PART VII

Imagined cities

CHAPTER 26

The (utopian) city in Greek political thought

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Why was the *polis* so very good to think with? What, if anything, distinguishes the thought that it inspired? The usual answer points to its utopianism. Greek political thought seems uniquely preoccupied with the lofty ends implied by ordinary politics, especially as these culminate in the virtues. In theory and practice, the Greek city was the site of a "virtue politics" (Balot 2009), albeit not without its dysfunctions and inequities, many of which became proverbial.[1] The moderns, seeking to overcome these shortcomings, repudiated classical utopias as "imaginary principalities," preferring to go directly to the so-called effectual truth (Machiavelli, *Prince* 15.1), even if modern political thought has an ambitiousness all its own, arguably rooted in the very critique of classical utopianism found in Machiavelli.[2] Medieval thinkers, meanwhile, might have remained utopians, but the bent of their political thinking seemed even more otherworldly. This characterization, although true perhaps in the abstract, misses more basic – and in some ways more illuminating – aspects of Greek political theory. These have to do with the concept of the political and the political way of life. For the Greeks, *ta politika* were normally understood as the shared pursuits of a common good, to be distinguished from the self-interested domination of a despot or tyrant (Hansen 2006, 112; Lane 2014, 3–4; Smith 1999). This understanding – although certainly "normative" – is not necessarily utopian. The good pursued in common by the citizens of one city can require visiting evils on those of another. That which is believed to be good for the city can in fact be bad. The very belief that something is good for the whole community can be weaponized by mendacious parts of it. Intriguingly, it is such "realist" aspects of the political that Greek thought especially emphasizes, not in spite but because of its basic normative understanding.

To see as much is not to deny that Greek political thinking is distinctively utopian. Utopia may be an early modern neologism, but its origin was a free imitation of Plato's *Republic*, whose "city in speech" has always been synonymous with thinking through the extraordinary ends implied by our ordinary hopes and wishes. The modern literary genre invented by More is deeply indebted to the "utopian thinking" characteristic not only of Platonic political philosophy but of Greek political thought more broadly (Destrée, Opsomer, and Roskam 2021). As Moore evidently saw, the best *politeia* was

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at once a "good place" and a "no place." It exists not by nature but as an image, a work of human art. The *Kallipolis* envisioned by the Platonic Socrates may be a paradigm of political justice, but it is not simply to be identified with justice. Like the idea or "form" of justice, the just city is not possible in the sense that any actual city could fully assimilate itself to its pattern. Socrates argues for its possibility only as an approximation (Plato, *Republic* 472c–473a).[3] Unlike the idea of justice, the just city does not exist independently of the "speech" that produces it. The just city is not an "ideal." "[I]deal is not a Platonic term" (Strauss 1963, 55). The just city is rather a device of representation. It is a tool for illustrating what the city would have to become were it to embody our hopes for justice in the extreme and, by extension, what the individual human soul would have to become were it likewise to share in justice to the greatest possible extent. It is better to say that the just city is a utopia, however anachronistic that term may be in its own right. Utopia captures the sense in which the just city is unreal. Utopian political thought is not necessarily "idealistic."

Was there something about Greek politics that made such thinking especially appealing, illuminating, or conceivable? This chapter begins by sketching an answer in the affirmative. No hoary theoretical tradition stood between Greek political thinkers and the phenomena that they studied; they had more immediate access to "the political things." Indeed, it is a testament to the fruitfulness of that immediacy that we, the intellectual heirs of these thinkers, cannot but look on politics through the prism of their categories. The Greeks were in touch with a "pre-philosophic" experience of politics that can be difficult for us to fathom, having as we do thousands of years of theoretical reflection standing between us and those circumstances. On the other hand, precisely because the Western tradition was born of those circumstances, it naturally reflects them and can thus be used to put ourselves back in touch with them.[4]

Nature, convention, and the birth of political philosophy

According to Cicero, Socrates inaugurated the philosophical study of politics. He "was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil" (*Tusculan Disputations* v. 4.10–11, trans. King). This claim has often puzzled readers familiar – as Cicero himself obviously was – with the rich history of political thought antedating the Socratic Turn. Others before Socrates had called into question the things of the city (McKirahan 2010, 365–66). Socrates must represent a new way of inquiring into political things, a way that uniquely deserves the name of philosophy.

