“Xenophon on the Inescapability of Politics”

Chris Nadon
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The title of this year’s Olin seminar series is “The Lessons of Classical Political Thought for the Twenty-First Century,” and I’ve been asked to explore “what we might learn today from classical (primarily Greek) political thought.” Yet when looking to make a comparison of the practical achievements of classical political thought with those of the political thought that has contributed so much on the eve of the millennium to the world dominance of America and our political ideas, I’m inclined to side with the response John Adams gave in the face of a similar proposal: “Not much.”

If Cicero and Tacitus could revisit the earth and learn that the English nation has reduced the great idea [of mixed government] to practice and brought it nearly to perfection by giving each division of a power to defend itself by a negative; had found it the most solid and durable government, as well as the most free; had obtained by means of it a prosperity among civilized nations in an enlightened age like that of the Romans among the barbarians; and that the Americans, after having enjoyed the benefits of such a constitution a century and a half, were advised by some of the greatest philosophers and politicians of the age to renounce it and set up the government of the ancient Goths and modern Indians --what would they say? That the Americans would be more reprehensible than the Cappadocians, if they should listen to such advice (*Defense of the American Constitutions*).

Here Adams presents modern political thought as a continuation of classical thought (in opposition to Gothic or Indian thought), and rightly so inasmuch as both sought to promote such things as stability, military strength, the rule of law, avoidance of civil war, and prosperity, and all to the accompaniment of political liberty. Moreover, it seems indisputable that we moderns, or, more properly, to take Lady Thatcher’s recent scolding to heart, we English speaking moderns have figured out how better to secure these goods. On this ground it is we who should instruct not just the French and Germans but the ancients too. Case closed.

Yet Adams does not consider the new political science to be simply or only the practical perfection of the old. One important difference emerges in the course of an exhortation he gives to “the
younger gentlemen of letters in America” to take up the study of politics.

The subject [of politics] is the most interesting that can engage the understanding of the heart; for whether the end of man, in this stage of his existence, be enjoyment, or improvement, or both, it can never be attained so well in a bad government as a good one.

This is to admit, or in the present case rather to boast, that “good government” need not concern itself with man’s ultimate end. The great virtue of the modern system is the discovery that the lesser ends of man can be more securely obtained if the state remains agnostic but not hostile toward the greater. But to remain agnostic on the question of “enjoyment” or “improvement” is in fact to side with pleasure, or what we call today “preference.” For, all things being equal, there’s no reason to march uphill unless that just happens to be your thing. Now on this question of whether man should take enjoyment or improvement as his end and engage or not engage in politics accordingly, Xenophon offers an instructive contrast and admonition to Adams’ feigned indifference.

In the *Memorabilia* Xenophon’s Socrates argues for the inescapability of politics, understood as requiring a painful mastery of the passions, in the course of a conversation he initiates with Aristippus, one prompted by the observation that this companion was too undisciplined with regard to lust, sleep, cold, heat and toil. Socrates begins with the question of the proper education to make a youth competent to rule. The two quickly come to agree that those fit to rule must be continent in precisely these matters and that those unable to control themselves can have no claim to rule. Socrates then asks Aristippus into which category he would justly place himself, apparently thinking to shame him into some change in his easy-going ways. But if this were Socrates’ hope, his strategy fails miserably. Aristippus has in fact considered if not this exact question then another related and seemingly more comprehensive
one. He emphatically refuses to place himself among “those who would wish to rule.” Indeed, he considers those who do wish to rule, whether competent or not, to be altogether foolish. Cities make use of them as he does his house-slaves. It is enough, Aristippus claims, for a human being to furnish his own needs without looking to take on the additional task of procuring those of his fellow citizens, especially since this requires him for the most part to abstain from the very goods he must provide. Moreover, any failure renders such a one subject to a penalty. Aristippus prefers instead to count himself among “those who wish to live as easily and pleasantly as possible” as opposed to those who wish to rule (Mem. 2.1.1-9).

Faced with Aristippus’ arguments and observations, Socrates turns directly to the question of who lives more pleasantly, the rulers or the ruled, and begins with what can be gathered from the realm of international relations. There the ruling and overpowering nations clearly live more pleasantly than the ruled and overpowered. Now Aristippus could easily have replied that the situation of one collectivity ruling over another is an improper and misleading standard for the assessing the desirability of political rule for individuals. But instead he is provoked into a somewhat more revealing account of his position, one with something of a contemporary ring.

But I, for my part, do not put myself in the order of slaves either. Rather, in my opinion, there is a certain middle road between these, which I try to travel, neither through rule nor slavery, but through freedom; and this road especially leads to happiness. (2.1.11).

If the invocation of the standard of easy-living and pleasure stood in need of a sharp reminder of the political conditions of their enjoyment, an appeal to freedom would seem to be more fully conscious
of its foundation. Yet, according to Socrates, Aristippus in his pursuit of happiness through freedom is forgetful not just of the actual relations between states but between human beings altogether. Politics is the necessary, though not always sufficient (2.1.14), means by which even fellow citizens seek to protect themselves from suffering injustice at one another’s hands. If Aristippus thinks he can avoid the dangers and duties of political life by not confining himself to any one regime and living as a stranger everywhere (2.1.13), he runs an even greater risk of suffering harm. There are bandits on the interstates and the cities do not always treat foreigners particularly well, even, or especially, if they are wealthy. Moreover, the freedom and pleasure of his way of life rest on his use of slaves, possessions he could not safely maintain independent of the political regimes he claims to avoid (2.1.14-17). If, as Aristippus objects and Socrates seems to accept, there is no difference between the bodily sufferings of slaves and of those who practice the virtues necessary to rule, there are differences of another kind: first, the one who willingly suffers hardship can stop the suffering when he wishes; and second, the willing endurance of suffering is accompanied by a good hope, the hope that this suffering will somehow make him better, which actually serves to transform such toil into a source of pleasure and delight (2.1.18-19). In this way, Socrates answers the apparent pleasure seeking of Aristippus on the level of hedonism.

