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Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition

LORRAINE SMITH PANGLE *University of Texas at Austin*

This study illuminates Xenophon's teaching about the underlying psychological motives of the most fully developed political ambition. An analysis of what the Cyropaedia *portrays as the interplay among Cyrus's spiritedness, justice, benevolence, piety, and cultivation of an aura of divinity leads to an unveiling of supreme ambition's deepest root: not the desire for power as such, nor the love of justice, but the desire to be a quasi-divine benefactor. The article traces the development of this ambition from its earliest manifestations in the young Cyrus's puppylike spiritedness, through his hope-filled rise to power, to his grim mature rein and his death, showing how a shadowy concern for immortality drives him in ways he is reluctant to see or acknowledge.*

THE PROBLEM OF AMBITION

Contemporary political science is curiously uncurious about political ambition. In assumptions and methods it is better suited to measuring overt behavior than ferreting out hidden motives and obscurely felt hopes, more given to attending to what is widely shared than to what is unusual. When ambition is studied it is chiefly to measure the effects of a drive that remains unanalyzed or to explain its strength in terms of cost-benefit calculations; on the few occasions when political scientists look to personal traits to explain the root causes of ambition, they have focused on the sort of demographic features and "political values" that opinion surveys can capture in everyone.[1] Our political system counts on the existence of ambition to draw talent into public service and on its institutional structure to keep that ambition safely contained. But already in 1834 Abraham Lincoln warned that Americans are poorly prepared to grasp the forces that would impel a "towering genius" to disdain the ordinary trusts of offices already established and to seek honors of a higher and more dangerous order. Describing a member of what he called the "family of the lion" or the "tribe of the eagle," he writes, "Distinction will be his paramount object, and although he would as willingly, perhaps more so, acquire it by doing good as harm; yet, that opportunity being past, and nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down" (Lincoln 1953, 114). Ancient political science was more attentive to this human type. It recognized in it the same restless, boundless, dangerous yearnings as Lincoln did, but it also identified something more unified and even higher than the thirst for fame at the core of these men's ambition. The Socratic student Xenophon, meditating longer than had the young Lincoln on these men's driving passions and observing first-hand such statesmen, future tyrants, and aspiring conquerors as Pericles, Alcibiades, Critias, and Cyrus the Younger, produced in his historical novel about Cyrus the Elder, the *Cyropaedia,* what is arguably the richest ancient study of high political ambition. Whereas Lincoln sketches towering ambition mainly to warn his fellow citizens against its dangers, Xenophon shows how noble such yearnings can be even when the results are oppressive, how the best and most dangerous elements of ambition spring from common roots, and how the same tangled motives that can be seen vividly in a man like Cyrus are at work more obscurely and in more fragmentary form in all political leaders, and even, since we are political animals, to a degree in all of us. Beginning from the extraordinary rather than from the ordinary, the *Cyropaedia* offers a corrective for the defects of vision to which our political science is prone.

In the first chapter of the *Cyropaedia,* Xenophon makes clear that his historical novel is intended to provide a paradigmatic case study that will answer a fundamental political question. At first that question seems to be just the problem of how to achieve stable rule—a task so difficult, as Xenophon presents it, as to make us wonder whether only a god could solve it. Humans so strongly resist control by their fellow humans, he observes, that any ruler is doing well if he can stay in the saddle for any length of time at all. Reflecting on the comparative ease with which humans govern animals, Xenophon says he was at first inclined to the judgment that "it is easier, given his nature, for a human being to rule all the other kinds of animals than to rule human beings" (1.1.3).[2] Human nature seems to be essentially political yet ungovernable, naturally directed neither to republicanism nor to monarchy. "But when we reflected that there was Cyrus, a Persian, who acquired very many people, very many cities, and very many nations, all obedient to himself, we were thus compelled to change our mind to the view that ruling human beings does not belong among those tasks that are impossible, or even among those that are difficult, if one does it with knowledge" (1.1.3).

Lorraine Smith Pangle is Professor of Government, University of Texas at Austin, 158 W. 21st St., Stop A1800, Austin, TX 71712 (lorrainepangle@gmail.com).

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[1] On the former see Ehrenhalt (1991), Rohde (1979), and Schlessinger (1966); on the latter see Fox and Lawless (2005) and Lawless (2012).

[2] All quotations from Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* will be cited in the text by book, chapter, and section number. Translations are based on that of Wayne Ambler with occasional modifications.

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This conclusion is perhaps less of a complete reversal than at first appears, for in the course of the work it at least becomes a question whether Cyrus's rule is a simple case of a human governing other humans. On one hand, Xenophon gives many troubling hints as to the resemblance between Cyrus's reign and the rule of shepherds over sheep: perhaps he reduces his subjects to a condition somewhat less than fully human.[3] On the other hand, Xenophon describes the hold Cyrus had on others as something so extraordinary, so uncanny, that he seems almost to have been divine. He says that Cyrus was willingly obeyed by many who had never seen him and even by many who knew they never would see him, men who were unknown to one another and who had no language in common. "He was able to extend fear of himself to so much of the world that he intimidated all... and he was able to implant in all so great a desire of gratifying him that they always thought it proper to be governed by his judgment" (1.1.5). These hints about Cyrus's uncanny aura of divinity become more explicit as the book proceeds. Cyrus promotes one enthusiastic follower, Artabazus, who begins reporting to everyone that Cyrus is "descended from gods" (4.1.24; cf. 1.2.1 and 7.2.24), and immediately Cyrus' successes seem to everyone to happen "somehow divinely" (4.2.1). He deliberately imitates the gods in his training of his own men (6.2.29). He represents the gods as a judge in putting a king on trial (3.1.6); a defeated enemy all but prays to him as to a god to tell him his fate and to make it a happy one (7.2.25); and he appears to victims of oppression as a divinely sent avenger of injustice, causing them to prostrate themselves in gratitude (7.5.32; cf. Nadon 2001, 45n, 134).

The project of the *Cyropaedia* as promised in this first chapter would seem to be to unveil Cyrus's secrets and thereby teach the ambitious reader how he, too, might come to rule the world. Yet by the end of the chapter Xenophon has already shifted or expanded his question from that of Cyrus's skill to that of his birth, nature, and education (1.1.6). As the work proceeds we are drawn into sustained reflections on what is driving Cyrus, whether he achieves what he hopes for, whether he is happy in the end, and what he really thinks of the strange despotism he ends up establishing. Taking our cue from this early signal of Xenophon's expanded agenda, we begin to see that the whole book is in fact a thought experiment in imagining the character of the man who would be most perfectly suited to seek and attain universal rule, identifying the gifts but also the passions, inclinations, and hopes, however explicit or buried, that would drive such extraordinary ambition, as well as the education that might give it its fullest and most revealing realization.[4] And indeed, only on this reading do either the striking historical inaccuracies or the strange title of the work fully make sense. To be sure, Xenophon's project does include an account of the early education that might best contribute to sharpening a young man's ambition and forming his outlook and character to be perfectly suited for ruling. As a child in Persia Cyrus acquires extraordinary self-control and courage and a love of virtue; as an adolescent in Media he discovers the delights of using that same self-control together with his natural charm to win friends and a devoted following, while glimpsing the attractions of absolute monarchy; returning to Persia in late adolescence he perfects his self-control while learning more deeply the limits of the rule of law. But Xenophon's account of Cyrus's formal education is completed by the end of the first book. If the *Cyropaedia* is indeed a book about education, the most important subject of the next seven books is the education of Cyrus's ambition and hopes through a lifelong, ostensibly successful attempt to satisfy them, and of Xenophon's careful reader through reflecting on what unfolds. This extended education will reveal both the ease with which an expert in human psychology could gain and keep power, and the difficulty or impossibility of satisfying the deepest yearnings that would drive one to pursue that power in the first place.

Nor is this all. The universal scope of Xenophon's opening invites reflection on every kind of rule, not only of like by like but also of lower beings by higher ones. If the deepest theme of the book is the question not of how to rule but of why ambitious men wish to rule and what is implied in that ambition, is this question not appropriately asked of every kind of ruler? If the book is a thought experiment, does it not invite reflection on what the motives of a divine ruler might be, whether or not any in fact exist—and on whether a wise divinity, if such did exist, would choose to rule? And indeed Xenophon explores just these questions, explicitly through the speech of Cyrus's father Cambyses and implicitly through his own portrayal of the man who spent a lifetime imitating providential gods as he conceived them.

