

ON CLASSICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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The ancients "would therefore advise the moderns rather to raise their own side of the hill than dream of pulling down that of the ancients; to the former of which they would not only give license, but also largely contribute."—The Battle of the Books

TODAY the status of political philosophy is more precarious, and its meaning is more blurred, than at any time since political philosophy emerged many centuries ago, somewhere in Greece. Its present condition is sufficiently illustrated by the fact that it has become possible, and indeed customary, to speak of the "political philosophies" of vulgar impostors.

In the past political philosophy had a very precise meaning. The galaxy of political philosophers from Socrates to Rousseau, and even certain more recent thinkers, conceived of it as an attempt to replace opinions about political fundamentals by genuine knowledge concerning them or by the science of political fundamentals. These fundamentals include two groups of subjects: "the nature of political things" (that is, of laws, institutions, power, authority, duties and rights, conditions, actions, decisions, programs, aspirations and wishes, human beings as political agents or as objects of political action); and "the best, or the just, political order." Political philosophy, as formerly understood, was identical with political science, or, if not identical, then the relations between the two were regarded not as those between one field of inquiry and another, but as those between the way and the goal. Moreover, political philosophy was thought to be fundamentally distinguished from history: it was not considered a historical discipline.

The present crisis in political philosophy is due to the two-fold fact that in one way or another a distinction is generally made between political philosophy and political science as two different fields of inquiry, and that the idea of an ahistorical political philosophy has become doubtful. It is due, in other words, to the unsolved problems raised by positivism and historicism.

In contrast to earlier political philosophy, positivism and, more obviously, historicism must regard the study of the history of political philosophy as an integral part of their own philosophic effort. They naturally tend to interpret earlier political philosophy from a positivist or historicist point of view. The dangers of misinterpretation are perhaps greatest as regards classical political philosophy. It is safe to say that the typical present-day interpretation of classical political philosophy is not historical, but historicist. A historical interpretation is one that tries to understand the philosophy of the past exactly as that philosophy understood itself. The historicist interpretation is one form of the attempt to understand the philosophy of the past better than it understood itself; for it is based on the assumption, wholly alien to the thought of the classics, that each philosophy is essentially related to its time—to the “spirit” of its time or to the “material conditions” of its time, or to both. In trying to understand classical political philosophy in the light of this assumption one does not understand it as it understood itself: one does not understand it historically.

The purpose of the following remarks is to discuss especially those elements of classical political philosophy which are particularly likely to be overlooked or insufficiently stressed by the schools that are most influential in our time. These remarks are not intended to sketch the outlines of a truly historical interpretation of classical political philosophy. They will have fulfilled their purpose if they point to the way which, I believe, is the only one whereby such an interpretation can eventually be reached.

I

Classical political philosophy is characterized by the fact that it was related to political life directly. It was only after the classical philosophers had done their work that political philosophy became definitely "established" and thus acquired a certain independence of political life. Since that time the relationship of political philosophers to political life, and their grasp of it, has been determined by the existence of an inherited political philosophy: since then political philosophy has been related to political life through the medium of a tradition of political philosophy. The tradition that originated in classical Greece was rejected in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in favor of a new political philosophy. But this "revolution" did not restore the direct relation to political life that had existed in the beginning: the new political philosophy was related to political life through the medium of the inherited general notion of political philosophy or political science, and through the medium of a new concept of science. Today, political science may believe that by rejecting or by emancipating itself from political philosophy, it stands in the most direct relation to political life; actually it is related to political life through the medium of modern natural science, or of the reaction to modern natural science, and through a number of basic concepts inherited from the philosophic tradition, however despised or ignored.

It was its direct relation to political life which determined the orientation and scope of classical political philosophy. Accordingly, the tradition which was based on that philosophy, and which preserved its orientation and scope, preserved that direct relation to a certain extent. The fundamental change in this respect was prepared by the new political philosophy of the early modern period and reaches its climax in present-day political science. The most striking difference between classical political philosophy and present-day political science is that the latter is no longer concerned with what was the guiding question for the former: the question of the best form of government, or of

the best political order. On the other hand, modern political science is greatly preoccupied with a type of question that was of much less importance to classical political philosophy: questions concerning method. Both differences must be traced to the same reason: to the different degree of directness in which classical political philosophy, on the one hand, and present-day political science, on the other, are related to political life.