We can begin to grasp what distinguishes Socratic political philosophy from its "pre-philosophic" forebears by considering Hippodamus of Miletus, of whose theory we read in Aristotle. Aristotle does not clothe Hippodamus in the mantle of philosopher. But he does maintain that Hippodamus "was the first of those not engaged in politics to undertake to give an account of the best regime" (*Politics* 2.8.1267b 29–30).[5] Quasi-mythical lawgivers like Solon and Lycurgus may have given such accounts as well. But as figures very much "engaged in politics," theirs were accounts limited by (if also attentive to) certain basic political verities. On Aristotle's telling, Hippodamus has the distinction (or ignominy) of being the first political theorist, the first to make the study of the best political regime his vocation. Unfortunately, his account of that regime would seem the worse for it. It comes off as an earnest (and therefore comical) attempt to impose on the city a mathematical order

that hardly belongs in human affairs (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1094b12–25). Pangle (2013, 84) suggests that Aristotle here "playfully acknowledges that there was something preposterous, morally as well as intellectually, about someone who [like himself] would claim to articulate standards for politics without himself being experienced in or taking responsibility for, any actual politics." Hippodamus conceives of the best regime as a city in which the number three prevails: three classes, three forms of property, and three kinds of law.[6] It is as if political order were achieved in the same way that one organizes one's thoughts, as though envisioning the best regime were like laying out the most orderly grid of streets. Indeed, Aristotle reports that it was Hippodamus "who invented the division of cities and laid out Piraeus" (*Politics* 1267b 24–25). But human beings are not as tractable as inanimate matter. Any plausible account of the political must take this well into account. In this vein, Aristotle calls special attention to the proposal that citizens be rewarded for thinking up ways of improving existing laws and conventions. To honor legal innovation, Aristotle warns, "is not safe, although it sounds appealing" (1268b 24–25). Change is advantageous with arts like medicine or urban planning, where the art is unambiguously improved by incorporating new discoveries and innovations. But "change in an art is not like change in law; for law (*nomos*) has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit, and this is not created except over a period of time" (1269a 20–23). Legal innovation may be occasionally advantageous, but it comes with an important drawback to which Hippodamus appears to have been oblivious.

As naïve as Hippodamus may seem, his willingness to rethink conventional politics in such a thoroughgoing and radical way attests to a discovery that made such thinking possible. Hippodamus stood out "through ambition" (*dia philotimian*, 1267b 24) and wished to be learned "with regard to nature as a whole" (*peri tên holên phusin*, 1267b 28–29). He judged politics in light of this ambition. He took as the measure of politics not law or convention (*nomos*) but nature (*phusis*).[7] For to call into question what is conventionally or habitually done presupposes a measure beyond convention itself, something that has greater authority than habit or antiquity or what is simply "one's own." Nature can have such authority only once the goodness of convention loses its self-evident character. Nature must be "discovered" for convention to be questionable, for it to be perceptible as "mere" convention (Strauss 1953, 81). By nature, the distinction between convention and nature would seem imperceptible. The authority of the conventional depends on complacency about or even ignorance of alternatives. As Plato's Athenian Stranger observes,

> If [human beings] are brought up under laws (*entraphósin nomois*) which by some divine good fortune have remained unchanged for a great length of time, if they neither remember nor have heard that things were ever otherwise than they are at present, then the entire soul reverences and fears changing any of the things that are already laid down. (*Laws* 798a–b, trans. Pangle)

The Stranger is here endorsing a "device" (*mêchanê*) that renders *nomos* veritably immune to change. This contrivance he associates with the Egyptians, who by "sanctifying" musical conventions conserved them unchanged for an amazing length of time (cf. 656d–657b). But as his quoted remarks attest, the resulting stability in legal convention becomes a source of authority in its own right. What is of great antiquity inspires "awe" or "reverence" (*aidôs*). It stands for an ancestral consensus whose magnitude dwarfs the present. The countless generations before us saw fit to do things a certain way. Who are we to do differently?

The Stranger's Egypt would seem to represent a time before the "discovery" of nature (cf. 679c; Herodotus 2.37–42), a time that a lawgiver would do well to reproduce artificially, availing himself of the *mêchanê* of which the Stranger speaks. Whether or not we agree with this counsel, the question for us is how the relative invisibility of the conventional *as* convention came to an end and why the *polis* appears to have occasioned that event. The point is not that the *nomos/phusis* distinction could not or did not emerge elsewhere, nor that there really was a time or place where customary norms were simply accepted without question. Rather, the *polis* was uniquely supportive of a critical political discourse, one necessary for a new form of social life and ultimately for political philosophy. The Egyptians and Persians lived under ancient, sprawling empires, the Hellenes, in small, self-governing communities of diverse ways and opinions. The simultaneous proximity and variety of local customs meant that variances between the cities in how things were done or in which things were believed could be more visible. The significance of this visibility was the greater because the variety in Greek conventions touched on the weightiest matters. Each city had its local civic gods held to have originated and endorsed its particular norms and ways. At the same time, and just as significantly, these differences were not so great as to be mutually unintelligible and thus easily dismissed.[8] As different as one *polis* was from another – whether in its theistic beliefs, origin stories, or governing institutions – every *polis* was enough like the others to be an object of ready comparison. The authority that convention otherwise derives from appearing inevitable or eternal was thus especially undercut in the Greek context (Raaflaub 2005, 42–43). It became possible and even necessary to defend the ways of one's own city against those of the others. The alternatives represented by other cities could be and were understood as live options. But appealing to the fact that a city's conventions were its own or had long been observed could carry only so much truck. The same could be said of almost every city, in which case no city could claim that its conventions were anything more than arbitrary.