With the recent revival of Xenophon studies, commentators have had much to say about his Cyrus's skills, methods, and merits as a ruler, and more recently about the problematic effect of Cyrus's reign and the conclusions we should draw about the possibility of finding a true common good in politics.[5] Much less has been written on Cyrus' own soul and his unfolding desires and yearnings. The two most notable exceptions are Faulkner (2007) and Bartlett (2015). Faulkner interprets Cyrus, much as Lincoln does the man of towering ambition, as one whose core motivation is his own rather hazily defined advantage but who would prefer to achieve it through moral means if possible. Bartlett identifies Cyrus's core motivation as a concern with justice.[6] I will argue that Cyrus's deepest wishes are

[3] For an elaboration of this thought see Newell (1983, 892) and Whidden (2008).

[4] Of course to call Xenophon's Cyrus perfectly suited to rule is by no means to agree with such commentators as Due (1989), Grant (1871, 124), and Miller (1914, xii) that Cyrus is an ideal prince either in the perfection of his character or the salutary effects of his rule.

[5] See especially Field (2012), Nadon (1996; 2001), and Newell (1983; 2013).

[6] Both persuasively argue against the "Machiavellian" interpretation of Cyrus as an armed prophet whose sole goals were power and glory for himself and whose piety, like his talk about virtue, was a fraud. Machiavelli himself applies this reading to the historical or

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neither so thoroughly selfish nor so principled as these two readers respectively suggest, and that what most deeply animates Cyrus is rather a driving wish to be a benefactor in a way that rivals the gods. In defending this thesis, I will look more closely than commentators have hitherto done at Cyrus's own unstudied words and actions in childhood and his own most passionate expressions of his desires as an adult, at the connections Xenophon draws between Cyrus's spiritedness and his godlike aspirations, at the insights and techniques by which Cyrus succeeds in appearing godlike and inspiring a piety that attaches both to the gods and to himself, and at the clues Xenophon provides about what is at work in Cyrus's own piety. Finally, I will examine the contrasting ways the gods are conceived by individuals Cyrus converses with, the parallels between these conceptions of the gods and different human types, including the key type represented by Cyrus himself, and the theoretical implications of these connections. By addressing these important but understudied themes in Xenophon scholarship, I hope to shed fresh light on the generally neglected phenomenon of supreme political ambition.

THE ROOTS OF AMBITION

In one of the *Cyropaedia's* many paradoxical twists, when Xenophon begins to tell the story of the boy who would grow into such a godlike ruler, what he presents as setting the young Cyrus apart are two characteristics that show his kinship with the subhuman rather than the superhuman. Young Cyrus, like a well-bred puppy, showers his friends with eager affection, and like a well-bred puppy, he also loves to hunt and kill (1.4.4, 15, 21; cf. Plato *Republic* 375a–6c). Thus Xenophon suggests that to have such success at winning and holding men's loyalties, one would need an extraordinary attachment to one's own together with a keen taste for a good fight: two aspects of the phenomenon that the ancients called spiritedness or thumos. Without a keen desire to be a benefactor, Xenophon suggests, one could be at best an Agathocles or a Hiero, but never a Romulus or a Cyrus. Without a willingness and even eagerness to kill one's enemies, one could yearn for empire, but one would not have the stomach to attain or keep it. Lacking both, one might still be as wise and as good at ruling as Xenophon himself is in his self-portrayal in the *Anabasis*, but one would not be ambitious enough to bend every effort to acquiring power. Xenophon's comparison of the young Cyrus to a puppy continues the device of animal comparisons that begins in the first chapter and runs throughout the *Cyropaedia*. Cyrus comes to understand extraordinarily well the passions and vulnerabilities men share with animals and uses them to great effect to gain and hold power (2.1.28–9; 2.4.22 and 25; 7.5.62; 8.2.4; 8.6.12 and 17; cf. 8.2.14).[7] But how do these forces work in his own soul, and how are they connected to his own aspirations?

Cyrus is educated until the age of 12 in his native Persia, recast by Xenophon as an improved Sparta, but he emerges in the story as an individual only when he arrives for an extended visit at the Median court of his grandfather Astyages. The first action that Xenophon narrates shows Cyrus's affectionate nature, as he spontaneously embraces Astyages on first meeting him (3.1.2). The second shows his generosity and gratitude, as he distributes meat to the courtiers, returning their favors to him and his mother. The third shows again his affection and also his fierce desire to enjoy the return of that affection, as he becomes the rival of Sakas the cup bearer who controls access to Astyages. Cyrus' attachments start with love of his own but rapidly expand into a project of winning over courtiers, boys, and the boys' families to be his adherents as well. This urge to win a following seems as innate as it is insatiable throughout Cyrus's life. And already in his first days in Media Cyrus discovers his signature means for satisfying it: his naturally moderate tastes, reinforced by his austere Persian upbringing, allow him to give away goods and to abstain from ordinary pleasures, using his ability to resist these as currency to win the loyalty, trust, honor, and love he craves much more.

In all of this we may distinguish several strands of passions and inclinations. First, emerging clearly in childhood are the simple, uncalculating, puppylike qualities of a social animal: friendliness, ready affection, a love of one's own, and an eagerness to please, to be loved, and to be praised. Then, in adolescence, a uniquely human concern for dignity emerges to restrain and ultimately redirect these impulses. Already in childhood and increasingly thereafter we see the possessive and protective spirit of thumos taking an unusually active and expansive form in Cyrus's desire to win new followers. The wish to be a strong superior who is capable of benefitting his followers and to be honored and loved as such will come to be Cyrus's ruling passion. As a boy he yearns to become a good ally to his grandfather (1.3.15; cf. 1.4.25 and 28). In his first speech to the peers he extolls those who benefit their cities (1.5.7–10). In his parting conversation with Cambyses he discusses at length the means to win loyal gratitude from his subordinates (1.6.10, 22, and 24). In trying and forgiving the Armenian King he expresses his hunger for willing and grateful allies (3.1.28 and 34;

Herodotean Cyrus more than to Xenophon's (e.g., Prince, chapter 6), but this approach has been adopted by Tatum, who presents Xenophon's Cyrus as "ruthlessly self-serving" (1989, 98), and taken even further by Reisert, who identifies Cyrus's goal as "a kind of total mastery" that reaches its fulfillment not even in honor but only in the "total annihilation of independence of those . . . whom he dominates" (2009, 301). Rubin (1989) likewise reads Cyrus as a figure who cynically manipulates everyone's eros and other passions for narrowly self-serving ends. Nadon (2001) repeatedly raises the question whether there is anything behind Cyrus's seeming generosity and benevolence except self-interest, but he never seriously explores the possibility that there is. This line of interpretation cannot be absolutely ruled out, since it is virtually impossible to prove that any real or fictional individual's expressions of generosity, moral concerns, or piety are not feigned. The most serious reason to reject it is that it would render pointless all of Xenophon's extremely subtle suggestions about Cyrus's complex motives and his rich Socratic presentation of the way human beings' noblest concerns are tangled up with self-interest and shot through with ambivalences.

[7] What Cyrus understands much less well is the way human love goes beyond that of animals: see 8.4.20 and Whidden (2007, 550–1).

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3.3.3). In response to Gobryas's generosity he explains what it is he most cherishes and understands his best followers to envy in him: his ability to prove his merit in benefitting others (5.2.8–12; see also 4.2.12; 4.3.3; 5.1.1, 19, and 29; 5.3.19; 5.4.32; 8.2.13 and 20–2; 8.4.5, 8, and 9).

Xenophon's second and third ascriptions of puppylike qualities to Cyrus bring out the darker side of his spiritedness: his love of killing. The second comes when Cyrus is finally allowed to bring his friends out beyond the palace park to a hunt in the wild. Astyages, accustomed to a ceremonial style of hunt befitting the oriental despot that he is, forbids everyone else to shoot until Cyrus has had his fill, but Cyrus begs him to allow all the boys to compete freely. "Cyrus . . . owing to his own pleasure, was not able to keep silent. Rather, like a well-bred puppy, crying out whenever he approached a wild animal, he called everyone on by name. And he . . . [would] laugh at one, while . . . praising another, not being envious in any way whatsoever" (1.4.15). It is the best part of Cyrus's generous nature that he loves to provide opportunities for others, to instigate competitions, and to reward those who prove themselves best (cf. 2.3.19, 4.4.3).

