INTRODUCTION

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This volume is a companion to Greek "political thought," rather than "political philosophy" or "political theory" – why? One reason will be apparent from the table of contents: the chapters have a broader scope than the terms "philosophy" and "theory" would suggest, and their authors have been trained and teach in a variety of fields, including philosophy, classical literature and history, and political theory. But there is a more substantial reason behind the choice of title. There are three propositions that unite these chapters and that define a central tendency in recent interpretive work on Greek political thought:

(1) Our consideration of fundamental questions about politics in the world of ancient Greece must be pursued in texts that cross the standard modern genre distinctions among philosophy, history, and literature. Taking these modern academic distinctions too seriously as a guide to inquiry is an anachronistic mistake and can result in serious distortions of the Greek texts. Treating Plato as a post-Kantian systematic and doctrinal philosopher is one important example of such a distortion; treating Thucydides as a proto-"scientific" historian is another.[1]

(2) But the purpose of studying these Greek texts and practices is not archival or antiquarian, 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

[1] On Plato, contrast Kraut 1992 with Cooper 1997. See also Griswold 2001. On Thucydides, see the chapters by Thompson and Mara in this volume.

in these ancient texts into our contemporary discussions of political thought and action.

(3) At the same time, this attempt to bring ancient Greek voices into modern discussions will itself be anachronistic unless we are very careful to place the Greek texts in the context of debate and action in which they were written.

The major recent direction in the study of Greek political thought is the emergence of a variety of ways of interpreting Greek texts and institutions with an eye to *both* the ancient Greek political/discursive context *and* modern practice. We no longer see the field divided between scholars who show how Greek political theory fits into ancient Greece and scholars who show how such theory might be instructive for our own time. More and more, the presumption is that one must be able to do both at least adequately in order to do either well. There is widespread agreement that our job as interpreters of Greek political thought is to show how these texts speak to us *indirectly*, that is, through their response to the arguments and events of ancient Greek political life. Negatively put, we see a rejection of the agendas of both antiquarianism and presentism/progressivism – of both the idea that the study of Greek texts is an activity that has no purpose beyond that of accumulating as accurate as possible a record of the thoughts and deeds of ancient Greek civilization as an end in itself, and the idea that the modern world is so different from that of ancient Greece as to render any conversation between them impossible at best and a sign of reactionary politics at worst. Politically, this means a general reorientation around the project of bringing questions that arise in contemporary democracies to the study of Greek texts and institutions. This new focus has meant a healthy lessening of the influence of disciplinary boundaries among political scientists, classicists, and philosophers, and has provided a healthy counterbalance to the strong "modernist" bias of some influential modern political philosophers, such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. All of the chapters in this volume are characterized by a present and future-oriented – though historically informed – interpretation of Greek political thought. One proposition runs through all the chapters: the texts and practices of ancient Greece can provide contributions to modern democratic discussion that are otherwise unavailable. Thomas Jefferson was wrong.[2] Our goal is in part to rebut an

[2] "The introduction of the new principle of representative democracy has rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government, and in a

all-too-common assumption among teachers and students of political theory that we can begin our study with Machiavelli or Hobbes and that we moderns no longer have anything to learn from thinking through the Greek texts.

Another way of characterizing this recent tendency of studies in Greek political theory is to say that they have aimed at broadening the "modern political imaginary" (Charles Taylor's[3] phrase), our sense of what is politically normal and possible. For example, thinking through Greek political theory might enable us to call into question the Hobbesian and Kantian idea that the job of political theory is to discover principles, whether formal or substantive, that will solve our deepest political problems. A number of students of Greek political thought, beginning with Hannah Arendt, have suggested instead that the job of political theory is to prepare citizens to make the best possible judgments by encouraging us to discern and reflect on the central problems of political life; not to tell us what we must do, but, in Arendt's phrase, to help us "think what we are doing."[4] Other scholars have used reflection

great measure relieves our regret if the political writings of Aristotle or of any other ancient have been lost or are unfaithfully rendered or explained to us" (Jefferson 1903, p. 66).

