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Political Virtues in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy
(Research project)

In Western intellectual history, the philosophical discussion of the legitimization of political power has its origin in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and is also a crucial topic in medieval political philosophy.¹ In both ancient and medieval philosophy, the concept of the legitimization of political authority is closely related to the concept of a rational, just, non-manipulative political leadership and—more or less—to the concept of natural laws. The interrelations of these three concepts are the subject of the proposed project. The first part of this study is about Plato and Aristotle, followed by some considerations on the Stoic idea of natural laws. The second part is about medieval philosophy, in particular Aquinas and Marsilius of Padua.

1. The ethical foundation of Ancient political philosophy:
Virtue(s), Knowledge, and the Good Life

Generally, ancient philosophical theories about both the legitimization of political authority, and a just political constitution (or regime) are imbedded in general ethical theories. Ancient philosophical thinking is subordinated to the question what is the best way for a human being to live. To answer this question means to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions of a good life. Human beings are, as Aristotle puts it, “by nature political animals”. Indeed an individual person’s life is embedded in various ways of social interaction, and the individual person’s good life depends upon successful social cooperation. This is why every attempt to

¹ Some remarks on Early Greek narrative sources: The nature of political power is already addressed in the opening scene of the earliest surviving text of Western literature, Homer’s *Iliad*, in the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. Greek Tragedy addresses aspects of social and political leadership mainly in the portrayal of the tragic hero (on the political implications of tragic poetry cf. Meier 1988). The *Iliad* is first in a series of literary texts, representing more or less theoretical treatments on training and educating political leaders, such as Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*. Another—and most important—source of political thinking is the work of Thucydides. In a recent historical study, Tsamakis (1995) argues for the thesis that Thucydides’ aim was to compose a kind of handbook which could be used by future politicians. Although this project is confined to philosophy, such narrative treatments will be

answer the question of the individual person's good life (eudaimonia) naturally leads to the analysis of the structure of a community that provides the conditions for the pursuit of happiness of its citizens.

The starting point of ancient philosophical reasoning is always the character of the individual person. Ancient philosophers explain the human personality in terms of moral and intellectual *virtues*. A virtue is conceived as an enduring character trait of a person, involving both a motivation to produce a certain desirable end and the reliable success in bringing about that end. Although there are different conceptions of virtue in antiquity, the common principal idea is that virtue, or the possession of certain key virtues, respectively, is *both* constitutive of the individual person's *happiness* and is a necessary condition for a *just political order*. For the virtuous person is a person who is able to *perform* all her various activities *well*, including the activities of reason *and* of social interaction. For ancient philosophers, a virtuous life is a life guided by a certain kind of *knowledge*—knowledge of the Good, that is an explicit and comprehensive knowledge about *how one ought to live*. Plato's Socrates even identifies virtue with knowledge. (This doctrine, known as 'Socratic Intellectualism' sets some problems of its own that will be addressed in the section on Plato.) Knowledge of the Good is, among other elements, characterized both by *self-knowledge* and *self-control*, that is, the ability to guide one's own decisions and action by the knowledge of what is good. The ancient idea of self-knowledge and self-control is more complex than modern conceptions in so far as *self-knowledge* entails *moral knowledge*, and *self-control* entails *moral motivation*, that is, the motivation to act on behalf of the needs and interests of other persons. This implication underlies the well-known Socratic claim that no one does wrong willingly, but only through ignorance. Aristotle conceives a combination of both theoretical and practical knowledge as *phronesis*, and he regards self-control (*enkrateia*) as an essential element of virtue. For the Stoics, the "wise man" is a person who is, apart from other qualities, a perfectly self-controlled person.

The rationale of ancient ethics and political philosophy is the attempt to find rational solutions to *conflicts* about the value of certain goods such as wealth, wisdom, expert knowledge, technical skills, power, honour and fame. All these are human goods. But we can be in conflict about the real *value* and the *proper use* of such goods. To find rational solutions to such conflicts, we need to *know* how to value and how to use our goods. Such knowledge is

useful. They influenced philosophical debates and were discussed in philosophical texts (in particular in the work of Plato and Aristotle).

the basis of both the individual's pursuit of happiness and a just society. The political dimension of ancient ideas of virtue and happiness may be put this way: To become a virtuous person means at the same time practising the life of a *citizen* of a just *political* community. For only virtuous persons can successfully contribute to a well structured society. In turn, it is only a well structured just community that provides the conditions for the successful social interaction and cooperation that are necessary for the individual person's pursuit of happiness. The issue of the authority of laws was explicitly discussed by some Sophists. The way Plato portrays the *dramatis personae* Protagoras, Callicles, and Thrasymachus supports the assumption that certain Sophists raised this issue in debates on whether the law is a matter of nature (*physis*) or a matter of convention (*nomos*) (cf. M. Gagarin / P. Woodruff 1995). The Sophists challenged traditional views on norms and values. In a surviving fragment of Antiphon's *On truth* we are told that conventional laws are "chains of nature." A comprehensive theory of both the legitimization of political power and political leadership was, however, first developed by Plato.