In Xenophon's third comparison of Cyrus to a young dog, the love of killing reaches its crescendo as the seventeen-year-old Cyrus with his extreme daring transforms a perfunctory skirmish into a rout of the marauding Assyrians. "Just as a well-bred but inexperienced dog rushes without forethought against a boar, so also rushed Cyrus, seeing only that he struck whomever he caught, with forethought for nothing else" (1.4.21; cf. 1.4.8). Eventually this fierceness will be focused on avenging injustices, but its root, like the root of Cyrus's benevolence, is more visceral and unreflective. This pleasure arises equally in killing noble animals and ignoble human beings (cf. 1.4.11 and 19). To triumph over whatever resists or whatever flees is for Cyrus a pleasure so intoxicating that Xenophon twice refers to his blood-lust as mad (1.4.8 and 24).

With this depiction of the highest ambition's childhood roots, Xenophon helps us see how Cyrus's generous affectionateness and fierceness are both expressions of the same spirit of thumos, just as they are in the guardians of Plato's *Republic*. We tend to think of thumos as merely a reactive force, but as Aristotle says in commenting on Plato's guardians, thumos is also "the power of the soul by which we love" (*Politics* 1327b41–28a1). Xenophon is not suggesting that all ambition involves Cyrus's expansive desire to be widely loved as a benefactor; perhaps such characters as the younger Assyrian king have only or chiefly a harsh wish to dominate. But he does suggest that men like the Assyrian are neither the most interesting cases, nor the healthiest, if thumos's natural function is a protective one, nor the type best suited to take over the world. Political passions seem to burn most intensely among those who genuinely want to become great benefactors and be loved and revered for doing so.[8] At the same time, Xenophon's depiction of the young Cyrus's puppylike affections prompts us to wonder how much of even the most impressive human benevolence has its roots in the deeper neediness of social animals who are not self-sufficient. Xenophon depicts the first manifestations of Cyrus's generous affection as the spontaneous expression of pleasure and self-confidence rather than of any felt need for a hedge against scarcity or for allies against threats. It is the wants of others and not his own that Cyrus always seems keenest to address. Yet might this very eagerness to defend others not betoken at least an incipient awareness of their shared vulnerabilities? Indeed, might not Cyrus' alacrity in helping and defending his followers be all the more eager inasmuch as addressing their vulnerabilities allows him to forget his own? But what is he himself hungry for as he goes about trying to satisfy the hunger of everyone else?

Clearly Cyrus does want things for himself, even if most ordinary pleasures and possessions leave him cold. He definitely craves love, gratitude, and admiration, but does he want each just for itself or also for something further? One indication that what Cyrus seeks most fundamentally is not quite love as such, at least in the form most people desire it, comes in his bemused and ultimately cold response to the erotic love of Artabazus (1.4.27–8; cf. 7.5.48–55; 8.4.27).[9] Yet even as Cyrus laughs at Artabazus, he is moved to tears by the sorrow of the crowd that escorts him home at the end of his first sojourn in Media. So perhaps it is winning the love of as many people as possible that most moves Cyrus. Or is it honor? But again, what he craves is not quite honor as such: he wants to be admired for his real excellence and not his royal lineage; he willingly laughs at himself for accomplishments he lacks (1.4.4). What, then, does he most want? At one level it seems it is simply to fill the whole world with his name and impressive deeds.

Human spiritedness, as Cyrus so beautifully illustrates, has a clear animal core in its impulse to protect oneself and one's own and to prevail over rivals, and a boundless, inchoate periphery. In the end, no number of subjects or amount of space will prove big enough for Cyrus: as the boy Cyrus soon outgrows Astyages's park full of tame animals and wants to hunt in the wilds, so the man is soon dissatisfied by small defensive wars and ultimately finds that Assyria itself and indeed the whole earth can scarcely satisfy him. He is exasperated in coming up against unworthy opponents and delighted to crush them; he takes pleasure in contending against noble opponents and in killing noble animals; yet he is dismayed to find himself crushing noble human beings (7.1.40–4). Where is all this going? Spiritedness restlessly intuits that it must be in the service to some goal, even as it resists being in the service to anything. Can the love of justice give it satisfactory direction and order?

[8] Consider Xenophon's *Hiero* (1954), in which the tyrant's desire to love and be loved by all his subjects and his enthusiasm for rule are both present but weaker than Cyrus's.

[9] Cf. *Hiero* 1.27–38 and 8.1. As Newell observes (2013, 207), Cyrus's coldness to the love of individuals is not incompatible with and may even contribute to his "universal and demotic love of all men."

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CYRUS'S JUSTICE

Eventually the spirited roots of Cyrus's ambition will indeed produce a complex plant with a strong moral component, but it is not a passion to make the world more just that drives his ambition from the start. The young Cyrus certainly is eager to show his gratitude for personal favors, but this impulse seems to arise more from a spontaneous sociability and desire to please than from any keen desire to see all individuals get what they deserve. Indeed, at the outset Cyrus is strikingly easygoing about justice. When his mother hesitates to allow him to extend his stay in Media, fearing that he will not learn justice there while his teachers are in Persia, Cyrus replies that he knows justice accurately already and tells the story of how he learned it. Once he was assigned to judge disputes among the boys, and he had to consider the case of a big boy with a small tunic who had taken the big tunic of a small boy and had given him his own. Cyrus says that he judged in favor of the big boy, for he "recognized that it was better for both that each have the fitting tunic." But the teacher beat him for this crooked judgment, saying, Cyrus reports, that "whenever I should be appointed judge of the fitting, I must do as I did," but that when the question was one of just possession, one must follow the law, for "the lawful is just, and the unlawful violent."[10] Cyrus not only proclaims himself fully versed in this lesson and in the Persian principle that "the equal is the just," but he assures his mother that while in Media he is also ready to acquiesce in Median justice, whereby the King makes himself "master of everything," and hence (far from teaching him to aspire to tyranny) will prevent him from becoming greedy (1.3.16–8).

What should we make of this story? Cyrus's mind is as supple as a sophist's but his soul is still that of a boy scout, ready to be good in all the ways his elders expect of him. His own inclination is to equate justice not with the equal and certainly not with the will of the stronger but with giving to each what is fitting. Yet he is as yet not particularly troubled by the gap he finds in the world between the fitting and what in each place the laws demand. Still less is he troubled by the question of what exactly the proper standard of the fitting is, let alone by Glaucon's question in Plato's *Republic* of why justice is good at all. And might not precisely this combination of mental adroitness, benevolent, meritocratic inclinations, and uninquiring, sunny decency be the perfect material for the most successfully ambitious leader? If deeply troubled by the *question* of what justice is, Cyrus would be too skeptical and detached from politics in his attempt to understand it; if deeply troubled by the *problem* of justice, or of the world's evident injustice, he might well be too moralistic, vindictive, and rigid—or, alternatively, too cynical—to inspire a great following and to rule most effectively. Indeed, for all his spiritedness, Cyrus throughout Xenophon's story is remarkably free of moral indignation[11]—further confirmation that what most fundamentally fuels his ambition is not a passion for justice but a more elemental affection, a desire to please and benefit his own, a desire indeed to please and benefit as many as possible, thereby making them his own, and a fierceness in defending himself and all of these against all threats.

Eventually, to be sure, Cyrus becomes quite attached to the thought that he deserves friends for the benefits he confers, that friends who are good deserve benefits, and that enemies, especially those who are bad (or are all enemies bad?) deserve harm. This thought becomes explicit in Cyrus's first battle when he catches sight of the enemy troops ravaging the Medians' land: "'By Zeus, Grandfather,' he said, 'these seem to be worthless men mounted on worthless horses who are plundering our property; isn't it necessary, then, for some of us to drive them off?'" (1.4.19). Yet the close parallels in Xenophon's depictions of Cyrus's behavior on the hunt and in his first battle, including his eagerness to engage, the qualities of both a noble dog and of mad daring that Xenophon attributes to Cyrus in the fray itself, and his reports of Cyrus's unsettling pleasure in gazing on the dead animals and dead men afterwards, all bespeak Xenophon's judgment that the deepest root of such a man's hostility to inferior rivals is not a passion for justice but something less reflective and more elemental that spirited human beings share with spirited animals. Not a universal wish to see the world made more fair, but a personal indignation at the idea of being bested or eclipsed by others and especially by ones who are unworthy, is the form that Cyrus's nascent concern for justice takes (1.5.11, 1.6.8).

Ultimately an enthusiasm for distributive justice will indeed become an explicit and central part of Cyrus's rule, as he transforms the army of a sleepy, hide-bound Persian oligarchy into a meritocracy, assuming for himself the central, godlike role of dispensing rewards and punishments. Yet deep tensions persist in the way he conceives of virtue in general and justice in particular—tensions that surely reflect his limited interest in theoretical questions but perhaps also are essential components of the greatest ambition.