In keeping with the apologetic character of the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon refrains from telling us whether these arguments and the subsequent recitation of Prodicus’ set-piece on Heracles at the Crossroad had any effect on Aristippus’ continence or turned him toward a life of responsible political engagement. The predominant thrust of Socrates’ argument is that Aristippus’ easygoing and apolitical way of life is unsafe, and, as Aristippus maintains no connection or attachment to any particular state, he
must mean unsafe for him as an individual and not simply for the political community as a whole. But politics and the cultivation and practice of the political virtues may be necessary for human beings in general without them being necessary or even desirable in every or any particular case. It then remains debatable (i.e., a question best left to a prudent consideration of the facts on the ground) whether it is more dangerous to run the risk of exposing oneself to international bandits and the potential xenophobia of indigenous peoples or of serving in a citizen army and submitting one’s conduct to the judgement and possible censor of one’s fellow citizens. If we are right in suspecting that Socrates’ arguments and exhortations did not effect a change of heart in Aristippus, although they might have made him more circumspect in his pursuits, we can assume he weighed the respective risks and continued in what he considered the safer path. As far as we know he was not slaughtered or enslaved on the roads. Nor was he ever condemned and executed by the inhabitants of any city.

For us, today, living in a much more domesticated world where slavery has been almost entirely abolished and where other nations actually do announce and largely ensure that it is safe for us to come and go (cf. 2.1.15) — in Stendhal’s epitome of Hobbes, “thousands together less bad, the cage less gay” — Socrates’ arguments for the danger of Aristippus’ way of life carry even less weight. Today, perhaps more than ever, human life is not inextricably political, at least in the sense that we must endure the harsh practice of political virtue or suffer enslavement at home or abroad. Modern institutions and technology have genuinely abated this necessity. And if we have the option not to suffer (2.1.18), what but some masochistic perversity would prevent us from making this choice?

Yet Socrates makes another separate claim, almost in passing, namely, that the pursuit of the
easygoing (rhadiourgiai) and immediate pleasures made possible by the rejection of the political virtues
is incapable of producing or putting “any worthwhile knowledge into the soul,” just as it does not suffice
to put the body in good condition (2.1.20). The homespun, Poor Richard’s wisdom of Xenophon’s
Socrates, for whom “hunger is the best sauce,” doesn’t shy from adopting the coach’s favorite
exhortation: “No pain, no gain.” Aristippus, however, remains unmoved by or unmindful of this claim.
Just what is the “worthwhile knowledge” put into the soul through willingly enduring hardship,
particularly the hardship of practicing political virtue? Much to the reader’s disappointment, the
suggestion receives no further development. Aristippus’ lack of experience, his unwillingness to try the
experiment, and, more importantly, even to consider or examine this proposition, apparently disqualify
him as a proper interlocutor with whom to pursue the inquiry. But not all of the characters one meets in
the Xenophontic corpus are similarly disinclined. His Cyrus, for one, is said by the barbarians to be
“the most ambitious” and willing “to endure all toil” (Cyro. 1.2.3; cf. 1.3.3, 1.4.3); and the full potential
of this promising disposition is considered at length in a conversation with his father, Cambyses, a most
Socratic figure. We turn then to this exchange with some hope of discovering what “worthwhile
knowledge” this disposition can engender in the soul.

According to Cyrus, the good ruler ought to surpass the ruled “not in easy living
(rhadioourgein) but in taking forethought and love of toil.” And, like an industrious shepherd rather
than a hungry wolf, among the things he toils for is to provide those under him with the necessities of life
in abundance so that they will all be as they should (Cyro. 1.6.8, 7). Cyrus appears then to share the
conventional understanding of what makes a good ruler, as well as the conventional aspiration to be
But the conventional understanding is not altogether unproblematic, as we can see from the extraordinary inferences Cyrus draws from it. He believes himself to possess the requisite qualities to such a degree that when he contemplates “ruling itself” and reflects on what he has seen of other men and their rulers, he concludes that it would be shameful to cower before them and not wish to go and fight. Cyrus knows first hand, “beginning with our friends,” i.e., the Medes, that some think a ruler should surpass his subjects in sumptuousness of fare, having more money, longer hours of sleep, and, in general, enjoying greater luxury and ease. But since rule should go instead to those with the appropriate virtues, and as Cyrus believes himself to possess these to a greater degree than do the others, in principle there is no reason why he should not take their places. Here, then, for the first time, the almost limitless nature of Cyrus’ ambition stands revealed before his father; and its roots would seem to lie in the respectable opinion that rulers should be superior to the ruled in virtue. The wholesome exhortation to make oneself eminently qualified to rule, such as Socrates made to Aristippus, opens a potentially limitless prospect. Now normally one would expect the claim to rule based on superior foresight, love, of toil, and endurance in the face of hardship to be balanced or limited by some other virtues. Justice, for instance, to say nothing of a concern with nobility (cf. 1.5.13), would seem to dictate that Cyrus help his relations and allies, not fight with and overthrow them, since it is for this task that the Council has made him general (1.5.4-5). And in Persia justice is understood to require obedience to the laws, not to mention respect for his elders.

