

Interpretation

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Aristotle's Politics on the Hoof: Sparta, Crete, and Carthage

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I have long been interested in Aristotle's analysis and promotion of the regime he calls "regime," aka the "polity" or "republic," and especially the form of polity based on what he calls the "middling element." I have tried to learn from his observations on politics as they apply to human beings living in political communities. What meaning does his defense of the polity hold for us? The polity is recommended as the best for "most cities and men," suggesting that it is a goal that can be appreciated rationally and a goal to which most political communities can reasonably aspire, but that there are no guarantees of its success. Chance or the wrong choices made at crucial times could derail the best of intentions. Indeed, in his analysis of real political experience in Sparta, Crete, and Carthage, Aristotle seems to present a case *against the best intentions* in politics, a case that instead shows that modest aspirations combine with most people's modest virtues to produce livable cities, while high aspirations will likely end in failure.

In this paper, I work with Aristotle's discussions of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage to begin an examination of the prospects for a "polity" in the real world. I believe that Aristotle is showing that the painstaking lawgivers of these admired communities could not engineer a situation in which both the citizens would be virtuous and the city stable. On the other hand, these regimes did achieve some good political effects in terms of stability, if not those at which the original lawgivers aimed. I conclude that Aristotle suggests that, as important as the initial lawgiver is for establishing the way of life of a regime, he cannot take all contingencies into account and he cannot rely

on future statesmen to maintain the way of life against all odds. If chance must play a large role in human affairs, then certain characteristics of a political order will enable it to weather the storm. What characteristics must the citizens embody and the regime entail to guard the basic arrangements against inevitable decay? In his discussion of these regimes, admired as attempting to be the best simply, Aristotle points toward the institutional arrangements of a polity, which mixes the influence of the rich and the poor to create a regime that is neither democratic nor oligarchic, but a little of both. We shall see that the Spartan, Cretan, and Carthaginian regimes already mixed some democratic elements with quite a few oligarchic elements yet still failed. I will argue that if Sparta, Crete, or Carthage had offered him the opportunity to advise them on reform, Aristotle would have suggested creating a substantial middle class, the lesson he teaches in his in-depth discussion of the polity in *Politics* IV as the best means of strengthening the balance of oligarchic and democratic elements in these regimes, thereby creating the best atmosphere for political stability and achievable justice.

THE DEFINITIONS OF POLITICS AND THE POLITY

Throughout the *Politics*, Aristotle examines the historically new phenomenon of politics, both defining and defending it as a human activity. Before the regime called “*politeia*” is defined in book III of the *Politics* and examined in depth in book IV, the polity as a standard for a good regime and “political” as a standard for rule are mentioned in a number of contexts, most extensively in the assessments of the regimes thought best by others in book II.

Aristotle first makes use of the term “polity” in reference to a particular regime, rather than to regimes in general, in II.6, when he examines Plato’s *Laws* and then again in describing the commonly praised regimes of Crete and Carthage. These regimes, as well as that of the Lacedaemonians, are criticized with reference both to the standards of the simply best regime (described in books VII and VIII) and those of the polity. They clearly fail in Aristotle’s eyes to approach the simply best, but aspects that resemble the polity are praised. In the descriptions and criticisms of these regimes, Aristotle gives some indications of what is good in and what is required by the *politically best*, as opposed to the *simply best*, regime.

The distinction at issue is that between the “political” standard, by which the polity is the superior regime, and the standard of the best simply or of virtue, by which the regime of books VII and VIII is judged

superior. Aristotle gradually introduces the distinction in II.6 and 9–11, refers to it in book III, but does not fully articulate it until book IV. This differentiation obviously depends on Aristotle's use of the term "political" and his observations on the distinctiveness of politics as a type of human association and activity.

M. I. Finley argues persuasively that a prime difficulty in studying ancient political life is that the Greeks "invented" politics, so to speak, and, as a result, they were often making up its rules as they went along (1987, 53–54). The polis is a Greek invention and the best arrangement of life within it was a matter of heated controversy—a matter of political debate and struggle. My working hypothesis is that Aristotle looks back on a few centuries of political history and political thinking and tries in the *Politics* to make sense of its manifold ends and means. Which ends are most appropriate to political life per se? Which belong only in nonpolitical orders, such as tyranny or kingship? Which forms of politics achieve the appropriate goals of a political order?

In the brief first two chapters of book I, Aristotle establishes the basic premises of his observations and arguments concerning politics. The city is the political association. Life in a city is natural to man. Thus, the human being is, by nature, a political animal. The best political association will be the best city, providing the best support for the flourishing of the political animal. When Aristotle henceforth distinguishes "political" arrangements and activities in actual or theoretical cities from other sorts of arrangements and activities, he adds to our understanding of the uniqueness of politics and the standards its practice requires. Communities have existed in the world and in men's minds that do not fulfill the requirements of political life strictly speaking. Though all cities by nature may aim at full sufficiency and a good life, human fallibility and the need to choose particular arrangements under particular circumstances can cause the enterprise to go astray. The organic metaphor of a city growing from households and villages is not to be taken too literally—unlike most acorns, which, given the right conditions, grow into tolerably fine oak trees, most cities do not grow into good political orders. When they do, it is by human effort as much as, or more than, by unaided intrinsic development.

The remainder of book I, a discourse primarily dealing with the activities and organization of the household, makes few mentions of regimes or of politics as ordinarily understood. The household is a necessary step toward the political order and, as Aristotle argues in II.4, a necessary

component of a successful city, but it is a subordinate part of the city. In the context of the account of household rule, the discussion of the conditions under which slavery could be considered natural and just and the discussion of the types of rule that obtain within the family will, however, have particular import, usually as essential points of contrast, in Aristotle's later analyses of types of political rule.

Aristotle summarizes his account of natural slavery thus:

It is evident from these things as well that mastery and political [rule] are not the same thing and that all the sorts of rule are not the same as one another, as some assert. For the one sort is over those free by nature, the other over slaves; and household management is monarchy (for every household is run by one alone), while political rule is over free and equal persons. (1255b16–20)

The account of the subordinate parts of the city originally aims at distinguishing political rule from other types of rule with which it is often confused (1252a10–17). The expertise of the master is merely to know the things he commands the slave to perform—a rather undignified expertise best relinquished to an overseer. The implication Aristotle makes here is that no *political* leader should view himself as a master of slaves or his rulership as merely commanding actions he would not perform himself.

In I.12–13 Aristotle treats the relations between the head of the household and his wife and children, and thereby sheds some more light on the distinctiveness of the political relationship. The passage just quoted asserted that *political* rule is over persons not only free, but equal. What entitles some people's "intellects" to rule equal people's appetites? In I.12 we learn that rule over children is kingly, that is, a benevolent attention to the well-being of those who are as yet inferior in reasoning capacity; in other words, free persons ruling free and potentially rational, but temporarily inferior, persons. A husband's rule of his wife, on the other hand, is singled out for its *similarity* to political rule. The latter comparison suggests that husband and wife are equal in some important respect, in addition to being, like their children, free.

"The story Amasis told about his footpan" shows something significant and universal about political relationships: conventional distinctions mask the underlying and "natural" similarities between ruler and ruled in a political situation. Unlike a just kingship, it is not clear who should rule and who obey in a city of equals. In a natural relationship, the superior rules the inferior. Aristotle earlier asserted that not only is it advantageous for the

proper ruler to rule that which is properly ruled, but it is positively harmful if they are on an equal or reversed footing (1254b4–9). When all citizens are free and politically undifferentiated, what criterion can be used to determine who will be treated as the superior and who the inferior? Aristotle goes on to argue that the ruler who deserves his office differs from his subjects not only in the greatness of his virtue but in the types of virtues he exercises. Because ruling and being ruled differ in kind, the virtues necessary to their performance must differ in kind. The ruler of a city must have “complete virtue of character,” presumably because his rulership is exercised over the largest and most complete association, aiming at complete human sufficiency and the good life (1259b32–60a4, 14–24). If, in the marital relationship, there is potential for conflict because the ruler and ruled differ only in the degree to which deliberation rules the soul,¹ in the political realm, where ruling offices rotate among roughly equally deliberative persons, there could be a much greater problem: the ruled must have certain virtues to be able to obey properly and others when it is their turn to rule.

These final chapters of book I present a general problem to be addressed by the rest of the *Politics*. If politics and the city are natural to human beings—and I do not believe that Aristotle ever repudiates this view—why is it so hard to find a stable and self-sufficient city? In what sense does optimum politics require what might at first appear to be suboptimal conditions—that there be no clear superior to rule? Insofar as political rule is natural, the hierarchy of ruler and ruled should have its roots in the soul. Because the city is, by definition, an organization of free and equal citizens, however, much controversy surrounds the problem of distinguishing the best souls for ruling and satisfying the ruled that they should obey others who are, in some sense, their equals. The inequalities of offices, even when they are temporary, cause resentment, potentially instability. Again, this controversy flourishes on the level of selfish motives, but it represents a serious question. How can a city discern the significant differences in the souls of equals in order to be ruled in the best fashion? If political rule is among equals, however, and stability rests on the satisfaction of all parts of the regime, is it possible that the best *political* regime does not require the best to rule, but only those the city can be persuaded are the best in the circumstances?

As Aristotle criticizes Plato's *Republic* in book II, this issue is elaborated. A city is not a household. First, truly political rule is not

¹ The quotation from Sophocles's *Ajax* (1260a30) calls even this difference into serious question.

permanent but rotated. Those who are ruled also know how to rule. Second, it is necessary for the sufficiency of the political association that the citizens be many and differ greatly (1261a22–24). Yet members of cities are all free adults, who see themselves as equal to all the others. One who willingly defers to his father will not necessarily defer *politically* to all people of his father's age (Plato, *Republic* 463c–e). In political life, as opposed to life in a village or a feudal monarchy, he would demand his share of rule in return for being ruled. And surely no free man would willingly submit to slavery. "It is thus reciprocal equality which preserves the cities." (Aristotle refers to his "ethics": *Nicomachean Ethics* 1132b33–33a2.) Although he admits that giving each man one art, a permanent aristocracy or kingship, might be more effective for particular aims, Aristotle shows that if all are "equal in their nature," all must share the benefits and burdens of office (1261a30–b4). Both here and in a later passage, he admits that although such sharing would create defective rule because the rulers are not uniformly wise, it is not defective politically.

Aristotle suggests by his criticisms of the *Republic* that self-sufficiency and stable diversity are more properly political aims for the lawgiver than either perfect harmony or doing justice to the better men. Surely the better men suffer when they are ruled by the worse, but for the sake of stability those who believe themselves equal, and for the sake of justice those who are in some important sense equal, must be allowed to share in rule. Widespread satisfaction with the regime due to equal treatment of roughly equal citizens is a political good, for "the good of each thing is surely what preserves it" (1261b9).

That a city is also not really like a man is obvious and yet it must be stated because the *Republic* seems to depend on the opposite assumption. Aristotle has indeed argued that a city is analogous to a living organism, insofar as it stands toward a citizen as the whole body to a hand. Each part of the city performs its function for the support of the whole. Again, however, Aristotle insists that that analogy cannot be stretched as far as Socrates takes it. For one human being to obey another as the body or the hand "obeys" the soul is not politics, but slavery (1254b2–9).

Book I and the beginning of book II distinguish politics from the monarchy of the household by calling it a partnership of equals ruled by the participation of the members and not controlled by a person of obvious superiority. Politics is also shown to differ from the despotism of the household, in which servants are ruled as if they were not fully human, without the capacity to exercise judgment. Finally, politics takes place among a larger

and more diverse group of people than the relationship between husband and wife. With many free persons contributing to the sufficiency and happiness of the whole, the city achieves a more complete end than the household—an end associated with the virtue of justice. Such an achievement has its costs: the city must contend with the danger of instability and factional conflict among those who see themselves as (at least) equals and desire honor from all of their fellows. The city is much less likely to be stable and peaceful than a family or the kingship of a widely recognized superior man.

The activity of politics is also distinguished from the perfection of a man's soul. Its requisite diversity and equality of status among the members rules out the possibility of its ever achieving the harmonious hierarchy of a philosophic soul, in which the rational part always rules the appetites and spiritedness always serves the just end. Aristotle suggests that, in a political situation, the human beings who represent the appetites and spiritedness demand their due, sometimes more than their due calculated by another standard, and cannot safely be denied some rewards and honors.

Lest he appear a mere sophist playing with the notion of the best regime, Aristotle insists he must dispose of the regimes, both actual and speculative, called fine or noble by others before he describes his own "best regime" (1260b29–33). Only if these other regimes are "in fact not in a fine condition" can his enterprise be genuine and not sophistical. For purposes of this inquiry, the regimes shown to be "not fine" with reference to the standards called "political" are the most important.

MAGNESIA

In the course of discussing Plato's *Laws*, Aristotle associates the "political" life of the city with relations toward foreign regions, as opposed to isolation. All regimes must defend themselves against enemies, but "political" cities also must take care "to use for war the arms that are useful not only on its own territory, but in foreign regions as well" (1265a20–28). Here a crucial part of the political city's life consists of the formidable use of the army for defensive measures, and a willingness to engage in offensive measures. Though this mention of political life is not associated immediately with the polity as a specific regime, it begins to narrow the limits within which a regime can be described as strictly political. It excludes settlements that are purposely established in so isolated a position as to be able to lead a private (*idion*) life of internal perfection. The political regime must act in the

world and be prepared to enter into militarily enforced relations with others. (See also 1267a18–31.)

These criteria of “political” regimes are soon related to the regime of the *Laws* through Aristotle’s association of polities with a dominant class that reveres military virtue: “The organization [of the Magnesian regime] as a whole is intended to be neither democracy nor oligarchy, but the one midway between them which is called polity; for it is based on those who bear [heavy] arms” (1265b26–29). As we shall see in the criticism of Sparta, the cultivation of military virtue to the detriment of all others is an error in legislation. Nonetheless, the military art is an essential one for a *political* order and cannot be ignored. To put those who are capable of practicing the military art in a position of power in the city surely elevates the status of this virtue in the regime. Aristotle points out, however, that the Athenian stranger’s proposal to support five thousand warriors (and their wives and attendants) in idleness is not economically feasible (1265a8–18). Though military virtue must be honored, soldiers will have to perform other productive services for the city as well.