First, as Bartlett (2015, 146–8) observes, Cyrus is ambivalent on whether virtue is fundamentally means or end. His first speech to the peers in 1.5 is his boldest argument for a utilitarian view of virtue, but even here he does not simply reduce virtue to a means. Sensible people, he insists, practice virtue so that they may get some good out of it for themselves—*or* for their countries: Cyrus admires not just shrewd self-aggrandizers but benefactors. Anyone who cultivates virtue and gains nothing, he says, is as foolish as a farmer who never gathers his harvest—*or* a fine athlete who never competes and wins the prize: in the second case unrewarded virtue is not pointless but merely incomplete. Here and

[10] For a subtle interpretation of what this principle does and does not imply, see Danzig (2009).

[11] The one clear exception comes in the trial of the Armenian King, and it is very personal: Cyrus is indignant towards the king who has broken his oaths to his uncle, so that he temporarily loses sight of his own interest and purpose (3.1.11–26; cf. 2.4.14).

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throughout the story Cyrus is given to holding up both virtue and its reward as the proper aim of life, while striving to ensure that there be no unrewarded virtue and hence no reason to ask which really matters more. It is no small part of his success that he manages to suppress the very question.

Second, and closely related, Cyrus is chronically imprecise on what the standard is of the merit that he seeks to reward. Is it Cyrus's goal to give to each what he most needs? What each deserves on the basis of intrinsic merit, like a music director giving the best instrument to the best performer? Or what each deserves as a reward for his service, and if so, for his service to the common good or for his personal service and loyalty to Cyrus? For a time Cyrus almost succeeds in making these standards seem identical, and his deft inventor Xenophon cheerfully plays along. Only very late does Xenophon reveal the reason for the special honor Cyrus has given from the beginning to Chrysantas: his outstanding personal loyalty to Cyrus (8.4.9–12). But already in the trial of the Armenian king in 3.1 we see Cyrus's tendency to conflate what is just with what is good for him, and already in his treatment of the disobedient Cadusians in 5.4 we see his inclination to equate disobedience with folly.[12] For Cyrus the "fitting" is a standard that he must keep ambiguous in his followers' minds if he is to work his magic upon them. He must keep it equally ambiguous in his own mind, however, if he is to be the inspiring dynamo of hope and moral purpose that he is, for only then can his ambition derive the greatest possible energy from self-interest, benevolence, and high moral purpose all at once.

Third and also closely related is the ambiguity in Cyrus's own reasons for wanting to reward merit. There are three distinct ways we might understand the grounds of this desire, each of which we hear echoed in statements Cyrus makes. First, insofar as "merit" consists in nothing but the skills and habits that are necessary but not sufficient for the success of any enterprise, Cyrus might regard rewarding it as simply prudent management, and he is indeed confident that just such consistency in rewarding merit is his own best policy. Nature does not reliably reward good behavior and neither do badly run enterprises, but Cyrus, in dispensing rewards more wisely, will elicit everyone's best efforts for everyone's benefit (e.g., 2.1.20–4, 2.2.20, and 27; 5.3.32). Alternatively, Cyrus might think of merit as something that always sooner or later *is* rewarded, and accordingly could think of his own activity as chiefly educational. By offering his followers praise and promotions in the short term, he encourages them to develop more fully the habits that are bound to make them happy in the long term (e.g., 2.3.4). Yet Cyrus's enterprise is an army, not a firm, and in armies soldiers suffer and die. Finally, then, insofar as merit consists especially in the willingness to incur terrible costs, Cyrus might view his own activity of rewarding merit as essentially moral, a practice of ensuring that the noblest men are rewarded with the honor if not the happiness that nature by no means reliably confers on those who deserve it, but should. And at times he takes this position too (e.g., 2.2.24–5; 3.1.15; 6.3.16; 7.2.6 and 11).

Cyrus's justice as a rewarder of merit seems to consist in prudent self-interest, educational benevolence, and noble devotion to principle all at once, and again, it seems essential to his supreme ambition that Cyrus never clearly disentangles these strands in his thinking. His confidence that he has learned the key to success in the world inspires him; his sunny belief that virtue will be rewarded and his delight in teaching this lesson energize him and inspire his followers; his belief that the world needs him to defend the innocent and punish the wicked helps fuel his high sense of mission. And what does he think about his own need for justice? If the world is not already just, does he need a divine protector to bring him happiness in this life, or to crown his virtue with an eternal happiness that he could never secure for himself? It is striking, however, how silent Cyrus is on the whole question of death and the afterlife until the very end of his life. He never calls on his followers to face death bravely; he is never shown holding funerals for those who die in battle except when he is making an object lesson of the reckless Cadusians (5.4); he is utterly unprepared for the death of his brave follower Abradatus and has nothing to say to comfort the widow Panthea; he does nothing to educate his sons or to prepare for an orderly succession. All his life he seems to forget and to encourage everyone to forget what lies beyond the stage upon which he is playing such a gratifying, godlike role. Might Cyrus's energetic pursuit of justice be driven in part by an obscure hope that by *making* the world one in which virtue is rewarded, he will also somehow secure his happiness for his lifetime and even beyond?

CYRUS'S PIETY

What does Cyrus believe about the gods, then? To what extent is he devoted to them in a spirit of godliness, to what extent is he hopeful for their help, and to what extent is he trying to supplant them in becoming godlike himself? Once again he seeks to evade hard choices as he wraps himself in both piety and godlikeness. Let us try to disentangle the threads. In many ways Cyrus evinces an almost traditional piety. His education regarding the gods as Xenophon presents it has three strands: the standard education of a Persian peer and two extended conversation with his father Cambyses (1.6) and with Croesus (7.1), in each of which he listens silently to important theological claims advanced by his interlocutor. Piety in Old Persia is rather unconventional as piety goes, consisting as it does in a tranquil trust and reverence for gods who nonetheless play little part in human life. The whole account of Persian education in 1.2 includes no discussion of sacrifices or prayers. Evidently the Persians are schooled in such self-reliance that at least in peacetime they feel scant need of the gods, and their lean, hardy republic neither instigates nor invites war (cf. 3.3.58). Yet the

[12] On Cyrus's tendency to identify virtue with loyalty to him, see Bruell (1987, 100). For a full account of what Cyrus learns through the trial, see Pangle (2015).

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Persians are also schooled in gratitude, for "they think that those who are ungrateful would be especially uncaring also about gods, as well as about parents, fatherland, and friends; and shamelessness seems to follow upon ingratitude, and it seems in turn to be the greatest leader to everything shameful" (1.2.7). If we may doubt whether punishing ingratitude is a sure path to instilling true gratitude, we may at least concede that this method is likely to curb insolence. In the youthful Cyrus, however, we see the intended result in full bloom: an attractive combination of dignified self-reliance and generosity with a readiness to give thanks and credit wherever they are due. Not fervent devotion but self-control and collective self-reliance, purged of arrogance and graced by a frank acknowledgement of indebtedness to ancestral gods, parents, and friends, seems to be the foundation for the best republican life and for producing some of the most impressive human beings—including the human being best equipped to subvert that life.

Cambyses' parting advice as he accompanies Cyrus to the frontier at the start of his campaign is all about resourcefulness and self-sufficiency vis-à-vis allies, subjects, enemies, and even the gods. Prudence and piety both require that one refrain from asking the gods for anything, including knowledge, that one can secure oneself through intelligent effort. Thus piety itself demands that a military commander know how to take his own auspices so as to avoid dependency on unreliable priests, and that he make himself the absolute master of his art and his resources.[13] Cyrus's tone throughout this conversation is one of frankness, trust, and eagerness to absorb any useful advice that Cambyses may have for him before setting off to face formidable enemies. His own expressions of piety here are striking both for their overall conformity to the education he has received and their uniquely Cyrean flavor.

> I remember hearing you say once that he who did not flatter the gods when he was at a loss, but rather remembered them especially when he was faring very well, would probably be more effective in action with gods, just as also with human beings. And regarding friends, you said that it was useful to take care the same way . . . . I am disposed to the gods as though they were my friends. (1.6.3–4)

But Cambyses, who himself quietly questions Cyrus's preference of an active over a contemplative life (1.6.7) and who echoes many of the sober reflections that Socrates offers to ambitious young Athenians in *Memorabilia* 3.1–7, does not stop at urging Cyrus to hone his own prudence and husband his own resources before seeking aid from the gods. This wisest figure to appear in the *Cyropaedia* closes his parting advice with the striking warning that the gods, though they know all things, may or may not reveal what they know to those who ask, "for the gods are under no compulsion to care for those whom they do not wish to" (1.6.46). Wise gods may well not be ruling gods at all.[14] To these reflections, the fiery Cyrus listens in silence.