[3] Taylor's position on our modern relationship to Greek texts is complicated. On the one hand, he frequently asserts the neo-Hegelian view that modernity is sui generis and that it is not possible to understand modern freedom and democracy via the categories and methods of the ancient philosophers. On the other, he has been instrumental in establishing the position that ancient philosophy, and especially Aristotle, is right about certain key issues in ethics and politics that are generally misunderstood by modern moral and political philosophy. A good example is the following from *Sources of the Self*:

> [There is] a tendency to breathtaking systematization in modern moral philosophy. Utilitarianism and Kantianism organize everything around one basic reason. And as so often happens in such cases the notion becomes accredited among proponents of these theories that the nature of moral reasoning is such that we ought to be able to unify our moral views around a single base. John Rawls, following J. S. Mill, rejects what he describes as the "intuitionist" view, which is precisely a view which allows for a plurality of such basic criteria. But to see how far this is from being an essential feature of moral thinking we have only to look at Aristotle's ethical theory. Aristotle sees us pursuing a number of goods, and our conduct as exhibiting a number of different virtues. We can speak of a single "complete good" (*teleion agathon*) because our condition is such that the disparate goods we seek have to be coherently combined in a single life, and in their right proportions. But the good life as a whole doesn't stand to the partial goods as a basic reason. (Taylor 1989, pp. 76–77)

[4] Arendt 1958, p. 5.

on Greek political theory as a point of departure for thinking outside the categories of modern political theory by suggesting that politics is not simply about securing equal liberty and providing mutual benefits or a social minimum, but also has something to do with human well-being or the quality of life. Two important examples of this line of analysis are the "capabilities" approach to the study of political development initiated by Martha Nussbaum (2006) and Amartya Sen (1999, 2004) and the naturalism of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999). This broadening of our conceptual repertory has been prompted by new readings of the big three – Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle – but also by new studies of Homer, Herodotus, the playwrights, and the orators.

These new developments in the study of Greek political theory have implications for liberal education in the humanities that reflect more than a growth of interest in a particular scholarly specialty or historical period. The chapters in this volume represent a variety of orientations to the study of Greek political theory, but there is within that variety overall agreement that we need to reject both a narrow historicism that reduces text to context and an abstractly ahistorical approach that treats ancient authors as if they were our contemporaries. Speaking of his approach to Homer in the conclusion to the first chapter of this volume, Dean Hammer puts it this way: "The challenge of political thought is to remain attentive to the historical, cultural, and poetic context from which the epics emerged without, in turn, reducing interpretation to that context." The shared goal of all the chapters is to reconstruct Greek political thought as a conversation that matters to us because it is both like and unlike the political discourse of our own time.

The first four chapters in this volume address texts that are not typically regarded as political philosophy or systematic political thought: works of epic poetry, tragic drama, and narrative history – works by Homer, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Herodotus and Thucydides. One might call these "pre-philosophic" works, but all four chapters indicate that to say this would be to overstate the difference between these works and those of the political philosophers. This refusal to be guided by traditional genre expectations comes across strongly in all the chapters in this volume. Narrative history, imaginative literature, and self-conscious philosophizing need to be brought into dialogue with one another, a step precluded by the strict genre distinctions that are silently reinforced by the organization of specialized inquiry in the modern university.[5] To

[5] See Plato's Socrates in the *Gorgias* on *muthos* and *logos*. At 523a, Socrates prefaces his mythic account of death and judgment with the following: "Listen, as they say, to

use a convenient Greek term, there is a kind of *logos*, of articulate speech about human nature and its relation to nature as a whole, in all the texts we consider, and it is our job to bring these *logoi* out and to engage them with the *logoi* – both explicit ones and those implicit in our practices and institutions – about politics and human action that are familiar to us as members of our own political communities today. In all of these chapters, a refusal to be tightly guided by genre expectations about what counts as literature or history or philosophy yields substantively new interpretations of Greek politics and Greek reflections on political life.