In the next section, the Athenian stranger is taken to task for his definition of the optimum amount of property for a Magnesian citizen: “as much as is needed to live with moderation” (1265a28–32). Aristotle does not abandon the pursuit of moderation, but he recognizes another criterion for the good political life, generosity. The political regime must support liberal moderation, or the avoidance of both luxury and penury by the practice of two quite accessible virtues concerned with property (1265a32–38). Rather than praise very wealthy citizens for grand expenditures, the best citizen—a person of more moderate means—will perhaps not contribute so lavishly to the grandeur of his city, but he will be both able and willing to share his sufficient possessions with his fellows. At this point the polity is a good regime associated with certain virtues, but not all virtues, and perhaps not the grandest.

Aristotle acknowledges that Magnesia may be “the most attainable [or generally accessible, *koinotatēn*] of all the regimes for cities” (cf. *Laws* 737d), but it does not surpass “more aristocratic” regimes in its excellence, “for one might well praise that of the Spartans more, or some other that is more aristocratic” (1265b29–33). Despite the Athenian stranger’s claims, this polity is not the second-best regime according to the standards appropriate to Socrates’s republic or Aristotle’s best regime. The second-best according to that ranking would be the “timocracy” of the *Republic* or, as Aristotle suggests, the Spartan regime. If the criteria of the simply best regime are employed,

Magnesia belongs in no higher than the third rank. Aristotle says it claims to be a mixture of democracy and tyranny (1266a1–3; the term used at *Laws* 693d is the more neutral *monarchian*), and that either these are not regimes at all or they are the worst of regimes. Rather, Magnesia actually mixes democracy and oligarchy, but tends to favor oligarchy, according to Aristotle.

Since he has identified Magnesia as most closely resembling a polity, Aristotle proceeds to criticize it as, in books IV and V, he will criticize other cities that fall short of this regime's goals and tend to emulate either democracy or oligarchy excessively. He cites the encouragements for the wealthy to participate in offices and elections and the lack of such encouragements for the poorer citizens—a dangerous situation, because the elections turn out to favor a relative few who are willing to form coalitions (1266a1–31).

The examination of the regime of the *Laws* yields a number of ideas concerning the institution of a political regime and, specifically, a polity. Aristotle insists on the importance of military preparedness and involvement in foreign regions, of liberal moderation and moderate liberality, and of the judicious balance of democratic and oligarchic principles, particularly in the electoral arrangements. He also attends closely to the property distribution of this city. Care must be taken—by whom, it is not obvious—to insure that important divisions of property will not decay over generations into great wealth for some and great poverty for most (clearly a response to the decline of Sparta's property arrangements). As we shall see in Aristotle's critique of Sparta, in a regime in which property is distributed to achieve equality, but marriages and births are not carefully regulated to maintain that equality, the other three criteria would be impossible: there would be insufficient men prepared to bear heavy arms, insufficient funds in the hands of most and too great wealth in the hands of a few for a moderate and liberal existence, and the democratic and oligarchic elements of the city would be so radically divided as to rule out political cooperation. Thus, despite the fact that Aristotle does not link Magnesia's property arrangements explicitly to the requirements of a stable polity, such links clearly exist. Indeed, having made it quite clear that he considers the Magnesian regime an attempt at a polity, in concluding his account of it, Aristotle points us to book IV for further discussion of that form of regime: "That a regime of this sort should not be constituted out of democracy and monarchy, then, is evident from these things and from what will be said later, when the investigation turns to this sort of regime" (1266a22–25; Lord 1984, 245n41).

POLITICS ON THE HOOF

1. Sparta After discussing the regimes and the reform proposals of people not engaged in politics, Aristotle turns to the often praised regimes of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage. These regimes suffer both the advantages and the disadvantages of being real cities under investigation, for they test the ramifications of political theories in practice. That is, they show “whether some aspect of the legislation is fine or not with respect to the best arrangement.” They also demonstrate conflicts among the purposes or weaknesses in the intentions or the practices of statesmen and legislators, that is, they show “whether [some aspect of the legislation] is opposed to the presupposition and the mode of the regime they actually have” (1269a30–34). Aristotle thus warns us that he will evaluate these regimes according to two standards: the simply best “arrangement” and “the presupposition” of the regime.

Aristotle separates his consideration of these three regimes into discrete sections, but his frequent comparisons suggest that the three have much in common. “These three regimes...are very close to one another in a sense, and at the same time very different from the others” (1272b26–28). In addition to the fact that the Spartan regime is said to have been based on the laws of Crete, they each represent better or worse answers to the same questions or political problems. For example, as Aristotle argued earlier in reference to the *Republic*, “the natural beginning” for an investigation into the best regime is to ask in what things the citizens share, “in everything or in nothing, or in some things but not in others” (1260b36–39). To share in nothing would rule out the existence of a city—citizens obviously share a place and a way of life, their regime. Socrates exceeds both possibility and desirability in his argument that the citizens of Kallipolis must share everything. To treat property as a private responsibility is to exploit, for the benefit of each citizen and of the city as a whole, the fact of human life that one cares most for one’s own. Yet in his comments on the *Laws* and these three real regimes, Aristotle shows that he does not endorse the privacy of property for its own sake: one common defect in these regimes is the tendency toward oligarchy, more or less explicitly honoring the accumulation of individual wealth. Aristotle’s suggestions for the improvement of these regimes may have in view the formula for the regulation of property that grows out of his criticism of the *Republic*: privately owned property put to public use (1263a24–40). Other aspects of these regimes that Aristotle considers include the provision of leisure for the citizens, the defense of the city, the offices necessary for a good

regime, and the virtues the regime will foster. None of these regimes presents a fully adequate solution to these political problems, but each is praised as fine in one way or another: the three “are justly held in high repute” (1273b25–26). It is necessary to ask what justifies these good reputations for regimes that are not the best.²

The discussion of the Lacedaemonian regime makes no direct reference to polity, though it is held up to the standards of that regime in book IV and it is compared to Crete and Carthage in the next sections, where the latter are explicitly associated with polity.³ The lawgiver's intention seems to have been to create the best regime simply, that is, the assumptions Aristotle mentions as underlying the Lacedaemonian regime resemble those of the *Republic* and in some ways those of the regime of *Politics* VII and VIII. Yet when Sparta is shown to have failed in these intentions, its arrangement of offices is held up to the less exalted standards Aristotle associates with the polity. Spartan practice is shown to be “opposed to the presupposition...of the regime they actually have” in various ways. Its lawgiver is said to have desired the city to be hardy and not licentious and to be strong militarily—neither extraordinary nor despicable political goals—and he is assumed to have wanted to provide leisure for the citizens “from the necessary things” and to discourage greed—more lofty aims. Indeed, the leisure from necessity is related to a “finely governed” city and anticipates Aristotle's best regime (1334a11–b5). Yet “the legislator”⁴ is said to have failed to make the arrangements needed to educate and habituate the citizens to the higher ends he sought.

In Aristotle's view, the founder and lawgivers of Sparta, like Socrates in the *Republic*, did not understand the delicate relationship between education for citizenship and the institutional arrangements for the restraint

² Peter L. P. Simpson (1998, 127) suggests Aristotle salvages some of these regimes' institutions for his own “best regime.” These political arrangements are not irredeemable, but these cities merely used them poorly, for which Simpson amply chastises their lawgivers. Michael P. Davis (1996, 44), on the other hand, argues that these regimes' failures in Aristotle's eyes have more to do with the unavoidable paradox of political science when it attempts a rational understanding of the not-completely-rational world of politics. I am arguing that the irrationality of the rational animal engaging in politics leads Aristotle to propose several split-the-difference measures to ensure the success of the quintessentially political regime.

³ Cf. 1294b17–36. I disagree with Jaffa (1972, 127) that these three real cities are criticized primarily according to the principles of the simply best regime.

⁴ Roger A. de Laix (1974, 27–28) makes the interesting observation that Aristotle refers to Lycurgus by name in book II only when Sparta's institutions are praised, and refers to him as “the lawgiver” when criticisms are leveled.

of the citizens from vice. As Aristotle argues in II.5, while institutional restraints may be important supplemental devices for encouraging virtue, they can never substitute for education in and habituation to good action, and sometimes they can positively detract from such an education. Socrates's particular fear was that if the guardians were allowed to have private possessions, to call things "mine" in a private way, they would become mean and illiberal, rather than friendly toward their fellows (*Republic* 464c–465c). Otherwise put, the communal arrangement of property aimed to create an artificial friendship among the guardians and between the guardians and the working classes (1263b15–22).⁵ For Aristotle also, friendship and the virtues that flow from it are a prime concern. Genuine friendship, he argues, requires private property in order to provide opportunities for generosity toward friends and for the pleasure of having possessions to offer to a friend. If it forces all to share everything, if "excessively one," the regime discourages both friendship and virtue:

It is odd that one who plans to introduce education and who holds that it is through this that the city will be excellent should suppose it can be set right by things of that sort [unifying the city through institutional constraints], and not by habits, philosophy and laws, just as the legislator in Lacedaemon and Crete made common what is connected with possessions by means of common messes. (1263b32–64a1)

A regime much more fitting to free men and to the free man's quintessential virtue, liberality, would result from an arrangement of private property put to common use (1263b5–14). The laws cannot banish wickedness or depravity, the true cause of contentious behavior. Socrates's communal solution, or "making the city excessively one," will not accomplish the banishment of evils from politics. The laws must also be concerned with educating souls even to mitigate human wickedness. If they succeed with the latter, enforced communism of property becomes superfluous at best. More likely, it will be detrimental, because of the deprivations of good things it occasions. For example, with communal property, one cannot be properly liberal; with communal wives, one cannot exercise sexual temperance (1263b7–29; see 1260b14–20 for the significance of the virtue of women for politics).

⁵ Jowett's (1885, xxviii) restatement of this principle, "more good will be done by awakening in rich men a sense of the duties of property, than by the violation of their rights," misses the point. Duties and rights are not at issue here. The virtues to which Aristotle refers are habits, somehow based on rationality, but far from the modern conception of duties based in a rational "law of nature" or premised on a Kantian good will. Whereas we moderns are enjoined to study our duties for ourselves and to practice good actions for our own moral satisfaction, Aristotle is talking about a city in which men learn their ethics from the laws and customs of the regime and practice it out of habit or are punished.

Similarly, in II.9, Aristotle argues that the Spartan lawgivers have done more harm than good with a number of their well-intentioned institutions. The helots are a troublesome and disruptive solution to the need for leisure (Simpson 1998, 113); the failure to discipline the women provides a source of laxness and luxury, rather than supporting hardiness and disdain for extravagance (cf. 1294b19–40; *Laws* 692a–b; Simpson 1998, 113–15); the excessive emphasis on soldiering then leaves these luxurious persons essentially in charge of the city much of the time. Only after these three considerations does Aristotle take up the “naturally first” question, concerning the division of property and the arrangements for the family. Sparta’s once careful equalization of property has declined by Aristotle’s time into great disparities of wealth and the maldistribution of land. Together with the general license of the women, the failure to oversee the marriages of heiresses and the donation and bequest of land has undermined the intended equalities. Though Aristotle emphatically dismisses the communism of women and property in his criticism of the *Republic*, he nonetheless recognizes that any public regulation of property is ineluctably tied to the public regulation of marriages. Spartan history provides clear evidence for Aristotle’s criticism of Phaleas’s communal plan, that he fails to recognize this essential connection (1266b8–14). The concentration of land is also said to leave Sparta vulnerable to attack—the inefficient distribution cannot indefinitely support a sufficient armed force. Aristotle may assume in these criticisms that Sparta was intended to be the best regime (with its leisured ruling class, strict citizen training in the regime’s understanding of virtue, and careful division of communal property) and any inadequacies in the maintenance of its standard condemn it to failure. Yet this failure also illuminates a danger for a lawgiver aiming to institute a polity: military virtue is both practically necessary and the virtue that a large number of citizens can reasonably practice, but it is not sufficient as the focus and aim of the successful political regime. Economic concerns, traditionally and perhaps naturally (see Jacobs 1992, chaps. 2 and 5) disdained by warriors, must claim the attention not only of the original lawgiver but of citizens throughout the life of the regime.

According to Plutarch, Lycurgus left Sparta having insisted that the Lacedaemonians take an oath not to change the rhetras of his founding until he returned. He then committed suicide. Plutarch praises the regime he left behind as a philosophical city that endured for five hundred years (*Lycurgus* 29.1–6, 31.2). Aristotle, evaluating the regime at closer historical range, might agree that the lawgiver had philosophical aspirations and he later praises the attitude implied in Lycurgus’s actions, namely, government by

laws rather than by human discretion. Real cities, however, cannot be ruled by static law. Into the founding principles the lawgiver must build principles for modifying the laws when necessary and for ongoing oversight of the education of each generation so that future citizens will make the changes (and only the changes) necessary to sustain the regime.

The regime of the Lacedaemonians fails also in its arrangement of offices, yet Aristotle is more forgiving in his analysis of these deficiencies. The board of overseers, the Ephorate, is a popular office, prone to bribery, and too influential in the government. Rather than providing a balance against tyrannical tendencies in the dual kingship, the Ephors were apparently tyrannical in their own right: “because the office is overly great—like a tyranny in fact—even the kings are compelled to try to become popular with them; this has done added harm to the regime, for from an aristocracy, it has become a democracy” (1270b14–17).⁶ Instituting the board of overseers was, however, not simply a mistake, for its existence quiets the people with a share in the regime; that is, it provides one support characteristic of polity as a regime. If the popular element causes the regime to become unbalanced, tending toward an unmixed democracy, it will risk offending the few wealthy or aristocratic citizens and breaking the first law of politics: “If a regime is going to be preserved, all the parts of the city must wish it to exist and continue on the same basis” (1270b21–22; see also 1272b41–73a2). As long as the popular branch remains proportionate to the other elements of the regime, however, the people should have a share, Aristotle argues. There is no argument for the justice of their claim—indeed, it is quite plainly asserted that they do not merit their office either for their virtue or for their capacities to rule for the good of the city:

although they are of an average sort, they have authority in the most important [judicial] decisions. Hence it would be better if they judged not at discretion but in accordance with written [rules] and the laws. Also the comportment of the Overseers does not agree with the inclination of the city: it is overly lax, though in other respects [the city] goes to excess in the direction of harshness. (1270b28–33)

There are only two grounds for granting the many a share. One is that they will make trouble if they have no share—they will not wish the regime preserved—a striking instance of political extortion to which Aristotle assents.