1.1 Plato

In a famous passage of the *Apology* (30a-b), Plato has Socrates telling his fellow citizens: "You are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth and honour as possible, while you do not care for ... wisdom ... or the best possible state of your soul? ... I ask you to make your first and strongest concern ... that the soul should be as virtuous as possible. For virtue does not come from wealth, but through virtue, wealth and everything else, private and public, becomes good for men." It is most interesting to note that Plato's Socrates explicitly speaks to his audience as citizens of Athens. What becomes explicit in this passage is the idea that a life guided by knowledge of the Good—the "examined life" (38a)—is the foundation of a just political order. For Plato, a good life requires what he calls "knowledge of the Good" (cf. e.g. *Laches* 199d, *Charmides* 174c, *Meno* 78c), that is, knowledge of how to make proper use of a persons various abilities and skills. We may call this kind of knowledge "eudaimonistic knowledge" (cf. for a detailed explanation Hardy 2007). The overall argument of Plato's ethics may be put this way:

- (1) The final end of all our actions is to live a good life (*eudaimonia*), that is, the pursuit of happiness.
- (2) A person lives a good life if—and only if—she is able to make proper use both of her own skills and abilities, and of external goods.
- (3) This requires the possession of virtue (*arête*).
- (4) The possession of virtue requires knowledge of the Good.
- (5) Thus the pursuit of happiness requires knowledge of the Good.

This argument naturally leads Plato to his political theory. For the same conditions apply to a community as a whole: A just political community is structured the way that every citizen can best contribute to the communities' benefit. This requires the possession of virtue, including social virtues, and these virtues are to be acquired by education and theoretical teaching. What Plato conceives as knowledge of the Good entails various ways of both training one's own character, and obtaining theoretical knowledge (including a certain kind of second-order knowledge about valid logical patterns as well a set of criteria for evaluating the epistemic quality of beliefs).

In the *Republic*, Plato gives a detailed account of both acquiring a “just soul”, and building a just city. Socrates draws an analogy between five different (partly fictive) regimes, and five corresponding ways of living. He considers aristocracy in the sense of the rule of the best men (the philosophical rulers), timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny each of which is defined by a certain supreme final end of action, that is, a certain good (such as knowledge, honour, wealth, freedom, and power) the citizens of a given regime aims to maximize. Plato wants his readers to understand that only the just life which corresponds to the rule of best men (i.e. the philosopher-kings) is a happy (*eudaimon*) and therefore desirable life. Precisely at this point *political leadership* comes into play since the individual's just and happy life is guided by the same principles which constitute a community that is ruled by philosopher-kings.

On the face of it, this analogy is far from being self-evident. But notice: The upshot of the analogy is to understand why only a just life is a happy life. The “philosopher-king” Plato portrays in the *Republic* is a part of this analogy. The principal aim of the analogy is not the description of various political constitutions (or regimes) that really exist (or have existed). In other words: Plato does not seriously claim to write a piece of political history. This follows from the upshot of the overall argument in favour of the supremacy of justice (as an

individual person's virtue). Just as the individual's virtue is an *excellent* state of character, an excellent political leader is a person who is able to rule a community so that it allows its citizens to pursue their happiness. The just and enlightened political leader represents the *ideal* of living a good, virtuous life. A political leader is a person who has educated her character and has acquired knowledge of the Good in such an excellent way that she can help her fellow citizens to cultivate their character, to improve their skills, and to gain knowledge of the Good. If there were a philosopher-king to rule a community, she or he (in Plato's ideal state women are not dismissed from political leadership) would be a leader who would also show the citizens how to best contribute to a just society on the basis of self-knowledge and self-control. For this reason, a rational and just political leader would organize a community the way that the citizen can develop and cultivate their own abilities of self-knowledge and self-control. By the same token, such a person would be accepted and *acknowledged* by the citizens *as* a legitimate authority. Even though this is not explicitly stated in the *Republic*, we can easily infer such a conclusion from Plato's description of the philosopher-king's personal qualities, above all, from her or his deep motivation (and commitment) to promote the citizens' eudaimonia.