Circumstances like these seem to have inspired the efflorescence of political thought and practice during the Greek fifth century. The unique visibility that Greek social life lent to conventional political differences made it exceptionally possible to doubt the authority of convention and to imagine a standard beyond arbitrary facts to which one needed to appeal in persuasively defending (or maligning) a given regime. It is this light that one should consider the significance of a Hippodamus. His particular way of appealing to nature may have been comically innocent, yet it represents a general possibility that was anything but. Serious thinkers arose in his wake who used the *nomos/phusis* distinction not only to envision utopian regimes or to illuminate the human condition. So-called "sophists" began teaching ambitious youth to throw off reverence for the law and custom standing between themselves and their desire to rule.[9] After all, it is *nomos* that enjoins the practice of justice and the other civic virtues, adherence to which requires self-limitation. If convention proves to be artificial and arbitrary, why take its moral teachings seriously? For just such reasons, Pre-Socratic philosophers like Xenophanes turned away from the human things, not least the anthropomorphic gods. But for those moved more by greed than wonder, the horizons opened by doubt of convention had more deleterious consequences for the community if not for themselves. "Trying to get a greater share than most is said to be unjust and shameful by law [*dia. . .nomôi*]," says Plato's Callicles, boldly articulating "what others are thinking but are unwilling to say."[10] "But I believe that nature itself reveals that it's a just thing for the better man and the

more capable man to have a greater share" (*Gorgias* 483c–d, 492d). As Callicles goes on to explain, "with all frankness,"

> By nature [*kata phusin*] the man who'll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them. And when they are as large as possible, he ought to be competent to devote himself to them by virtue of his bravery and intelligence, and to fill them with whatever he may have an appetite for at the time. But this isn't possible for the many, I believe; hence, they become detractors of people like this because of the shame they feel, while they conceal their own impotence. (491e–92a)

For communities whose very survival depended on citizens shouldering tremendous personal burdens, not least by hazarding their lives in frequent, hand-to-hand warfare, such transgressive ideas could pose a mortal threat. By so overturning the discourse of public spiritedness, making virtues out of narrow self-gratification, the sophistic teachings discouraged the self-limitation on which the *polis* so especially relied (cf. Thucydides 3.82).

On the other hand, the *nomos/phusis* distinction could be invoked in more civically responsible ways. In Plato, Socrates argues against sophistic critiques of justice by appealing to the very category from which such critiques derive their force. Socrates does not deny that conventional morality is confused and contradictory or that nature is the only authoritative standard in political and moral reasoning. He shows rather that nature is more supportive of the virtues on which the city depends. The fact that conventional opinion comprehends and extols these virtues in irrational ways does not imply that the virtues are merely and necessarily artificial shadows. It remains open to us to think of them rather as "participating in" or "imitating" genuinely natural virtues, those defined by a permanent, unchanging *eidos* (*Republic* 435b, 476a). The artificiality of the virtues praised by convention shouldn't lead us to reject the reality of virtues consistent with the common good. It should lead us to search for the nature of such virtues on the hypothesis that what is acclaimed by convention is already oriented toward what is true by nature. Convention itself is "by nature" in the sense that human happiness is impossible without broad respect for the cooperative behavior that *nomos* enjoins, however incoherently. In this regard, Plato's accounts of Socrates should be compared with Xenophon's, which emphasize Socrates' outward conformity to conventionally moral behavior rather than his efforts to connect conventional moral opinion to natural moral ideas. In both cases, however, we encounter a philosopher uniquely alive to the political context of his inquiries and how the appeal to "nature" can be politically destabilizing.

It is the alternative represented by such self-awareness that distinguishes Socratic political philosophy. The discovery of nature led the first philosophers to disdain the human and political things as artificial ephemera. In repudiating this approach, Socrates "call[ed] philosophy down from the heavens." But unlike those sophists who were already "inquiring" into the political things – more from love of glory than of wisdom – the Socratics did so without assuming those things to lack all connection with nature. To the Pre-Socratics, political philosophy was an oxymoron. The political was a hindrance, either to the truth or to one's appetites. What is novel about Socrates and his successors is their willingness to search for nature among the political things despite full awareness of the conventionalism of those things.

Socratic political philosophy can thus be seen as a public service of the highest order. Socrates certainly challenged the authority and coherence of *nomos*; in Plato's *Republic*,

the dialectical examination of justice begins (or begins fulsomely) only once the pious patriarch, Cephalus, leaves the conversation along with all that he represents. Still, the parochial incoherence that dialectic exposes is for the Socratics the extent to which convention falls short of meeting its own moral aims, aims now removed as far as possible from rationalistic debunking. The ideas that represent those aims are unchanging and self-consistent by definition (380d, 479a). Conventional opinions about justice may not conform to what is just by nature, but they should command respect nonetheless as they participate in natural justice. In this way, Socratic political philosophy demonstrates how politics can coexist with philosophical inquiry and the exposure of the conventional basis of political opinion. It is a testament to the success of that coexistence that political order could be rooted for centuries thereafter on the doctrine of natural right, which finds its origins in the Socratic school.