⁶ Simpson (1998, 117) shows nicely how a kingship in which the kings fear the democratic element of the regime is not merely a democracy, but an extreme form of democracy: the Ephors in effect force the kings to become demagogues, truckling to the many to keep their power.

The political imperative to preserve the regime through the common wish of all the inhabitants seems to outweigh the higher aim of distributive justice. The other reason is that the kings and the *gerontes*, of which the kings form a part, were becoming tyrannical and a balance against their influence was necessary. In this case, the (undeserving) citizens gain a share for the sake of the common good because the hereditary kingships and the education of Spartiates failed to produce virtuous rulers. The problem is not that Sparta's lawmakers stooped to low political considerations when creating the Ephorate, but that they did so unwisely and unsuccessfully and in response to another failure, that of the education of the kings and the Spartiates.

Thus, the kings, supposedly descended from Heracles, and the venerable Senate do not escape scathing criticism. The Senate was surely meant to be an aristocratic element of this mixed regime, due to the senators' election and their status as elders, yet Aristotle sees the senators as senile, improperly educated, self-promoting bribe takers. As a cure for their dangerous oligarchic propensities, Aristotle suggests that they be audited. He is reluctant to give the job to the Ephors, for they already hold too much discretionary power in the regime, but, all other things being equal, they would be his choice (1271a3–9; see also the praise of Solon's demotic measures at 1274a15–18). That such an expedient—that the representatives of the many inspect and control the few—even enters the discussion as a plausible arrangement indicates again that Aristotle is not arguing for the reform of Sparta into a simply superior regime, but is attempting to raise it to the level of a practicable political regime with a fair chance at survival. His suggestion would not make the so-called aristocrats or the many into excellent men or citizens, but would balance the democratic elements of the city against the oligarchic elements to create a balanced polity.

On the other hand, Aristotle criticizes the senators' self-nomination in the name of an apparently aristocratic principle, that "the one who merits the office should rule whether he wishes to or not" (1271a10–13). This appearance of aristocracy may be deceptive. Aristotle speculates that "the legislator" must have wanted to promote ambition in the citizens when he instituted the practice of people nominating themselves for the Senate. The argument against this practice is not solely that it may not select the best rulers, but also that "most voluntary acts of injustice among human beings result from ambition or from greed" (1271a16–18). Ambition in moderation is a virtue, not a vice (see IV.4), and a moderate amount of it would be acceptable, even useful in a citizen of a polity. Yet any city, however defective in

other respects, must want to discourage “voluntary acts of injustice.” Aristotle could be using the standard of the polity, just as much as that of an aristocracy, in this warning against fostering excessive ambition.

In like fashion, the kings are not trusted in the Lacedaemonian laws, according to Aristotle’s analysis of the Spartan belief that “factional conflict between the kings means preservation for the city.” Neither harmony nor justice, but mere preservation is sought in the arrangement of the dual kings drawn from separate hereditary lines who are “repeatedly sent on embassies accompanied by their enemies” (1271a23–26). Aristotle does not approve of such a kingship; rather, a king should be chosen on the basis of his own merits, not his family lines, and one of those merits should presumably be trustworthiness in office. The danger of hereditary kingship of any kind is that however good and skillful the first of the line, there is no way to ensure that his offspring will emulate him. “How should one handle what pertains to the offspring? Must the family rule as kings also? But if those born into it are persons of average quality, it would be harmful” (1286b23–25). If Sparta cannot make the case that its kingship is like Aristotle’s *pambasileia*, the rule of the supremely virtuous over willing and obviously inferior subjects, the next best arrangement is the rule of the few best. We have seen, however, that the necessary support for a genuine aristocracy—a body of well-educated and virtuous citizens—also does not exist in Sparta. The mixed regime, specifically the mixture of oligarchy and democracy known as polity, is the third choice, as we saw with the *Laws*.

Aristotle’s commentary on the regime of the Lacedaemonians seems to aim much more toward the last regime than toward either of the superior regimes. To balance Sparta’s oligarchic tendencies, Aristotle has praised the Ephorate, if it were less corrupt and tyrannical, and he also praises the democratic institution of common meals, again if it were so reformed that the poor could share in it as well as the rich. On the other hand, the grave error of the lawgiver in the presupposition of the Spartan regime stands as a warning to the founder of a polity, the regime that depends on those who bear heavy arms and possess a certain military virtue:

The entire organization of the laws is with a view to a part of virtue—warlike virtue. ... Yet while they preserved themselves as long as they were at war, they came to ruin when they were ruling [an empire] through not knowing how to be at leisure, and because of there being no training among them that has more authority than the training for war. (1271b2–6)

If the citizen body does not practice virtues other than courage, strength, and military cunning, it will believe that not the opportunities to practice the peaceful virtues, but merely the spoils and glory of war, are the ends for which they fight. “They wrongly conceive [the rewards of virtue] to be better than virtue” (1271b7–10). The citizens, not knowing the arts of peace and leisure, among them surely the art of politics, pursue only wealth and luxury when they return home—and they pursue them not in spite of, but as a result of, their rigorous training in military discipline and self-denial (1270b30–33). While giving full recognition to the need for military preparedness and prowess in any political regime, Aristotle warns that it cannot be the exclusive preoccupation of the lawgivers or the citizens. Even if the armed class rules and is justified in doing so primarily on the ground of its military virtue, the regime must cultivate in its members other virtues for times of peace. These virtues are discussed in book IV.

What is praiseworthy about the Spartan regime for Aristotle? The only aspects that we see escape strong criticism are essentially democratic. From this fact and the criticism of most of the rest of their institutions, we learn the *political* benefits of the principle of mixing a democratic element into an oligarchic regime. These benefits remind of the lower rather than the exalted side of human life in common, of the power of numbers and greed over virtue.

Sparta's experience serves as a warning to all founders and legislators. Assuming that at least the original lawgiver to whom Aristotle refers is Lycurgus, the best intentions, thoughtful study of foreign governments, fairly sophisticated psychological analysis, and the most careful attention to minute details of everyday life will not prevent errors that will have to be addressed by future lawmakers. Those changes are likely to have unintended consequences as well.

2. Crete The regime characteristic of Cretan cities, though it accomplishes some aims more fittingly than Sparta, is surely not vastly superior. Aristotle describes it as less fully finished (*hētton glaphurōs*) or less fully articulated (*hētton diērthrōtai*) (1271b20–24). Its common mess is more democratic in effect, thus more successful than that of Sparta, for “everyone—women, children, and men—receives sustenance from the common [treasury].” The lawgiver is said to have been philosophic (*pephilosophēken*) in his understanding of the need to create a “beneficial” scarcity of food, and at the same time to control population growth by the encouragement of homosexuality and the segregation of the women (1272a16–27). As a whole,

the provision for sustenance is kept in proportion to the population and does not invite the dissolution of virtue or foreign invasion that Aristotle envisions for Sparta, nor the domestic factionalism he foresaw in Phaleas's plan (1266b7–14, b32–67a5).

In the negative column, the Cretan Orderers (*Kosmoi*), whose powers correspond to those of the Spartan Ephors, fall short of providing even the political advantages of the Ephors. For, rather than being elected from all the people and thus encouraging the many to wish the regime to continue, the Orderers are elected from certain families and are then eligible to rise into the Council (the more evidently oligarchic body). Owing to their quasi-democratic selection and status, the Orderers are as little beneficial to the regime in their virtue or abilities as the Ephors and, owing to their oligarchic source, they are less beneficial in their political effect. Further, their opportunities to do harm are augmented by their assumption of leadership in war after the overthrow of the kingship. On the other hand, the people's opportunities to defend themselves or to influence political decisions are limited to a virtually powerless assembly (1272a8–12).

Though the text is ambiguous as to whether Aristotle is referring to the Council or the Orderers (Lord 1984, 253n87), this regime, like that of Sparta, is said to invite corruption because certain officials are not audited and are allowed to judge matters at their discretion and not according to laws. Aristotle later argues that it is only in an absolute kingship of the best man, if even then, that a city can rightly be ruled solely according to the ruler's discretion (III.17). Clearly, in Aristotle's eyes neither Sparta nor Crete has the intention or the wherewithal to aspire to *pambasileia*. Though there may be less corruption in Crete—there are said to be fewer instances of bribery here than in Sparta—this circumstance is not due to the Orderers' virtue but to a fortuitous lack of offers. The insularity of Crete saves it from a common type of foreign influence left otherwise unattended (1272a39–b1).

Cretan cities are described as having succeeded where Sparta failed in the provision of leisure for the citizens by the use of serfs. Again, this success does not reflect the wisdom of the Cretan lawgivers, however. Rather, it is owing to a fear of their own serfs that surrounding cities do not ally with the Cretans' *perioikoi* to overthrow the regime. A certain international balance of terror holds between masters and servants in and around Crete, whereas the helots are not similarly deterred from frequent revolts (1269a36–b7). The peacefulness of their serfs is attributed to the facts that Crete is protected by the sea and had not, since the time of Minos, pursued

an imperial policy that would offend other cities and spur on those who could aid a serf rebellion.

The lowest form of stability obtains in Cretan cities, a stability said twice to be “unsafe.” Aside from the uneasy calm among the serfs, the many keep quiet and do not revolt. We are instructed, however, that this state of affairs does not indicate a “fine arrangement,” because the officials rule “in accordance with human wish” and not “in accordance with law,” and because the source of the stability is not “political” but dynastic. That is, the people do not share in rule, as “political” rule requires, and they are not empowered to expel the Orderers once they are elected. Is this powerlessness a reproach in itself? If this were a genuine aristocracy, the majority of the people would also not be able to vote for just anyone nor to vote out incumbent officials. The Cretan regime is not, however, a genuine aristocracy, but a dynastic oligarchy, in which the members of certain families are assured offices whether they deserve them or not, and in which apparently many of the dynastic families engage in factional warfare with each other and cause frequent civil disorder, even the dissolution of the political partnership (1272b11–14). Such a situation is the very definition of political instability. When a defective regime is “not political,” that is, when it neglects to include the ordinary inhabitants in some political functions, a dangerous situation results. The dynasties may succeed for a time in overpowering them, but their ruling position will be constantly threatened by a dissatisfied majority in addition to the rivalries with each other. In the course of making this point, Aristotle says that Crete has some elements of a polity, but actually is a dynasty (*echei ti politeias hē taxis, all’ ou politeia estin alla dunasteia mallon*) (1272b9–11), which is, as Aristotle later defines it, the worst form of oligarchy: “when son is in place of father...and not law but the officials rule. This is the counterpart among oligarchies to tyranny among monarchies” (1292b4–8). Also:

If [those who own property] concentrate further, becoming fewer and having larger properties, the third advance in oligarchy occurs—that where the offices are in their own hands, in accordance with a law requiring that the deceased be succeeded by their sons. When they become overly concentrated with respect to their properties and in the extent of their friendships, this sort of dynasty is close to monarchy, and human beings rule rather than the law. This is the fourth kind of oligarchy, the counterpart to the final kind of democracy. (1293a26–34)

Generally speaking, the regime is the political entity: it embodies the laws, the arrangements of offices, and the way of life of the

citizens of a city. In short, it is the whole in which politics takes place. Aristotle names the regime in which the majority rules for the common good “*politeia*,” the name that names all regimes. This ambiguous name creates some problems for translation and interpretation. Usually context shows whether the generic “regime” or the specific “polity” is meant, but in certain cases the context fails to resolve the difficulty and may even support the ambiguity. One of the latter cases occurs in the criticism of Crete. There are two possible translations of the sentence quoted above: (1) The Cretan “arrangement has elements of a regime but is not so much a regime as a dynasty” (Lord 1984; cf. Sinclair 1962, Barker 1958) or (2) the Cretan regime “has a republican element, although it is not actually a republic but rather a dynasty” (Rackham 1932, which is similar to Jowett’s revised translation in Ross 1921). The first interpretation relates to the Aristotelean position that the extreme form of a regime, particularly a defective regime, is no longer a regime, a settled order of offices and way of life according to law or custom, but individuals ruling for private benefit according to ever-changing whim. The second interpretation suggests that, within the context of their politics, the Cretans’ oligarchic party is so strong that the form of government approaches the dynastic or most extreme form of oligarchy rather than the moderate mixture of oligarchy and democracy found in the regime called polity. The point seems to imply that the Cretan regime wanted (or should want) to be a polity, but fails. The two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. If the Cretan regime is strongly dynastic, it is neither a polity nor, in Aristotle’s strictest sense, a regime. If it is strongly dynastic, then it is not ruled by the give and take of truly political life, in which the various parts of the citizen body are satisfied with the regime and do not want another one, but by a combination among strong families which subdues opposition by force, not by persuasion and education.

The first translation is supported by the immediate context, in that Aristotle goes on to describe the apparently common disputes among the dynastic families, supported by friends and followers, disputes that effectively mean the dissolution of the political order. These governments so vitally center on these dynasties that they border on chaos. Such a state of affairs can hardly be considered a regime—it is civil war. An examination of the broader context of the passage supports the second interpretation as well: The Cretan way of life has an indubitable democratic element, the arrangements for common meals in which all parties participate, a successful attempt not to exclude anyone from a common institution. The Orderers’ office, for which the people do vote, if not freely, represents a superficial attempt to involve the many in the government of the regime. If this office has become corrupt and

the Council, which draws its members from the Orderers, has carried its powers far beyond the intent of the lawgiver, then the Cretan cities may be said to have declined into dynasty from an older, more republican, regime. This decline may be related to Aristotle's earlier characterization of the regime as less finished or less fully articulated than Sparta. The lawgiver clearly tried to involve the people but may have lacked the political wisdom or historical examples to help to carry this intent into practice.