Yet from an early age Cyrus seems to have been inclined not to take this claim too much to heart. The reasons behind his rejection of the Persian view came to light most clearly in an exchange
with his mother, Mandane. Astyages, Cyrus’ Median grandfather, proposed that Cyrus be left behind with him when his daughter decided to return home to her husband in Persia. Rather than oppose her father’s will (he is after all a despot), Mandane defers the decision to Cyrus. Astyages, who had become quite attached to the boy, tries to entice him with all kinds of extravagant promises: his bodyguard will no longer keep Cyrus from visiting when he pleases; horses and whatever else Astyages possesses will be at his disposal; he will be permitted to eat in whatever manner he wishes; the animals in the park will be his to hunt; and other children will be found as playmates. In short, Astyages concludes, “Whatever else you may desire, just ask me and you shall not fail to have it” (1.3.14). Cyrus “quickly and without hesitation” declares his wish to stay. When Mandane asks in good Persian fashion for the reasons behind his decision, his response, though qualified by Xenophon’s “it is said that he said,” makes no mention of his grandfather’s promises. While he is the best among the children in Persia at throwing the spear and shooting the bow, he finds that here in Media he is inferior to his playmates in horsemanship. “And let me tell you, Mother, this vexes me very much.” But if he stays and learns how to ride, he will still retain his excellence at the Persian exercises on foot, and, moreover, be able to give support to his grandfather as a cavalry man if ever called upon (1.3.15). Mandane seems not to have anticipated that Cyrus would wish to stay behind, and his motives for doing so, however laudably expressed, do nothing to quiet her worries. Her concern for her son and the future King of the Persians now pushes her to broach a delicate subject, and one particularly difficult to discuss in the presence of her father. “But how, my child, will you learn justice here when your teachers are over there?” Cyrus reassures her that he already knows all about these things and recounts the
lesson that taught him so thoroughly as to dispense with the need for further studies under their care. In Persia,

the teacher appointed me to decide cases for the others, as being myself very exact in the knowledge of justice. Yet in one case I received a whipping for not having decided correctly. The case was this. A big boy with a small cloak put it on a small boy who had a big cloak and then took the other's for himself. When I tried the case, I thought it better that each keep the cloak that fitted him. Upon this the teacher whipped me saying that when I was the judge of a good fit I should do as I had done, but when I was to judge whose cloak it was I must examine what just possession is; whether he who took something from another by force should have it, or whether he who made or bought it should possess it. And since what is lawful is just, and force is unlawful, he commanded the judge always to render his verdict in conformity with the law. So, Mother, I understand what is just in all cases very exactly. But if I am at all deficient my grandfather here will teach me that. (1.3.16-17)

Cyrus based his decision on a reasonable consideration of what each of the boys could best use. In this particular case there was a common good or coincidence of interests between the two; they both benefitted from the exchange. To understand the teacher’s violent reaction, we must keep in mind that education in Persia is in effect restricted to the wealthy. The distinction between rich and poor constitutes a limitation on the degree to which all Persians may share in the larger common good of the political community. Of course, not every wealthy child is deserving, nor every poor child unworthy of being educated. Whatever disproportions might arise could seem to be resolved by the same method Cyrus applies to the problem of the coats: redistribution with an eye to what is fitting or most appropriate. Yet even or especially a republic like Persia, one that aims at the perfection of its citizens’ virtues, must look to secure the preconditions for their cultivation and practice. Education requires a certain amount of leisure and wealth, and so the regime must ensure that at least some citizens enjoy them. But were Persia, or any other society, to recognize the legitimacy of Cyrus’ decision about the
coats and attempt to apply the standard of “the fitting” to the possession of all other goods, the effects would be revolutionary and disastrous. The direct appeal to what is useful or good is therefore forbidden by the laws which unequivocally declare that just possession depends on making or buying and that one must *always* decide according to the law. In this way there may be particular instances of injustice that go uncorrected, but the good of the community as a whole is better preserved. But the laws, or rather those who make and enforce them, cannot afford to make these, or any other, round-about arguments in their defense, since their respectability and power depend in large measure on a belief among the citizens in an absolute obligation to obey. The “teachers” therefore make no arguments whatsoever and enforce such a general belief with beatings and threats of other punishment (cf. 2.2.14). That the distinction between lawful possession and force is itself maintained at bottom by force is a lesson not likely to have been missed by Cyrus as he received a beating for having undertaken to benefit his fellows.

Unlike the mutual tolerance and respect that doubtless issues from multicultural education today, Cyrus’ time abroad and exposure to “the other” seems to have borne fruit in the inclusion of the Persians’ Median “friends” among those whom he thinks himself worthy to rule and thus conquer. What is surprising is that this proposal does not meet with anything like the kind of outrage or moral indignation that one might expect on the part of Cambyses. This is all the more striking given that Cyrus’ understanding of what constitutes the true claim to rule leaves no room for recognition of the authority of the Council that elected him general, and, when carried to its logical conclusion, poses as great a threat to Cambyses as to Cyaxares. But Cyrus has chosen this moment of candor with his usual exquisite timing. He, and not his father, now stands at the head of the Persian army. If, as Cambyses himself admits,
arguments made by someone who is in control of a well-ordered military force are for that very reason often more persuasive (1.6.11), then those made by the unarmed must be correspondingly weaker, regardless of their “merits.” To receive an attentive hearing, the one arguing from a position of weakness must adapt his speech to the interests and passions of the powerful. If he is to defend himself and the integrity of the Persian regime from the imperial ambitions of his son, he must do so in a manner calculated to appeal to those ambitions. This approach also serves to establish his credentials as a hard-nosed and therefore valuable advisor.

He begins by pointing out that to be ranged against contemptible opponents is not always enough to guarantee victory.

“But son,” he said, “there are some respects in which one must contend not against human beings but against matters themselves (and it is not very easy to surpass them readily. You doubtless know that if the army does not have the necessary provisions, your rule will dissolve at once.”

But father,” he said, “Cyaxares says that he will provide these things for all who come from here, no matter how many they may be.”

“So, son,” he said, “you are going off trusting in the funds of Cyaxares?”

“I am,” said Cyrus.

“Well,” said he, “do you know how much he has?”

“No, by Zeus,” said Cyrus, “I don’t.”

“And you nevertheless trust in these uncertainties? Don’t you know that you will need many things and that now he must of necessity spend for many other things?”

“I know,” said Cyrus.

“Then if his expenses outstrip him, or he is willing to lie to you, what will the condition of your army be then?”

