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WITH PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

An Essay on Eudaimonic Politics



Paul Schollmeier

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Paul Schollmeier

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*To our Progenitors
And our Progeny*

... ἀλλὰ λέληθέ σε ὅτι ἡ ἰσότης ἢ γεωμετρικὴ
καὶ ἐν θεοῖς καὶ ἐν ἄνθρώποις μέγα δύναται·
σὺ δὲ πλεονεξίαν οἶει δεῖν ἄσκεῖν·
γεωμετρίας γὰρ ἀμελεῖς.
– Σώκρατες

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I presented, to the consternation of my audience, a paper gleaned from the last chapter of this book at the second Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Hellenic Heritage of Southern Italy held in Syracuse, Sicily. The paper was entitled “Plato, Politics, and Poetry,” and it has since appeared in *Politics and Performance in Western Greece*, edited by Heather L. Reid, Davide Tanasi, and Susi Kinbell (Sioux City, IA: Parnassos Press, 2017), pp. 253–264.

Preface

With this volume I offer an apology for political philosophy. Who among us, philosopher or no, could not be aware that political philosophy in our day has gone awry? Contemporary philosophers who theorize about politics have become little more than mouthpieces for the status quo. They preoccupy themselves with developing and explicating theories to justify political societies of the kind that we presently inhabit.

But we live in political societies considerably less than just, I dare say. Our societies consist of both prosperity and poverty in the extreme. Some people succeed in amassing fortunes beyond fantastic, and some people struggle to get by on less than a pittance. Is a distribution of wealth so disproportionate likely to be just? Today one percent of the adult population owns one half of the household wealth in the world.¹

That some more fortunate persons among us are philanthropic souls who use their wealth to do well by others, I would not deny. But I would also ask, Should those less fortunate among us have to depend on kindnesses?

I propose to discourse more on how one might restore to political philosophy her proper dignity and less on how she might have fallen into her present plight. My intention is to develop a philosophy of what a political society in our era ought to be rather than another theory of what a society happens to be. My hope is that the philosophy proposed will inspire my colleagues and companions with a new purpose for their political inquiries and endeavors and ultimately alleviate the disparities of privilege and privation so evident today.

I shall advance a novel principle for my instauration of political philosophy. Actually, the principle only appears novel to us. I could hardly pretend to have invented a principle entirely new for an endeavor as longstanding and as enduring as politics. Unfortunately, political philosophers have recently subverted this principle if they have not ignored it altogether. They exhibit a distinct tendency to subordinate the principle to other, less worthy, principles.

My principle is happiness. This principle will appear novel to many because I wish to take this concept in its ancient sense—albeit with appropriate modifications. I shall advocate political happiness in the sense of a rational activity and not in the sense of an emotional passivity. We are happy, I shall argue, when we engage in a rational activity primarily for the sake of itself and not primarily for the sake of something else, usually our profit or pleasure. I defer to Plato and Aristotle for an exposition and defense of this definition (see esp. *Ethics* 1. 7.).

I would thus ask you to entertain a simple and, I should think, evident hypothesis, that each and every human being who wishes to be happy, and who does not, ought to have an opportunity to be happy. Each and every one! I do not say, nor can I say, that every human being who wishes to be happy ought to be happy. No, happiness we can no more grant to one another than we can grant one another wisdom or virtue.

Happiness in the classical sense requires that we not only wish to be happy, but that we also choose to take the appropriate measures to become happy. If we are happy, we are performing an action for its own sake and acting from virtue, which is simply a good habit. If we are to become happy, we must accordingly choose to perform an appropriate action, we must choose to perform our action for its own sake, and we must choose to perform our action repeatedly until it becomes habitual.

But we cannot act without resources. These resources include, at a minimum, a function to fulfill within a society, an education appropriate for a function, and the material means requisite for its fulfillment. No one can provide another with the aspiration or the dedication to take proper advantage of the necessary resources. But one can offer others who possess the desire and the ability an opportunity to avail themselves of these resources. Surely, one ought not to hamper or to hinder another by denying them an opportunity of this kind.

Please take note that this volume concerns happiness in a political sense and not in a personal sense. I shall mention personal happiness only by contrast. We too often neglect to consider our happiness within political society. Our society can, paradoxically no doubt to a contemporary ear, be an end in itself and not a mere means. Happiness in a political form consists of participating in a political society—participating, I mean, for its own intrinsic public value and not for private instrumental value.