Classical political philosophy attempted to reach its goal by accepting the basic distinctions made in political life exactly in the sense and with the orientation in which they are made in political life, and by thinking them through, by understanding them as perfectly as possible. It did not start from such basic distinctions as those between "the state of nature" and "the civil state," between "facts" and "values," or between "reality" and "ideologies," distinctions which are alien, and even unknown, to political life as such and which originate only in philosophic or scientific reflection. Nor did it try to bring order into that chaos of political "facts" which exists only for those who approach political life from a point of view outside of political life, that is to say, from the point of view of a science that is not itself essentially an element of political life. Instead, it followed carefully and even scrupulously the articulation which is inherent in, and natural to, political life and its objects.

The primary questions of classical political philosophy, and the terms in which it stated them, were not specifically philosophic or scientific; they were questions that are raised in assemblies, councils, clubs and cabinets, and they were stated in terms intelligible and familiar, at least to all sane adults, from everyday experience and everyday usage. These questions have a natural hierarchy which supplies political life, and hence political philosophy, with its fundamental orientation. No one can help distinguishing among questions of smaller, of greater, and of paramount importance, and between questions of the moment and questions that are always present in political communities; and intelligent men apply these distinctions intelligently.

Similarly it can be said that the method, too, of classical political philosophy was presented by political life itself. Political life is characterized by conflicts between men asserting opposed claims. Those who raise a claim usually believe that what they claim is good for them. In many cases they believe, and in most cases they say, that what they claim is good for the community at large. In practically all cases claims are raised, sometimes sincerely and sometimes insincerely, in the name of justice. The opposed claims are based, then, on opinions of what is good or just. To justify their claims, the opposed parties advance arguments. The conflict calls for arbitration, for an intelligent decision that will give each party what it truly deserves. Some of the material required for making such a decision is offered by the opposed parties themselves, and the very insufficiency of this partial material—an insufficiency obviously due to its partisan origin—points the way to its completion by the umpire. And the umpire par excellence is the political philosopher.¹ He tries to settle those political controversies that are both of paramount and of permanent importance.

This view of the function of the political philosopher—that he must not be a “radical” partisan who prefers victory in civil war to arbitration—is also of political origin: it is the duty of the good citizen to make civil strife cease and to create, by persuasion, agreement among the citizens.² The political philosopher first comes into sight as a good citizen who can perform this function of the good citizen in the best way and on the highest level. In order to perform his function he has to raise ulterior questions, questions that are never raised in the political arena; but in doing so he does not abandon his fundamental orientation, which is the orientation inherent in political life. Only if

¹ Note the procedure of Aristotle in *Politics*, 1280a7–1284b34; also Plato, *Eighth Letter*, 354a1–5 and 352c8 ff., and *Laws*, 627d11–628a4.

² See Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, iv 6, 14–15 and context; also Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 28, 5; also the remark by Hume (in his essay “Of the Original Contract”): “But philosophers, who have embraced a party (if that be not a contradiction in terms) . . .”

that orientation were abandoned, if the basic distinctions made by political life were considered merely "subjective" or "unscientific" and therefore disregarded, would the question of how to approach political things in order to understand them, that is to say, the question of method, become a fundamental question, and, indeed, *the* fundamental question.