Cyrus, who has perhaps relied on an out-dated assessment of his opponent’s capacities, did not consider that the uncle whom he is apparently planning to supplant might anticipate his intent and have something similar in mind for him. Sobered by this oversight and encouraged by his father’s lack of
moral pretense or outrage, Cyrus drops what little remained of his own posturing and asks forthrightly for advice “while we are still in friendly territory,” i.e., before they cross over into the territory of their “allies,” the Medes (1.6.9).

The fact that Cyrus now heads the Persian army is not the only difficulty Cambyses must overcome in his effort to moderate his son’s ambition to conquer. An even greater obstacle or complication arises from the circumstances that have contributed to placing Cyrus there. The Assyrian’s expansion of empire does pose a genuine threat to the very existence of the Persian republic. Cyrus’ military genius and other skills, along with his indomitable spirit to emerge victorious from every contest, make him a valuable resource, perhaps one indispensable for victory. But these qualities combine in such a way to make him both the greatest hope and greatest threat to the survival of the regime.

Inasmuch as Cyrus is the defender of Persia against an aggressive imperial power, Cambyses must share with him his experience and knowledge of how best to defeat it. But as Cyrus also seems willing to pursue victory at the possible expense of Persia, he must do his best to moderate that desire. The necessity to maintain this delicate balance governs Cambyses’ speech throughout the conversation and limits what he can say and do himself: for example, if he points out the difficulty of getting supplies for the army and keeping the soldiers healthy, he must also make clear the best means to do so (1.6.9-10, 15-16). Thus Cambyses’ advice stands in tension with itself, and necessarily so, certain parts actually undermining others. This tension comes to light most clearly in their discussion of the best way to obtain the obedience and love of his soldiers.

In order to keep the soldiers in line, Cyrus intends to follow the example of his father, his
teachers, and the laws. They all praise and honor the obedient while dishonoring and punishing the disobedient. Cambyses agrees (and in doing so renders his judgment on the true nature of the Persian education) that this is indeed the road to obtain “obedience by compulsion” (v But Cyrus ignores, or perhaps has no experience with, a better and shorter road, the one that leads to “willing obedience” (v cf Mem This kind of obedience men render up with great pleasure to those whom they think more prudent about their own interests than they are themselves. Its power is manifest in the eagerness with which the sick follow a doctor’s orders and passengers at sea the directions of the pilot. Travelers, too, assiduously stick with those whom they believe to be more familiar with the roads. But if human beings think that they will incur some harm by doing so, punishments and rewards cannot make them willingly obey. “For no one willingly accepts even a gift when it brings him harm” (1.6.20-21).

Cyrus immediately understands his father to mean that what is most effective in keeping subjects obedient is then “to seem to be more prudent than they” (1.6.22, emphasis added). If the best or strongest kind of obedience depends upon the will, and the will depends upon the mind or the opinions that guide it, a ruler must be attentive to the impression he makes there. Accordingly, Cyrus asks his father how he might gain such a “reputation” as quickly as possible, for without it whatever prudence he does possess will remain to some extent politically ineffective.¹ But if Cyrus hopes in this way to remain satisfied with the mere appearance of prudence and to avoid the long and difficult task of actually becoming so, Cambyses is ready with a fatherly rebuke.

¹Plato Republic 488d-89a.
If you wish to seem to be a good farmer when you are not — or horseman, doctor, flute player or anything whatsoever — consider how many things you must contrive for the sake of so seeming. Even if you should persuade many to praise you in order to get a good reputation, and procure fine equipment for each of these [arts], you would deceive only for the moment, or a little bit beyond. And when put to the test you would be refuted and exposed as a boaster. (1.6.22)

To gain a secure reputation for prudence one must become so in reality through an assiduous devotion to learning the necessary arts, much as Cyrus has already done with regard to tactics. But political and military success frequently depends upon foresight about particulars, whereas the arts can predict and control only the outcome of events in general.² He must recognize the limits of prudence and concerning “those things that cannot be learned nor foreseen by human foresight” make inquiries of the gods “through prophecy.” True human prudence includes an awareness of its own limitations, and this awareness inclines towards a certain dependence upon the gods. But as the gods might sometimes wish to do harm, something which Cambyses is now willing to admit (1.6.18; cf. 1.6.4, 46), it is best to avoid exposing oneself to dangerous or risky situations whenever possible. Prudence then, at least in politics, seems indistinguishable from a cautious and conservative regard for self-preservation (cf. 3.1.20, 24-25).

²Mem. 1.1.6-9.
The superiority of willing obedience to obedience by compulsion, the inevitable detection and punishment of boasters, the need for genuine yet hard-to-acquire prudence, the limitations of that prudence, the connection of political success to the disposition of the gods, and the doubt that their disposition will always be favorable: all of these arguments Cambyses tailors to dampen Cyrus’ ambitions by making him less confident of their attainment. Yet there are certain difficulties with Cambyses’ advice and admonitions. For his part, Cyrus does not acknowledge their soundness as he did with his father’s earlier suggestions.\(^3\) Willing obedience may be preferable and stronger than obedience by compulsion, but it is not always possible nor even necessary to obtain it. Human beings defer to prudence when they believe this to be in their best interest. Yet even the most prudent ruler, and especially a general at war, must sometimes ask, indeed require, the sacrifice of individual interests. To obtain obedience at such times some form of compulsion, open or otherwise, remains a necessity. For no one willingly accepts even a gift if he believes to do so is to his disadvantage. Whatever else its merits, willing obedience can never entirely replace obedience by compulsion, at least not so long as war and law remain essential elements of political life.