Although the primary aim of the *Republic* is to prove that only a just life is a happy life, the *Republic* also contains a political theory in so far as Plato describes the necessary conditions for a just community. Again, these conditions can be inferred from the particular (motivating) knowledge that enables a *philosopher-king* to rule a just community. The authority of a philosophical ruler represents the situation of a perfectly just community. As is well known, Plato's *Republic* has been the target of massive criticism (cf. e.g. K. Popper's *The open society and its enemies*). However, if we consider the methodological function (and the corresponding constraints) of Plato's model of an ideal just state, much (and probably most) of Popper's (and others') critique seems to be the result of a misunderstanding. What is most relevant for an appropriate understanding of Plato's conception of political leadership is that the leader of the ideal just state has to undergo a long and arduous way of both theoretical *education*, and practical training. The educational program outlined in the *Republic* is a program of gaining self-knowledge, including moral knowledge, and practising self-control. The political leader is the one who comes closest to the excellence of character that everyone desires. (This crucial point has also been neglected by Aristotle, and it seems to me, that this, in turn, undermines Aristotle's critique of Plato's *Republic* set forth in the second book of his *Politics*).

In the *Statesmen* too, Plato emphasizes the necessity of a certain kind of knowledge which singles out the statesmen. In this dialogue he adds an explicit distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, defining the statesman as the one who possess theoretical political knowledge. In the *Laws* Plato explicitly states the end of a community (and its laws) in terms of the pursuit of happiness (628d, 702a-d). The *Laws* mark, however, a new stage in Plato's political philosophy in so far as this work presents a very detailed description (and proposal) of the laws of a just regime.

The Platonic conception of political leadership has received much attention in the political philosophy of the European Enlightenment. In France, Diderot and Voltaire both endorsed the ideal of the knowledgeable despot who would transform the absolute dictates of reason and the principles of human nature into politics. The idea of superior morality and practical wisdom which is present in the British idealists' vision similarly reflects a deep commitment to a transformed conception of the prototypical Platonic leader. Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century philosophers were ready to endorse a kind of authoritarian leadership executed by the reasoned, wise expert, as long as it could lead to the achievement of a policy that corresponds to their visions.

1.2 Aristotle

Aristotle rejects Plato's metaphysical foundations of moral philosophy, and Book II of his *Politics* presents a detailed critique of Plato's *Republic*. However, Aristotle endorses the eudaimonistic argument outlined above. He also follows Plato's idea of a human *ergon*, the human function which is the foundation of an appropriate conception of a good life, (cf. e.g. Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). Aristotle develops his own theory of virtue on the basis of his bio-psychological conception of the human nature. In his political philosophy, Aristotle presents a rich analysis of the structure of various political constitutions (and regimes).

A community is defined by common action for the sake of common goods. Aristotle explicitly links the investigation of the best regime to the topic of happiness: the ultimate end of a community (or state) is its citizens' eudaimonia (*Politics*, III 9, 1280b39ff.). One of the principal arguments both of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* says: Every action aims at some good. Since a community is constituted by common action, every community aims at some good. And "the one that does so in the highest degree and aims at the most authoritative

of all goods is the community which is the most authoritative of all and embraces all others: this is the one called the polis or the political community”. This definition of *polis* opens the *Politics*. In this work, Aristotle is on the search of the best political constitution—the one which promotes its citizens happiness (eudaimonia). Since human beings are, according to Aristotle, are by nature “political animals”, a community (*polis*) exists by nature (and not only by convention), and the same holds for the different forms of authority within a community. Aristotle considers a community a compound of households (or families), and he therefore begins the *Politics* with an analysis of the nature and function of a household. In the second book of the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses the ideas of Plato, Phaleas, and Hippodamus about the best constitution (or regime), the regimes Sparta, Crete, and Carthage, and finally nine lawgivers. Book Three then offers an analysis of the guiding principles of regimes, and in particular of the best regime. At this point, Aristotle also addresses the question of the decision-makers who should rule a community (III 9-13). The best community (or regime) is, in short, the one which is ruled by the best men—and this idea has to be understood in terms of excellence (virtue).