The inescapability of rule

Another aspect of Greek political thought that is especially obscure to us, encumbered as we are by the long theoretical tradition standing between us and them, has to do with the inescapability of direct and personal "rule" (*archê*). Modern politics are characterized by representative government in which rule is or ought to be indirect and impersonal. Claiming to represent those it rules, the modern state paradoxically disclaims rule; it is merely the organ of the people's will. The people can't be said to rule themselves either, at least not directly. Sovereign power is vested in representatives who are responsible for passing and enforcing laws, even against the voters who elected them. Nor is the modern state defined by the statesmen at its helm. It exists or is believed to exist independently of those who wield its machinery.

> It is there before they arrive, waiting to be claimed, and it will continue after they have departed, waiting with equanimity and impartial regard for the next claimant. The state may be thought to have no interest, like a neutral, or to have its own interest serve as an arbiter, but in either case, the essential point is that it does not belong to any of the contending parties or groups. The state exists independently of parties and groups (Mansfield 1983, 849).

Herein lies the genius of representative government. No one really wants to be ruled; representative government makes it seem as though rulers and ruled are one and the same. I need not rule in my own right to avoid being ruled by others; freedom does not presuppose seizing political power directly.

These hallmarks of modern political thought are so familiar as to be taken for granted. They have become part of our own conventional opinion. But as with all convention, ours too conceal something of the truth. They lead us to consider the primary political question in a much narrower compass than was hitherto the norm. Instead of asking who should rule and by what right – to what vision of ultimate human purposes should the political community be dedicated – we ask instead who best represents the people, who most adequately expresses public opinion, whose policies can be most considered to come from ourselves.

Before Hobbes taught the moderns to think this way, the stakes of political conflict appeared in starker terms (cf. Mansfield 1971 with Finley 1983 and Lane 2014, 316–317). This was especially true in the *polis*, where the vistas opened by the *nomos/phusis* distinction led to partisan debate over the kind of *politeia* the city ought to have.

Usually translated as "regime" or "constitution," *politeia* refers more precisely to the "form" (Aristotle, *Politics* 3.3.7–8) or even "soul" of the city (Isocrates 7.14). It encompasses the institutional distribution of power "but also the community's ethos, including its goals, values, and educational strategies" (Balot 2006, 179). The concept implies that the ruling offices (*archai*) reign by imprinting on the community its defining character (Plato, *Republic* 435e, 544d). To rule is to shape this community character. *Archê* is inseparable from the community; there is no "state" whose relation to society is impartial or autonomous. Rather, the *politeia* inescapably molds society; cities with distinct regimes necessarily admit of citizens forged from different casts. Nor does *politeia* abstract from personal claims to rule (Plato, *Laws* 690a–c). On the contrary, the regime is defined by those claims. Aspirants to rule make their case by describing the community as rightly or naturally belonging to themselves or those like themselves. The regime can be identified with the rulers, whether few or many. The *politeuma* or "governing body" *is* the regime (Aristotle, *Politics* 3.6.1). Above all, thinking of politics in terms of *politeia* spotlights questions of the greatest magnitude, questions that the indirect and impersonal rule of representative government settles in advance or consigns to the private "conscience" of individuals. To describe a *politeia* fully, one must take account of the community's "end" or "aim" (4.1.10), and the *polis* is the community that "aims at the most authoritative good of all" (1.1.1). To deliberate over the regime is thus to argue about the most important human purposes. It is to ask after the comprehensive vision of human flourishing that we as a community should endorse and pursue. "For it is through hunting for this [happiness] in a different manner and by means of different things that [groups of] individuals create ways of life and regimes that differ" (7.8.5).

At the core of Greek politics, then, were questions of far-reaching human importance. What shape did arguments over competing answers to these questions take? How did rival parties articulate their personal claims to rule in terms of ultimate human purposes? Here too Aristotle is illuminating. His *Politics* stages a debate of sorts between the primary parties of Greek political life, one that the philosopher calmly and sympathetically adjudicates. Again, the contrast with the moderns is striking. With few exceptions, modern parties present themselves as loyal to a "constitution" whose terms are settled.[11] Greek politics kept "constitutional questions" very much alive. Democrats were partisans of democracy, oligarchs of oligarchy. All parties laid claim to rule the city exclusively, for it was understood that democratic rule would decisively shape the city's *politeia* in ways inconsistent with the spirit of oligarchy and vice versa. Even so, no party made such claims as mere assertions of self-interest. Each expressed its claim as an appeal to justice. "Justice is the political good, and this consists in what is of common advantage" (3.12.1). Aristotle does not treat these appeals as cynical rhetoric; he observes that every such appeal grasps part of the truth about justice. Each is, however, distorted by the party's self-interest. "All who dispute about regimes speak of some part of justice," he observes (3.9.15). Some part, not the whole.[12] It is the economic basis of the party clamoring for power that indelibly shapes its claim to rule, along with the character of its rule, should it be successful. In practice, democracy is rule of the many poor, oligarchy of the rich few (3.8.7–8).