It is true that political life is concerned primarily with the individual community to which the people happen to belong, and mostly even with individual situations, whereas political philosophy is concerned primarily with what is essential to all political communities. Yet there is a straight and almost continuous way leading from the pre-philosophic to the philosophic approach. Political life requires various kinds of skills, and in particular that apparently highest skill which enables a man to manage well the affairs of his political community as a whole. That skill—the art, the prudence, the practical wisdom, the specific understanding possessed by the excellent statesman or politician—and not "a body of true propositions" concerning political matters which is transmitted by teachers to pupils, is what was originally meant by "political science." A man who possesses "political science" is not merely able to deal properly with a large variety of situations in his own community; he can, in principle, manage well even the affairs of any other political community, be it "Greek" or "barbarian." While all political life is essentially the life of this or that political community, "political science," which essentially belongs to political life, is essentially "transferable" from one community to any other. A man like Themistocles was admired and listened to not only in Athens, but, after he had to flee from Athens, among the barbarians as well; such a man is admired because he is capable of giving sound political advice wherever he goes.³

"Political science" designated originally the skill by virtue of which a man could manage well the affairs of political communi-

³ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III 6, 2; Thucydides, I 138. See also Plato, *Lysis*, 209d5–210b2, and *Republic*, 494c7–d1.

ties by deed and by speech. The skill of speaking differs from the skill of doing in that it is more capable of being taught. Accordingly, that part of political skill which first became the object of instruction was the skill of public speaking. "Political science" in a more precise sense, that is, as a skill that is essentially teachable, appeared first as rhetoric, or as a part of it. The teacher of rhetoric was not necessarily a politician or statesman; he was, however, a teacher of politicians or statesmen. Since his pupils belonged to the most different political communities, the content of his teaching could not possibly be bound up with the particular features of any individual political community. "Political science," on the level which it reached as a result of the exertions of the rhetoricians, is more "universal," is to an even higher degree "transferable," than is "political science" as the skill of the excellent statesman or politician: whereas strangers as statesmen or political advisers were an exception, strangers as teachers of rhetoric were the rule.⁴

Classical political philosophy rejected the identification of political science with rhetoric; it held that rhetoric, at its best, was only an instrument of political science. It did not, however, descend from the level of universality that had been reached by the rhetoricians. On the contrary, after that part of political skill which is the skill of speaking had been raised to the level of a distinct discipline, the classical philosophers could meet that challenge only by raising the whole of "political science," as far as possible or necessary, to the rank of a distinct discipline. By doing this they became the founders of political science in the precise and final sense of the term. And the way in which they did it was determined by the articulation natural to the political sphere.

"Political science" as the skill of the excellent politician or statesman consists in the right handling of individual situations; its immediate "products" are commands or decrees or advices

⁴ Plato, *Protagoras*, 319a1-2, and *Timaeus*, 19e; also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1181a12 ff.

effectively expressed, which are intended to cope with an individual case. Political life knows, however, a still higher kind of political understanding, which is concerned not with individual cases but, as regards each relevant subject, with all cases, and whose immediate "products"—laws and institutions—are meant to be permanent. The true legislators—"the fathers of the Constitution," as modern men would say—establish, as it were, the permanent framework within which the right handling of changing situations by excellent politicians or statesmen can take place. While it is true that the excellent statesman can act successfully within the most different frameworks of laws and institutions, the value of his achievement depends ultimately on the value of the cause in whose service he acts; and that cause is not his work but the work of him or those who made the laws and institutions of his community. The legislative skill is, therefore, the most "architectonic" political skill⁵ that is known to political life.

Every legislator is primarily concerned with the individual community for which he legislates, but he has to raise certain questions which regard all legislation. These most fundamental and most universal political questions are naturally fit to be made the subject of the most "architectonic," the truly "architectonic" political knowledge: of that political science which is the goal of the political philosopher. This political science is the knowledge which would enable a man to teach legislators. The political philosopher who has reached his goal is the teacher of legislators.⁶ The knowledge of the political philosopher is "transferable" in the highest degree. Plato demonstrated this *ad oculos*

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b24-29 (compare 1137b13); also Plato, *Gorgias*, 464b7-8, and *Minos*, 320c1-5. The classical view was expressed as follows by Rousseau, who still shared it, or rather restored it: "s'il est vrai qu'un grand prince est un homme rare, que sera-ce d'un grand législateur? Le premier n'a qu'à suivre le modèle que l'autre doit proposer" (*Contrat social*, II 7).