The way Aristotle treats the topic of the legitimization of political authority is a consequence of his general account of justice. In Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the laws of a polis consist both of natural, and of ‘civil’ laws. The natural law is unchangeable and always the same. It does not depend upon the consent of the people whereas the civil laws result from the people’s different interests and their different convictions about justice. Due to the variety of such interests and convictions, there is no general agreement among different communities on just civil laws. And yet for every community there is one best constitution (or regime). The best regime is the one that is ruled by the principle of distributive justice set forth in Book V of the NE. In *Politics* III, 9-13, Aristotle relates distributive justice to political authority, discussing the question about the distribution of political power in a given community. A good polis aims at the pursuit of happiness (eudaimonia) of all the citizens. As this is a very complex matter, different social units can contribute to the community’s overall welfare in different ways and to different degrees. The best and most important contribution comes from those who possess virtue and phronesis. For this reason legislative and executive positions in a government ought to be distributed consistent with the degree of a person’s virtue and phronesis, whereby these qualities are basically constituted by knowledge and by the ability of self-control. The best rulers who ought to have the supreme authority in a good community are the most virtuous

people. But there are also other persons who possess the qualities required to a lesser degree and who can fill certain political positions.

1.3 Ancient Roman Philosophy

The relation between virtue, knowledge, a just political order, and political leadership is also present in later Hellenistic philosophy. In the work of Cicero, Chrysippus, Plutarch, and Zeno we find substantial considerations on the ideal of a philosopher's well-ruled community. The vision in Zeno's *Republic* even seems to anticipate the modern view of an internationalist, cosmopolitan state. Although there is a scholarly dispute whether such an idea can really be attributed to the author of the *Republic*, it is evident that he portrays the political leader as "a citizen of the world".

In *De re publica* Cicero highlights that fact that all successful and honourable political leaders of the past have been philosophically educated persons. There is, however, a certain tension to be noticed. On the one hand, *De re publica* seems to be a plea for the combination of both philosophical, and practical, political knowledge and interests. On the other hand, in the proem of this dialogue, Cicero compares the works of statesmen (or politicians) with the works of philosophers in order to show the superiority of the role of politicians. Cicero's argument relies on the main premise that human beings have by nature the irresistible desire (*necessitas*) for virtue (*virtus*). For Cicero, it is, however, not sufficient to *possess* virtue. What really matters is the *performance* (or pursuit) of virtue (*virtus*). The success of virtue entirely depends upon its use or pursuit (*usus virtutis*). In Cicero's view, the best and most important pursuit of virtue (*maximus usus virtutis*) is political activity, that is, the work of a government (*civitatis gubernatio*), as opposed to the philosopher's activity. Cicero holds that the philosophers only talk about the worthy things that others, the politicians, *do*. It is interesting to note that in Cicero's view *virtus* takes the place of the Greek idea of *eudaimonia*. Cicero self-consciously breaks with the Greek philosophical tradition which took political authority to be based on comprehensive, philosophical knowledge. Hence we find in *De re publica* an entirely new conception of political leadership. Interestingly enough, Cicero takes up philosophical and rhetorical elements of Greek philosophy, in particular of Plato's dialogues, in order to turn the arguments around – against the idea of a philosophically well educated philosophical politician who takes care of a community's welfare.

The extremely influential Stoic contribution to the history of political thought is the idea that the laws of a civic life have to be based on the human nature that is one and the same in all human beings. An intriguing question is whether the Stoic conception of the “wise man” that plays a key role in Stoic epistemology can be understood as the vision of ideal political leadership.

2. Medieval Political Philosophy

Medieval political philosophy is the second main part of the proposed study. For reasons explained below, we shall focus on the work of St. Thomas Aquinas and Marsilius of Padua. Medieval political thinking takes up Aristotle’s ethics and political philosophy as well as the Stoic conception of a natural law. St. Augustine’s moral theology in his *The City of God* is based upon an interpretation of Aristotelian ethics. The same is true of Albert the Great’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean ethics* which had a great influence on Thomas Aquinas, who is probably the most influential figure in the history of medieval political thinking.

2.1 Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas discusses political topics not only in his *Summa Theologia* but also in his (by himself unfinished) commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*, and in smaller writings like the *Quaestiones disputatae on potentia*. Aquinas endorses the Aristotelian doctrine that human beings are by nature political animals as well as the Aristotelian account of virtue, but his conception of a natural law (*lex naturalis*) follows the line of thought of Roman Stoics. Aquinas’ political theory is grounded in his theological cosmology: The universe as a whole is a certain kind of ‘community’ which is ruled by God’s eternal law (*lex aeternum*). This law determines and rules the whole creation, but in different ways. The non-rational beings follow the eternal law by nature, whereas rational, human beings participate in the eternal law in so far as they have a natural, inborn inclination to act in accordance with the eternal law. This is what Aquinas

calls “natural law” (*lex naturalis*, *Summa Theol.* I-II, 91, 2), and the human law (*lex humana*) has to follow and to execute the natural law.