\(^3\)Compare 1.6.24 with 1.6.19, 16, 11, 9.
Cyrus responds to his father’s emphasis on prudence and the kind of obedience it supposedly gives rise to, not with approval but with his own declaration that “being loved by one’s subjects” is among “the greatest matters.” He intends to rely on this other and potentially greater force to supplement what he takes to be the compulsions of punishments and praise (cf. 5.1.12, 7.5.60); and he plans to obtain their love by “being manifest in doing good for them” (1.6.24). Cambyses is quick to point out that “it is difficult to be able at all times to do good for those for whom one would like to do good.” But even he must admit that a ruler can secure the love of his subjects merely if “he shows himself” to rejoice in their prosperity and to commiserate in their misfortunes, and if he “appears” eager to help them and fearful lest they suffer any harm. Soldiers in particular are won over when their ruler “shows himself” to seek out a bigger share of their common hardships by enduring more heat, cold, and toil than all the rest. Cambyses’ stress on the utility of appearances implies that a ruler need not always do or be these things in reality. He even gives some further encouragement to Cyrus with the observation that these common burdens do not in fact weigh equally on a ruler, for to him belongs the greatest honor of the undertaking and, conscious that nothing he does goes unobserved, his labors in fact become “somewhat lighter” (1.6.25; cf. 8.2.22). Despite appearances, Cyrus will then endure less not more of the army’s hardships. But this means that the soldiers’ love for him will be based at least in part upon an illusion. The ability to exploit this mistaken impression, to say nothing of the utility of inspiring his followers from time to time with great but false hopes (1.6.19; cf. Mem. 4.2.17), ameliorates the difficulty of not always being able to benefit those whom he would wish. But if this deception, which amounts to a kind of boasting, is a useful tool to gain his men’s love, why could it not
be equally useful in obtaining their willing obedience, for example, by convincing them that their best interests are being pursued even when they are not? “By nature all believe that they love those by whom they believe they are benefitted” (Oec. 20.29). Moreover, Cambyses’ dire warning about the consequences of practicing false prudence and boasting, an argument that boils down to the utilitarian nostrum that honesty is the best policy, is only to be feared if the deception fails to reduce its victims to a state from which they have no effective means to protest. Even granting the dubious assertion that all such falsehoods must eventually come to light, “the little bit” of time between their implementation and discovery may well suffice for the achievement of some important plan (cf. 3.3.51, 4.5.16 with 8.5.22-27). For example, Cyaxares rather quickly discovers the deceit behind his nephew’s request to borrow cavalry, but nevertheless finds himself completely undone (4.4.9, 5.5.32-36). If society remains essentially and irremediably constituted by opinion (5.5.34), then the “effectual truth” of politics is “appearances,” and deceit the key to its mastery.

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4Consider 3.3.51-52 with CL 9.1.
Cambyses’ argument against relying on deception, which issues in a rejoinder to depend instead upon the counsels of the gods, was therefore itself deceitful and intentionally so. Inasmuch as he knows, or strongly suspects, that Cyrus’ desire for limitless conquests stands in conflict with the best interests of the republican regime, he sought to moderate that desire by denying the utility of deception and by overstating the importance of genuine prudence or knowledge as the necessary means to political success. As the lesser of two powers, he had almost no choice but to employ falsehoods himself in his effort to correct or curb his son. Cyrus, however, was not taken in and immediately shifted the discussion to a topic where his father was forced to concede the utility of deception. According to his own statement, we would expect Cambyses to pay the price for having his ruse so soon discovered. And he does. At the conclusion of the discussion of how to win the love of his men, Cyrus professes the opinion that for a well prepared general “moderation” consists in “desiring to fight against the enemy as quickly as possible.” Cambyses can only respond by trying to insert at least one qualification: Cyrus should attack only if he is sure to gain some advantage from it (ov ὧν, 1.6.26).5 The cool calculation of “enlightened” self-interest is the final barrier he places in the path of his son’s ambition. But to make this argument he is forced to invoke the principle said to be most characteristic of tyranny (1.3.18). Impelled by the force of Cyrus’ questioning, the ensuing discussion of “how most of all to take advantage of enemies” lays bare the questionable foundation of the Peers’ friendship with one

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5Cf. Hipparchicus. 4.13.
another, and with it, the Persian regime’s claim to care especially for the common good (1.2.3).

Cambyses maintains that to take advantage of the enemy is neither an easy nor a simple task (ἡ ὑδαίνα, literally “single”). To do so, one must be a plotter and a dissembler, treacherous and deceiving, a thief and a robber, and ready to take advantage of one’s enemies in all things.⁶ Cyrus seems genuinely surprised if not by the content then at least by the candor and boldness of this revelation. “O Heracles, father, what sort of man do you say I must become?” he asks with a laugh.⁷ Cambyses responds that precisely this sort of man is “both most just and most lawful” (1.6.27). Cyrus is puzzled. If such behavior is the peak of justice, why as boys were they taught just the opposite? Cambyses defends the teachers’ practice by emphasizing the distinction between friends and enemies. Toward their fellow citizens they should still abide by the rules given them in childhood. Taking advantage is to be practiced only against their enemies. As for the actual instruction in how to harm them, this was not neglected but taught to the children covertly. Just as they learned to shoot by aiming at a mark instead of at one another, so they learned to take advantage in war by fighting on unequal terms against the animals that they hunted with nets, snares, and pits. In this way the boys became practiced in the skills necessary to harm enemies should this ever be required, while avoiding any injury to their fellows. What seems to make this double teaching necessary is the fact that men are divided into potentially hostile cities and tribes. Were there only one peaceful, universal nation, lawful conduct

⁶Cf. 6.3.15, Mem. 3.1.6-7; Machiavelli Prince, chapter 15.

⁷On the whole, Persian life is characterized more by tears than laughter. Cf. 2.2.14, 2.3.1.
would perhaps admit of no exceptions.\(^8\) Justice would again be something simple.\(^9\) However, in the present, imperfect world the constant threat of war demands two different standards of justice, one for friends, another for enemies (cf. *Mem.* 4.2.12-18).