⁶ Consider Plato, *Laws*, 630b8-c4 and 631d-632d, and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1180a33 ff. and 1109b34 ff. On the difference between political science proper and political skill see Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, VI, lectio 7, and also Fârâbi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, Chapter 5.

in his dialogue on legislation, by presenting in the guise of a stranger the philosopher who is a teacher of legislators.⁷ He illustrated it less ambiguously by the comparison which frequently occurs in his writings, of political science with medicine.

It is by being the teacher of legislators that the political philosopher is the umpire par excellence. All political conflicts that arise within the community are at least related to, if they do not proceed from, the most fundamental political controversy: the controversy as to what type of men should rule the community. And the right settlement of that controversy appears to be the basis of excellent legislation.

Classical political philosophy was related to political life directly, because its guiding subject was a subject of actual political controversy carried on in pre-philosophic political life. Since all political controversies presuppose the existence of the political community they are not primarily concerned with the question of whether and why there is, or should be, a political community; hence the question of the nature and purpose of the political community is not the guiding question for classical political philosophy. Similarly, to question the desirability or necessity of the survival and independence of one's political community normally means to commit the crime of treason; in other words, the ultimate aim of foreign policy is not essentially controversial. Hence classical political philosophy is not guided by questions concerning the external relations of the political community. It is concerned primarily with the inner structure of the political community, because that inner structure is essentially the subject of such political controversy as essentially involves the danger of civil war.

The actual conflict of groups struggling for political power within the community naturally gives rise to the question what group should rule, or what compromise would be the best solution—that is to say, what political order would be the best order.

⁷ Not to mention the fact that the authors of the *Politics* and the *Cyropaedia* were "strangers" when they wrote those books.

Either the opposed groups are merely factions made up of the same type of men (such as parties of noblemen or adherents of opposed dynasties), or each of the opposed groups represents a specific type. Only in the latter case does the political struggle go to the roots of political life; then it becomes apparent to everyone, from everyday political life, that the question as to what type of men should have the decisive say is the subject of the most fundamental political controversy.

The immediate concern of that controversy is the best political order for the given political community, but every answer to that immediate question implies an answer to the universal question of the best political order as such. It does not require the exertions of philosophers to lay bare this implication, for the political controversy has a natural tendency to express itself in universal terms. A man who rejects kingship for Israel cannot help using arguments against kingship as such; a man who defends democracy in Athens cannot help using arguments in favor of democracy as such. When they are confronted with the fact that monarchy is the best political order, say, for Babylon, the natural reaction of such men will be that this fact shows the inferiority of Babylon and not that the question of the best political order does not make sense.

The groups, or types, whose claims to rule were considered by the classical philosophers were "the good" (men of merit), the rich, the noble, and the multitude, or the poor citizens; in the foreground of the political scene in the Greek cities, as well as in other places, was the struggle between the rich and the poor. The claim to rule which is based on merit, on human excellence, on "virtue," appeared to be least controversial: courageous and skilful generals, incorruptible and equitable judges, wise and unselfish magistrates, are generally preferred. Thus "aristocracy" (rule of the best) presented itself as the natural answer of all good men to the natural question of the best political order. As Thomas Jefferson put it, "That form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually for a pure

selection of [the] natural aristoi into offices of the government.”⁸

What is to be understood by “good men” was known also from political life: good men are those who are willing, and able, to prefer the common interest to their private interest and to the objects of their passions, or those who, being able to discern in each situation what is the noble or right thing to do, do it because it is noble and right and for no ulterior reason. It was also generally recognized that this answer gives rise to further questions of almost overwhelming political significance: that results which are generally considered desirable can be achieved by men of dubious character or by the use of unfair means; that “just” and “useful” are not simply identical; that virtue may lead to ruin.⁹

Thus the question guiding classical political philosophy, the typical answer that it gave, and the insight into the bearing of the formidable objections to it, belong to pre-philosophic political life, or precede political philosophy. Political philosophy goes beyond pre-philosophic political knowledge by trying to understand fully the implications of these pre-philosophic insights, and especially by defending the second of them against the more or less “sophisticated” attacks made by bad or perplexed men.