At any rate, both interpretations present interesting points in preparation for the argument in favor of polity as the political regime par excellence. Using Crete as the model, either Aristotle distinguishes the regime (the *politeia*, the political entity) from other sorts of social orderings, such as tyranny and its plural form, extreme dynasty, and thereby adds to his description of politics as a distinct human enterprise, or he distinguishes the moderate *politeia* as a particular regime from extreme and unmixed oligarchy, and thus begins his demonstration of the superiority of polity to one of the more common regimes, oligarchy.

3. Carthage In introducing the consideration of Carthage, Aristotle declares that "many of their arrangements are finely handled" and makes some general remarks on "a well-organized *politeia*." Apparently these criteria apply to Carthage: "the people [*dēmos*] voluntarily acquiesce in the arrangement...there has never been factional conflict [*stasis*] worth mentioning, or a tyrant" (1272b29–33). Any regime (here again Aristotle excludes tyranny from that category) must have general acquiescence, and not constant factional battling, in order to carry on its governance and way of life. This statement gives the political entity at least two essential characteristics: it is internally peaceful and its citizens are not enslaved, but rather are willing to be ruled by its arrangements. Whereas Crete quite obviously fails these tests, Sparta comes closer to fulfilling these criteria and, as Aristotle will argue, Carthage even closer.

The Carthaginian common mess is said to be arranged like that of the Spartans, which is not praise, but its offices are generally better ordered. Its version of the Ephors (the Hundred and Four) and its kings and Senate are superior, principally because they are elected to office on the basis of merit, not heredity, in the case of the kings, nor age, in the case of the senators, nor are they selected by chance from just any people, as Aristotle implies is the case with the Spartan Ephors.

These comments all appear to form a general introduction to the Carthaginian regime. Aristotle then dismisses the possibility that Carthage, or either of the other actual regimes, is the simply best regime. If Lord's interpolation is correct, Carthage is grouped with Sparta and Crete in their common deviations from the best regime. None is a fine candidate for that title, and for roughly the same reasons. On the other hand, Carthage deviates uniquely from "the presupposition of aristocracy and polity." Unlike Sparta and Crete, Carthage is not predominantly oligarchic. Rather, "some features incline toward [rule of the] people, others toward oligarchy" (1273a4–6). If it is not the best, at least it represents a somewhat balanced mixture of the elements of these two common regimes, along with some elements of aristocracy. A well-balanced mixture will be the *sine qua non* of a polity. What are Carthage's especially "political" characteristics? What is done well and what may need to be improved?

All proposals, save those on which the Senate and kings agree, must be submitted to the people for ratification or rejection. The democratic element of the regime, therefore, exists not merely for the sake of appearances. The people may speak against, present their own opinions on, and come to an independent decision concerning these proposals, as well as others voluntarily submitted to them. Representing the opposite element of the regime are the "Committees of Five, which have authority in many great matters." Self-selection, the power to elect to "the greatest office," and the influence of their members even when outside of office render these bodies oligarchic. There are even aspects of aristocracy in the Carthaginian practices of election (versus the use of the lot) and of not paying the officials, and in the arrangements for trials (1273a6–20). Because many hold that "rulers ought not to be elected on the basis of desert alone but also on the basis of wealth," in order that the rulers be at leisure, the election practices are not simply aristocratic, but also oligarchic, "particularly in the case of the greatest offices, kings and generals" (1273a22–30).

Aristotle initially criticizes these mixed priorities: rather, if he wants the best men to rule, the legislator must take care that the men of virtue be able to be at leisure. Officials receive no pay for their duties in order to prevent them from entering office for the profit, and yet this practice ensures that only the wealthy can afford to serve the regime—the same method used to discourage corruption may in fact encourage it, by barring the virtuous from taking office, if we presume with Aristotle that the good are not necessarily rich. In effect, the "good offices can be bought." The argument that this

effect is harmful accords with the principles of aristocracy, but not with those of oligarchy. “This law makes wealth something more honored than virtue, and the city as a whole greedy” (1273a37–39). Aristotle is less concerned here with the mix of oligarchy and democracy than with setting a standard for a regime in which the authoritative element will influence the whole citizen body to follow a beneficial opinion.

In contrast to this aristocratic point of criticism, Aristotle next comments on a Carthaginian institution that is not popular and political enough: in Carthage, it is considered beneficial to bestow multiple offices on one man. Without providing the Carthaginian argument for such an opinion, Aristotle deprecates the practice on two grounds: “One work is best accomplished by one,” and it is more political [*politikōteron*] and more popular [*dēmotikōteron*] to have more persons in offices. “The legislator should... not command the same person to play the flute and cut leather” (1273b8–15). The famous Socratic injunction that one man have only one art in the best regime might be taken to be a model for this argument, yet Aristotle attacked this aspect of the *Republic* earlier in book II. There, it is said to be more salutary for the political partnership among equals that offices rotate, that “shoemakers and carpenters change places rather than the same persons always being shoemakers and carpenters” (1261a32–37). More will be accomplished by a person trained and experienced in one job—whether we speak of public or private life. According to Socrates some are born to rule, others to farm, others to make shoes, and each is excluded from the other occupations. Aristotle agrees that where the differences are quite discernible such a hierarchy is preferable. As we have seen in the account of Sparta, Aristotle here again says that “those capable of ruling best should rule” (1273b5) rather than allowing the rulers to be chosen on the basis of a less relevant standard, such as wealth. Where, however, “all are equal in their nature, and where it is at the same time just for all to have a share in ruling,” that is, where all deserve office roughly equally, then there should be rotation among rulers and ruled. When one returns to ruling, he may not occupy the same office. This alternation of ruling and being ruled is not inconsistent with the more minimal suggestion here that one person perform one art *at a time*, as long as we remember that in both places Aristotle is arguing for the more “political” arrangement among equals; in the earlier case, political is distinguished from hierarchic and aristocratic, here, from exclusive and oligarchic. In both places, he advocates the arrangement that will involve more persons in the offices of the regime and will accustom more persons to the ways of both

ruling and being ruled, as both are required in many important occupations, for example, the military and sailing (1273b13–17; cf. Simpson 1998, 127).

The oligarchic exclusivity of the Carthaginians' offices could thus be fairly easily remedied. Other tendencies to oligarchy are balanced by a fortuitous upward mobility in society: "a part of the people is always becoming wealthy through being sent out to the cities [of the empire]" (1273b18–20). The danger that the poor will revolt is doubly cured by sending them away and by making them less poor. Yet "if some mischance were to occur," perhaps if the empire were to fall, Aristotle warns that "there is no medicine that will restore quiet through the laws" (1273b22–24). Whether his suggestions for broader political participation and for the reward of virtue over wealth are meant to be that medicine is not clear, but they might begin to solve this major defect in domestic arrangements.

Thus, in Carthage, as well as in Sparta and Crete, the majority of Aristotle's criticisms center around the problem of keeping the many satisfied and preventing a revolt. Though Carthage receives more praise than the others and is twice associated with aristocracy, the regime proves to be too oligarchic in its mixture of elements even for a well-mixed polity and Aristotle fears for its future on this account. To improve the regime into either an aristocracy or a polity would require both the alteration of some institutions and the education of the citizens' political opinions so that wealth is not honored above either virtue or the claims of the free majority.

POLITICAL LESSONS FROM REGIMES HELD IN HIGH REPUTE

Did these regimes fail because their lawgivers did not take all the necessary steps toward the theoretically best or because the lawgivers aimed too high for the citizen body or circumstances available to them? On the other hand, if they had aimed more consciously at a well-mixed polity, would they have done better? In contrast to Miller (1997, 191, 253), I am arguing that the "first function of the lawgiver and true politician" is indeed "to establish and maintain the best constitution," but that that best constitution for real lawgivers in real cities is not the one "according to our prayers impeded by no external thing" but rather the polity of the middling element. While the science of politics includes contemplation of the simply best regime, every city is "impeded" by external circumstances; no regime can actually come to be "according to our prayers." Aristotle is showing that

the polity properly constituted is not “the second-best constitution” but the best political constitution.

What can a founding legislator plan for and what not? In the course of her comprehensive interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics*, Nichols argues that Aristotle's view is that overall the lawgivers of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage “were not comprehensive enough” (Nichols 1992, 46). As she points out, they started down paths of economic, family, and educational regulation, but did not anticipate the many consequences that their regulations could produce. She sees Aristotle exhorting statesmen to “a further exertion of reason,” to correct their regimes for these purposes. If Aristotle judged that these three cities could realistically succeed in achieving the simply best regime, such an exhortation would be required. I am arguing, however, that he is advising those cities, as he advises “most cities and men” in books IV through VI, to embrace the polity as the best *political* regime. Rather than attempt to anticipate the unpredictable or to educate a populace not suitable for the highest virtue, the prudent legislator sets up a balance of power between wealthy and poor (which means between virtuous and vicious, between educated and ignorant, even between wealth and poverty themselves) and allows the citizen body to respond to problems as they arise in the course of political life.

As one example, Nichols uses Aristotle's criticism of the Ephorate. Aristotle acknowledges that it may have saved the Spartan regime by giving the many a share of power, but it shows a flaw in Lycurgus's founding because he failed to anticipate the need for such an institution. Nichols emphasizes Aristotle's remark that the Ephorate arose not “through the legislator” but “by chance” (*dia tuchēn*) so Lycurgus gets no credit for the necessary balance of the many against the few. What can “by chance” mean here?⁷ To make sense of the context, it must mean the original lawgiver did not think of it when the laws were first devised, but it cannot mean that some irrational, inexplicable event created the institution. Someone *thought* of a board of overseers, probably in response to disaffection among Spartiates who were not accorded much influence over the ruling Senate. It was not that a statesman did not exert reason: a decision was made, led or backed by Theopompus (1313a25–28), in response to the situation on the ground, a decision that moved the original aristocracy/oligarchy toward polity by incorporating a democratic element. Someone deliberated and accomplished

⁷ Cf. Nichols (1992, 119): “Human beings overcome the chaos of chance through the deliberative choices of those options that give permanence to their lives. This is the teaching of Aristotle's *Politics*.”

just what Aristotle recommends in IV.9. That the Ephorate became “tyrannical” (1270b14–15) suggests that Theopompus’s reasoning was not prescient and, therefore, a further effort at balancing is required. Aristotle even hints at what could be done: give the Ephorate auditing powers over the Senate, but adjust the eligibility requirements for the former and expand the common messes or change the property laws to diminish the temptation to succumb to bribery. In other words, rebalance the oligarchic and democratic elements.

Using the criticisms of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage as part of his argument that Aristotle is trying to work through the difference, and yet the unavoidable connection, between theory and practice, Davis observes that all three regimes are shown to have an idea, and not a bad idea, about the best way to organize a city, but all three work or don’t work because of a collision with reality that proves their theories false. Sparta aims at manliness and moderation and results in the rule of women and luxury. Crete seems to have stumbled accidentally on a way to enforce moderation and harmony by being an island and short on rations. The legislators of Carthage note correctly that wealthy men are in a better position to be virtuous, but by using wealth as a criterion for office they end up encouraging oligarchy rather than aristocracy. All three muddle through, but not exactly for the reasons their legislators intended. Specifically, Davis notes Aristotle’s mixture of reason and chance to explain Sparta’s status in the fourth century: He observes that “one cannot understand Sparta without taking into account how it understands itself, but its self-understanding is a cause of its turning out differently from what it thinks it is” (1996, 41–43). A lawgiver must think about what he wishes to accomplish but the means he chooses may not look like the end he seeks or, if they do, the means may achieve the opposite result. The more Sparta focused on producing self-restrained he-men, the more time it spent on war, leaving the women, untrained and sick of deprivation, in charge of the city and moving it toward luxury and vice. Davis sees the lesson here as part of his overall argument that philosophical analysis is both necessary (and necessarily entailed) in politics, but that it must be concealed and its success in improving a political regime is limited by the nature of human beings and the world they inhabit. Despite the fact that Aristotle criticizes Sparta’s lawgiver for specific failures with regard to the education of women,⁸ the property-transfer laws, and the encouragement of childbearing, he also

⁸ It is interesting that Plutarch’s account of Lycurgus’s Sparta, one in which Plutarch admits he is cherry-picking the historical record and implies he is idealizing the regime, emphasizes the rigorous training of the women and their roles in supporting the moderation and manliness of the men (*Lycurgus* 14–15).

knows that no statesman can be so careful as to anticipate all consequences (1287a23–28, b18–29). Moreover, the achievement of any political goal often needs to be concealed behind what appears to be its opposite: to protect the military virtue of the men, Sparta should have spent more time on the education of its women; the institutional restraints that force citizens to live moderately produced an overwhelming desire for living immoderately. Finally, these suggestions for the lawgiver make a curious mixture: include the women in the educational scheme, tinker with the property laws to keep estates from becoming either too large or too small (which might require a wrenching land redistribution), and rethink the public incentives to produce more children. To what extent can a statesman achieve such reforms and to what extent must the citizen body decide for itself that reform is necessary? To what extent can the citizen body be persuaded to act contrary to what it habitually views as its advantage?

Not only does he make what we might call policy recommendations, Aristotle makes reform proposals concerning the ruling offices of the Spartan regime: the original aristocratic aspirations are rightly tempered by the Ephorate, tempered indeed to such an extent that the regime is no longer an aristocracy. Because the *demos* demands a voice in political decisions, the Ephorate “keeps the regime together.” Because the Senate is peopled with senile and corrupt men who have received no successful education in virtue, it requires audit by another body and Aristotle all but recommends the auditing body be the Ephorate. The Senate’s aristocratic qualities are also compromised by the process of self-nomination, another avenue to corruption. Sparta illustrates two important pitfalls of a serious attempt to institute an aristocracy: the difficulty of providing over time the requisite complement of virtuous men for rule and the immanent possibility of their corruption if they are not watched by another political authority (1270b14–71a18).