On behalf of oligarchy, "those with property" claim that justice demands the rule of the minority, seeing as the rich few contribute to the city the thing it needs most. Without their taxes and pecuniary donations, the city would be incapable of preserving its freedom, among much else. "[W]ar is a matter not so much of arms as of money" (Thucydides 1.83.2). On behalf of democracy, meanwhile, the poor but free people adduce "military virtue" as the basis of their own conception of justice. As the bulk of

the city's army, their valor truly secures the city's glory and independence. In canvassing these arguments, Aristotle comments on the failure of partisans to speak "of the whole of justice in the authoritative sense" (3.9.1). All agree that justice is by nature a matter of proportional equality: equal things to equal people, unequal things to unequal people (3.12.1). But all parties "being bad judges concerning their own things" (3.9.2), each conflates difference or similarity in one respect with difference or similarity in the decisive respect. The rich would deserve exclusive rule only if the *polis* existed for the sake of mere life; in fact, it exists for the sake of living well (3.9.6, cf. 1.2.8). Money can furnish life's necessities; it cannot supply the virtue or excellence at the core of a fully human life, a life that realizes a person's moral and intellectual capacities (cf. Plato, *Laws* 870a–c). Nor does the *polis* exist for the sake of what can be won with the military virtue in which all citizens are roughly equal; it is more than a defensive alliance against foreign aggression. Aristotle's point is that thinking through partisan claims to rule leads us to recognize just how lofty the good that rulers must claim to deliver. Under the circumstances of the *polis*, where the profound and inescapable effects of rule are so visible, aspirants to power are driven to express the justness of their claims in the broadest possible terms. Partisans must show that their exclusive rule redounds to the highest or most authoritative good for whose sake the city exists. But no actual party or claim on its behalf captures this highest good. Each rather reflects the evanescence of convention. "[T]he just things that are not natural but human are not everywhere the same, since the regimes are not either; but everywhere there is only one regime that is in accord with nature, the best regime" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 5.7.1135a3–5, trans. Bartlett and Collins). Aristotle thus points toward a utopian regime whose rulers really would work for the highest good and whose claim to rule would therefore be truly just, not merely by agreement but by nature. On the other hand, he is never simply dismissive of the imperfect regimes and their partisan supporters. Instead, very much in the spirit of Socrates, he critically refines their self-justifications, each of which contains an ingredient of truth.

Under Aristotle's guidance, then, we can see how ordinary Greek politics implied in an especially vivid way a best regime by whose measure ordinary politics could be adjudicated. Aristotle treats this regime in the final books of his *Politics*. The best regime aspires to the most choiceworthy way of life (7.1.1); it excludes from rule persons incapable of sharing in that life. Only those capable of virtue in the fullest sense would be admitted as citizens, who would then take turns ruling and being ruled as friends of the highest order, each invested in the others' ethical development and perfection. The perfection of which Aristotle speaks, however, reflects a profound ambivalence. Humanity may be by nature political, in that our highest natural end is realized only under the aegis of political community (1.2.9–10), but Aristotle questions whether the active life of sharing in the *rule* of that community truly calls on the highest virtues and constitutes the most authoritative human good. "[S]ome assert" that an apolitical life of philosophic contemplation is the most choiceworthy (7.2.5), an assertion against which Aristotle raises certain objections but that he declines to disavow. The most compelling claim to rule and the most according to nature may be the one available to the genuinely virtuous, but the virtue on whose behalf that claim is made is itself ambiguous (cf. 3.4.5). In any case, the nature of the city militates against the claims even of virtue. The city is unavoidably a partnership of diverse persons whose capacities for moral excellence vary widely. Like the rich, the virtuous are few; to fully recognize their superiority would deprive the many of the honor and dignity that attaches to rule. Doing so "is a matter for alarm, for when there exist many who are deprived of

prerogatives and poor, that city is necessarily filled with enemies" (3.11.7). In practice, the rule of the few, however virtuous, would invite the dread specter of *stasis* or "faction." It would destroy the community the virtuous would otherwise best serve. "Yet it is certainly not virtue that destroys the element possessing it, nor is justice destructive of the city" (3.10.2). Besides, the claims of the virtuous can be turned against themselves. A certain few might have a stronger title to rule than the popular majority, owing to their exceptionally good character, but precisely because good character is so rare and hard-won, it is possible and even likely for an individual among their number to merit exclusive rule by himself (3.10.5). For all these reasons, Aristotle speaks of the best regime less as a practical possibility than as a city "of our prayers" (*kat' euxên*, 7.4.1). The best regime is politics according to nature, but its reality is as a rational postulate toward which political life implicitly wishes or prays to move. What is best in speech may not be straightforwardly translated into what is best in practice (cf. Plato, *Republic*, 473a).