When the pre-philosophic answer is accepted, the most urgent question concerns the “materials” and institutions which would be most favorable to “the rule of the best.” It is primarily by answering this question, by thus elaborating a “blueprint” of the best polity, that the political philosopher becomes the teacher of legislators. The legislator is strictly limited in his choice of institutions and laws by the character of the people for whom he legislates, by their traditions, by the nature of their territory, by their economic conditions, and so on. His choosing this or that law is normally a compromise between what he would wish and what circumstances permit. To effect that compromise intelligently, he must first know what he wishes, or, rather, what

⁸ Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813.

⁹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b18 ff.; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV 2, 32 ff.

would be most desirable in itself. The political philosopher can answer that question because he is not limited in his reflections by any particular set of circumstances, but is free to choose the most favorable conditions that are possible—ethnic, climatic, economic and other—and thus to determine what laws and institutions would be preferable under those conditions.¹⁰ After that, he tries to bridge the gulf between what is most desirable in itself and what is possible in given circumstances, by discussing what polity, and what laws, would be best under various types of more or less unfavorable conditions, and even what kinds of laws and measures are appropriate for preserving any kind of polity, however defective. By thus erecting on the “normative” foundation of political science a “realistic” structure, or, to speak somewhat more adequately, by thus supplementing political physiology with political pathology and therapeutics, he does not retract or even qualify, he rather confirms, his view that the question of the best polity is necessarily the guiding question.¹¹

By the best political order the classical philosopher understood that political order which is best always and everywhere.¹² This does not mean that he conceived of that order as necessarily good for every community, as “a perfect solution for all times and for every place”: a given community may be so rude or so depraved that only a very inferior type of order can “keep it going.” But it does mean that the goodness of the political order realized anywhere and at any time can be judged only in terms of that political order which is best absolutely. “The best political order” is, then, not intrinsically Greek: it is no more intrinsically Greek than health, as is shown by the parallelism of political science and medicine. But just as it may happen that the members of one nation are more likely to be healthy and strong than those of others, it may also happen that one nation has a greater natural fitness for political excellence than others.

¹⁰ See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1265a17 ff. and 1325b33-40.

¹¹ See Plato, *Laws*, 739b8 ff., and the beginning of the fourth book of Aristotle's *Politics*.

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1135a4-5.

When Aristotle asserted that the Greeks had a greater natural fitness for political excellence than the nations of the north and those of Asia, he did not assert, of course, that political excellence was identical with the quality of being Greek: otherwise he could not have praised the institutions of Carthage as highly as the institutions of the most renowned Greek cities. When Socrates asked Glauco in the *Republic* whether the city that Glauco was founding would be a Greek city, and Glauco answered emphatically in the affirmative, neither of them said any more than that a city founded by Greeks would necessarily be a Greek city. The purpose of this truism, or rather of Socrates' question, was to induce the warlike Glauco to submit to a certain moderation of warfare: since a general prohibition of wars was not feasible, at least warfare among Greeks should keep within certain limits. The fact that a perfect city founded by Glauco would be a Greek city does not imply that any perfect city was necessarily Greek: Socrates considered it possible that the perfect city, which certainly did not exist at that time anywhere in Greece, existed at that time "in some barbarian place."¹³ Xenophon went so far as to describe the Persian Cyrus as *the* perfect ruler, and to imply that the education Cyrus received in Persia was superior even to Spartan education; and he did not consider it impossible that a man of the rank of Socrates would emerge among the Armenians.¹⁴

Because of its direct relation to political life classical political philosophy was essentially "practical"; on the other hand, it is no accident that modern political philosophy frequently calls itself political "theory." The primary concern of the former was not the description, or understanding, of political life, but its right guidance. Hegel's demand that political philosophy refrain from construing a state as it ought to be, or from teaching the state how it should be, and that it try to understand the present

¹³ Plato, *Republic*, 470e4 ff. and 499c7-9; see also *Laws*, 739c3 (compare *Republic*, 373e, with *Phaedo*, 66c5-7); also *Theaetetus*, 175a1-5, *Politicus*, 262c8-263a1, *Cratylus*, 390a, *Phaedo*, 78a3-5, and *Laws*, 656d-657b and 799a ff.; also *Minos*, 316d.