The second extended conversation Cyrus has about the gods is with the defeated King Croesus of Lydia. In contrast to Cambyses, Croesus presents the gods as active benefactors to good men and avengers of evil, and in accord with traditional Greek piety, his gods speak to all who inquire of them through he Delphic Oracle. Yet Croesus seems to have discovered a sharp limit to the gods' goodwill towards human autonomy and especially towards the attempt to establish independent knowledge of the highest things. Croesus relates how he once tested all the divine oracles to see which, if any, was reliable before asking about his own future and how he might best succeed. Only Apollo's Delphic Oracle passed the test, but at the cost of offending the god. As Croesus ruefully acknowledges, "Even when noble and good human beings, not to mention gods, realize they are distrusted, they are not friendly toward those who distrust them" (7.2.17). To punish his hubris, Croesus relates, Apollo lured him to his downfall with misleading prophecies.

Thus far Xenophon's account of Croesus' story follows Herodotus's, but there is a curious difference in the nature of the prophecy that Apollo uses to beguile Croesus. According to Herodotus, Croesus asks the oracle whether he should attack the kingdom of Assyria and it replies that if he does he will bring down a great kingdom—not revealing that that kingdom will be his own (*Histories* 1.46–53). According to Xenophon, the oracle answers Croesus' question, "What must I do to be happy?" with a dictum as Socratic as it is Delphic: "Know thyself" (7.2.20). Believing it the easiest of all things to know who he is, Croesus considers his happiness assured. His defeat teaches him that one does not, after all, know oneself until one understands one's abilities and limits. Socrates would surely add that one still does not know oneself until one knows one's needs and where one stands with respect to the highest beings. Yet according to Plato, Socrates' quest for knowledge brought him, too, to test the Delphic Oracle with the cross-examinations that ultimately led to his execution for impiety. For both Croesus and Socrates, it seems, the god himself demands that humans engage in a quest for knowledge that unavoidably draws us into a questioning that "Apollo" can only condemn as hubristic. Cyrus listens without comment to Croesus's story as he did to Cambyses' warning, but he resembles Croesus' gods in his craving for trust and deference. In the alternate theologies of Cambyses and Croesus, Xenophon outlines two possible directions divine intelligence might take, and in the lives of Cambyses and Cyrus, their human analogues.

Cyrus manages to avoid Croesus' hubris, however, even as he applies Cambyses' sober Persian lessons about self-sufficiency. He sacrifices before every

[13] For a well-balanced assessment of the problem of augury and the status of Cyrus's piety in the *Cyropaedia*, see Bartlett (2015, 148).

[14] A ruler must address everyone, if only through promulgating and enforcing laws. By contrast, "Socrates . . . whose specific function is "speaking" or discussing, does not engage in discussion except with those with whom he likes to converse. The wise man alone is free" (Strauss 2013, 84; see also 197–204).

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campaign and every battle, proceeds only when the auspices are favorable, and rejoices at good omens (e.g., 2.4.18–20). Indeed, so assiduous is Cyrus in courting the gods' favor that he prays and sacrifices not only to his own ancestral gods and heroes but to those of other lands he enters. Just as he welcomes horses and humans of every provenance into his entourage (2.2.26), so he welcomes all gods, and as he seeks to build a universal empire it is the god most universally worshipped, the sun, that he turns especially to honoring (2.1.1; 3.3.21–2; 8.3.11; 8.7.3). Repeatedly Cyrus also acknowledges the gods' help when speaking of his own successes. But his characteristic phrase, "with the gods" (e.g., 4.6.8; 5.3.19; 5.5.19) is ambiguous. Is it as superiors or as allies that he is thanking them? Perhaps it is only as auxiliaries: on entering Chaldaea he tells his men that the omens are favorable but that "nothing is so strong an ally to human zeal as dispatch" (3.2.4). And while Cyrus gladly enlists the gods' support in efforts in which he has made every possible preparation for success, we never see him praying for the dead, whom it is beyond his power to help. The unusual twists Cyrus puts on traditional Persian piety, especially his penchant for regarding gods as friends and seeking promiscuously to win all gods to his side, in fact lend credence to the genuineness of his certainly unconventional piety. Of course this genuineness cannot be proven, but neither is there reason to think that this unphilosophical young Persian who has never encountered an atheist would have reason to doubt the gods' existence, and his complicated views on morality suggest deep hopes that would make his childhood piety difficult to give up.

More clues about Cyrus' piety come in scattered comments to his men, which taken together reveal that his views on divine providence contain just the same ambiguities as do his views on justice. At times he speaks as if the gods have simply set things up so that the virtuous ultimately prosper and the vicious meet with defeat and misery (e.g., 2.3.4; 7.5.73). At other times he suggests that the gods put happiness within reach of the virtuous but that they must still take the initiative in seizing it (see 4.1.10; 5.1.23; and especially 1.5.8–9). At yet other times he presents the gods as his allies in effecting a just distribution of goods that is by no means assured without their special providence, nor is that providence simply to be counted upon, as when he says, "Let there be gratitude to the gods because they granted that we obtain what we believed we deserved" (7.5.72).

So much does Cyrus seem to believe in the importance of his own vigorous efforts to defend justice that we may wonder if there is not a certain glibness to these expressions of gratitude. Very different in tone, however, are the spontaneous prayers and declarations punctuated by oaths that he occasionally offers. And yet, remarkably, these appeals to the gods are even further from being requests for just rewards that he cannot secure for himself. These are the moments when Cyrus voices his noblest, most self-denying hopes, as when the Medes' vote of confidence in his leadership prompt him to pray, "O greatest Zeus, I ask you to grant that I surpass in doing good the honor they now show me" (5.1.29; cf. 3.1.28 and 34; 4.2.12; 5.2.8–10; 5.4.32; 5.5.35; 8.4.8 and 9). Does Cyrus need divine help in nothing else than in being noble? Or is there beneath and fueling these noble sentiments a deeper yearning that flows in a different direction, a yearning that precisely cannot surface without marring his hopes?

CYRUS'S IMITATION OF THE GODS

Be this as it may, these noble professions certainly contribute to making Cyrus seem divine to his followers. But they are only one part of what gives him his uncanny hold on people. He imitates the gods and wins devotion also through his masterful skill in inspiring fear, admiration, gratitude, and guilt, and in satisfying the yearning for vengeance.

Fear is the most rudimentary and essential of the passions Cyrus deploys as a ruler, and he wields it through shrewdness, military skill, and great but never reckless daring. In his first campaign as general he reduces the Armenian king to abject submission through a combination of such lightning strikes and shrewd reconnaissance that he seems to appear out of nowhere, to be everywhere at once, and to know the king's purposes almost before the king has formed them himself. Yet what seems uncanny to the king is nothing but the stealth, dispatch, and forethought the young Cyrus perfected while hunting animals (1.6.28–9 and 39–40; 2.4.22 and 25). Must one not be a predator who knows well the ways of his prey, partly through understanding the needs and passions he shares with it, to be good at this?[15]

For his intelligent forethought as for his other virtues, Cyrus wins admiration, a further source of his astonishing power. As a young man he seeks admiration for genuine virtues and does so with an admirable freedom from envy. Even as a boy he is confident enough to compete most energetically in the pursuits that he does not yet excel in, such as horsemanship. His outstanding courage already in adolescence makes Cyaxares say "you are our king" (1.4.9); his extraordinary continence impresses everyone and is the one point on which Cyrus boasts even super-human strength (6.1.36).

Admiration without affection can spark bitter rivalry, but Cyrus proves a master at winning another source of quasi-divine power that complements it perfectly: his followers' grateful love. The satisfaction of winning appreciative protégés is something that Cyrus quickly discovers living among the pleasure-loving and politically powerless subjects of the Oriental despot Astyages. He is unable to enjoy it among the lean and hardy Persians: when he returns there from Media, the virtues that won him affectionate friends in Media only seem to leave his Persian age-mates "intimidated" (1.5.1). But wartime provides such opportunities in abundance. As Cyrus observes even before taking command of his army, people are most grateful for what they have not already been promised and do not already claim as their own (1.6.11).

[15] Xenophon charmingly imitates his subject by relegating Cyrus's use of fear to light hints (e.g., 5.4.51), which Newell draws out of the shadows (1983, especially 904).