Dean Hammer, in "Homer and Political Thought," begins by rehearsing the traditional view that Homeric epic and philosophy are entirely different kinds of discourse, and goes on to argue that this distinction is overstated. Hammer contends that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are veridical, reflective, and political – rather than merely an artful expression of the folkways of a pre-political society. He challenges the standard view of a sharp rupture between the Homeric world and the emergence of the democratic polis. Instead, he argues, the poems give us a picture of politics as a "field" of contention over rights and leadership, "one in which charismatic and participatory elements are held in tension." According to Hammer, "the story Homer tells, like the story Achilles tells Priam, is one in which we are moved toward a recognition of a shared world, a recognition that arises not from outside, but from within a world constituted by experience." Properly understood, the Homeric epics give modern readers the opportunity to think of politics as an activity, and thus help liberate us from "the Weberian association of politics with the exercise of a monopoly of force." Hammer's very different understanding of politics owes an acknowledged debt to Hannah Arendt, but his chapter is no mere restatement of her position; instead, he puts us in a better position to read Homer as Arendt did, paying attention to both the political questions of our own time and the particular context and language of the ancient poet.

Arlene Saxonhouse's "Foundings vs. Constitutions: Ancient Tragedy and the Origins of Political Community" develops further this question of how to think about the emergence of political life in ways that are foreign to the modern social imaginary. She argues that the

this especially beautiful *logos*, which I think you will regard as a *muthos*, but which I regard as a *logos*." Distinctions among genres ought to be preserved and discussed, but treating them as rigid and deterministic leads away from liberal education and toward narrow scholarship. The chapters in this volume, taken together, express a turn in the opposite direction.

problem of the founding is brought into a surprising and valuable new perspective by several Greek tragedies, notably Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. One significant potential gain from reading and discussing these plays as she suggests is a way out of the pervasive conceptual world of the modern social contract metaphor. As Saxonhouse reads them, "what the tragedies offer is a different understanding of the original grounding of cities – not as constitution writing moments of self-limitations, but as moments when human rationality faces the terrifying forces that limit it." What the tragedies can provide is not a new theory of the founding, but an opportunity to expand our political imagination and hence our powers of judgment.

The next two chapters turn to the work of the Greek historians, Herodotus and Thucydides. As they do, they continue to explore the possibility that the work of political thought, of whatever literary genre, and in modern times as well as ancient, is the project of opening the imagination beyond the limits of the prevailing culture as a way of educating practical reason. Norma Thompson ("Most Favored Status in Herodotus and Thucydides: Recasting the Athenian Tyrannicides through Solon and Pericles") shows that while the rejection of tyranny is a central feature of each writer's narrative of the two great wars of the fifth century BC, both aim to debunk the traditionally honored Athenian story of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton as the embodiment of the founding of democratic rule. Instead, they propose two figures – Herodotus' Solon and Thucydides' Pericles – whose lives and characters they present as heroic and exemplary, and yet at the same time as flawed and for that very reason open to continuous reinterpretation. As Thompson reads the two historians, their portrayal of non-tyrannical political leadership in this complex and even ambivalent way leads to two conclusions: that their work has more in common than has usually been thought; and that we must reject the stereotypes of Herodotus as the simple and uncritical transmitter of the prevailing myths of the day, and of Thucydides as a precursor of modern social scientific history who refuses to evaluate the phenomena he explains. What can we say, then, about their intention? According to Thompson, this:

> Both historians hold out the hope that in another time and place, the unlearned lesson from their age might get another review. The historians' purposes are political as well as literary, and revolve around making a tighter case against tyranny than their characters were able to effect. Herodotus and

> Thucydides identify with their characters, in other words, for the purpose of deepening their own testament to self-rule.