¹⁴ *Cyropaedia*, I 1 and 2, III 1, 38-40; compare II 2, 26.

and actual state as something essentially rational, amounts to a rejection of the *raison d'être* of classical political philosophy. In contrast with present-day political science, or with well known interpretations of present-day political science, classical political philosophy pursued practical aims and was guided by, and culminated in, "value judgments." The attempt to replace the quest for the best political order by a purely descriptive or analytical political science which refrains from "value judgments" is, from the point of view of the classics, as absurd as the attempt to replace the art of making shoes, that is, good and well-fitting shoes, by a museum of shoes made by apprentices, or as the idea of a medicine which refuses to distinguish between health and sickness.

Since political controversies are concerned with "good things" and "just things," classical political philosophy was naturally guided by considerations of "goodness" and "justice." It started from the moral distinctions as they are made in everyday life, although it knew better than the dogmatic skeptic of our time the formidable theoretical objections to which they are exposed. Such distinctions as those between courage and cowardice, justice and injustice, human kindness and selfishness, gentleness and cruelty, urbanity and rudeness, are intelligible and clear for all practical purposes, that is, in most cases, and they are of decisive importance in guiding our lives: this is a sufficient reason for considering the fundamental political questions in their light.

In the sense in which these distinctions are politically relevant, they cannot be "demonstrated," they are far from being perfectly lucid, and they are exposed to grave theoretical doubts. Accordingly, classical political philosophy limited itself to addressing men who, because of their natural inclinations as well as their upbringing, took those distinctions for granted. It knew that one can perhaps silence but not truly convince such people as have no "taste" for the moral distinctions and their significance: not even Socrates himself could convert, though he could silence, such men as Thrasymachus and Callicles, and he admitted the

limits set to demonstrations in this sphere by taking recourse to "myths."

The political teaching of the classical philosophers, as distinguished from their theoretical teaching, was primarily addressed not to all intelligent men, but to all decent men.¹⁵ A political teaching which addressed itself equally to decent and indecent men would have appeared to them from the outset as unpolitical, that is, as politically, or socially, irresponsible; for if it is true that the wellbeing of the political community requires that its members be guided by considerations of decency or morality, the political community cannot tolerate a political science which is morally "neutral" and which therefore tends to loosen the hold of moral principles on the minds of those who are exposed to it. To express the same view somewhat differently, even if it were true that when men are talking of right they are thinking only of their interests, it would be equally true that that reserve is of the essence of political man, and that by emancipating oneself from it one would cease to be a political man or to speak his language.

Thus the attitude of classical political philosophy toward political things was always akin to that of the enlightened statesman; it was not the attitude of the detached observer who looks at political things in the way in which a zoologist looks at the big fishes swallowing the small ones, or that of the social "engineer" who thinks in terms of manipulating or conditioning rather than in terms of education or liberation, or that of the prophet who believes that he knows the future.

In brief, the root of classical political philosophy was the fact that political life is characterized by controversies between groups struggling for power within the political community. Its purpose was to settle those political controversies which are of a fundamental and typical character in the spirit not of the partisan but of the good citizen, and with a view to such an order as would be most in accordance with the requirements of human excel-

¹⁵ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b4-6 and 1140b13-18.

lence. Its guiding subject was the most fundamental politically controversial subject, understood in the way, and in the terms, in which it was understood in pre-philosophic political life.

In order to perform his function the philosopher had to raise an ulterior question which is never raised in the political arena. That question is so simple, elementary and unobtrusive that it is, at first, not even intelligible, as is shown by a number of occurrences described in the Platonic dialogues. This distinctly philosophic question is "What is virtue?" What is that virtue whose possession—as everyone admits spontaneously or is reduced to silence by unanswerable arguments—gives a man the highest right to rule? In the light of this question the common opinions about virtue appear at the outset as unconscious attempts to answer an unconscious question. On closer examination their radical insufficiency is more specifically revealed by the fact that some of them are contradicted by other opinions which are equally common. To reach consistency the philosopher is compelled to maintain one part of common opinion and to give up the other part which contradicts it; he is thus driven to adopt a view that is no longer generally held, a truly paradoxical view, one that is generally considered "absurd" or "ridiculous."