As Aristotle will argue in book III, politics is neither merely an economic nor essentially a military relationship, although the political order must attend to the sufficiency of goods to support the lives of its citizens and to the defense of the city from external enemies. The political relationship, though it includes economics, household management, intermarriage, and international relations as essential components, is more than any of these enterprises. A truly political order must establish common offices with authority over all its members and it must use these offices to take care that the citizens measure up to its standards and become just and good human beings, at least in their political capacities, that is, to attend to “political virtue

and vice [*aretēs kai kakias politikēs*]” (1280b6–8, 31–35). In what regime is this care likely to be taken? It may be surprising, but the polity, a regime founded on attention to the moderate virtues attainable by most men and not on the “extreme” of excellence portrayed in such detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is that regime. Sparta fails in two ways with its education in virtue. First, it focuses so much on military virtue that it ignores the virtues of peace. Sparta’s internal politics is characterized by corruption and the tyranny of the majority. Second, it takes those virtues to such an extreme that an ordinary citizen cannot live up to its standards: the sort of person who is reasonable, accommodating to all parties, self-reliant, and only moderately ambitious would fail on Lycurgus’s training field. Sparta publicly aimed to produce the perfect soldier perfectly devoted to his city, but it actually produced some (but not enough) very good warriors devoted to hoarding wealth.

In light of Sparta’s experience, we should not rush to condemn the individual virtues Aristotle expects from the middling element of a well-balanced polity, because Aristotle mentions some revered founders and statesmen as coming from the middle class. Solon, Charondas, and even Lycurgus are examples of the “middling” type Aristotle has in mind (1296a17–21), and they performed the essential political act of lawgiving. Lycurgus’s Sparta and Solon’s Athens exhibit some moderate characteristics. Solon’s democracy tried to prevent the predominance of the most vulgar (1281b22–34); Aristotle elaborates in his *Constitution of Athens* 5–12 on Solon’s feats as a “mediator” and claims that “by wealth and education he belonged to the middle class.” His moderate measures are also described and then summarized in 11.2 as follows:

The common people had believed that he would bring about a complete redistribution of property, while the nobles had hoped he would restore the old order or at least make only insignificant changes. Solon, however, set himself against both parties, and while he would have been able to rule as a tyrant if he had been willing to conspire with whichever party he wished, he preferred to antagonize both factions while saving the country and giving it the laws that were best for it, under the circumstances. (von Fritz and Kapp 1950)

Lycurgus’s regime mixed aristocracy with the preexisting monarchy. Not much is known of Charondas, but his city, Catana, employed the device “used in polities” against the poor by which the rich are fined more than the poor for nonattendance at the law court (1297a14–24).⁹ Thus, it seems, all

⁹ Charondas is said at 1274b5–9 to be a better draftsman of laws than Aristotle’s contemporaries

three men, whom Aristotle portrays rightly or wrongly as being of moderate means, can be credited with political initiatives using some of the principles of the polity. They were neither great kings nor the best political philosophers, but they reformed corrupt oligarchies into more moderated, decent regimes, and at least Solon and Lycurgus exercised a virtue, legislative prudence, that Aristotle calls in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI the highest exercise of prudence. The essence of the quintessentially *political* rational virtue is to establish the fundamental principles and aims of a *political* regime. This account suggests that, in Solon, Lycurgus, and Charondas, the middle class has produced the best of political men. Nonetheless, their superiority is measured in political terms, not in terms of the highest virtue of human reason, wisdom, or the highest pursuit of the human mind, philosophy, nor even in terms of the leisure pursuits of the ruling class of the best regime, music.

CONCLUSION

The early sections of the *Politics* supply a number of insights into Aristotle's understanding of the activity of politics and the arrangements proper to political life. He begins to distinguish the standards according to which a political regime is to be judged excellent from those of the best regimes "according to prayer." The polity is introduced in reference to Plato's *Laws* as a standard for a stable and decent regime, and that standard is applied to the regimes of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage in suggestions for their improvement. The citizens of the simply best regime may be held to the exacting expectations of full virtue, but the simply best regime and this virtue are apolitical in important respects: their essential aims lie beyond politics. Thus, the "best" becomes the enemy of the good political regime.

If, as both I.2 and III.6 argue, a human being is by nature a political animal, a being whose perfection lies in some significant part in its political participation, then the best political regime, the best situation in which human beings rule and are ruled in turn for the sake of the common good and attainable virtue, is both a worthy subject of political speculation and the most valuable aim of active political men, founders and legislators. The virtue attainable by ordinary, decent human beings, the citizen obligations manageable by people who are not usually at leisure, and the level of deliberation achievable by these moderately virtuous citizens all seem to point to the polity, indeed toward the polity based on the middling element

because of his precision, but in the later passage here discussed, he is accused of using an ill-advised device against the poor. His status as a member of the middling element could not certify that his laws would be excellent, but he had some good qualities as a legislator.

that Aristotle elaborates in book IV. Both the justice and the stability attained by a polity should be able to withstand chance, the hard times or crises that are brought on by domestic strife, warfare, and economic decline. They do not rely on extraordinary circumstances, so they should be able to weather changes. The moderately moderate, by some nonpolitical standards mediocre, citizen does not expect perfection and is therefore not likely either to abandon the city in despair in a crisis or to exploit a crisis situation to try to make radical improvements in the regime. He will muddle through and restore his life to an even keel. If the middling element can manage to hold sway in the regime, then the individuals' attempts to right their lives will aggregate into a restoration of normalcy in the polity.

Aristotle admits in IV.7 that the regime he calls polity "has not often existed," though he suggests in the accounts of Sparta and Carthage that some regimes commonly classed in other categories have approached the characteristics of polity in some aspects (Sparta: 1293b15–20, 1270b20–26; Carthage: 1272b30–33, 1273a4–b23). Davis (1996, 65–74) ingeniously explains Aristotle's philosophical reasons for the fact that no regime understands itself as a polity, though many may actually be classifiable as such. Unlike both Socrates's regime of the philosopher-king and Aristotle's own "best regime" of books VII and VIII, this way of ruling and living has existed somewhere and could come to be again. Its description is not so much a "prayer" as those of the perfect cities are. Because it has a broad range of possible ways of achieving its characteristic mixture, it is a regime that could be formed out of a number of existing imperfect regimes and would be an improvement over the common oligarchies or democracies that fill the world, as well as over those rare regimes that aspire to aristocracy and fail.

Thinking in these terms of the politically practicable, then, what is Aristotle's take-away message? The extensive education necessary to underwrite the simply best regime relies on the confluence of many unlikely chance conditions. Real republics, insofar as they successfully establish a way of life, are educational in the way they operate—they institutionalize the tendency toward moderation that the middling citizen ordinarily displays—but they cannot be expected to oversee every aspect of a citizen's life, to habituate everyone to make the right choices under every circumstance. The founders of real regimes, which means in most cases the reformers of failing regimes, can choose institutions that counteract the sources of failure (usually excesses coincident with the type of the existing regime) and point the regime toward a polity. Since (1) a polity is a mixture of regimes which

an observer or participant might identify as any of its constituent regimes (or none of them) and (2) stuff happens—foreign invasion, plague, famine—and people react to shelter themselves or to take advantage of chance events, a polity's citizens must be habituated to maintain this balanced mixture in the future. If, at any point, the city becomes definitively a democracy and not an oligarchy (or vice versa), it is in trouble.

Nichols (1992, 98) discusses the middle-class polity, “the best for most cities and most human beings,” in the course of her analysis of book IV, and points out that Aristotle even “speaks as if it were simply best.” She emphasizes Aristotle’s remarks about the capacity of the middling element to befriend members of both the upper and lower classes and thus to support a harmonious life. Although an accommodating attitude is a good start, more is needed to achieve the goal Aristotle lays out for the political regime per se: stability through fairness to all parties. The middling citizen is also reasonable, willing both to rule and to be ruled, attentive enough to wealth to take care of himself and “his own” but not so much as to become arrogant or envious. As Sparta’s and Carthage’s political problems seem to grow out of an intention to encourage the most virtuous to rule, an intention that produced its opposite, the rule of the merely wealthy and corrupt, both cities would do well to cultivate a middle class that could bridge the gap between rich and poor, but more importantly, also between high aspirations for individual virtue and the inescapable bad tendencies of human nature. Throughout her book, Nichols stresses the need for statesmen who know what is at stake in maintaining the balance of democratic versus oligarchic institutions and can explain the relation of each part of the city to the whole regime. While I am sure that Aristotle sees the advantage of such a person’s being available to a polity, and perhaps he is expecting someone with such an understanding to emerge from among his students to start the reform ball rolling in the direction of polity, if most cities populated with most human beings have to rely consistently on a statesman’s theoretical training and persuasive capacities, most polities will be doomed. It is an important indication of the political utility of middle-class virtues that the middling element in Athens or Sparta produced a Solon and a Lycurgus, but it obviously did not happen often.

Reasoning from Aristotle’s presentation of Sparta, Crete, and Carthage, I would argue that the statesmanship a political order *usually* needs is not that embodied in a Lycurgus or a Solon, a Lincoln or a Churchill. If we are talking about reasonable deliberation over day-to-day matters, some political horse-trading will usually serve the purpose. The middling elements

of the city will have the virtues that are normally associated with their middling status: reasonableness, lack of arrogance and malice, moderate ambition, willingness to rule *and to be ruled* as free men are ruled, friendliness, self-reliance (1295b5–34).

In a polity based on a simple mixture of the rich and the poor, a citizen whose party or class has gained a political advantage will need to give up that advantage—not a very likely outcome short of class warfare. Hence, the need for the dominance of the middle class, a party that will feel no disadvantage from throwing its weight into the opposite scale when one party has gained too much political power. The great advantage of the virtues associated with the middle-class polity is that they do not require rigorous training. Aristotle sees them accruing almost naturally to people who find themselves in the middle, socially, economically, and politically, even morally. Indications are that if Sparta, Crete, or Carthage had offered him the opportunity to advise them on reform, Aristotle would have suggested strengthening the balance of oligarchic elements versus democratic elements in the regimes and that is best done by creating a substantial middle class.

As much as Sparta, Crete, and Carthage aimed at aristocracies, Aristotle praises them for the aspects that would make them polities. In our own day, real communities with aspirations to aristocracy, that is, with elections based on merit and with governments attempting to hold a high moral ground in both international and domestic policy, should take Aristotle's practical political advice to heart. No political order, no order that respects the freedom and the equal claims of all its citizens, can control all the chance events or the human choices that would need to be controlled in order to predict the long-range effects of their policies. Moreover, a regime that controls education and the actions of citizens to such an extent that it can guarantee full virtue is not actually producing virtue, which is a matter of reasoned choice. The best solution is not to aim so high in the first place—the best *political* regime is not the best that can be imagined, but the best that can be accomplished among free and equal people. Aristotle's reasoning leads to a system in which the claims and the powers of the major social/economic classes are balanced against each other and in which the middle class will be inclined (because of its middling status) and empowered (because of its ability to hold a modest political majority) to keep those claims in balance. Aiming higher than that does not improve the situation, it is more likely to be detrimental to the individual citizens and to the polity as a whole.

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Dante's *Staius*: The Comedy of Conversion

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In the *Letter to Can Grande* (16), Dante reveals that “the kind of philosophy under which [he] proceeds” in the composition of his *Comedy* is “moral philosophy.” In the *Convivio*, Dante credits Aristotle with the perfection of moral philosophy: it was brought to its completed state by Aristotle’s articulation of the “final end of human life to which man is directed insofar as he is human.” This end is happiness or “blessedness” which proves to be coincident with “the use of our mind.” But “the use of our mind is twofold”: “practical and speculative.” These two together constitute our supreme happiness, though the speculative use of the mind is the “more complete” or “fuller blessedness.” The less complete, practical use of mind is characterized by the exercise of the so-called cardinal virtues—prudence, moderation, justice, and courage. These virtues are to be found in states of character and actions in accordance with the mean and the corresponding vices in those that veer towards one of two extremes, excess or defect. Having brought moral philosophy to its perfection, Aristotle, Dante declares, must be understood to be the “master and leader of human reason”¹ whose words “are the supreme and highest authority” and who is himself “most worthy of our faith and obedience” (1990, 162–64, 212–14).

Dante then is an Aristotelian. He is also, however, a Platonist. He recognizes, for example, that Plato and his Socrates are responsible

¹ This judgment is reiterated in the *Inferno* when Dante calls Aristotle “the master of those who know” (IV.131) and when Virgil calls Aristotle’s *Ethics* “your Ethics” when reminding Dante of its teachings (XI.80).

for the discovery of the teaching of the measure of the mean that Aristotle perfected. At the same time he recognizes that Plato and his Socrates cannot have the same authoritative status as Aristotle given the nondoctrinal or aporetic character of their philosophizing. As Dante remarks, “in [Socrates’s] philosophy no affirmative statements were made” (1990, 164). In Dante’s view, then, Socrates and Plato’s philosophy exhibits an unrivalled determination to persist in a state of perplexity or doubt before those difficulties that are authentically perplexing or doubtful. Despite or because of this, Dante declares Plato to be the paradigmatic human being because of the “supreme excellence of his nature” (219) and he attributes to Plato the discovery or rediscovery of the fact that concealed beneath the anthropomorphic images of the gods of the antique poets lie the intelligible and universal forms or natures—the ideas (48). Dante, that is, rightly credits Plato with an understanding and perfection of the art of writing of these same poets who presented their most profound insights beneath the cloak of fables. Plato understood the art of the poet, which conveys the truth through the construction of noble or beautiful lies.² Plato, therefore, also seems to have recognized the principle of this art of writing—the distinction within the human race between men of “sound intellect” and men of sick or unsound mind or of “no rational life whatever” (40–41; compare *Inf.* IX.61–63; *De Mon.* I.iii.10; *De Vulg.* I.ix.9; *Letter to Can Grande* 2; also *Par.* II.1–9). This distinction in kind between men requires the deployment of a “polysemous” art of writing (*Letter to Can Grande*, 7) that addresses different readers according to their differing capacities. The distinction between sound and unsound intellects is obviously not identical with the distinction between faithful Christians and non-Christians. Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Cicero, Avicenna, and Averroes—to mention but a few—were, in Dante’s view, men of sound intellect. None were Christians. Dante himself on the basis of an insight into the more primary distinction and according to his own testimony in both the *Convivio* and the *Comedy* employs such an art of writing (*Inf.* IX.61–63; *Purg.* VIII.19–21; *Par.* I.19–24, IV.22–60). Dante tells lies, if beautiful lies.