Gerald Mara's "Thucydides and Political Thought" approaches the question of Thucydides' intention in a similar spirit. In his analyses of the speeches of Pericles, the Melian debate, and especially the speech of the enigmatic Diodotus concerning the fate of the Mytileneans, Mara stresses the provisional and open-ended character of Thucydides' account of the events, both the spoken words and the deeds, of the Peloponnesian war: "The alternative readings that I offer suggest that Thucydides' narrative should be interpreted as contributing resources for the thoughtful judgments and practices of citizens, not simply within his own immediate political context but within political futures whose contours are necessarily indeterminate." As Mara reads it, Thucydides' artful logos is anything but directive and conclusive; the book achieves the status its author claims for it (as a "possession for all times") by presenting the inevitable open-endedness of political life and thus providing a contribution to democratic discussion, both ancient and modern, that is otherwise unavailable. This incitement to ongoing deliberation – and to coherently focused anxiety – about a vividly depicted and non-obvious set of political problems is what the book is about. Mara's Thucydides summons us to face and to worry about things we would not otherwise notice.

The next three chapters focus on the Platonic dialogues, and so concern themselves with self-consciously philosophical texts; all three, however, underline the continuities between Platonic philosophizing and the epic, theatrical, and historical works discussed in the first four chapters. Susan Bickford's "'This Way of Life, This Contest': Rethinking Socratic Citizenship" takes its title from the rallying cry Plato's Socrates addresses to "all human beings" at *Gorgias* 526e. Bickford's initial point is that just what the Socratic way of life involves is far from clear, especially concerning the relationship of this way of life to the politics of democratic Athens. Starting with the *Apology* and then working through critical passages in *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Laws*, she builds a case for thinking that the sort of "soul-shaping" that both Plato and Socrates practice is neither paternalistically antidemocratic (as many democratic critics of Plato have argued), nor only counterculturally aporetic (as for example, Plato's Cleitophon claims in the dialogue that bears his name). Nor does she accept the dubious easy out of regarding Plato as the arch-authoritarian and Socrates as at least a semi-democrat.

Plato's Socrates, for Bickford, is never *merely* aporetic – he also offers images, myths, and "the inspiration of his own practice and discourse." The dialogues themselves, she argues, are best understood as "summoners" – they provide us with a summons or exhortation to investigate, like those sense-objects that "don't declare any one thing more than its opposite" (*Republic* 7, 523b–25a). Such objects, according to Socrates in the *Republic*, cause us to see that sense perception isn't enough; analogously, the dialogues cause us to see that received opinions aren't enough. Thus the dialogues themselves, for Bickford, like these sense-objects, provide, when properly interpreted, both an aporetic moment *and* a call to rigorous inquiry. Is Socrates' kind of inspiration institutionalizable? Bickford concludes with an intriguing argument that in the *Laws*, in which Socrates is not a character, Plato indicates the indispensability of Socratic summoning for successful self-rule by sketching the institution of the Nocturnal Council as a site for Platonic/Socratic dialogue that includes political leaders as participants, but that promotes deliberation about fundamental questions rather than producing authoritative decisions and rules.

David Roochnik's "The Political Drama of Plato's *Republic*" addresses directly the charge that the *Republic* is a manifesto for undemocratic rule by philosophers. Roochnik acknowledges that the dialogue contains a radical critique of democracy, providing ample reason for critics of Plato, like Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, to conclude that the *Republic* has no value for committed liberal democrats: Popper's "enormous distaste for Plato's *Republic* may appear well founded, but in fact it entirely neglects an essential feature of the dialogue," argues Roochnik. "Plato is a genius at throwing a monkey wrench into what initially seems to be a smoothly functioning piece of conceptual machinery, and thereby transforming it into something far more puzzling and provocative." Roochnik identifies five such "monkey wrenches" in the *Republic*, including the ambiguity of the dialogue's position on democracy and the extent to which the concluding myth of Er provides a defense of diversity. What the *Republic* seems to teach, on his view, is no straightforward doctrine, whether democratic or anti-democratic, but the necessity of asking certain questions, such as "What is the value of democracy and of diversity?" and "What form of authority ought to hold sway in a political community?" Roochnik concludes that what matters about this most famous of the dialogues is not whether it is pro- or anti-democracy: "The *Republic* expresses a tension. . . . It forces its readers to wonder about justice, the city, and the question of political authority, and it sets into motion a series of responses, both

positive and negative, that becomes the history of political philosophy itself." A history, moreover, that calls for our participation.