What is at stake is the very idea of a political community. We human beings can find happiness by participating in a community, I shall argue. One might think of political society as if it were a choreography of human activities in which we can participate and enjoy as an end in itself. We ought also to afford our companions an opportunity to participate. Why disregard their potential? When we give others an opportunity, we are likely to make our society the better for it and to enable others to make themselves the better.

I wish to argue, then, that contemporary political philosophers overlook an important human good when they fail to give due consideration to our political happiness. Indeed, they overlook, I shall claim, the most important political good of all. With my endeavor I shall question the most basic assumptions of contemporary political thought. My contention shall be that a political society ought itself to be a moral end and not a moral constraint, so-called, on private ends.

Our contemporaries for the most part gussy up current economic theory in an attempt to make it seem moral. They apparently deem economic considerations paramount. We live in what we euphemistically call a consumer society. We preoccupy ourselves with producing and consuming material goods. But do we not have all the devices and appliances that we could possibly want? Indeed, we are throwing away gadgets and gizmos at such an alarming rate that their disposal presents serious problems.

I wish suggest that we have burdened ourselves with fallacious thinking of an embarrassingly elementary sort. We appear to be of the opinion that the more material resources we possess the better persons we will become. Good persons do require resources, but resources do not make a good person. Not even a good producer or a good consumer.

I would that I could also advocate specific policies for the attainment of our political happiness. But I am, alas, a humble philosopher and not a politician. This fact is not laudable, I admit. Even Plato and Aristotle lament the fact that theory and practice were far more often than not separated from each other. They thought that any one who might be possessed of both philosophical acumen and political ability would be nothing less than a godsend.

I shall not, then, make any pretense to go beyond a formulation and a defense of principle. What I set out in theory I can only hope that others more experienced than I might deem worthy to pursue in practice. Indeed, what little experience I have gleaned in matters political suggests that policy matters ought best to be specific to a given situation. Those more versed in their own circumstances would most likely be best suited to develop and to implement policy.

My hypothesis about our happiness rests on a prior assumption that we ought to be cognizant of our humanity. Our humanity, I assume, provides a foundation for our happiness. What is a human being? A rational animal, I should think. I hope that this answer is unproblematic. What is our rationality? This answer might be problematic. We shall see that our rationality, when we exercise it, is our happiness. Even when we exercise it in a political arena.

We deny our rational nature if we exercise it not for its own sake but for the sake of something else. A rationality exercised for something else would most likely be employed ultimately to procure satisfaction for our desire. Our happiness, so-called, would no longer be a rational activity but an emotional passivity, and we would not be rational but passional animals. We would be less than fully human. We would be human beings in potentiality only and not in actuality.²

I would also ask, What is a human being if not a political animal? Our humanity can find an expression within a political society. We best exercise our political nature when we engage in political activity for its own sake though we tend to forget this fundamental fact. We can be happy, in a word, when we participate together with others in political activity without an ulterior motive. Not to engage in political activity of this kind would also be to deny our nature.

I intend, then, to draw attention to our political functions and roles though I would not deny private roles and functions. If we are political animals, we ought to perform a political function. Or else we forsake our happiness and our nature. At least, in part we do. The political, I shall argue, is a *res publica* to be held in common, not a *res privata* to be held in contention. We are surely less than happy and less than human when we utilize our political activity for private ends. We live without a community though we live within a society.

My antagonists in this endeavor are, as always for a eudaimonist, if I may use the term, the sophists. We live in an age of sophistry, I make bold to say, and we are now reaping its rewards. I do not speak of intellectual sophistry, though it, too, is surely present. I speak rather of moral sophistry, and in particular I speak of its political variety. The moral sophists seek happiness not in a rational but in a passional sense.

Sophistry we usually think to be fallacious reasoning. We can see why one might so think if we ask why anyone would indulge in fallacies. The most likely explanation

is that we permit ourselves to rationalize about our conduct when we seek to indulge our appetites. Our rationalization takes for its principle whatever notion might seem to justify our indulgence. A rationalization of this sort can obviously pervade political theory and economic theory as well.