Nor is that all. He is ultimately compelled to transcend not merely the dimension of common opinion, of political opinion, but the dimension of political life as such; for he is led to realize that the ultimate aim of political life cannot be reached by political life, but only by a life devoted to contemplation, to philosophy. This finding is of crucial importance for political philosophy, since it determines the limits set to political life, to all political action and all political planning. Moreover, it implies that the highest subject of political philosophy is the philosophic life: philosophy—not as a teaching or as a body of knowledge, but as a way of life—offers, as it were, the solution to the problem that keeps political life in motion. Ultimately, political philosophy transforms itself into a discipline that is no longer concerned with political things in the ordinary sense

of the term: Socrates called his inquiries a quest for "the *true* political skill," and Aristotle called his discussion of virtue and related subjects "a *kind* of political science." ¹⁶

No difference between classical political philosophy and modern political philosophy is more telling than this: the philosophic life, or the life of "the wise," which was the highest subject of classical political philosophy, has in modern times almost completely ceased to be a subject of political philosophy. Yet even this ultimate step of classical political philosophy, however absurd it seemed to the common opinion, was nevertheless "divined" by pre-philosophic political life: men wholly devoted to the political life were sometimes popularly considered "busybodies," and their unresting habits were contrasted with the greater freedom and the higher dignity of the more retired life of men who were "minding their own business." ¹⁷

II

The direct relation of classical political philosophy to pre-philosophic political life was due not to the undeveloped character of classical philosophy or science, but to mature reflection. This reflection is summed up in Aristotle's description of political philosophy as "the philosophy concerning the human things." This description reminds us of the almost overwhelming difficulty which had to be overcome before philosophers could devote any serious attention to political things, to human things. The "human things" were distinguished from the "divine things" or the "natural things," and the latter were considered absolutely superior in dignity to the former.¹⁸ Philosophy, therefore, was

¹⁶ Plato, *Gorgias*, 521d7; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b11.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a1-2 (compare 1177a25 ff.), and *Metaphysics*, 982b25-28; Plato, *Republic*, 620c4-7 and 549c2 ff., and *Theaetetus*, 172c8 ff. and 173c8 ff. See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I 2, 47 ff. and II 9, 1.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1181b15, 1141a20-b9, 1155b2 ff., and 1177b30 ff. Compare the typical disagreement between the philosopher and the legislator in Plato's *Laws*, 804b5-c1, with his *Meno*, 94e3-4, and *Apologia Socratis*, 23a6-7 (also *Republic*, 517d4-5, *Theaetetus*, 175c5, and *Politicus*, 267e9 ff.). Compare also Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I 1, 11-16.

at first exclusively concerned with the natural things: originally it was an attempt to replace opinions about the nature of the whole by genuine knowledge of the nature of the whole. Thus, in the beginning, philosophic effort was concerned only negatively, only accidentally, with political things. Socrates himself, the founder of political philosophy, was famous as a philosopher before he ever turned to political philosophy. Left to themselves, the philosophers would not descend again to the "cave" of political life, but would remain outside in what they considered "the island of the blessed"—contemplation of the truth.¹⁹

But philosophy, being an attempt to rise from opinion to science, is necessarily related to the sphere of opinion as its essential starting point, and hence to the political sphere. Therefore the political sphere is bound to advance into the focus of philosophic interest as soon as philosophy starts to reflect on its own doings. To understand fully its own purpose and nature, philosophy has to understand its essential starting point, and hence the nature of political things.