The third chapter on Plato, Catherine Zuckert's "Practical Plato," presents a reading of the *Statesman* as perhaps the "strangest" of Plato's dialogues. On the one hand, it is intensely "practical," insofar as the Eleatic *xenos* (stranger or visitor), who is the principal speaker in this dialogue, seems bent on "gradually leading his interlocutors (and Plato's readers) toward an understanding of politics as arising not from human nobility, but from human need." The Eleatic, on Zuckert's reading, lowers the goal of politics from justice to preservation and protection – unlike both the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Moreover, there is no apparently ideal or nearly ideal polis imagined here, nothing to compare with Kallipolis in the *Republic* or even Magnesia in the *Laws*. And yet, a central theme of the dialogue is that the science of politics and the life of true political leadership, "properly understood, requires extraordinary intelligence and learning. Precisely for that reason, it is also extremely rare, if it exists at all." Politics, according to Zuckert's reading of the *Statesman*, thus seems both to require and to resist philosophical leadership:

> Politicians, properly speaking, are not contemptible. . . . The problem, on the other hand, is that individuals capable of acquiring the "science of the rule of human beings" will learn that they will not be able to exercise that knowledge without endangering their own survival. There is little, if any incentive for such individuals to perfect their knowledge, especially if they see that they will never be able to put it into practice for long, if at all.

Readers may wonder whether this deep and apparently insoluble problem indicates the essentially tragic character of political life. Like Plato, Zuckert steadfastly refuses to resolve or domesticate the dilemma her reading uncovers.

The three chapters on Plato are followed by two on Aristotle. Both chapters stress continuities between the two philosophers, but not in terms of principles; rather, these chapters argue that Aristotle, like Plato, follows a non-doctrinal and non-systematic mode of philosophizing about political life. My chapter, "Reading Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* as a Single Course of Lectures: Rhetoric, Politics, and Philosophy," attempts to trace Aristotle's pedagogical aims in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and *Politics*. I treat the two works not as separate treatises,

but as a single series of connected lectures on what Aristotle calls *politikē*, a term that corresponds in one way to our "political philosophy" and in another to our "social science." My argument is that these lectures do not intend to supply a systematic political theory, but rather to show auditors and readers how to address what Aristotle takes to be the central and permanent problems of political life – and indeed of human life as a whole. While it is true that Aristotle asserts a distinctly naturalist approach to politics, his introduction of the language of his version of natural science into political matters is not intended to replace political discourse, or to serve as a fundamental first premise from which political principles can be deduced; instead, his goal is to supply a point of view – a conceptual space – from which our particular political deliberations may be more successfully undertaken. "*Successfully* undertaken" here means undertaken in such a way that the potential benefits of the practice of politics for human virtue or excellence can better be achieved and that the degradation to which this same practice too often subjects humanity can better be avoided.

In their chapter "Lived Excellence in Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*: Why the Encomium of Theramenes Matters," Jill Frank and Sara Monoson address the genre question directly: what kind of a work is the *Constitution of Athens* (*CA*)? Their answer, using categories from Aristotle's *Poetics*, is that it is a "poetic history," an account of Athenian events and institutions, from the distant past up to Aristotle's own time, that has the universalizing quality Aristotle attributes to poetry. They identify two major examples of such universalization in the *CA*, both of them aspirational norms, "lived excellences" in Frank and Monoson's phrase, that can serve as an incitement to good politics. The first is the story of an individual Athenian politician, Theramenes; the second, the story of the Athenian demos itself: "Aristotle uses his commentary on Theramenes and on the constitutions with which he associates Theramenes to open a course for both citizen virtue and Athenian constitutional development, a course of lawfulness and moderation absent from the regimes under which Theramenes lived, but available for the future through an understanding of Athens's past and present." These life-stories are no mere record of events, but a look at the qualities that, for Aristotle, identify these lives and ways of life as meaningful wholes. On this reading, Aristotle presents Theramenes as an embodiment of the key political virtue of *lawfulness* – a devotion to the norm of constitutional government that by no means rules out radical disobedience against a regime that transgresses its own laws. Such subtle lawfulness is also a kind of moderation, in the sense that it rejects