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What Cyrus soon learns in addition is that the deepest gratitude is felt not by the strong, confident, and self-sufficient, but by the most vulnerable. A ruler ambitious for love and gratitude needs followers hungry for protection and even forgiveness. Cyrus comes to understand the full power of guilt and the opportunity it affords him early in his campaign at the trial of Cyaxares' unfaithful subject the Armenian king. The trial has from the start a confessional quality. Surrounding the King's army and forcing him to submit to him as a judge with divine authority (3.1.6), Cyrus invites the whole court to watch and convicts the Armenian on the basis of his own words. While the Armenian is easy to capture and subdue, however, Cyrus is dissatisfied by a rule that rests only on fear.

> By the gods . . . I think that I would be displeased to make use of such servants as I knew to be serving out of necessity. Yet as for those of whom I should think I know that they contribute what they must out of goodwill and friendship for me, these I think I would endure more easily when they do wrong than those who hate me but labor greatly at all things out of necessity. (3.1.28)

But prince Tigranes persuades him that no one will feel deeper gratitude than one who knows he is undeserving and finds unexpected forgiveness. Cyrus needs no further instruction to become the most gracious of sovereigns; his generous clemency soon brings the Armenian to fall in wonder at his feet.

Even more important in winning Cyrus an awed reverence and quasi-divine power is his constant readiness to avenge injustices, as he does for the oppressed and bitter Gobryas and Gadatus. The new king of Assyria is the mortal enemy of both, having castrated Gadatus and killed Gobryas's only son out of envy. Both of these men show dramatically the intense, irrational core of spirited anger: they are willing to do anything for Cyrus if only he will give them the revenge that their crushed sense of dignity craves (4.6.2 and 7; 5.3.18 and 4.35). Their misery gives Cyrus the opportunity to prove his justice, to destroy his arch-rival, and to win two devoted adherents.

In championing the oppressed, Cyrus elicits and strengthens a piety that extends both to the gods and to himself, both strands of which in fact strengthen his hold on his followers. After Cyrus appears suddenly and almost miraculously to rescue him from a revolt by his own men, Gadatus says,

> I, by the gods . . . was coming in order to contemplate you again, how you appear in sight, who have such a soul. You need from me now I know not what, nor did you promise me that you would do these things, nor have you experienced at my hands anything good, at least for yourself personally. But because I seemed to you to benefit your friends a bit, you helped me so enthusiastically that—although on my own I would be done for—I have been saved, thanks to you. (5.4.11)

Later Gadatus brings Cyrus a gift of gratitude and again invokes the gods and weeps, protesting his innocence of any wrong to justify the terrible harms he has suffered (5.4.31). The more bitter and less hopeful Gobryas never mentions the gods when he tells his story and he sheds no tears (4.6.7). But when Cyrus unexpectedly becomes his savior as well as Gadatus's, they both prostrate themselves, first to the gods and then to Cyrus, the man who defends the innocent and vindicates justice itself, and both shed tears of joy.[16]

Under his empire Cyrus reinforces his rule with a new demand for piety in his subjects, which was as little needed in his hopeful, meritocratic, expanding army as in old Persia, but which is most helpful now in keeping subjects faithful. "He believed that the good ruler was a seeing law for human beings, because he is sufficient to put into order, to see who is out of order, and to punish. So being of such a judgment, he first of all displayed himself laboring more over things concerning the gods at this very time, when he was happiest" (8.1.22–3). Evidently, then, Cyrus surmises that he will be viewed more as an all-seeing presence the more the gods are viewed that way. But perhaps piety would have quickly grown again even without any effort from Cyrus. For under despotism people have none of the proud self-sufficiency of the early Persians and much need of comfort for their hard lot.

On his deathbed Cyrus reaffirms his belief in the trust-demanding, justice-enforcing gods of Croesus, praying,

> Ancestral Zeus, Sun, and all gods, accept these gifts for the completion of many noble actions and these gifts of gratitude because you gave signs to me in sacrificial victims, in heavenly signs, in birds, and in omens, both as to what I must do and what I must not. Let my gratitude to you be great because I knew your care and never began to think thoughts higher than a human being should over my good fortune. (8.7.3)

Yet he also reaffirms his resemblance to such gods. He exults that "I beheld my friends becoming happy because of me, and my enemies enslaved by me" (8.7.8), and threatens punishment from beyond the grave if his sons fail to carry out his will. And in his last words Cyrus confirms that what has most pleased him in life is being just such a benefactor and avenger: "remember this last thing from me, that by benefiting your friends, you will be able to punish your enemies" (8.7.28). Godlikeness as Cyrus sees it and human spiritedness have much in common.

THE LIMITS OF BENEVOLENCE

If Cyrus is a great benefactor to Gobryas and Gadatus, however, it is only in such extreme and extremely unfortunate cases that he is able to give others what they most desire. And even then he cannot give them what he himself cherishes most: the opportunity to show one's nobility that comes only to those entrusted with great power (5.2.9). Cyrus cannot give this away because, like the jealous gods of Croesus' account, he

[16] As in the *Iliad*, so here in the *Cyropaedia* it is human anger that sets in motion the events that humans experience as divine interventions.

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wants supreme authority and trust all for himself. Thus, with allies who feel less unworthy than the Armenian or less vulnerable than Gobryas and Gadatus, Cyrus discovers troubling limits in his ability to win grateful affection. Nowhere is this clearer than in his relations with his uncle Cyaxares. When the Medes and Persians rout the Assyrians in their first battle and the aggressors beat a disorderly retreat, Cyaxares throws a tent party in celebration while the restless Cyrus wonders how he can keep the campaign going. He disingenuously asks to borrow some cavalry to round up stragglers and capture a little booty for his men to take home (4.1.20). Cyaxares says he cannot begrudge him this, whereupon Cyrus promptly persuades all the Median horsemen not at the tent party to follow him as he instigates a daring campaign of world conquest. When, flush with new wealth and allies, Cyrus finally leads his magnificent army back to Media, Cyaxares is so overcome with bitterness and shame that he weeps. Cyrus thereupon protests that he is not Cyaxares' enemy but his benefactor, reminding him of the riches and increased security he has brought to both their kingdoms, but Cyaxares replies,

> Cyrus, I do not know how one could say that the things you have done are bad. Be well assured, however, that they are good in such a way that the more numerous they appear, the more they oppress me, for I would wish to make your country greater by my power rather than to see mine enlarged by you, for your deeds are noble to you who do them, but somehow the same deeds bring dishonor to me. (5.5.25-26; cf. 33)

A man of spirit can never rest content with the status of passive beneficiary, unless perhaps he has been so soundly defeated and has been shown so thoroughly incompetent that he is glad even to be left alive, the condition to which Croesus is reduced (or perhaps prudently feigns being reduced) by Cyrus (7.2.28–9).

Cyrus does not wish to become anyone's hated oppressor; in response to Cyaxares' tears he weeps himself, and in response to the speech above he begs for more time to prove that he really is well disposed to Cyaxares. But in trying to become the greatest benefactor, he is perforce depriving everyone around him of both independence and honor.[17] With the terrible threat from Assyria ended, the threat of competition from Cyrus's friends increases. He finds then that he must keep them dependent and divided and weak—and in the best cases childless and even castrated—so that he will have no rivals for their affection or for his status as protector. Cyrus yearns to be a source of all blessings to his followers, but the tragedy of his life is that while he gives the lesser blessings of wealth and protection unstintingly, the things that he himself judges as the greatest blessings of all—power and trust and honor and freedom to act on a grand scale—are scarce goods that can be divided but not truly shared.

Does Cyrus see any of this? It is perhaps a testimony to his toughness that he never complains of his disappointed desire for love as Hiero does, but his actions in the last stage of his rule, in setting his friends to spying on one another, dividing their loyalties, keeping them financially dependent, and providing against their knifing or poisoning him at dinner, are ample testimony that he is not unaware of what is happening. Yes, we may say, but does he really face it? Xenophon himself with his deliciously light touch makes it easy to take Cyrus's side almost to the very end: the Cadusians who defy Cyrus are so disloyal; the Armenian so soft, hypocritical, and inept; Cyaxares so self-indulgent and Croesus so imprudent that we find ourselves cheering Cyrus along and wanting to believe that he deprives no one really worthy of anything truly worthwhile.