The politics of piety

A third aspect of Greek politics that is especially enlightening – even revelatory – involves the place of piety in human affairs.[13] Ancient Greek polytheism famously lacked a written doctrine. Like the Hebrews, the Greeks conventionally believed the gods to communicate with humanity, but they held the medium for such communication to be oracles, not scripture. Greek poets certainly sang of the gods and were consulted as authorities about the divine things (*ta theia*), yet no tradition of prophetic revelation attached to their writings. Piety was less a matter of orthodoxy than ritual observance. At the same time, the gods were very much a part of political life. The laws of cities like Sparta were held to have originated with Olympians like Apollo; the laws of all cities were believed to enjoy divine protection (Willey 2016). In the atmosphere created by the visible conventionalism of Greek laws, these facts at once underscored the place of piety within the city and enabled a critical discourse to grow up around it. The city's need for reverence for the gods was well-nigh universally acknowledged; the divine things were accorded a seriousness that could bring down fierce punishment on atheism and insolence. Even so, the mark of piety having little to do with adherence to any doctrine, it was possible to speak about the gods in diverse registers. Much as one could be serious about justice while being skeptical of the just things according to convention, one could extrapolate from the human needs imperfectly served by civic piety to theorize a theology more in accordance with nature.

Doubtless the most famous such account is that of Plato's Socrates in the *Republic*. This account responds to complaints of the character, Adeimantus, who inveighs against the deleterious effects of civic piety when it comes to upholding justice. Common opinion testifies to the reality of providential gods who reward observance of the city's laws and punish unlawfulness and wrongdoing more generally. But the very notion that gods extend such external incentives implies a derogatory view of justice; divine providence is not conventionally believed to impart to justice any intrinsic appeal (363a–e). What is worse, opinion holds it possible to atone for injustice by appeasing the gods with gifts (cf. 330d–331b with *Laws* 906b–d). The stories told of the gods by the laws and the poets do not unequivocally prohibit the breaking of the law in secret, acquiring more than one's share of the things held good by convention (things like money and power), and then mollifying the gods' wrath with these ill-gotten gains

(365e–366a). The gods themselves are believed to practice injustice on the grandest scale – cruelly deceiving human beings, raping beautiful young women, capriciously lording their awesome power over mortals. At any rate, the gods are believed to put advantage before justice when the two conflict (cf. Thucydides 5.105). If even they cannot resist the appeal of injustice, how can they punish mere mortals for the same failure (391e)?

Against these customary opinions about the gods, Socrates sets down a novel theology in which the divine things are more consistently supportive of justice, if also less anthropomorphic and emotionally satisfying. The natural political need of leaders selflessly dedicated to the common good would seem to demand a more austere piety, one in which the gods are held to be self-sufficient, without the need of and not responsive to human propitiations (390e; cf. *Laws* 905d–907b). Such piety would also hold the gods to be the cause only of what is good, least of all prone to injustice or to associating greed with happiness (379c, 380c). Above all, Socrates gratifies Adeimantus and his brother, Glaucon, in their desire to see the intrinsic worth of justice extolled, lest justice prove good merely for the consequences that attend its reputation. On this vital score, however, even the gods "by nature" would seem of little help. The heavenly ideas represent and redeem the natural goodness of justice, along with Socrates' analogy of the just soul to the healthy body. The sort of gods that can be objects of civic worship and the kind of justice that can meet the sometimes onerous necessities of political community appear quite unlike the impersonal ideas and psychological equanimity for which Socrates argues (Bloom 1991, 352–53). Socrates' "gods" might resolve certain abuses to which conventional piety is prone, but they do so while leaving other civic needs unmet. It is telling that Socrates feels obliged to reintroduce and reinforce the cosmic penology that supports political justice by means of external rewards and punishments (612b ff., cf. *Gorgias* 523a–526d, *Laws* 903b–905c, *Phaedo* 107c–115a). In these ways too, the *Republic* attests to how "utopian" political thought is revealing as much in what it fails to accomplish as in what it positively endorses. When we think through the diverse political needs to which piety responds, we begin to understand why no piety could answer all the hopes that are naturally laid up in it.

A less familiar but equally intriguing attempt to reimagine Greek piety can be found in Aristophanes. His *Peace*, *Wealth*, and *Birds* all revolve around comically literal efforts to address failures of the traditional gods to deliver on human longings.[14] Trygaeus of the *Peace* takes it on himself to end the Peloponnesian War by ascending to heaven, intent on apprising Zeus of the disaster, whom he piously assumes to be ignorant of its baleful toll. Zeus, he discovers, is already wise to the sufferings brought on by the war and, tired of watching and listening to it, has in fact retreated with the other Olympians further from the earth to escape its din. In his place, Zeus has established the awful god, War, who has buried alive the goddess Peace with Zeus' sanction. It falls to Trygaeus to defy War and Zeus together, excavate Peace, and descend victoriously with the goddess back to Earth. His victory is all the greater for how it escapes any of the punishments threatened by the godheads. Indeed, in its wake, as humanity turns its prayers toward the goddess who has delivered it from its sufferings, most of the other gods simply fade away.