Protagoras is probably the most famous exponent in the ancient world of sophistry in the intellectual sense. Man is the measure of all things, he declares. Though less well known for it, he also expounds sophistry in a moral sense. Man is apparently the measure of all things moral, too. Ironically, Socrates with a theory of deferred gratification best explicates this sophistical position for us and apparently for Protagoras himself. At least, Plato so argues in an eponymous dialogue.

Plato also portrays other ancient sophists in his dialogues. Perhaps Callicles and Thrasymachus are the most famous of these. Callicles argues brashly that those with political ability ought to be manly enough and brave enough to satisfy all their desires, and that they ought to make their desires as many and as strong as possible. Thrasymachus bluntly contends that those who have political ability ought to use others solely for their own satisfaction.

These poor souls and their ilk Plato imprisons for all eternity in the lower class of his ideal political society. This class comprises the artisans and the farmers and herders. A guardian class, he argues, must control these persons with external constraints because they lack any ability to control themselves. These unfortunates are at the beck and call of their desires, he avers.

Modern sophists usually advance their cause under another banner. They prefer to call themselves utilitarians. Among these sophists we may number most prominently Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Their motto is the greatest happiness for the greatest number. They would thus appeal to a principle of happiness. But their principle is also a passionless happiness. They think human goodness to be desire satisfaction.

I shall focus on utilitarians in their contemporary guise. Philosophers theorizing about politics today may seem to stand in opposition to utilitarianism. John Rawls and Robert Nozick provide conspicuous examples. Rawls and Nozick both protest explicitly against the utilitarian theory. They agree that utilitarianism would in principle permit us to sacrifice the interests of a few persons for the benefit of the many.³

But neither Rawls nor Nozick can quite escape utilitarianism and its allure. Though their means differ, their ends are essentially utilitarian. They both agree that our highest good is to fulfill a plan of life. But what is the purpose of a plan of this kind? A plan of life has the purpose of satisfying our desire, they argue. If we have a plan, we can the better satisfy our desires by organizing them and by avoiding conflicts among them.

Rawls and Nozick, in other words, offer similar theories of deferred gratification though they offer dissimilar concepts for deferring gratification. They both agree that our happiness ought not to make others less happy. Rawls argues in effect that those who are more happy ought to benefit from institutions that make more happy those who are less happy. Nozick in effect argues that those who are less happy ought not to benefit from institutions that make less happy those who are more happy.

Whether modern or contemporary, the utilitarians, then, lack a principle of political happiness in the sense of a rational activity of value for its own sake. They advocate

happiness only in the sense of satisfying our desire. They would thus subordinate political activity, eudaimonic or not, to personal happiness, and personal happiness they conceive in a passionate sense.⁴

My purpose, then, shall be to delineate differences both salient and significant between a eudaimonic philosophy of politics and a sophistic political philosophy. I wish to perform a philosophical experiment, one might say. With the political philosophy of the classical era I shall analyze and critique two contemporary political philosophies of no little import and influence. My focus will be on the overarching theme of eudaimonic politics and not on the minutiae of scholarly commentary.

In my discussion I intend to glean general concepts of importance for my experiment from the Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophies and from their epistemologies and ontologies. I shall take these ancient theories for granted and avoid undue exegetical complications. I do devote some discussion to contemporary commentary. But I limit my discussion to commentary that might help clarify the classical concepts for my reader.

I shall also focus on the commonalities to be found in the Rawlsian liberal theory and the Nozickian libertarian theory. I shall forbear to indulge in an analysis of their more specific differences and of their sectarian controversies. I take the Rawlsian and Nozickian theories for granted as well. I assume for the sake of my critique that their arguments are sufficiently successful, and I critique them as they stand. No doubt their theories do have their imperfections, but my concern is not to improve upon their specifics.⁵

But my reader may wonder, How can we make use of a principle of happiness in a political society? How can we employ a concept of eudaimonic activity to organize a society? I propose to borrow another idea from the ancient Greeks. I wish to suggest that we ought to rest our political philosophy on a concept of polity. We would seem to forgo any consideration of polity today though nearly everyone lives in a polity of a sort. We do so because usually we think a polity to be a democracy or perhaps an oligarchy. Hence, a concept of polity proper remains inarticulate.

I shall take into account polities of two species. These species are what I would call a eudaimonic polity and an expedient polity. I obviously wish to advocate a eudaimonic polity. A polity of this kind is a political society that takes for its end an activity of happiness attainable by most people. This feasible activity I take to be what I shall call artisanal happiness. My assumption is that anyone who is able to engage successfully in an artisanal activity for its own sake is happy.