The philosophers, as well as other men who have become aware of the possibility of philosophy, are sooner or later driven to wonder "Why philosophy?" Why does human life need philosophy, why is it good, why is it right, that opinions about the nature of the whole should be replaced by genuine knowledge of the nature of the whole? Since human life is living together or, more exactly, is political life, the question "Why philosophy?" means "Why does political life need philosophy?" This question calls philosophy before the tribunal of the political community: it makes philosophy politically responsible. Like Plato's perfect city itself, which, once established, does not permit the philosophers to devote themselves any longer exclusively to contemplation, this question, once raised, forbids the philosophers any longer to disregard political life altogether. Plato's *Republic* as a whole, as well as other political works of the classical philosophers, can best be described as an attempt to supply a political

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 519b7-d7; compare *ibid.*, 521b7-10.

justification for philosophy by showing that the wellbeing of the political community depends decisively on the study of philosophy. Such a justification was all the more urgent since the meaning of philosophy was by no means generally understood, and hence philosophy was distrusted and hated by many well-meaning citizens.²⁰ Socrates himself fell victim to the popular prejudice against philosophy.

To justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community means to justify philosophy in terms of the political community, that is to say, by means of a kind of argument which appeals not to philosophers as such, but to citizens as such. To prove to citizens that philosophy is permissible, desirable or even necessary, the philosopher has to follow the example of Odysseus and start from premises that are generally agreed upon, or from generally accepted opinions:²¹ he has to argue *ad hominem* or, more exactly, "dialectically." From this point of view the adjective "political" in the expression "political philosophy" designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment;²² from this point of view, I say, "political philosophy" means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy—the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life. This deeper meaning of "political philosophy" tallies well with its ordinary meaning, for in both cases "political philosophy" culminates in praise of the philosophic life. At any rate, it is ultimately because he means to justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community,

²⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 520b2-3 and 494a4-10, *Phaedo*, 64b, and *Apologia Socratis*, 23d1-7. Compare Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, II 1, 4, and *De officiis*, II 1, 2, and Plutarch, *Nicias*, 23.

²¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV 6, 15.

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1275b25 (compare J. F. Gronovius' note to Grotius, *De jure belli*, Prolegomena, § 44); see also Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III, 9, §§ 3 and 22. Note especially the derogatory meaning of "political" in the term "political virtue": Plato, *Phaedo*, 82a10 ff., and *Republic*, 430c3-5, and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1116a17 ff.

and hence on the level of political discussion, that the philosopher has to understand the political things exactly as they are understood in political life.

In his political philosophy the philosopher starts, then, from that understanding of political things which is natural to pre-philosophic political life. At the beginning the fact that a certain habitual attitude or a certain way of acting is generally praised, is a sufficient reason for considering that attitude, or that way of acting, a virtue. But the philosopher is soon compelled, or able, to transcend the dimension of pre-philosophic understanding by raising the crucial question "What is virtue?" The attempt to answer this question leads to a critical distinction between the generally praised attitudes which are rightly praised, and those which are not; and it leads to the recognition of a certain hierarchy, unknown in pre-philosophic life, of the different virtues. Such a philosophic critique of the generally accepted views is at the bottom of the fact that Aristotle, for example, omitted piety and sense of shame from his list of virtues,²³ and that his list starts with courage and moderation (the least intellectual virtues) and, proceeding via liberality, magnanimity and the virtues of private relations, to justice, culminates in the dianoetic virtues.²⁴ Moreover, insight into the limits of the moral-political sphere as a whole can be expounded fully only by answering the question of the nature of political things. This question marks the limit of political philosophy as a practical discipline: while essentially practical in itself, the question functions as an entering wedge for others whose purpose is no longer to guide action but simply to understand things as they are.²⁵

²³ *Eudemian Ethics*, 1221a1.

²⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1117b23 ff., and *Rhetoric*, I 5, 6. See also Plato, *Laws*, 630c ff. and 963e, and *Phaedrus*, 247d5-7; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV 8, 11 (compare his *Apologia Socratis*, 14-16); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2, 2, qu. 129 art. 2 and qu. 58 art. 12.

²⁵ See, for example, Aristotle, *Politics*, 1258b8 ff., 1279b11 ff., and 1299a28 ff.