This response leaves Cyrus perplexed, and rightly so, for it fails to address his original objection. Even if it is necessary to distinguish between the treatment of friends and enemies, why was this not explained to the children in the beginning? Moreover, the actual practice of the teachers as it now stands revealed serves to undermine the distinction. To teach the necessary skills of war, they themselves practiced a kind of deception on the children, even if only to prevent them from harming one another. Thus the original commandment not to deceive, which the need to prepare for war required be qualified by the distinction between friends and enemies, seems to demand yet another qualification: sometimes it is apparently permitted even to deceive friends (cf. 6.1.39ff., 7.5.46). Or were these teachers not the children’s friends? Cyrus immediately sees the inadequacy of the simple distinction between friends and enemies, and, dropping it altogether, insists that “since it is useful to know how to benefit and how to harm human beings, both these things should have been taught with human beings as

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\(^8\)Cf. *Hipparchicus*. 5.9.

\(^9\)See 3.2.32 for another instance in which justice becomes something “single/simple.”
well" (1.6.30). Cyrus' intransigent pursuit of what is useful prompts Cambyses to tell a story about a former teacher who once taught justice in the very way Cyrus now bids.

10 An alternative ms. reading is “against human beings.”
But it is said, son, that in the time of our ancestors there was once a man, a teacher of the boys, who taught the boys justice in the way you insist, both to lie and not to lie, to deceive and not to deceive, to slander and not to slander, to take advantage and not to take advantage. He defined which of these one must do to friends and which to enemies. And he taught moreover that it was just to deceive even one’s friends, at least for a good [result], and to steal the things of friends for a good end” \(^{11}\)

Now to teach these things properly it was of course necessary to have the boys practice on one another. But some, "being naturally suited to deceive well and take advantage well, and perhaps also being not unnaturally lovers of gain, they did not refrain from trying to take advantage even of their friends” (1.6.31-32). As a consequence of the ensuing disorder, there came to be a decree still in use among them to teach the children (just as with house slaves) "simply" to tell the truth, not to deceive, and not to take advantage. Those who disobey are punished and hence inured by habit to become tamer citizens. Only when they are about the age of Cyrus is it considered safe to reveal what is lawful toward enemies, for if they have grown up together in mutual respect they do not seem to break away and become savage when presented with this supplementary teaching (1.6.33-34).

\(^{11}\)Cf. *Mem.* 3.1.6, 4.2.11-20; *Plato Republic* 331c, 333a-334b.
Cambyses’ story, whether historically true or not, does have the merit of addressing Cyrus’ original concern about the children’s apparently defective education, although it raises as many questions as it resolves. Now, it appears, not so much the possibility of war but rather the elusive and shifting character of any particular or contingent good lies at the root of the inadequacy of any single or simple teaching about justice, such as obedience to law as is taught in the Persian schools. The exceptional stresses of war merely bring to the surface deficiencies in the established laws already present though perhaps less pressing in times of peace. If this teacher’s desire to attempt such an experiment in the first place casts doubt on the ultimate respectability of the laws, and therefore on justice understood as obedience to law, its failure reveals not so much the solidity or goodness of those laws but the hollowness of the Peers’ friendship for one another (and, by implication, their hostility to foreigners as such), a friendship that rests at bottom on habits inculcated by force and reinforced with shame. This, and not some shared common good, is what ultimately binds them together. Of course, one could point out that the Peers do share a common good or interest in providing for their mutual defense and keeping down the Commoners. Yet, as it is founded on a calculation of self-interest, like the justice of a band of thieves, it carries no permanent sense of duty or obligation. Indeed, it is the kind of benefit that almost

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12Cf. Mem. 4.2.17, 3.8.1-3, 4.6.8.

13Cf. Plato Republic 352b-c.
dares not speak its name.\textsuperscript{14}

What is the proper response to the insights gained from this new or supplementary teaching about justice, and is it then the “worthwhile knowledge” that Socrates claims can be put into the soul by a serious devotion to political virtue, namely, the realization that such virtue is ultimately just a means to satisfy or secure the collective selfishness of the community? The reaction hoped for by the teachers, and upon which the republican regime depends, is for the young man to accept the necessity to take advantage of enemies by whatever means necessary but to remain bound by the law in his relations with fellow citizens. Should it occur to him that his earlier education was based on a mixture of compulsion and deceit, this only serves to deepen his sense of loyalty. The laws, like a loving but firm parent, administered all this for his own good. A citizen could, and should, even feel gratitude for the beatings and tears inflicted in his youth. Such is the response of Aglaitadas, the sole Persian to defend their ancestral ways over and against the innovations introduced by Cyrus. But can we accurately describe this reaction as one based on “knowledge”? If so, it seems to have been a knowledge shared by Aristippus (2.1.8-9), and, given Cyrus own early insights into the character of Persian justice, Cambyses’ revelations could not have been altogether new to him. And what the regime actually hopes

\textsuperscript{14}Cyrus voices his most candid assessment of the Persian regime in a private conversation with a foreigner (2.1.3).
for is that the citizens’ deep habituation, ingrained by dint of their having been reared to feel shame before one another (v vo; cf. 2.1.28), will prevent them from acting on their “better” (that is to say, not genuine) knowledge. As this loyal Peer’s opposition suggests, Cyrus is himself unlikely to have responded in this way. Among other things, Cyrus did most of his growing up (♂) on his own and far way in Media (1.4.1).

It seems more plausible that when properly understood the debunking of the Persian claim to take special care for virtue and the common good produces in the soul a certain dissatisfaction with the regime. And this dissatisfaction itself could give rise to the hope and ambition to found a new kind of political community. If full Persian citizenship depends more on birth than intrinsic merit (1.2.15), and the Peers’ friendship for one another rests on a false foundation, why not work to establish a regime where arbitrary distinctions between friends and enemies no longer dominate political life, cosmopolitan in character and tending toward a world-state ordered for the sake of true human virtue rather than one where virtue is subordinated to, and even constituted by, the demands of a closed society? Cyrus frequently draws power from his denunciations of the injustice inherent in narrow republican patriotism, and directs this force toward the creation of a worldwide meritocracy, one where the duties of citizenship and humanity would apparently be reconciled (e.g., 2.2.26). Yet the foreseeable limitations that govern Cyrus’ construction of an empire make it anything but this hoped for utopia. It turns out to be at least as corrupt as republican Persia, and, in addition, much more unstable (7.5, 8-1-3, 8.8).