What is an artisanal activity? An activity of this kind is what one might more commonly call a productive activity. I would suggest that we can be happy when we are making things, in other words. We can recognize that a productive activity itself has value as an end, and we can give priority to its value as an end. I would hardly deny that a productive activity has a value as a means. But I would argue that its intrinsic value ought to be primary and its instrumental value secondary.

The concept of a productive activity as an end starkly contrasts with a concept of production as a means. We can all too easily degrade production and its intrinsic value if we give priority to its instrumental value. The consequence is a productive activity that denies us our humanity for the sake of ever greater output. We can no longer

express our rational nature in production. Production, especially on an assembly line, can become banal in a most pejorative sense.

A polity of expediency is less than eudaimonic. A polity of this kind rests on a mixture of principles. It assumes not a concept of eudaimonic happiness but a concept of hedonic happiness. Its end is none other than the gratification of desire. This polity accordingly rests on ancillary principles needed for our gratification. These principles are concepts of liberty and property.

A polity of this mixed variety is today a utilitarian society. It plainly recognizes that we need both liberty and property to satisfy our desire. A society of this kind thus becomes a compromise between a democratic party, which would take the expression of liberty to its extreme, and an oligarchic party, which would take the possession of property to its extreme.

Any polity, whether eudaimonic or expedient, ought rightly to favor the middle class. That the middle class should be the focus of political theory and practice, is part of contemporary culture though its consideration is falling out of favor. The middle class tends to lend more stability to a political society than either the rich or the poor class do. The rich or the poor too often carry their principles to an extreme, which can occasion conflict. Even in antiquity Aristotle and Plato took note this political fact.

Who are the middle class? A eudaimonic polity would define the middle class to be those who have the ability and the desire to pursue rational happiness. I am advocating an artisanal happiness, which, I would think, most people can attain. But an expedient polity would focus on those who pursue passional happiness. Happiness of this kind one can find in a consumer society. Democrats advocate liberty for consumption, and oligarchs advocate property for production.

My theory, then, constitutes a challenge to ancient political theory. The ancient Greek philosophers in their political theories do not think that productive activities can be eudaimonic. They think that production cannot have intrinsic value, but that it can have only instrumental value. Both Plato and Aristotle explicitly hold that the arts and crafts and their activities are inimical even to virtue and to happiness.

I would argue that the question is one of purpose. Can we not engage in productive activities with the purpose of performing them primarily for their own sake? Or must we invariably engage in them solely for the sake of their output alone? Though most do not, some corporations today recognize that even industrial production is a human activity that has both intrinsic and instrumental value. Many cottage industries also exist in which artists and artisans engage in productive activity for its own sake as well as for its results.

My theory is also a challenge to modern political theory. Contemporary philosophers do not appear to advocate eudaimonic happiness of any kind. Rawls and Nozick clearly do not. They prefer happiness of the hedonic variety, and they think that all rational activities are primarily of instrumental value. The upshot is that everyone is an artisan in the banal sense.

My reader may find that he or she can read this work in more ways than one. Permit me to mention three ways more salient and, I think, more significant. One reading is to take the political philosophy contained herein to be a new theory of democracy. "Democracy" is an ambiguous term. We tend not infrequently to think a contemporary

polity to be a democracy. We thus may, with a nod to this usage, take democracy to promote our eudaimonic happiness. This eudaimonic goal I wish to make explicit.

More often we think an expedient polity a democracy, however. We especially do so if a mixed polity claims to give priority to its principle of liberty. But we think a polity of this kind an oligarchy if its principle of property is a priority. My goal is to argue that we ought to make a principle of happiness the end of liberty and of property in our society. We would thus transform into a eudaimonic polity a polity of the mixed variety.

I also wish to extend the franchise, so to speak. Political functions include more than what we today call citizenship. To vote and to hold office are important functions, but they define citizenship only in a rather narrow sense. In a wider sense citizenship would include intellectual activities, martial activities, and artisanal activities. My focus, again, shall be on artisanal activities, and my assumption that most persons can happily pursue these activities, either in industry or in agriculture.