But the fact cannot be denied: Cyrus manages to remain content with his life right to the end only by squinting at the needs he cannot satisfy and the yearnings he cannot address, either in others or in himself.[18] The real problem of rule turns out not to be the problem of how to gain or keep it: this, after all, "does not belong among those tasks that are impossible . . . if one does it with knowledge" (1.1.3). The real problem of rule is the severely limited extent to which anyone can be anyone else's benefactor in the way that Cyrus wants to be. The problem is not an incidental one, due to the limits of human knowledge or time or the requisites of keeping one's rule safe. The problem is the deeper one that makes human rule so inescapably unsafe in the first place—the fact that even or especially the rule of the most generous and noble-minded human being throws him into an intractable competition with others for an essentially scarce good, noble action on a grand scale. The noblest men, like the providential gods they imitate, seek trust and gratitude. But perfect trust can be kept only at the price of preventing one's beneficiaries from learning to trust themselves, and gratitude grows sour in those who see they are being deliberately kept in the condition of sheep.

Still, does it even make sense that a man could so wish to be a benefactor that he would knowingly harm his friends? This is evidently the problem that prompts Faulkner (2007, 130, 146, 151) to argue that while Cyrus certainly has moral concerns, he is ultimately driven by a distinct and more powerful concern for his own good. But what is that good? It is hard for Faulkner to say, because it is so hard for Cyrus to say. Clearly the non-political goods of money, luxuries, and eros hold little charm for Cyrus; so do friendship that turns upon conversation and philosophy. If he sought rule as a means to such goods, surely with his generous, fair-minded spirit he would find a balance between

[17] Nadon (1996, 371, 373) argues well that the absence of a complete common good in politics is a key problem Cyrus cannot solve, but he perhaps overstates the problem while understating the contribution made to it by competition over the noble. Danzig (2012) takes the opposite position, claiming that Cyrus' pursuit of self-interest is fully compatible with his beneficence, for if Cyrus takes more power he also deserves it, and those like Cyaxares who lose out lose nothing but their empty pride. While making a good case that this is true for Cyaxares, Danzig does not address the disappointed hopes of Cyrus' more impressive followers.

[18] Noting the poverty of Cyrus's inner life at the end, Bruell (1987, 102) suggests that "what is most important to know about Cyrus is not the education he received but the one he lacked."

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his advantage and that of his associates. The problem is that it is rule itself that he wants. But is it mere power, the ability to dominate and have his way with everyone? Certainly there is some evidence for this thought in Cyrus's continual assiduity in accumulating power, in the despotic features of his mature reign, and in his last words at 8.7.28. But there is also strong evidence against it. It is precisely the desire to dominate without concern for benefits or desert that he sees in the younger Assyrian king and hates; it is precisely the dismay at seeing worthless men rule—men who neither possess nor cultivate nor reward virtue and are simply selfish—that prevents Cyrus from agreeing with Cambyses' preference for the private or contemplative life (1.6.8). Cyrus's characteristic, repeatedly expressed wish is to win not cowering subjects but grateful and admiring friends (1.6.10, 22, and 24; 2.4.10 and 14; 3.1. 3.1.28, 31, and 34; 4.3.3; 5.1.1, 19, and 29; 5.2.8–10, 12; 5.3.2; 5.3.19; 5.4.32; 5.5; 8.2.13). Even at the end when his rule grows darker and his friendships cooler, he continues his youthful activities of distributing food and cloaks and seeking to cultivate grateful followers, and indeed Xenophon reports that "his subjects venerated Cyrus as a father" (8.8.1). True, his friends find themselves more distant and divided and insecure than they would wish, but Xenophon also describes the empire under Cyrus as a place where the leading men keep their word, find honor for noble deeds, practice justice, and maintain the old "education and continence they received from the Persians," in contrast to the empire under his followers: clearly Cyrus has been at some pains to preserve the virtue of his Persian compatriots (8.8). Nor is Cyrus's youthful penchant for killing and gloating over the dead anywhere in evidence now. Xenophon's Cyrus does not even seem hungry for war at the end of his life the way Herodotus's is. From the start it is his spirited, puppylike love of defending and leading his followers to good things that makes him political; it is his desire to see virtue rewarded and the challenge of overcoming unworthy rivals that fires his imagination; throughout his campaigns it is the activity of being a benevolent friend and a champion of the oppressed that he most loves and fervently prays to succeed at; and it is the reputation for being such a protector and champion that is the only reward he seems to seek. He wants the whole constellation of goods, and the constellation is to be godlike.

As Cyrus says to Gobryas in a crucial speech in which he declines the offer of riches and of Gobryas's own daughter in marriage and promises "with the gods" to be a faithful ally, "I accept these valuables, but I give them to this child of yours and whoever may marry her. Yet I will go away with one gift from you, a gift in exchange for which I would not be more pleased even with the treasures of Babylon" (5.2.8). The gift is this: "You have made it clear to all human beings that I would not be willingly impious where hospitality is required, unjust for the sake of valuables, or voluntarily false in agreements. Be assured that as long as I am just and am praised by human beings because I seem to be so, I will never forget this but will try to honor you in return with all things noble" (5.2.10–1). This moment, it will become clear in retrospect, is the apex of Cyrus's life, his point of highest spirits and greatest hopes, surrounded by friends who are becoming rivalrous towards him but are still proud to be riding at his side to great things (5.2.12). Already Cyrus's desire to honor Gobryas is in some tension with his unwillingness to honor him with his full trust by accepting his hospitality in turn: he wants to keep what is most noble of all for himself (cf. Aristotle *NE* 9.8). For now the tension is muted, but from this point the story will begin to go downhill. Cyrus as emperor will settle for grim rule, oriental luxuries, and devising clever schemes of administration and espionage to secure maximum psychological power over everyone, but this is scarcely what he hoped to achieve when he set out.[19]

TWO FORMS OF HIGH AMBITION

The problem is that Cyrus's yearning to be a benefactor, despite and even by virtue of its very nobility, is both self-defeating and strangely insatiable—and indeed more self-defeating inasmuch as it is insatiable, and quite possibly more insatiable inasmuch as it is self-defeating. It is self-defeating because what at first and for a long time seems to Cyrus to be the best of all things, having the fullest life by being the most noble, most active, and greatest benefactor, runs aground on the terrible competition at the heart of political rule: whatever opportunities and actions he seizes, he necessarily takes from another. But why, again, is this desire for godlike rule so insatiable that Cyrus is unwilling to risk some security in order to share meaningful responsibility with his worthy friends, especially since he has never objected before to running risks to accomplish great things?[20] The *Cyropaedia* is a book about education, after all, and Cyrus is a quick study and a marvelous student. Why, once he sees what is happening, does he not recognize the limits of noble benefaction, recall the value of the self-sufficiency that the Persians know so well, and turn his rule in a republican direction? Why does he not focus his efforts on the less spectacular but more beneficial project of educating and providing opportunities for others? Why does he not even use his resourceful mind to invent a federal republic, sending out his already educated and freedom-loving Persian peers to seed self-governing colonies in different centers?

This a man with a more moderate soul just might have done—although the same man probably never would have conquered Babylon. Still, might his not be a better form of ambition? Cyrus's combination of extreme ambition and extraordinary ability has been seen in perhaps only a handful of men throughout history, including Julius Caesar in ancient times and Napoleon in the modern era. They are distinguished by their hunger

[19] For more of the ways in which Cyrus's mature reign represents a disappointment, see, e.g., Bartlett (2015, 150–2); Faulkner (2007, 170–6); Field (2012, 735–6).

[20] Consider especially the way Cyrus is unmoved by Cyaxares' strong arguments for caution at 4.1.13–8.

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to be the main source of good for everyone under them and to be loved for being so, and inevitably they restrict political life so as to be able to order everything as they see best. Napoleon put his brothers on thrones but insisted that they do his bidding; Xenophon's Cyrus sends friends out as satraps but is always prepared to sack them if they prove disloyal. Not only are such men intolerant of independent centers of power such as senates and independent judiciaries, but they seek to control even the flow of information under them: as Cyrus set everyone to spying against one another, quashing freedom of speech, so Napoleon closed nearly all of the newspapers in France. In all this they differ from a more moderate type of highly but not supremely ambitious man, perhaps exemplified best by George Washington, who have been willing to curtail their own power and freedom of action in order to help found and secure free republics. Washington too had great ambition and a keen sense of honor, but he was also a believer in liberal democracy and a man of a more self-sufficient temperament, more like the tranquil Cambyses than the ever-restless Cyrus. Washington appeared at the Second Continental Congress in military uniform, signaling his readiness to lead the army and to risk being hanged as a traitor should the colonists lose—a thing the young Cyrus would doubtless have done as well. But equally characteristic of Washington was his resignation of the presidency in 1796 to promote the republican ideal of ruling and being ruled by turn. As he wrote in 1784, after a prior retreat from public life,

> I am at length become a private citizen of America, on the banks of the Potomac, where under my own vine and my own fig tree, free from the bustle of a camp and the intrigues of a court, I shall view the busy world "in the calm light of mild philosophy," and with that serenity of mind which the soldier in his pursuit of glory, and the statesman of fame, have not time to enjoy. I am not only retired from all public employments, but I am retiring within myself and shall tread the private walks of life with heartfelt satisfaction. (Washington 1931–44, 27:314–5.)