The experiment in teaching the Persian children how to be bad for a good end makes them experts in deception, in effect releasing them from the constraints of law. The disastrous results seem to
indicate that nothing but habit and fear of punishment stand in the way of our helping an enemy or harming a friend should this satisfy our natural love of gain. Not so much any condition of natural scarcity, but this passion of unlimited scope (8.2.20-22) lies at the heart of conflicts not only between nations and civil factions but individuals as well.\textsuperscript{15} The perpetual war of every one against every one that it creates makes any lasting or more than mercenary friendship impossible or foolish. While enemies are virtually infinite, the only true and constant "friend" is oneself. Attachment to Persia, a regime which admittedly treats its citizens like domestic slaves for much, if not all, of their lives,\textsuperscript{16} becomes a question not of loyalty or duty but a mere calculation of its value as a means or tool to essentially individual, if not altogether private, ends.

Is the knowledge put into the soul by the willingness to eschew easy-living and immediate pleasures for the sake of political rule then the wisdom — indeed, the necessity — of seeking political power for the sake of self-aggrandizement? One could plausibly infer from the details of Cyrus’ subsequent career that this is the conclusion he draws. There is no standing on defense, for it’s eat or be eaten. The Aristippean excuse, “I merely wish to live quietly and without quarrel” will not be

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Hiero} 4.6, \textit{Mem.} 2.6.21.

\textsuperscript{16}Consider in this light Xenophon’s \textit{o o v} at 1.2.3. Cf. 1.1.2.
accepted by, nor can it safely be tendered to, those whose tastes include meat (1.4.5, 24, 7.1.13).

Such a reading of the *Cyropaedia* would confirm an accusation leveled against Xenophon by Machiavelli, namely, that this work covertly instructs its more astute readers (Caesars not Scipios) in how to pursue their ambitions even, or especially, at the expense of republican government (*Discourses* 3.22, *Prince* chpts. 17 and 18) — an undertaking less honorable in both intention and effect than his own public and “Manlian” airing of similar facts. But, to return for a moment to the *Memorabilia*, this would mean that Socrates must have been trying to turn Aristippus away from his easygoing hedonism to the pursuit of tyranny: a fool’s errand no matter how you consider it. And, again, so long as the true nature and foundation of political life is widely ignored, or recognized only in the field of international relations (*Mem. 2.1.10*), the actual danger of following Aristippus’ private byway is greatly diminished.

It is more likely that the knowledge made possible by a serious attention to political virtue and the necessities of rule is not of the goodness and desirability of tyranny, even if this appears to be the conclusion that Cyrus draws for himself (5.2.9-10). I suggested earlier that Cyrus’ insight as revealed in his conversation with his mother into the inadequacy of any simple equation of the just and the legal issued in an acceptance of that formulation not as an absolute obligation but as the best practical means of attending to the common good of the community. But now that the ultimate respectability of that community has been called into question over the course of this conversation with his father, there seems to be no reason to adhere to it at all. Indeed, it should be admitted that it was never entirely clear in that earlier exchange that Cyrus maintained or returned to a high respect for the Persian community, as opposed to an acquiescence in its greater power or strength (cf. 1.3.16, 1.4.25-26, 28). Mandane,
Cyrus’ mother and a partisan of Persia, in fact remained troubled by her son’s professed acceptance of the just as the legal. For in the circumstances in which the issue emerged, the formulation did nothing to address the difficulty that so worried her: that the same things are not everywhere considered to be lawful.

In Media Astyages has made himself despot over all, whereas in Persia equality is established to be just. Cambyses may be king of the Persians, but he is the first to accept and do whatever the city commands. Not his soul or will ( ), but the law is the standard of justice there.\(^\text{17}\) These different views are ultimately bound to come into conflict, as they did over the issue of whether Cyrus should return to complete his education in accordance with the Persian laws, or stay in Media as Astyages wished? Cyrus’ argument for staying in Media, combined with his expressed willingness to learn whatever might be left about justice from his grandfather, only heightened Mandane’s concerns. “How will you not be beaten to death when you come home if you arrive having learned not kingship but tyranny, according to which it is thought that one ought to have more than all others” (ov oχ v v v oύ v)? Cyrus was ready with a response. He claimed that Astyages was in fact much better at teaching others to have less than to have more (ov χ v) since he has taught all the Medes to have less. “So take heart, your father will not send me or anyone else away who will have learned to take unfair advantage” (ov v, 1.3.18). Cyrus’ argument assumed that he was as unlikely to learn tyranny from a tyrant as moderation from the example of the Persian elders. Yet much of the education he had already been given presupposed and encouraged the belief that virtue can be

\(^{17}\text{Cf. CL 15.7.}\)
taught by imitation. And Cyrus had already shown himself eager to follow his grandfather in matters of 
dress and adornment (1.2.8, 1.3.3, 10). Mandane remained troubled and further discussion apparently 
ensued. “But, at last, his mother went away, and Cyrus stayed and was brought up there” (1.4.1). 
Unstated is whether Mandane allowed him to stay because her fears were allayed or increased by their 
conversation. For his part, Cyrus soon excelled his Median playmates in horsemanship, but did not, for 
that reason, then think to return home (1.4.5 with 1.3.15). Cyrus’ acceptance of the just as the legal 
was then only skin deep and apparently contributed to his own tyrannical inclinations, which were only 
confirmed or emboldened by the exchange with his father. Not intolerance or contempt for the other, 
but a wholehearted if discreet admiration was the upshot of Cyrus’ multicultural education.