A eudaimonic polity, then, has practical advantages. Eudaimonic happiness defines a finite end for our activity, but hedonic happiness does not. Our pursuit of a profession or an occupation has a limit in its activity, but our desire for wealth or pleasure has an end with no limit. A eudaimonic polity would thus be especially pragmatic in a world of resources decidedly finite. People who are happy do not require excessive liberty or property. But people who are not happy often become licentious or greedy.

I must point out, however, that persons can pursue eudaimonic happiness in more than one specific variety. My purpose is to argue in support of a general principle of happiness and to place this general principle within a theoretical framework. But happiness, including artisanal happiness, can be of different kinds. Different societies may pursue different productive activities, and different persons within a society obviously pursue different activities. The particular species sought vary both by culture and by nature.

Another way to read this work would be to view my thoughts on political philosophy as an analysis of American democracy. The Declaration of Independence explicitly enshrines three inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life and liberty political philosophers have surely given due, if at times misguided, attention. But the pursuit of happiness has given them rather scant concern. Yet life and liberty are only ancillary to happiness.

I have in fact often had American democracy in mind as I write. I do so in part because I am not unacquainted with the democracy in which I have resided almost my entire life. I also must perforce write with my own democracy in mind because of considerable ignorance on my part. I simply am neither well informed about nor well acquainted with other democracies that have existed in the past or exist in the present.

I hope that I do not seem jingoistic. In my defense I would say that America is often recognized for being the first democracy in the modern era, and she is, deservedly or not, in the eyes of many taken to a paradigm of democracy. I do not make these assertions because of any arrogance, I assure you. I am well aware of the missteps and shortcomings of my political society. Indeed, my purpose is in part to offer considerations for renovating and reinvigorating the democracy in which I happen to live.

Other philosophers before me have taken American democracy for a modern paradigm. Perhaps Alexis de Tocqueville is the one who did the most to burnish her reputation in the world. Only his insights exceed his praises for this new democracy. He surely recognized that in America democracy was at its foundation a polity though he does not use the term. He sees this democracy as a society in which most persons are of the middle class and enjoy its comforts.

Unfortunately, Tocqueville offers an analysis that would have us believe that American democracy can be a polity not of a eudaimonic variety but only of an expedient sort. But he is well aware of the dangers of hedonic happiness, especially its instability. Persons in the middle class, he argues, have enough to be comfortable but not enough to be content. The wealthy class fear to have fewer comforts, and the poor desire to have more.

Yet I would like to think that, had he but thought of it, Tocqueville would likely approve of my analysis of American democracy. Polity in the true sense is an expression of our better nature. He would hopefully agree that, if we choose act eudaimonically, we can act from what he terms a virtue of beauty and not from a virtue of utility.

One might, finally, read these reflections on polity as presenting a paradigm for what many people proclaim to be a new global society. I shall say nothing of this political phenomenon beyond these few words. My ignorance of global affairs exceeds my ignorance of democracies other than my own.

What little experience I do have yields the impression that those who are today acting on a global scale are those who also concern themselves less with eudaimonic prosperity than with passional and material prosperity. Why should one expect that they would not model their global endeavors on their local ones?

I would aver that we ought to ask, What kind of globalization would we have? Is globalization inevitable? Perhaps. Is globalization inevitably sophistic? Perhaps not. At the very least, we ought to ask the question. Would we prefer to live a global society that is eudaimonic, or would we prefer life a world that is hedonic or pleonectic?

Unfortunately, these broader questions, important though they assuredly are, I had best leave for another occasion. Or for another author.

Our forebears bequeathed to us a political society. They handed down a society of the best kind they no doubt could. But the fact that our society is a gift does not mean that we cannot improve upon it. We especially ought to make changes when society appears less than just. If my arguments do not, perhaps the plain facts of the matter may prove sufficiently persuasive. Can you deny that many persons today live in ignorance, fear, and hunger, not to say degradation?

Too often in our preoccupation with our private lives we forget to ask ourselves, What kind of political society ought we to inhabit? Or even, What kind of political society do we inhabit? We can, if we so wish, create a society of worth for its own sake as an end in itself and not as a mere means for the sake of private interests. But we also can, if we do not so wish, accept by tacit consent the status quo.

I would ask, Ought we not to exercise and to enjoy our rational and political nature? Our humanity is truly a gift god-given to mortals such as we be. And pleasure and property? Are they not but paltry things?

Our humble humanity, then, I shall invoke for my instauration of a new paradigm for political philosophy in our era.