A similar plot unfolds in *Wealth*, in which Chremylos triumphs over Poverty much as Trygaeus vanquishes War. Chremylos is disturbed by the pecuniary success of injustice, believing as he does in the friendliness of the gods toward humankind. How can deities held to enforce justice allow the unjust to grow rich while the lawful suffer poverty? Turning to the Delphic oracle, Chremylos learns that Zeus, envious of human beings, blinded the god Wealth, who now can't but haphazardly allot his blessings. Chremylos

duly restores Wealth to sight, despite the god's fear of Zeus' wrath and the protestations of the goddess Poverty. As in *Peace*, Zeus proves unwilling or unable to make good his cruel will. Instead, Chremylos' success transforms the Athenian economy; the fairness sought from the old order at last becomes a reality. Likewise, concern for the old gods fades into oblivion, so much so that the temples are reduced to public toilets (1182–1184).

As in *Peace*, then, the upshot of *Wealth* appears to be that belief in the gods is rooted in hopes for deliverance from certain pressing if mundane hardships. Aristophanes amusingly puts on stage frustration at the gods' failures to make good these hopes. But he also invites reflection on how human initiative might finally deliver what the traditional gods could not. War and undeserved poverty might be brought to an end in these works by personifications of peace and wealth, but it is the audacity of Trygaeus and Chremylos that sets events in motion. And once events have run their course and human beings have been released from their erstwhile insecurity, the felt need for gods like Zeus amazingly dissipates. Humanity would seem to have under our power the capacity to shape the gods in which we believe.

Nowhere is this capacity more dramatically on display than in *Birds*. The protagonists of *Peace* and *Wealth* defy the will of Zeus and thereby alter the divine order; in *Birds,* the character Peisthetairos overthrows Zeus in his own name, although his success depends on promising the eponymous creatures the power he seizes for himself. Peisthetairos defends his revolution by showing how much better off humanity would be were it to worship birds in the Olympians' stead. Birds do not descend from heaven to ravage young women. They do not expect gory sacrifices of fatted cattle. They do not require expensive temples of Parian marble. Nor do they promise what they cannot deliver. Birds might not make the corn grow or heal the sick, but neither do Demeter and Apollo (577–584). At least birds can eat the pests blighting the crops! They can also be aids to commerce, reconnoitering routes of navigation and reporting on incoming weather (588–608). Once more the suggestion is that we look to gods primarily out of a desire to be relieved of pressing material insecurity. If new gods can seem more promising suppliers of such relief, it will be possible to replace the old with the new. In *Birds,* this replacement is accomplished by the comedy of building a wall in the sky, thus starving the old gods of the sacrificial vapors on which they depend (1518–1522). But as absurd as this conceit may be, it belies a serious insight. "What lives by opinion dies by opinion" (Ambler and Pangle 2013, 19). The gods are held to be powerful, but they are destroyed the moment men stop believing in and sacrificing to them. Their power is bound up with the inertia of convention. Zeus is mighty because he is believed to be mighty. Understand and manipulate the psychological forces behind such belief, and one can dethrone him. In this vein, Saxonhouse 1978 suggests that *Birds* provides a comedic model for Plato's *Republic*, more so even than the *Ecclesiazusae*, whose resonances in the *Republic* have long been noted.

Radical though Aristophanes may be on these scores, it would be a mistake to understand his orientation to traditional piety as simply critical. Certainly he is far from calling for outright public atheism. None of his heroes deny the existence of the gods they challenge or of gods in general. Even the Cloudcuckooland with which Peisthetairos replaces Olympus appeals because its birds better live up to the role of philanthropic deities. Nor do the new or newly promoted gods preside over revolutionized ethical norms. Aristophanes' birds might call for such a revolution, promising liberation from lawful convention, even from prohibitions against father beating (752–759). But Peisthetairos will brook no such liberation. He defends the law against father beating

against a father-beater (1352–1371)! He likewise excludes from the throngs seeking to live under his new avian order sundry oracle-collectors and sycophants, the better to maintain the city's respect for law, moderation, and justice (1044–1045, 1433–1435, 1448–1450). Despite overthrowing the old gods, Peisthetairos recognizes the need for the mores that those gods were held to protect. Aristophanes for his part affords his hero amazing success – not as a thoroughgoing revolutionary who would overturn traditional morality root and branch, but as a prudent if ridiculous lawgiver who appreciates the basic moral requirements of political life.