One of the more remarkable lies that Dante tells concerns the Roman poet Statius. As Dante presents him in the pages of his *Purgatorio*, Statius was a crypto-Christian. Indeed, Dante portrays him as having already converted to Christianity at the time of the composition of his *Thebaid*; he nevertheless exercised prudent caution and dissembled his beliefs as he was

² As Beatrice remarks, “Perhaps [Plato’s] judgment [*sentenza*] is other than his words [*voce*] sound, and may be of an intention not to be derided” (*Par.* IV.55–57).

loath to suffer the fate of his fellow Christians who openly professed their faith—persecution at the hands of the Emperor Domitian. There is not a shred of historical evidence to lend confirmation to these assertions. They are falsehoods told by Dante in the interest of conveying a hidden truth.

Dante and Virgil encounter Statius on the terrace of avarice. His sudden appearance there is ushered in by several significant allusions to the career of Jesus. Dante and Virgil are hastening on the way of their ascent when they suddenly feel the mountain tremble violently. Dante is terrified. He fears for his life and, of course, only his life since everyone else on the mountain has already left his bodily existence behind and, therefore, can suffer no harm from the consequences of a material event such as an earthquake. He likens this movement of the island mountain to the movement of the isle of Delos before the mortal woman Latona gave birth there to the sibling gods, Apollo and Artemis (XX.130–32). At the same moment as the earth trembles, the shades on the terrace all cry out “Gloria in excelsis deo” and Dante compares himself and his guide to the shepherds who first heard that song when “the holy spirit’s only bride”—the mortal woman Mary—gave birth to the incarnate God who is also the eternal and transcendent principle of the whole of creation (XX.136–41). In the wake of these events Dante conceives of a desire for knowledge more intense—if he remembers correctly³—than any he has previously felt (XX.145–48).

Dante calls this intense desire to know a “natural thirst” (XXI.1). It would seem, therefore, to be a species of that desire attributed by Aristotle to human beings on account of their nature as human. Such a desire begins in wonder, according to Aristotle, and finds its satisfaction in the acquisition of knowledge, at which point one ceases to wonder, at least in regard to whatever may have been the initial cause of that wonder (*Metaphysics* 982b12–21, 983a12–21; cf. *Purg.* XXVI.67–72). Dante, however, follows not Aristotle but the Gospel of John in suggesting that man’s “natural thirst” can be quenched only with “the water whereof the Samaritan woman asked the grace” (XXI.1–4). This, of course, is the water of everlasting life. The natural thirst that the waters of grace would appear to satisfy, therefore, must be above all the longing for continuance of one’s bodily existence, a longing that springs not from wonder but from the fear or terror before death. Dante has strangely conflated the desire for knowledge and the desire for bodily continuance. One might argue that he does so in imitation of the Christian

³ But compare *Inf.* XXVI.43–69.

identification of these two (e.g., John 11:25–26, 14:6–7); and yet the Samaritan to whom Jesus offers the waters of life is clearly a woman of exceedingly humble intellectual capacity. Jesus’s metaphorical speech is wholly lost upon her and she understands him in a strictly literal sense: if she drinks of the waters he speaks of she will be permanently relieved of thirst or the need for drink and never have to labor again at drawing water from the well. In this trait she resembles Jesus’s own disciples (4:31–34).

As Dante and his leader continue on their way, all at once a shade appears to them—it is the shade of Statius. Dante likens his sudden appearance to the sudden appearance of the newly risen Christ to Cleopas and his companion as reported in the Gospel of Luke (XXI.5–13). There Luke recounts how Christ convinces these men of two things: first, that he has indeed risen with renewed life from the tomb and, second, that the entire Hebrew scripture must be reinterpreted in such a way as to show that it points to his death and resurrection as its end and fulfillment (24:13–27). When, somewhat later, Jesus once again appears to these two after they have joined “the eleven” and their companions in Jerusalem, he convinces them all that he is not merely an apparition—a ghost or a shade—by insisting that they gaze upon his hands and feet and touch his “flesh and bones.” They are to come to “know” that Christ has attained everlasting life through the reports of their bodily senses that what is before them is a sentient body. Finally, Jesus goes so far as to still his hunger by eating a piece of fish before making his miraculous ascent into the heaven (24:33–53). The Hebrew scripture, Jesus teaches his disciples, must be read in such a way that its literal meaning can be seen to be an allegory pointing to a deeper truth that is its ultimate meaning. That is to say, the corporeality, as it is called, of the Old Law points to the “spirituality” of the New Law. All the same, the spiritual intent of the New Law finds its culmination in the everlasting corporeal life of the resurrected Christ. It is only after they have become convinced of these teachings that Cleopas and the eleven can be counted genuine converts to the Christian faith.

Despite his resemblance to the resurrected Christ, Dante’s Statius is merely an apparition—a shadow or shade (*ombre*). He takes Virgil and Dante to be “brother” shades on their way up to completing their acquisition of everlasting life on the model of Christ. When Virgil informs him that he is an “eternal exile”⁴ from the “true court” of the empire of the Christian God Statius wonders how it could be that they have come “so far along his

⁴ See Horace, *Odes* II.3.27–28.

stairs.”⁵ Virgil informs him that Dante is yet in his first, corporeal life and that, despite this, he has been given authority to ascend by the angel at the gate at the entrance to Purgatory. Virgil will guide him in his ascent as far as his “school” can take him. With this Statius’s curiosity is entirely stilled (XXI.13–33). This is in striking contrast to every other shade in Purgatory who learns of Dante’s bodily life, all of whom express extreme astonishment at Dante’s condition and his unprecedented presence on the mountain.⁶ It occasions not a single remark from Statius. Statius’s concern is forensic, not cognitive. His desire is to see justice as he understands it upheld, not knowledge revealed. Once it appears that Dante has official authority for his journey his concern is dead.⁷

We may conclude then that though Dante may be animated by a burning thirst for knowledge, Statius seems immune to such desire. Nonetheless, he is able, it would seem, in his response to Virgil’s inquiry, to offer an account of the causes of the earthquake and the exclamation of the shades that addresses Dante’s curiosity. In this account, Statius offers an interpretation of his own experience over more than a thousand years in Purgatory. He has lived as a soul divided against itself. He explains that God’s justice has set the desire of each soul in Purgatory toward the torment that it suffers. The shades are inclined to subject themselves to the punishment that is meted out to them. In at least this much they resemble the shades of the damned—those who have “lost the good of intellect” (*Inf.* III.18)—whose fear is transformed into desire on the banks of Acheron by divine justice. When the newly dead arrive there on the threshold of Inferno they suddenly long to rush to their tortures (*Inf.* III.121–26). The inclination of the shades of Purgatory to their torment, however, runs contrary to their will, which, Statius declares, is always directed to “a better threshold” (XXI.63–69). Virgil calls this inclination “the net that entangles them” (XXI.76–78). In their entanglement, these souls appear to reflect the state of the incontinent man as described by Aristotle in the seventh book of his *Ethics*, with the perhaps not insignificant difference that the uncontrollable desire that runs counter to their better will is inspired by “divine justice” (XXI.65). It is striking that nowhere in this account does Statius mention intellect or mind as present and operative within the soul. This is in sharp contrast to Virgil’s account of the

⁵ Statius’s question echoes Cato’s question at the opening of *Purgatorio* (I.40–48).

⁶ See *Purg.* VII.58–66, XIII.141–46, XXVI.53–75.

⁷ He does not reflect that Dante and Virgil’s very presence on the mountain seems to be a violation or alteration of the “religion” of the mountain, as he calls it, that he claims suffers no change (XXI.40–43).

soul in Cantos XVII and XVIII, in which he suggests that it is the “virtue that counsels” that makes certain that the subsidiary wills or desires of the soul are in accordance with the first will which is of necessity directed to the better or the good (XVIII.55–66). The virtue that counsels is the virtue of practical mind or prudence. Prudence plays no part in Statius’s picture of the soul.

It is, therefore, neither practical mind nor prudence that finally overcomes the conflict between the desire of the soul and the will, but the “payment of the debt” of punishment (X.108, XI.88). During life the sinner’s desire was toward the sin or vice. The sinner’s desire pays down the debt it has accrued to divine justice during its mortal life through its suffering at the threshold of its immortal life. Presumably such a transaction can be effected because the sinner has accumulated a wealth of pleasure from his sinning. This seems to be the “verdure” or “greenness” (*verde*) of the sin that the pain of the punishment “dries up,” as Statius puts it (XXI.49–51; cf. *Par.* VII.79–84).⁸ On this basis, Statius is now able to explain the cause of the earthquake and the shouting that Dante and Virgil have just experienced. It was not a geological or meteorological phenomenon, but a psychological and spiritual phenomenon that is strangely expressed in the shaking of a material body and the almost inarticulate shouting of the penitent shades. Having paid off his debts or made the exchange of pleasure for pain that divine justice requires, Statius’s will has been “purified” or cleansed of the countervailing desire for punishment and it is “now entirely free to change its convent and [it now] benefits it to will” (XXI.61–63), that is, its will to ascend is no longer made impotent by the overwhelming desire for punishment rooted in divine justice.⁹ With this explanation Statius offers us a picture of the completion of the transformation of the soul that conversion to the Christian faith is supposed to effect: the liberation of the soul from its bondage to sin and its consequent readiness for immortal life among the blessed. Statius informs Dante and Virgil that it is this liberation of the will that somehow causes the mountain to shake and the voices to shout. Statius does not explain how this

⁸ One wonders, of course, whether the envious or the slothful, for example, do indeed experience pleasure in their sins.

⁹ Statius’s description of the impotence or bondage of the will and “the net that entangles it” cannot help but put us in mind of the similar effect produced in Purgatory by the coming of evening and the rising of the three stars that represent the theological virtues—hope, faith, and love. At the moment of the rising of these stars the will to ascend is “hobbled...with impotence,” as Sordello informs Dante and Virgil (VII.44–60). Only in the morning when the light of these three stars is replaced by the light of the four stars representing the cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, moderation, and courage—is the will to ascend effective.

spiritual event can act as a cause of these material events. This is a mystery that remains unsolved.

Dante tells us that his thirst was of such an extent that, when he got a taste of Statius's account of the hidden causes of the earthquake and the shouting, he could not tell how much profit he derived from it or whether his thirst was actually quenched (XXI.73–75). Is the thirst he refers to the thirst for knowledge or the thirst felt by the Samaritan woman? It is certainly possible that the intensity of one's longing for immortal life might lead one to embrace an account of how to satisfy that longing, while rendering one incapable of judging whether that account was true or false. Is it equally possible that an intense desire for knowledge should render one incapable of judging whether what confronted one in an account was knowledge or nonknowledge and simultaneously dispose one to accept such an account despite its possible falsehood? It is more credible that one's intense desire for knowledge should lead one to suspend judgment before an account or to remain in a state of doubt regarding its truth or falsehood in order to avoid erring in accepting it precipitously. Dante's Thomas Aquinas in fact recommends precisely this conduct to Dante when the two meet in the Heaven of the Sun:

And let this ever be as lead to your feet, to make you slow, like a weary man, in moving either to the *yes* or the *no* which you see not; for he is right low down among the fools, alike in the one and the other case, who affirms or denies without distinguishing; because it happens that oftentimes hasty opinion inclines to the false side, and then affection casts the intellect into bondage. (*Par.* XIII.112–20)¹⁰

What might Dante find doubtful in Statius's account? That it is a credible account of the cause of the earthquake? Or of the soul? Or of how the soul is purified of its sin or vices? Certain it is that Dante's experience in his ascent up the mountain and his purification—as represented by the cleansing of his brow of the seven *Ps* inscribed there by the angel at the entrance into Purgatory—is strikingly different from Statius's experience of purgation and ascent. In Dante's case, his ascent is preceded by a prior and rather extensive descent and contributes to his comprehensive “experience of the world and of human vice and worth.” It is part of a voyage of discovery for the sake of “virtue and knowledge” (*Inf.* XXVI.98–99, 120). Statius's ascent is the ascent to the “blessedness” of everlasting life. The former is animated by the desire for knowledge; the latter is not. A similar distinction must be drawn

¹⁰ “They turn their faces more to speech [*voce*] than to truth and thus settle their opinion before listening to art or reason” (*Purg.* XXVI.121–23).

in regard to Dante's and Statius's experience of purgation or purification. The character of Dante's purification is made clear in the central cantos of the *Purgatorio* wherein Virgil both lays out the intelligible structure of Mount Purgatory and, at Dante's request, "demonstrates love" (XVIII.14). By Virgil's lights, it proves to be the case that the nature of love and how it falls into error are the organizing principles of the structure of Purgatory. The key to understanding the nature of love and the errors to which it is prone is a distinction within love between two radically different kinds of love: natural love (*amore naturale*) and spirited love (*amore d'animo*). The love that is genuinely natural to man and that never falls into error can only be the love of knowledge insofar as that love issues in doubt (XVII.91–94). As Dante declares in the *Paradiso*, "doubt springs up like a shoot at the root of truth, and *this is nature* which urges us to the summit from peak to peak" (*Par.* IV.130–32).¹¹ Spirited love, by contrast, errs both in failing to direct itself toward "the first good" and in failing to observe proper measure or the mean in regard to secondary goods. Through its erring it is the cause of the affections of hope, fear, and the outrage that brings with it the desire for revenge (XVII.95–102, 112–33). The ultimate root of these passions seems to be the fear of the loss of the secondary goods, that is, bodily goods and glory or reputation, that might result in the destruction of one's life, present or posthumous.