Part One

The Cave: The Turn to the Intelligible

Rational Animals

1. Where ought we to begin—we who are audacious enough to believe that our reflections might yield an insight into political society and sanguine enough to imagine that our insight, if any, might have an influence on the course of human events?

Philosophers given to pondering political phenomena exhibit a propensity to begin at the beginning. Modern philosophers are especially prone to begin in this way though the ancients are not entirely disinclined. And rightly so, I think. We surely ought to begin where we have most obviously begun. But we have not, I would submit, begun at the beginning! Where did we begin, then? *In medias res*! Who among us has not been born, willy-nilly, into a political society? Not one of us, I dare say.

I concede that there are feral children, raised without human society by animals in the wild, as were Remus and Romulus of legend. But these poor children are thankfully rare. If not discovered early enough, they must pay most dearly for the errors of those who abandoned them to the beasts of the forest or the desert. They have at best a diminished capacity to philosophize or even to cognize, let alone to socialize, because of those more bestial than the animals that could nourish them but could not nurture them.

The closest we might come to a political beginning would be a state of naïveté. We are initially, and too often subsequently, naïve about our society, into which we are born, and even about our very selves. We are especially naïve about our philosophical and political nature, I shall argue. But our initial naïveté is for us, I admit, a natural state as well. We cannot but be naïve philosophically and politically when we are born even though we are *ab initio* ensconced within a society.

Modern philosophers usually take our political beginning to be found in what they call a state of nature. This natural state most frequently, though not always, constitutes a condition that is rather bleak. Thomas Hobbes, for example, famously declares that we humans initially find ourselves in a natural situation that is a war “of every man against every man.” This situation, he famously informs us, entails a life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (*Leviathan* 1. 13. 8–9.).

But we soon discover the disadvantages of war and the advantages of peace, he argues. We learn that there is no justice in an all-out war, and that virtue is nothing but force and fraud (*Leviathan* 1. 13. 13.). We can establish peace if we form a contract with others and grant ourselves only as much liberty against others as we would grant others against ourselves (*Leviathan* 1. 14. 5.). This contract he takes to be the origin of justice (*Leviathan* 1. 15. 1–2.).

Ancient philosophers are not entirely unaware that one might postulate a natural state of this sort. Plato, for example, acknowledges it. In his celebrated dialogue on a just political society, he portrays an interlocutor describing a natural condition strikingly similar in its essentials to a Hobbesian state of nature. Though he does not himself accept it, Glaucon takes the position that by nature to do injustice is good and to suffer it is bad (*Republic* 2. 358e).

People soon discover, Glaucon continues, that the goodness of doing injustice is considerably less than the badness of suffering it. So they readily establish a contract of neither doing nor suffering injustice. Their contract is the origin of justice, he asserts. Justice is a mean between the best, which is to do injustice with impunity, and the worst, which is to suffer injustice without recourse (*Republic* 2. 358e–359a; also see *Gorgias* 483b–483d).

But I find myself obliged to ask, How many of us actually began our political life in a state of nature? Surely, not one of us! How many of us have lived even for a time in a state of nature? Most likely, only those few who have had the terrible misfortune to have been caught up in the clutches of war or poverty in the extreme, I should think. Most people have somehow managed, less through choice than through chance, to escape a fate of this dire sort.

I do not object to the fact that a state of nature is a hypothetical, perhaps mythical, situation. What I suggest is that to begin with a state of nature is to begin with the wrong hypothetical situation. If we wish to begin at the beginning, we surely ought to begin with a consideration of the situation in which we most likely began our political lives. We should do so even though in our reflections we must perforce rely on hypothesis.

My intention, then, is to avoid the presumption of beginning where no one has likely begun. I would venture to assert that any supposed state of nature might itself be an expression of a naïveté at once philosophical and political, and that, if we were to begin unawares in naïveté, we might very well end our philosophical reflections unawares in naïveté. That is to say, if we were to begin with a false presumption about our natural state, we might very likely end with a false assumption about our political state.

What is worse, if we begin with a false assumption, even if we take it for a hypothesis initially, we could all too easily end with the very same mistaken assumption and take it for more than a hypothesis. We might eventually presume to take our initial hypothesis for a non-hypothetical, perhaps god-given, principle of political theory and practice!