The Greeks as our contemporaries

In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Political Thought*, Stephen Salkever describes a key principle motivating recent interpretive work in the field. "The purpose of studying these Greek texts and practices is not archival or antiquarian," he explains, "nor is it a romantic longing to escape from modernity to a lost idyllic world; instead, the ultimate goal inspiring these studies is to bring voices embodied in these ancient texts into our contemporary discussions of political thought and action" (Salkever 2009, 1). The best such studies are wary of projecting into ancient voices modern prejudices and presuppositions. Inquiry is impeded not enhanced by losing sight of difference (cf. De Coulanges 1980, 4–5). But scholars can be mindful of anachronism without treating the ideas of other times and places as though they were imprisoned by historical context. Studies of Greek political thought can bring ancient voices into modern conversations precisely by stressing the ways in which the Greeks think about politics differently. Their voices can furnish new answers to old questions; they can bring to light new questions about which habitual forms of political thinking in modernity make us complacent or neglectful.

In our brief survey of the factors responsible for the distinctiveness of Greek political thought, we have stressed aspects of their historical situation that have long since disappeared but that gave rise to a political discourse from which we continue to learn. Within the context of the *polis*, conventional political differences became exceptionally visible; it became necessary to adduce standards beyond arbitrary facts to defend or criticize a given regime persuasively. The regime itself became the chief object of political contestation, making clear in ways few if any civic cultures have since appreciated just how great are the stakes of political struggle. The Greek city likewise made it possible to speak of the gods in a range of discourses that would have been heretical in other contexts, even as the *polis* remained deeply devoted to the gods' worship. Much as thinkers like Socrates were able to grasp the seemingly natural functions of certain moral conventions, they came to understand piety as fulfilling a similarly "adaptive" role within political life. In these and still other ways that we have not had occasion to consider, Greek political thought illuminates dimensions of the political that can be difficult to perceive under modern liberal democracy. If the Greeks had a special talent for imagining utopian political forms, for example, that was less because of any peculiar ambition or idealism than because of intellectually propitious circumstances. The best regime represented for the Greeks a working out of needs implicit in conventional political thinking and practice rather than a blueprint for radical political change. As often as not, thinking through these needs disclosed limits to political possibility and tradeoffs that political prudence would do well to take into account. "Politics is not one thing" (Hammer 2009, 34). But rooted as it is in human nature, it does admit of

irrepressible tendencies or longings that are more or less visible under different civic cultures. In our efforts to understand the political things, we would do well to attend to this fact, lest we remain oblivious to aspects of our own political reality.

NOTES

1 For an overview of slavery in classical Athens, e.g. see Rihll 2011. Traditionally, the problems of the "ancient republics" were more associated with *stasis* or "faction" and worries about "mob rule." See Roberts 1997 with Euben, Wallach, and Ober 1995 and Richards 1994.
2 Strauss 1958 and Newell 2013.
3 Laks 2022, ch. 2. For the view that the Platonic Kallipolis and Magnesia ought to be understood as "political blueprints" *rather than* utopias, see Brisson 2020.
4 My account of these points draws on that developed in Chapter 3 of Strauss 1953. For a longer analysis of this chapter and its enduring significance, see McBrayer 2015. On the unfortunate prejudice against Strauss' work among mainstream scholars, see Balot 2020.
5 Translations of the *Politics* are based on Lord 2013.
6 Suggesting a Pythagorean influence. Hogan 1959, 767; Lord 2013, 42n62.
7 It is important in this context to bear in mind the broad range of *nomos*, which includes what we mean by "law" but also extends to what we would describe as custom and convention. The classic study of the term's manifold significance in the context of the Athenian democracy is Ostwald 1969. *Nomos* takes on a pejorative connotation only when its conventionalism or artificiality is emphasized. It then appears to claim an authority it ought not to have.
8 As Cambyses dismisses Egyptian religious customs in Herodotus, e.g. (3.27–38). On the significance of Cambyses' "madness" in this regard, see Rathnam 2018.
9 The works of the sophists come down to us principally through their Socratic critics, although scholars generally hold the testimonies of Plato and Aristotle reliable. See e.g. the fragment of Antiphon quoted in McKirahan 2010, 20.3 = DK 87A44 A, col. 1, 6–col. 5, 24. On the sophists more generally, the analysis in Guthrie 1967 remains authoritative. See also Kerferd 1982 and Bartlett 2016.
10 Translations of the *Gorgias* are based on Zeyl 1987.
11 Among the exceptions, of course, are parties committed to radical right-wing populism. The emergence of such parties in the liberal democracies might suggest a reemergence of the question of the regime. For a sympathetic account of these parties that understands them in precisely these terms, see Daneen 2023. For a critical review, see Linker 2023.
12 Another way in which Greek partisans appealed to a good beyond self-interest was reflected in the aspiration towards *homonoia* or "same-mindedness." See the discussion in Cartledge 2005, 19–20.
13 For a comprehensive treatment of the subject, see Burkert 1985. See also Mikalson 2005 and the essays collected in Eidinow, Kindt, and Osborne 2016.
14 My interpretation of these works is based on Ambler and Pangle 2013. I have also learned from Saxonhouse 2006, who understands the "Old Comedy" that comes down to us through Aristophanes as illustrative of the possibilities made available under the Athenian democratic regime "to speak without fetters, without *aidôs* [reverence]" and thus to express a "thoroughgoing shamelessness" (130).

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