Virgil shows Dante that it is only through perceiving the distinction between these two species of love that the true nature of virtue and vice or sin is recognized. On the level of spirited love alone, "sin" or vice is a failure to observe proper measure or the measure of the mean in regard to the passions of the soul. Virtue is the observance of this mean. It is moral virtue. On the highest level, the life of sin or vice is identical with life in the absence of the good of intellect (*Inf.* III.18) and animated primarily by the fear of death. The life of virtue is the life of the mind animated by the love of knowledge and devoted to the search for truth. It is in cognizing the true distinction between the life of sin or vice and the life of virtue that the purification of natural love from spirited love is effected in the soul of the one so cognizing. It is a purgation of the love that animates the life of the mind of a contamination by the spirited love that is the root of the inclination to imagine oneself in the right, to rush to judgment, and to punish or exact revenge.¹²

¹¹ Cf. *Inf.* XI.91–93, where Dante addresses Virgil in these terms: "O Sun that heals every troubled vision, you do so content me when you solve, that, no less than knowing, doubting pleases me."

¹² In the *Convivio* Dante describes "an arrogance of disposition" that is one of the chief "sicknesses of the soul": "There are many who are so presumptuous as to think that they know everything, and they therefore take for certain what is uncertain" (1990, 195).

This is the purification of the soul that Dante experiences. By contrast, Statius's purgation is an entirely noncognitive affair: it takes place entirely on the level of the passions and the interplay of pleasure and pain, hope and fear, and the desire for punishment. Through the pain of punishment he pays the debt of the pleasure of sin, hoping, despite the fearsomeness of the torture, to attain through that torture the reward of everlasting life.¹³ The noncognitive character of Statius's version of purgation is confirmed by his own testimony regarding the "moral lesson" that he has ostensibly learned through his experience of the punishment that he has desired and suffered for over a thousand years. This testimony is elicited by the inquiries of Virgil.

Before proceeding we should pause to note that in the passages we are about to examine Statius is revealed to be a great misinterpreter of things generally speaking: he misinterprets the significance of Dante's smile and laughter; he misinterprets the significance of Titus's war against the Jews in its essential connection to his brother Domitian's policy of persecuting the Christians; and he misinterprets the intentions animating Virgil's poetical works. Most obviously, however, he misinterprets the character of the terrace upon which he has just completed his punishment, the general character of the punishments exacted on all the terraces of Purgatory, and the intentions of "divine justice" that such punishment is supposed to disclose.

After Statius offers his explanation of the hidden causes of the earthquake, Virgil poses three questions for him. He wishes, first, to know who he is. Having learned of his identity, he wonders how such a man could have fallen prey to the vice of avarice. Finally, he asks by what means Statius was converted to Christianity. It turns out that Virgil and his influence on Statius are central to each of Statius's answers to these questions. Statius identifies himself above all as the author of the *Thebaid*. But the sparks that kindled his poetic fire, he says, were derived entirely from "the divine flame" of the *Aeneid*—without it, Statius declares, he would not have been

¹³ This distinction between Dante's cognitive ascent and purification and Statius's noncognitive purgation and "ascent" is reflected in the distinction between the earthquake that is a sign of Statius's accomplishment of his noncognitive purgation and liberation to ascend and the earthquake at the beginning of the *Inferno* (III.130–33) that marks the passage of Dante across the river Acheron into the first circle of Limbo where he is ultimately greeted by the school of Virgil—the antique poets devoted to knowledge and art and worthy of the highest honors (IV.64–96). Here Dante is welcomed as a member of this school and follows the poets into a region of light that overcomes the obscurity and darkness of hell. Having entered this region of illumination he joins his companions in entering the noble castle at the center of which dwell Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Cicero, Avicenna, and Averroes, among others (IV.106–44).

worth a dram (XXI.94–99).¹⁴ Statius insists that the composition of his poem has secured for him the most long-lasting honor and fame (XXI.91–102). He lives on through his work.¹⁵

At the same time that Statius asserts that he learned to make his name immortal by taking Virgil's *Aeneid* as his "mama and nurse," he declares that he would willingly suffer another year of purgation if it meant that he could have lived at the time that Virgil lived (XXI.97–102). It is apparently this latter declaration that provokes Dante's smile and laughter (XXI.109). The cause of his amusement seems to be the fact that the seemingly impossible wish to which Statius's speech gives voice has already been granted to him in deed, although, in his ignorance of Virgil's identity, he is oblivious of this fact. If Virgil had had his way Statius would have remained in ignorance: he has signaled to Dante that he should keep silent and refrain from enlightening Statius in this regard (XXI.103–4). Though Dante attempts to conform himself to his leader's desire for concealment, his amusement at the collision of Statius's belief and the speech that expresses it, on the one hand, and what Statius is actually, though ignorantly, experiencing, on the other, makes it necessary that Virgil relinquish his desire to remain hidden. For Statius appears to construe Dante's laughter as a sign that he takes Statius's claim to be a follower of Virgil and his art to be laughable (XXI.110–14) and in the wake of this awkward development Virgil is compelled to give Dante permission to reveal his identity and disclose the true cause of his laughter.

Virgil's behavior before the revelation of his identity (namely, his wishing to keep that identity concealed from Statius) and after (his refusal to embrace Statius on the grounds that they are empty shades [XXI.131–36])¹⁶—both indicate, however, that Virgil as character and Dante as author do indeed find it ridiculous that Statius should claim to be a poet guided by Virgil's work: as author, Dante will show that his Statius, at least, has not understood one word of Virgil's poetry. By these means Dante instructs his readers that the

¹⁴ Statius never mentions Homer or his works.

¹⁵ Statius's poetic endeavors, therefore, seem to have had as their principal end but one of the three concerns by which the school of the antique poets in Limbo are defined: Homer, sovereign over all, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Lucan, and Dante himself are certainly worthy of the highest honors; nevertheless they themselves pay their highest honors to "knowledge and art" (*Inf.* IV.73–102).

¹⁶ That Virgil is perfectly willing and able to accept the embrace of other shades on other grounds, despite their "emptiness," is made clear by his enthusiastic response to Sordello as his fellow Mantuan (VI.72–75). One might argue that he refuses not Statius's embrace per se but his embracing his feet in a gesture of obeisance, though this is not the way Statius interprets his refusal. If he does reject Statius's respectful attitude, however, and not simply his embrace, this nevertheless reiterates the very point we have made above: Virgil refuses to recognize him as his disciple.

funny, particularly in the form of the collision of speeches (and the beliefs that are their source) and deeds, is one of the surest signs of truth as yet immanifest. Within the funny incidents of Dante's *Comedy* are concealed the truths that Dante wishes to make manifest to his attentive readers.

Both Statius's own declarations (XXI.85–87) and his sensitivity to ridicule demonstrate his concern with honor. Virgil registers this concern and, though he has refused to embrace Statius as a fellow poet, praises him¹⁷ before asking his second, somewhat more pointed question: How could the petty vice of avarice afflict a man of such good sense (XXI.130–36, XXII.19–24)? Statius's reply to this inquiry is more than surprising. He insists that he is not being punished for the vice of avarice here, but rather precisely for “its being too far parted from [him],” as he says (XXII.31–36). Statius was, by his own estimation, a prodigal until, that is, he finally took heed of the lines from the *Aeneid* wherein, according to Statius's reading, Virgil celebrates the love of gold. Statius believes that in these lines from the third book of the poem, Virgil expresses his own anger at human nature in its ubiquitous prodigality and exclaims, “Why do you not govern the appetite of mortals, O sacred [*sacra*] hunger for gold” (XXII.37–45). Now, although, given the equivocity of the Latin word *sacra/sacer* (which can mean both “sacred” and “accursed”), this is perhaps a possible reading of these lines when taken out of their context within the poem, it is clearly impossible to construe the meaning of these lines in such a way when they are examined within that context. Moreover, it is rash to impute these lines to Virgil himself, since it is his character Aeneas and not Virgil who expresses his outrage and angry moral condemnation before the vicious effects of the “accursed [*sacra*] hunger for gold” that prevails among men. In this passage from book III Aeneas has discovered through miraculous means the grave of Priam's youngest son, Polydorus, and learned the circumstances of his death. Towards the end of the siege of Troy, Priam had sent Polydorus to stay with the Thracian king, Polymnestor. Along with the boy he sent a large sum of gold for safekeeping. When the Greeks proved victorious, Polymnestor killed Polydorus, appropriated the gold, and made overtures to Agamemnon. It is Polymnestor's murderous love of gold that Aeneas condemns as “accursed” (*Aeneid* III.13–68). Statius, then, pulls a statement of one of Virgil's characters from out of its context in the *Aeneid*, attributes it to Virgil himself, inverts its meaning (the accursed is reinterpreted as the sacred), and treats it as a moral injunction or

¹⁷ Virgil at no time praises him as a poet or expresses admiration for his works, however. Rather he expresses his appreciation for the love, provoked by Virgil's great virtue, that Statius has for Virgil and assures Statius of his reciprocal “good will” toward him.

an exhortation to moral action. On this basis Statius repented of his “lack of measure” in regard to this affection and learned to open his hands less freely. Indeed, he declares that this line of Virgil convinced him not only to eschew prodigality, but to repent of all his other sins as well (XXII.34–45).

Statius, then, believes that he is being punished for his prodigality, rather than his avarice, since, according to his understanding of the “religion” of the mountain, “the fault which rebuts any sin (*alcun peccato*), by direct opposition, dries up its verdure here along with it” (XXII.49–51). Now Statius is entirely wrong about this. On no other terrace are both a sin and its directly opposing sin punished. There is also absolutely no evidence, apart from Statius’s own confused declarations, that such is the case on this terrace either. Indeed, all the evidence is to the contrary (XIX.115–26, XX.10–12, 19–33, 82–84, 97–117).¹⁸ Statius believes that the Christian understanding of virtue and vice or sin corresponds to the Aristotelian understanding, according to which vice lies in “lack of measure” on either side of the mean, namely, in the extremes of excess or defect. But Dante, through the course of the *Purgatorio* thus far, has shown that this Aristotelian view is in no way coincident with the Christian understanding. Rather, according to the latter view as illustrated on the terraces of Purgatory, the Christian sin of pride finds its corrective in the Christian virtue of humility; the Christian sin of envy, in the Christian virtue of love,¹⁹ the Christian sin of wrath in the Christian virtue of meekness, the Christian sin of sloth in the Christian virtue of zeal, to name only those pairs with which Statius might have become acquainted. Humility, love, meekness, and zeal are not among the moral virtues recognized by Aristotle or any other Greek philosopher and are certainly not to be found in a mean state or actions in accord with the mean in regard to the affection that they qualify—they stand at an extreme. According to the moral exemplars spoken of by the inhabitants of the fifth terrace, the virtue that is a corrective to the sin of avarice is poverty, exemplified, as are all the Christian virtues, above all by Mary.²⁰ At no point in his life did Statius embrace poverty as a virtue. Again, poverty is not a virtue according to the Aristotelian understanding. The last mentioned exemplar of the virtue of poverty, St. Nicholas

¹⁸ One might think to cite Canto VII of the *Inferno* in support of Statius’s view, but the inmates of the fourth circle are not punished for prodigality and avarice as such, but are either avaricious members of the clergy or the political men who, starting with Constantine and his “donation,” prodigally offered them the temporal goods and powers that they have illegitimately appropriated.

¹⁹ “Love those from whom you have suffered wrong” (*Purg.* XIII.36).

²⁰ The Christian virtues are all of a distinctly feminine character.

(XX.31–33), attained to his virtuous state by giving away the family fortune he inherited. By Aristotle's standards he was surely a prodigal.

In the light, then, of Statius's own words, we can only conclude that on the basis of his extraordinary misreading of Virgil and his continuing adherence to an Aristotelian understanding of moral virtue and vice, Statius compelled himself to practice avarice. It is for the sin of avarice that he has been punished for over five hundred years, all the while completely failing to understand that avarice is his sin and that he was suffering punishment for it. His punishment may have paid the debt of the sin that he owed to divine justice, but it has not informed him in any way. It has had no educational effect whatsoever. It has been an entirely noncognitive experience: he is no closer to understanding the Christian teaching regarding virtue and vice in its radical departure from the Aristotelian teaching than he was when his punishments began over a thousand years ago.