But I do not mean to seem so unpolitic. Let us turn to what I take to be our naïve beginning so that I might the better explain myself.

2. A state of naïveté is more germane to our present inquiry than a state of nature not only because it is more proximate in our experience. A state of this kind is germane also because it affords us an opportunity for reflection on our often benighted, if not bewildered, cognizance of our political and philosophical situation and on our capacity, though not unmitigated, for philosophical and political enlightenment.

That any knowledge of our naïveté cannot be other than hypothetical, I readily concede. We shall in fact see that all knowledge allotted to us poor worldlings is and can only be hypothetical. Our knowledge of our very lives, whether political or philosophical, presents no exception. We must employ hypotheses to understand and,

presumably, to overcome our initial naïveté about our present endeavors and our past and future endeavors.

The fact that human knowledge is hypothetical does have advantages. We may avail ourselves of various heuristic devices in our pursuit of knowledge, whether political or not. Among these devices, the American pragmatists would remind us, we find experimentation. We shall obviously be concerned in our present inquiry with a philosophical experiment though I would note that our experiments can be either philosophical or political.

But the fact that we only know hypothetically has its disadvantages, too. We poor mortals can, alas, never really and truly know any truth or reality. Our theoretical principles are obviously less than absolute. Even the vaunted postulates of Euclidian geometry, seemingly empyrean, have proved to be less than unexceptional. Not to mention our practical, including political, assumptions and presumptions.

I wish to begin with a philosophical experiment of ancient origin. This particular experiment is no more than a model, and it is, as are all models, a simplification of the facts. But this model I think worthy of our consideration because its simplification, if we take it seriously, can give us a profound insight into our initial state of naïveté, which we may neither remember nor understand as well as we might imagine.

The model in question is actually an allegory. Allegories, I know, are out of fashion today. But an allegory I take to be merely an example albeit an imagined one. We might think of this allegory more fashionably as a hypothetical, contrary-to-fact example. This particular contrary-to-fact example will, I hope, serve to quicken our recollection and make our past, in its essentials at least, clearer to us. Yes, to understand it, we shall have to recollect our past as best we can with an imagined example.

I wish to suggest with this allegory that the philosophical presuppositions of political theories in our day are particularly naïve. These presuppositions for the most part presume political phenomena to be not so much intelligible objects as sensible objects. Philosophers who reflect on politics tend to consider our ideas and impressions themselves not to be objects worthy of our desire. They prefer to take our ideas and impressions to be indicative of other objects, primarily visible and tangible. These other objects, including our material selves and our material resources, they think desirable.

We ought, I would urge, to consider the possibility at least that intelligible objects might themselves be desire-worthy. We might discover that intangible things have not only intellectual value but also practical value. Our intellectual principles, theoretical as well as practical, may prove to have a goodness of their own. If so, these intangibles may prove worthy of our endeavors, perhaps more worthy than tangibles.

Why might this distinction be important? The distinction is important because our philosophical presuppositions inform our political theories, and our political theories in turn inform our political lives. What objects we deem desirable in our theories has consequences for our actions and shapes our actions either felicitously or infelicitously.

The allegory in question I take from Plato. I wish to ponder our political plight with an analysis of his allegory of the cave. Plato himself does not obviously use his allegory to hypothesize a political beginning for us. But with it he surely does portray a naïve mind as well as a mind less naïve. He asserts that the allegory concerns persons both

uneducated and educated (*Republic* 7. 514a). He indicates further that the allegory is meant to illustrate a hypothesis about our education. Education, he claims, is a process of turning a soul away from objects of becoming toward objects of being (518b–d).

Plato would thus imply that we might overcome our naïveté if we can turn our attention away from sensible objects to intelligible objects. I am taking objects of becoming and being to be sensible and intelligible entities. Plato is famous for this distinction. The distinction underlies another allegory that serves to introduce the allegory of the cave. He uses what he calls the simile of the sun to distinguish a visible world from an intelligible world and to draw an analogy between the two (*Republic* 6. 507b–509c, esp. 508b–d).

The allegory of the cave, I admit, might seem to be more an introduction to philosophy proper than to political philosophy. Philosophers customarily so take it. But one might surmise that the cave would have some significance for political inquiry. After all, Plato does place his allegory in a dialogue that has the ostensive purpose of setting forth his theory of a just political society.