But might there not be another found for respect for the law other than its contribution to the so-
called common good of the community, or its utility as a mask for tyrannical ambitions? Commentators 
frequently claim that “Xenophon insists on the character of absolute obligation which is attached to the 
principle of obedience to law.” And they rely not only on these ambiguous passages from the 
Cyropaedia but cite instances from the Memorabilia where Xenophon’s Socrates endorses this view. 
Indeed, much of Xenophon’s defense of his teacher rests on just this point. But precisely the apologetic 
character of the Memorabilia casts doubts on its ultimate authority: the most persuasive or effective 
speech is by no means always the truest. As we’ve seen from the Cyropaedia, Xenophon is aware of

18 Luccioni 1949, 65; Sinclair 1967, 90-91; Gera 1993, 74-78; Ferrari 1995, 113 n. 43.

19 4.6.15.
powerful objections to such a simplistic understanding of the relation between justice and the law. And in the *Oeconomicus* he records a conversation between Socrates and Critoboulus where they come to a conclusion quite similar to that of the young Cyrus. Utility should determine the ownership of property; a thing belongs to the one who knows how best to use it. Not law or custom, but knowledge turns out to determine just possession. This line of reasoning ultimately culminates in the claim that only a wise man can correctly determine who should have what in each particular case. Yet Socrates does not draw from this argument an endorsement of tyranny. First, such perfect wisdom as would be required appears to be unavailable, at least to human beings (cf. 1.6.46). But second, and more importantly, a life spent entering into others' troubles and sorting out their disputes in order to distribute everything correctly would be a life of thankless toil, that is, a most foolish life (7.5.45, 7.2.27-28, 8.2.27). For these reasons, and perhaps because the wise apparently need very little to live on, it becomes tolerable to respect and even to defend the equation of the just with the legal, although in no way as an "absolute obligation," nor even one that rests on and best protects the common good of the community. Rather, what makes the law acceptable is the undesirability of political rule.

Cambyses, who shares Cyrus’ insights into the shortcomings of justice understood as obedience to law (1.6.27, 38) as well as the defects of the Peers’ education, somehow remains loyal to the regime. One might take this loyalty to derive from his position as king; in remaining true to republican Persia he simply remains true to himself and the high, if not exalted, position he holds there. But Cambyses is the

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20 *Oec.* 1.5ff, 6.4.

21 Compare 1.3.17 with the ϒ ov at *Mem.* 1.6.3.
only person in the *Cyropaedia* truly open to the Socratic view of ruling. This openness emerged as a point of disagreement between himself and Cyrus early on in their conversation.

> Have you forgotten, son, the conclusion we reached in the consideration you and I once made, that it is a strong and noble deed for a man if he is capable to take care that he becomes really noble and good himself, and that he provides for himself and his household sufficient provisions? And this being a great work, to know how to govern others so that they will have daily provisions in abundance and so that they will all be such as they should, this appeared to us then a wondrous deed. (1.6.7)

Cyrus recalls hearing his father’s views, yet now agrees only that “ruling nobly” is a very great work. 22

Whereas Cambyses distinguishes between ruling other human beings and becoming noble and good oneself — and is accordingly led to prefer the latter to the former whenever possible 23 — Cyrus retains a belief in the nobility and goodness of “ruling itself,” the common denominator of the otherwise conflicting views of justice in Persia and Media. In other words, unlike his father, he thinks or hopes that the pursuit of his political ambitions is in harmony with, or even constitutes, his own perfection and happiness (1.6.8, 8.7.6-9). But a genuine concern with one’s happiness, unlike political success, cannot rest satisfied with appearances. 24 And as Cyrus’ demand for praise seems to indicate (to say nothing of his alleged fear of the beautiful [5.1.8]), even the “enlightened” practice of political virtue, i.e., for the sake of self-aggrandizement (*pleonexia*), is less than fully satisfying.

Yet the worthwhile knowledge produced in the soul through following the path of political virtue

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22 Cyrus’ opinions about the gods rest on his father’s word; but he has other evidence to consult when it comes to “ruling itself.” Compare θ o o o at 1.6.3 and its repetition at 1.6.6, with o v o o , θ v, and vo at 1.6.8.

23 Cambyses: “No one willingly accepts even a gift when it is bad for him” (1.6.21).
cannot simply consist in the undesirability of rule. For on this point Aristippus and Cambyses are at one. Rather, it seems to consist in the knowledge of the disjunction between the capacity to rule and real human goodness and nobility. Unlike Cambyses’ formulation, Aristippus’ account of his unwillingness to rule lacks the potential even to raise this issue.

In my opinion, it is quite senseless that it not be enough for a human being to furnish himself with what he needs, although this is a big task, but instead to take on the additional task of procuring also for the other citizens what they need. (Mem. 2.1.8; compare Cyro. 1.6.7).

This is not to say that Aristippus has no opinion or belief about what a good and noble human is (Mem. 3.8.4-6). When pushed, the professed hedonist pridefully refuses to place himself in the category of those unfit to rule and takes pains to deny Socrates’ implication that he merits being classed with the enslaved (2.1.7-8, 10-11,). He then shares, if in a less extreme way, Cyrus’ opinion of the dignity of rule (cf. Cyro. 3.1.11, Hel.4.1.35). But his easygoing deprecation of the demands of politics, his sham shamelessness and refuge in the lofty name of freedom stand in the way of his taking up the inquiry that would put this opinion to the test.

Political life, at least in Xenophon’s day, encouraged, though by no means guaranteed, a sustained inquiry into human goodness and nobility by setting forth a clear, if not entirely distinct, standard of its contents for a citizen (Oec. 6.12-7.2). But our own political life, inasmuch as it

24 Consider the necessity “to believe in reality” at 3.3.53.
steadfastly refuses to take a stand on its ultimate ends, enjoyment or improvement, fails to provide a similarly compelling motive for turning our attention to such a question. And worse, inasmuch as its agnosticism it taken to rest on or authoritatively imply the futility of such an inquiry, it saps the hope, necessary to take the first fearful steps on such a path, of reaching a satisfactory end. What our political life then lacks and what classical political thought can help restore is not a richer conception of the common good, more civic virtue, participation in public affairs or patriotism, but rather a better awareness of the full implications of its reluctance to make definitive claims.