Perhaps one can only be the kind of benefactor Washington was if one has, or believes oneself to have, another source of happiness quite independent of politics, such as philosophy. Cyrus of course might say against Washington, with at least a grain of truth, that he has simply run out of energy for incessant political battles; he might question whether Washington has anything so fine as real philosophy or so noble as ruling to do on his Potomac farm; he might even use the line Washington cites from Addison's *Cato* to reproach him with a lack of public spirit. For it is the republican Cato who says to his friend with some reproach, "Thy steady temper, Portius, / Can look on guilt, rebellion, fraud, and Caesar, / In the calm lights of mild philosophy; / I'm tortured ev'n to madness, when I think / On the proud victor... / Who owes his greatness to his country's ruin." (Addison 1712, Act 1, Scene 1, lines 11–2). To such criticisms we could respond with equal truth that even or precisely in the way Washington balances disparate perspectives and concerns, he exemplifies the Aristotelian gentleman who has done such great good in so many times and places. But Washington does not, for the same reason, exemplify the most soaring, single-minded ambition, and about that we still have something to learn from Cyrus.

THE DEEPER MEANING OF AMBITION

As we are seeing, this ambition when it burns purest and brightest has a very troubling trajectory. If the natural root of Cyrus's ambition is a healthy social animal's spiritedness; if its natural development is to seek high office from which to accomplish great things for others even more than for oneself; if this very activity is indeed the most satisfying activity a spirited man can find to do; yet there is in Cyrus still a deep restlessness that suggests that he could not have been content even with such activity for a whole lifetime. This restlessness drives him to kill the very animals that seem to him most divine even when he does not want to eat them and to conquer an inveterately hostile city that will be great trouble to rule. Supposing that with difficulty he *could* found a great republic: it is not at all clear that this would satisfy him either. To do it he would have to relinquish power and become less active; he would have to acknowledge sharp limits on the good he is able to confer and the gratitude he can ever hope to win; he would have to give up his beliefs that he deserves supreme happiness and abandon his hopes of rivaling even the gods. The boundlessness and restlessness of Cyrus's ambition suggests a chafing at the deepest level against the limits of human life and another kind of ruler that he cannot shake off.

Therefore, we must suspect, Cyrus's natural spiritedness has another meaning, more self-interested and more obscure, which is for a long time scarcely in evidence. Cyrus expresses it indirectly in his most thematic statement on his own motivations very late in life, and one that now shows an old man's priorities: "By enriching and benefitting human beings, I acquire goodwill and friendship, and from these I harvest safety and glory" (8.2.20–2). The mention of safety is significant. Cyrus does claim at crucial junctures that his conquest of the world is a defensive operation, but since he seems rather less safe at the end than at the beginning, we must wonder whether it is not a deeper kind of safety that he craves, adumbrated also by the accompanying mention of glory. If Cyrus can provide for his subjects as gods do, might he not deserve to live eternally as gods live, perhaps metaphorically in human memory, but perhaps in a fuller sense as well?[21]

[21] One might object to my line of argument that this desire to overcome death through great deeds is an example of eros, as Diotima suggests in Plato's *Symposium,* and not thumos. A treatment of the rich reflections on eros in the *Cyropaedia* is beyond the scope of this article. It is noteworthy, however, that Xenophon presents Cyrus as remarkably unerotic and nonetheless supremely ambitious. If I am right that Xenophon is attributing to thumos much of the power that Diotima and Socrates attribute to eros, this may be a sign that the two passions, both rooted in and responses to our mortality, are not as different as they at first seem.

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Only on his deathbed does Cyrus finally acknowledge such a hope: he dreams that he is being called away to the gods (8.7.2), and he reveals that he has been meditating on the question of whether the human soul dies with the body, giving many arguments for why he "was never persuaded of this" (8.7.19). Yet he remains curiously unwilling even now to express a wish for what is in the gods' power to give or withhold. Rather than pray to them to take care of his soul, he voices only a hope that he will be forever remembered as "being happy"—but in the present tense (8.7.6 and 9; cf. Faulkner 2007, 170). He professes himself contented with the life he has had even if death is the end—but in a way that still does not quite acknowledge the finality of that end: "Summon all Persians and the allies to my monument, in order that they may share in my pleasure, for I will now be in a safe place, since I cannot suffer evil any longer, whether I am with the divine or no longer exist at all" (8.7.27). Even as he yearns not to die, he still yearns not to need anything he cannot secure for himself. This is why honor, which seemed at first just a pleasing confirmation of Cyrus's excellence, has taken on such a life of its own for Cyrus: being honored forever as supremely happy is the closest he can come through his own activity to being self-sufficiently godlike.

Have Cyrus' driving passions fundamentally changed over his lifetime? Certainly his charming personality has hardened and cooled; certainly his deepest desires have unfolded to reveal new elements, and the relative power of different aspects of his spirited ambition has shifted. As a boy he seeks to please and to win influence without any thought of becoming godlike; as a young man his concern for justice deepens as his hopes to prove his nobility and win love by conferring benefits on the grandest scale reach their apex. In his later years the concern with mortality that was incipient in his earliest, most puppyish fierceness against threats comes more clearly to the fore. At the same time, his disappointingly limited success in fulfilling his noblest hopes likely contributes to the hard edge of bitterness we see at the end, when he reverses the priorities of the young Cyrus in promising his sons that "by benefitting your friends you can punish your enemies" (8.7.28). But through all of this persists his desire to be active in the grandest and most magnificent way possible as the gods are, and to prove his merit by protecting the innocent, promoting the deserving, and arranging everything for everyone in the best way possible. This desire to be a godlike benefactor, Xenophon suggests, is the fullest unfolding of the thumos that first shows itself in puppylike affection and fierceness, and deep at its core is a yearning, extraordinary in Cyrus but present in all of us, to overcome the natural limits of human life.

But if it is the surreptitious hope for immortality that keeps Cyrus going when all his fine friendships have turned to sawdust, the hope that he cannot quite let go of and cannot quite face, this suggests that his key failing is a failure of self-knowledge: an essential ingredient of his vaunting ambition turns out to be a lack of clarity about what he most wants and where he stands. This lack of clarity bars him from coming to terms with necessity, and therefore bars him from achieving benefactions of the limited but solid kind that is attainable for human beings who know themselves and see clearly what good they are able to do.[22] Observing the many questions Cyrus has throughout his life refused to consider squarely, we are confirmed in the thought that the very highest political ambition is not compatible with wisdom. This reflection in turn raises the question whether truly wise, self-sufficient, immortal beings would have either the hunger for love and trust that Cyrus has or the same willingness to stunt others' strength in order to keep them dependent.

But that question Xenophon only points to; he does not answer it. While piety forms a major theme of the *Cyropaedia* and the gods are in a sense everywhere in the story, Xenophon never tells us whether he himself thinks gods exist or not, let alone what their natures are if they do. All the events he narrates are, to be sure, wholly explicable in terms of natural phenomena that are within the ordinary experience of everyone, but this consideration is by no means decisive in showing Xenophon's own piety or lack of it. From the psychological study of ambition and rule that he offers, however, it seems likely that if he did believe in wise divinities, they would resemble the tranquil, self-sufficient gods of Cambyses and Aristotle more than the god who punished Croesus for mistrusting his oracles. They might in fact resemble most of all not Cyrus but the other pole and hero of Xenophon's works, the philosopher Socrates, a man who had no money and no protection to give his friends but gladly shared his wisdom, whose friends counted it their greatest blessing to have known him, yet a man who, paradoxically, set out not just to test but to refute the oracle of Apollo.

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[22] Socrates' constructive advice to aspiring young statesmen in *Memorabilia* 3.1–7 is an example of the spirit in which one who has worked his way free of Cyrus's confusions can do real if limited good for others in politics; Xenophon's leadership in the *Anabasis* is another (Xenophon 1954).

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