My purpose, then, shall be to employ what Plato has to say about uneducated and educated persons to show what our political beginning might initially have been and what our beginning might eventually come to be. His hypothesis about human education entails philosophical consequences and political consequences that are hardly insignificant.

Let us ask, How does the allegory of cave illustrate human education? Readers who have any familiarity with it know that this allegory presents a rather unusual scene. We might accordingly refresh our memory. What would we see if we were to enter the cave? We would first discern within the cave a fire burning, and beyond the fire we would make out a path with a low wall constructed along its far side.

If we were to cross the path, we would be able to peer over the wall, and we would discover on the other side, dimly lit to be sure, people held in bondage. Because of their bondage, these unfortunate souls can neither move in place nor even turn their heads. They are constrained to face the far wall of the cave. They are, in a word, pilloried.

But we might have to step aside. Before long we would encounter people coming and going along the path. They walk between the fire and the low wall, and over their heads they hold up objects that are images of natural things, including people, and artificial things. They make use of the fire to cast shadows of these objects on the far wall of the cave. These people sometimes speak, and their words echo off the far wall.

The people holding the objects up would thus appear to be putting on a shadow play of some kind. Indeed, the result of their efforts is what Plato calls an extraordinary show for the prisoners. The flickering shadows on the wall of the cave seem to be animated and even to speak (*Republic* 7. 514a–515a, 515b).

How might this odd scene illustrate an educational hypothesis? Plato states laconically, “Like unto us” the prisoners are (*Republic* 7. 515a). How could the prisoners possibly be like us? He explains only that the prisoners see nothing of themselves except for their shadows on the far wall (515a–b). Remember their constraints. The prisoners might also hear little of their voices except for their echoes off the wall.

The prisoners thus have a rather limited view of their situation. Is this how they are like unto us? Indeed, what they see of their world are merely the shadows of the

puppets on the wall of the cave. Plato indicates explicitly that the prisoners take these shadows for the truth (515b–c). They would most likely take their own shadows for the truth, too, I would suppose. After all, they see nothing of themselves except their shadows.

One might say that these prisoners are very much like children attending a puppet theater. The children could easily be captivated by a similar show. But the prisoners are also unlike children at a theater. The children can turn around and see the puppets, and they can stand up and leave the theater if they wish. They might even be invited to come behind the scenes after the show and to see how the performance is done.

The allegory, then, would suggest that a political society might be a theater of some kind. Or, at least, that a society might have a theatrical aspect. The prisoners are in circumstances obviously theatrical and obviously social if not political. They are constrained to look at and to listen to visual and aural images that others create and animate for them.

One can now see how the prisoners are like unto us. We are not literally pilloried in a cave. But we are perforce restricted to a stream of images in our communications with one another, and we can become enthralled with the flow of images. I would think this fact more obvious today than ever given our mass media, including radio, television, and now the internet. But even everyday, face-to-face, communication occurs only with aural and visual imagery.¹

We can also begin to see how Plato's allegory illustrates his hypothesis about education. Plato already indicates for us that the prisoners are less than well educated. They know little or nothing but the shadows and echoes of their cave because of their constraints. We might say that they are quite taken with shadows playing on the cave wall.

Could the prisoners escape from a more naïve outlook to an outlook less naïve if they were able to turn their heads around and to see the puppets? They would then see the truth of the shadows, which are but images. But could they see the truth itself? They obviously could not. The puppets, too, are images. The prisoners might take for the truth objects that are only artifacts.

But now things become yet curiouser. The prisoners would initially take their own shadows, too, for the truth, would they not? But could they catch a glimpse of themselves, say of a hand or a foot, would they again be taking an image for the truth? After all, the puppets, which cast the shadows, are images. This fact would appear to imply that the prisoners themselves might be images of some sort. They might somehow be puppet-like.

Could one be naïve, then, to take sensible objects for the truth? But are not sensible things really and truly real? you might ask. Plato suggests otherwise. The prisoners and the puppets are sensible objects, but sensible objects appear to be the concern of the naïve. Indeed, he indicates for us that the prisoners would be less than well educated even if they could see the puppets and themselves. Education, recall, requires that we turn from sensible objects to intelligible objects.

Plato does offer an explanation that takes us a little further. When he does, he alludes to another allegory. This allegory appears to have some relevance to his hypothesis about education because it concerns objects of different kinds, and among them are