thomas Hobbes spoke for his mentor Sir Francis Bacon, for his contemporary René Descartes, and for the Enlightenment that followed upon their efforts when, after comparing himself with the author of the *Republic*, he set as the philosopher's preeminent task a conversion of the "Truth of Speculation, into the Utility of Practice." This project, which these three figures initiated and their successors in

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the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strove to complete, eventuated in a highly self-conscious campaign aimed at accomplishing what Plato's Socrates had considered impossible: the enlightenment of the multitude and their liberation from the cave. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, this project seemed to have run its course. For in the preceding decades, in the name of science and with support and applause from many of the most distinguished intellectual offspring of Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes, tyrants such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin established totalitarian regimes, authored massive tomes, and paraded as philosopher-kings—all as if in an unconscious parody in deeds of the city limned in speech by Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus. The totalitarian interlude was as great a disaster for philosophy as it was for politics, and it has had a sobering effect on those inclined to pursue the life of the mind.

In our various academies, students of philosophy still discuss the advantageous and the harmful, the just and the unjust, and good and evil, but they nearly all do so within the frameworks sketched out by the great figures of the past; with rare exceptions, they tend to confine their speculation within limits provided by the liberal democratic norms now predominant. It is as if, in a world at last made safe for democracy, there is no longer any prospect for an escape from the cave. The great tradition of moral and political speculation seems to have come to an end. We are saddled with a science reminiscent in its reductionism of that of the pre-Socratics and similarly forgetful of its origins in ordinary human concerns, and there is no one to awaken us from our dogmatic slumber.

Martin Heidegger, the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, eventually repudiated metaphysics, abandoned all appeal to *logos*, and, after a profoundly embarrassing flirtation with national socialism, resorted to a vatic prose reminiscent of that deployed by the ancient poets. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Heidegger's only serious rival, came in the end to the conviction that human thinking is unable to escape the confines of linguistic convention. Neither developed a philosophical teaching concerning politics and morality, for neither believed this possible. We stand in need of an Aristophanes to inspire in some twenty-first-century Socrates a recovery of the crucial distinction between *nomos* and *phusis* and a proper appreciation of its significance. Only then can philosophy be summoned back down from the heavens, settled in the cities and homes of men, and forced to make inquiry into life and morals and things evil and good.