In a certain way, Aquinas follows the ancient Greek idea of a good life in so far as his theology provides a comprehensive answer to the question of how a human being ought to live. For Aquinas, human beings are faced with the task of making right choices for the sake of her/his individual *beatitudo* (which is in a way a counterpart to what Ancient Greek philosophy calls *eudaimonia*). Just as ethics is concerned with questions about what one should choose to do for the sake of *beatitudo*, *political philosophy* is concerned with the right choices that have to be made by *political leaders*, that is, by the persons “who have the care of the community as a whole” in order to promote the *common* (or public) good, that is, a community's *beatitudo*. A good and just government has to ensure that all human laws are in accordance with the natural law. This is both the duty and the source of legitimization of a government. The best form of a government is, according to Aquinas, a combination of aspects of kingship, democracy, and aristocracy. One question to be addressed in the interpretation of Aquinas' work is: What conception of political leadership is implied in his theory of natural laws and good governments?

2.2 Marsilius of Padua

An opponent to the doctrine of a natural law is Marsilius of Padua. The final end of every community is what Marsilius calls tranquillity or peace which promotes the welfare of nations as well as of their citizens. To ensure and to promote the citizens' welfare is the function of a government. Sharing principal ideas about the function of a government, Aquinas and Marsilius present, however, completely different views about the foundation of the legitimization of political authority. Whilst Aquinas takes the natural law to be the undisputable solid ground of the legitimacy of political authority, Marsilius emphatically denies the existence of a natural law. For the author of the *Defensor pacis*, the sole source of legitimate political power is the people's will. In other words: The human law is the people's will or consent. A particular aim of the *Defensor pacis* is an attack on any ecclesiastical political authority. Marsilius puts forward a subtle argument: Christ himself declares that clergy should not be actively involved in the human, temporal affairs, and hence not in human political affairs. Thus the clergy cannot claim political authority and leadership.

Just like Aquinas, Marsilius explicitly refers to Aristotle. Large parts of the *Defensor pacis* can be read as a commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*. After having laid out his ideas on what he calls—referring to Aristotle—the “final cause” of a community (or state), the parts of a community, and the cause (and function) of the different parts of a community, Marsilius describes in *Discourse One*, ch. XIV the qualities of a “perfect ruler.” He seems to make an attempt to combine the Aristotelian account of virtue with his own conviction of the necessity of laws which do justice to the popular sovereignty. Although he claims “that no ruler, however virtuous or just, should rule without laws,” Marsilius puts some emphasis on a ruler's special qualities. A perfect ruler has to possess both intellectual and moral virtues. He has to have prudence, justice, and some more special virtues such as equity, “by which the judge is guided, especially with respect to his emotions, in those cases where the law is deficient.” Another quality which is required for a perfect ruler is an outstanding love or benevolence for the policy and the citizens. An external necessary condition for a good political leadership is the ruler's executive force; he needs to have proper instruments at his disposal for executing his decisions. Marsilius' important contribution to the development of political ideas is the doctrine of popular sovereignty which reappears in the theories of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau.

To sum up: Ancient (Greek and Roman) and medieval philosophers present different political theories in which the concept of the legitimization of political power is related to the concepts of political leadership. The various theories exhibit, however, different definitions and explanations of these three concepts: different arguments, and, consequently, a different understanding of the legitimization of political power and of political leadership. To analyze and to compare these various theories is the aim of this research project.

Project goals

The first goal of the project is to show how Ancient and Medieval philosophers built up their ideas of political power and social leadership within the framework of ethics, epistemology, cosmology, and theology. The project focuses on Plato, Aristotle, the Stoic conception of natural laws, Thomas Aquinas, and Marsilius of Padua. What is crucial to this investigation—and, to my knowledge, a desideratum—is to make explicit *the general conceptions* of both *practical reasoning* and *social interaction* underlying the various political theories. The second aim is to look at some cornerstones in the reception of ancient and medieval political thinking, and, not the least, to compare these conceptions with contemporary theories such as Rawls' *Theory of justice*, and the conception of human agency and morality by Christine Korsgaard who also refers to Plato and Aristotle in her current work. A model of such an approach is Santas 2001. From a methodological perspective one might also compare the studies of MacIntyre 1981, Taylor 1992, and Schneewind 1998. The leading methodological question is how to transform ancient and medieval philosopher's arguments into our own understanding without committing ourselves to certain metaphysical, cosmological, and theological assumptions we might not be willing to accept from a contemporary point of view.

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