Naturally Virgil offers no comment on Statius's extraordinary pronouncements. Rather he asks when and how a man who seemed to be entirely untouched by the Christian faith when he composed his *Thebaid* was persuaded to "set your sails to follow the fisherman" (XXII.55–63). If one were to generalize Virgil's inquiry, he might be understood to be asking how it was that the antique world, still paying lip service at least to the gods of the poets and steeped in the teachings of the various philosophical "sects," could have so easily been converted to doctrines of the Christian faith. Statius's response to Virgil's new inquiry is even more astounding than his response to his last. Just as Virgil, through his lines from book III of the *Aeneid*, convinced Statius to repent of all of his sins, so through a reading of Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* he was converted to Christianity. He understood its words concerning a renewal of the Golden Age, the return of justice to earth, and the descent of a new progeny from heaven to be so clearly and perfectly in accord with what the "new preachers" of the Christian faith spoke of that he came to "scorn all other sects" (XXII.64–87). Now Dante in his *De Monarchia* has made it clear that, in his view, the *Fourth Eclogue* speaks of the new age inaugurated by "the divine Augustus when a perfect monarchy existed... [and] mankind was...happy in the tranquility of universal peace" (I.xi, xvi). Statius's reading of the *Eclogue* is, as was his reading of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a misreading. Statius himself admits that his reading of the *Eclogue* could not have been in accordance with Virgil's own understanding and intention in composing it. Rather, he presumptuously insists, Virgil was "like one who goes by night and carries the light behind him and profits not himself, but

makes those wise who follow him” (XXII.67–69). Singleton (1973, 527) seems to be correct in locating Dante’s inspiration for these lines in Augustine’s *De Symbolo*, wherein Augustine declares “O Jews, you carry in your hands the torch of the law, and while you light the way for others, you are yourselves enshrouded in Darkness.” Just as Jesus attempted to teach the Jews the proper way to interpret their own scripture, so Statius attempts to teach Virgil the proper way to read his own poems. Contrary to their literal sense and the conscious intention of their own authors, both point to a “spiritual” meaning that was simply unavailable at the time of their composition, namely, the truth of the resurrected Christ of which Statius in his “rebirth” and redemption from sin here on Mount Purgatory is a figure.²¹

Statius declares to the wondering Virgil, “Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian” (XXII.73). He thereby indicates the common concern at the basis of his poetic activity and his conversion to the new faith: the overcoming of need and necessity as it is seemingly celebrated in Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue* and its talk of a return to the Golden Age. That overcoming of necessity culminates in the promise of supping with gods and sleeping with goddesses, that is, of mortal men attaining to the immortal life of the gods. Statius sought an everlasting name through poetry and everlasting life through his conversion to the faith of the new preachers. The securing of the posthumous life of his name, however, required that he compromise his allegiance to Christ. In order that his work survive the adverse times of Domitian’s rule, he was forced to pay lip service to the dominant religion of the time and his self-concealment led to his being punished for the tepidness of his faith on the terrace of sloth (XXII.88–93). “Tepidness” is the word the Christian teaching employs to describe states of character and actions in accordance with the mean. According to the standards of Christian conduct, Statius ought to have rejected such tepidness, openly confessed his faith, and embraced the martyrdom that would have followed upon that confession. But Statius hedged his bets. What Statius might style reasonable prudence or simply acting in accordance with proper measure, his new faith calls lack of

²¹ It is worth noting the distinguishing feature of Statius’s “art of reading.” First, he treats Virgil’s works as encouraging not of thoughts and further speeches, but of moral opinions and moral actions based on those opinions. Second, he takes statements out of context and blithely inverts their meaning. Third, he attributes statements of Virgil’s characters to Virgil himself. Finally, he assumes that the genuine intention of a work might be entirely unknown to the author of that work insofar as the recognition of that intention requires the assumption of a superior vantage point inaccessible or alien to the author himself. These principles, as it were, of Statius’s method of reading amount, in Dante’s presentation, to a roster of the real sins or errors of Statius. By articulating the contraries of these “principles” one may deduce a series of recommendations that Dante offers to his readers as to how to go about reading his *Comedy* and judging of its author’s intention.

zeal in the faith. Statius still takes pride in the work that secured his honored name, but according to the tenets of his faith, it is less than worthless. After more than a millennium in Purgatory, Statius remains a soul divided against itself. Moreover, though his torments in Purgatory were supposed to have liberated him from a desire for punishment and revenge, his enthusiasm for Titus's war against the Jews demonstrates that he remains wholly entangled in this net: he interprets the destruction of Jerusalem as God's just punishment of the Jews for the Jews' punishment, in accordance with God's own law and will, of Jesus, who himself represents God's will to suffer and through suffering remit the punishment merited by man for his "ancient sin" in seeking the good of intellect contrary to the command of God (XXI.82–84; cf. *Par.* VI.88–93, VII.10, 19–21).

Statius embraced the new faith as the return of the Golden Age and believed that his great teacher prophesied and celebrated such a return in his poetry. It is, perhaps, useful, by way of a conclusion, to consider Virgil's real opinion regarding the character of the Golden Age as it is revealed in the eighth book of his *Aeneid*. There Virgil's King Evander is given the privilege of revealing the true character of that first time: it was, he suggests, a precivilized state of rude savagery in which neither philosophy nor poetry, as discovered and perfected by Virgil's beloved Greeks, could possibly have found a home (306–36).²² The Golden Age in this sense is identical with barbarism. According to Virgil, then, the renewal of the Golden Age by Augustus and his Rome despite or rather because of their having made "universal" peace prevail, that is, having conquered and enslaved the world, have ushered in a new barbarian age. What, however, of Dante's Virgil—does he offer a similar teaching in regard to the events that Dante's Statius believes to coincide with a renewal of the Golden Age? Dante's Virgil says that when he experienced the earthquake that shook the precincts of hell at the moment of Christ's death, he "thought the universe felt love, whereby, as some believe, the world has many times been turned to chaos" (*Inf.* XII.34–45). This prediction of Empedocles, based on his assumption of the cyclical and eternal character of the world, was, of course, not fulfilled in cosmological terms at this time. Perhaps one must, however, understand Virgil's words in light of the political concerns that so dominate the pages of Dante's *Comedy*. If this is so, Dante would appear to follow the lead of Siger of Brabant, who, as he describes him in the *Paradiso*, "demonstrated invidious truths," truths that

²² Compare *Georgics* II.458–540.

were, of course, no less true for provoking the envy that they did. In his short treatise *On the Eternity of the World* Siger makes this remarkable statement:

From [the fact]...that [the prime mover is always in act] and so moving and acting, it follows that no species or being proceeds to actuality, but that it has proceeded before, so that the same species which were, return in a cycle; *and so also opinions and laws and religions* and all other things so that the lower circle around from the circling of the higher, although because of the antiquity there is no memory of the cycle of these. (Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Siger 1964, 93; italics mine).

Virgil wrote in the dying twilight of a genuine Golden Age—a world illuminated by the brightness of Homer and his Greeks. Dante writes in the light of the dawn of a rebirth of that world, a rebirth of which he is both the herald and the source. In order to establish himself as that herald and source Dante had to learn well the lesson of Siger's fate: it is impossible to teach openly invidious truths. Consequently, as we have noted, Dante adopted Plato's manner of presenting such truths. He conveys his most profound insights beneath a surface of "beautiful lies." Statius, the Christian convert of the *Purgatorio*, is a figure employed by Dante in order both to indicate and to obscure this polysemous character of the *Comedy*. Dante's Statius resembles Dante himself insofar as in the composition of his *Thebaid* he too dissembles.²³ Unlike Dante, however, he does not take the principle of the need for such dissembling to be the perennial, natural distinction within the human race between men of sound and men of unsound intellect, but rather the distinction prevailing in the Roman world of the first century between Christian and non-Christian or pagan. In the Christendom of Dante's era Statius would have been able to cast off his disguise, put away all "tepidness," and, burning with the ardor of an honest faith, exercise an unrestrained sincerity in the composition of his verse. A Statius thus situated would have been the author not of a pagan tragedy but of a "sacred poem" (*Par.* XXIII.62) along the lines of the *Comedy* as it is ordinarily understood or misunderstood. Statius as the author of such a "Christian epic," however, could never have performed the poetic feat that is so distinctive of Dante's *Comedy*: to appear as both the author of the poem and a character within it. For a Statian *Comedy* could not accommodate within its bounds a character modeled on the pattern of Dante's Statius—a Christian convert who is at the same time a figure of fun. A Statius unmasked could never employ the laughable as a means to the revelation of the truth.

²³ Ernest Fortin (2002, 114) takes the partial resemblance between Statius and Dante in this respect to be a sign that Dante is a covert "pagan" presenting himself overtly as a Christian.

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Dante's Statius and Christianity: A Reading of *Purgatorio* XXI and XXII in Their Poetic Context

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l'essilio che m'è dato, onor mi tegno

In Canto XXI of his *Purgatorio*, Dante introduces Statius, the first-century Neapolitan poet, as a poetic shadow (*ombra*) reminiscent of Christ appearing to two apostles on the way to Emmaus (7–10). The shadow appears “behind” (*dietro*, 10) Dante’s poetic persona—the pilgrim of the *Comedy*—and Virgil’s own shadow. The appearance of Statius as shadow responds providentially to the pilgrim’s “natural thirst” (*sete natural*, 1) for justice, or for “the just vindication” (*giusta vendetta*) of true virtue (6, after XX.47 and 95). Though our natural thirst for justice is said to be satisfied by grace alone (XX.1–3), hope for knowledge of the signs of justice suffices to begin moderating the pilgrim’s thirst (22 and 38–39). The signs in question amount to a “trembling” or shaking of the divine order, occasioned by the human will freely aiding the soul to ascend towards the good or proper object of desire (55–64); or so explains Statius, further indicating that the soul in question either “surges” simply (*surga*) or “moves itself / to rise above” (*si mova / per salir su*, 59–60), thanks to the intervention of a free will (compare I.7 and XXIII.131–33: Statius’s “dead poetry” is resurging thanks to Dante). Upon Dante’s struggling (*brigavam*) to surpass (*soverchiar*) the “paved path” (*strada*) “as much as was permitted to [human] power” (*tanto quanto al poder n’era permesso*, XX.125–26), Statius himself is supposed to have sensed the presence of a “free will on a better/stronger footing” (*libera volontà di miglior soglia*, XXI.69, echoing *Paradiso* XXXII.13), whereupon “the pious / spirits”

(*li pii / spiriti*, —*Purgatorio* XXI.70–71) of the mount of purgation rendered “laude / to that Lord who readily [*tosto*, from *tostus*, ‘heated by fire’] send them on the way up” (*lode / a quel Segnor che tosto su li ’invii*, 71–72, after XX.136–37 and *Inferno* VII.92). We are thus faced with two modes of ascent: the first is by grace and is readily recognized by pious Christian spirits; the second is the one engaged in by Virgil’s student (Dante as pilgrim) and arguably recognized by the Statius who appears seemingly providentially in response to Dante’s natural thirst for justice. Likewise, we are invited to discern two senses in the term *Segnor*, the “Lord” (XX.94 and XXI.72) who is the regal “sign” (*segno*) of the active presence of a free will (22–24; compare *Paradiso* VIII.32–39, 60). Whereas in the *natural* world, Lord is the Christian God, in the pre-Christian *political* world, Lord is a man, who in turn may be an authoritative persona (a legal fiction, as in *Inferno* I.71–72) or the author of personae, that is, a poet as *true* king.

The distinction between human and divine providence had first been stressed in *Inferno* VII (esp. 61–96). Illuminating is a comparison of that canto’s verse 96 and *Purgatorio* XXI.73–75: in the former locus, providence “takes pleasure in itself” (*si gode*) in the heavens; in the latter, Dante is compared to “he [who] takes pleasure in himself” (*el si gode*), suggesting that Statius (*el*) pleases Dante *from within*, or that Statius is an image of Dante’s own free will, or rather a “shadow” through which Dante’s persona, and indeed Dante’s own reader, may advance toward his good (*prode*, from *prodeo*, 75).¹ Whereas *divine* providence, or *fortuna*, finds pleasure in itself and through itself, Dante’s intervention across Purgatory signals pleasure through transposition *in another* (compare IV.1–11, XX.1–3, and *Paradiso* VIII.16–21). Accordingly, whereas the “paved path” or “street” of *fortuna* is circular, its human counterpart is straight or *diritta* (on the valence of the term *strada*, compare *Inferno* VI.112, VIII.91, XII.91–92, XV.43; *Purgatorio*

¹ In Canto XXV of *Purgatorio*, Statius responds to Virgil’s request to aid Dante, indicating that poetry itself legitimates Statius’s “unfold[ing] the eternal view for [Dante]” (*la veduta eterna li dislego*, 31), or his untying/resolving the pilgrim’s doubt about the otherworldly import of poetic nourishment (compare 19–21). Statius addresses Dante as a father would, calling the Florentine *figlio* or “son,” thereby echoing Virgil’s earlier allusion to Meleager, a son likened to an image in the mirror of his parent’s mind (22–26). In reality, here Dante is father to Statius, who speaks thus: “If *my* words, / son, *your* mind regards and receives, / may they be lamp to the ‘how?’ that you spoke” (*Se le parole mie, / figlio, la mente tua guarda e riceve, / lume ti fiero al come che tu die*, 35–36). The “how” or *come* in question refers to the possibility that poetry nourish us with words (20–21): properly regarded and received *in one’s own mind*, poetic words illuminate the way of true poetry, which must point back to its listener’s own awakening (in *Paradiso* IX.56–57 Dante’s *via* or way from sleep to waking is “eased”—*agevolata*—via poetry by Lucia, the “light” rendering cruel, “vulgar” images into beautiful and honest muses; compare *Inferno* II.88–105 and *Purgatorio* XIX.6–30).

I.119, XVI.107–8; *Paradiso* X.16–21, XXIX.128: the curvature of the heavenly “street” allows for the “uprightness” of the human “street” of civil virtue—and thus for the *ordine mondano*, from *mondare*, “to civilize/cultivate”): unlike the perfectly paved path of God, the “betrayed” one Dante struggles to purge of the appearance of vanity (*Purgatorio* I.119–20, reading *perdere* from *prodere*) emerges out of an obscured wilderness (the *selva oscura* of *Inferno* I.2)—where the paved path appears “foolish” (*folle*, VIII.91), “lurid” (*lorda*, IX.100), or “wild” (*selvaggia*, XII.92)—to the vision of a “straight street” or *dritta strada* (*Paradiso* XXIX.128). The perfect circularity of the heavenly order stands as the perfection of the mundane order (X.4–21, XIII.103–11, and XXIX.52–54, 64–66, 70–81). Yet, properly speaking, Dante’s ascent from the wilderness of *Inferno* I to the beatitude of *Paradiso* XXXIII is not straight, insofar as it ends *passively* in a cosmic loop (*Paradiso* XXXIII.143–45). What is straight is the path leading “without middle” (*sanza mezzo*, *Paradiso* VII.67, 70, 142, and XXX.122) from the “wild wilderness” (*selva selvaggia*) of *Inferno* I.7 to “the ancient wilderness” (*la selva antica*) of *Purgatorio* XXVIII.23, otherwise named “the divine forest dense and alive” (*la divina foresta spessa e viva*, 2), “lofty wilderness” (*alta selva*, as if “wilderness raised to heavenly heights”—compare *Purgatorio* XXXII.31 and 40–42), or “the great forest” (*la gran foresta*, XXIX.17; throughout the *Comedy*, the adjective *spesso* always indicates density: see *Inferno* IV.66, XIV.13, XXI.17; *Purgatorio* VI.10, XVII.4, XXI.49, XXXII.110; and *Paradiso* II.32, V.135, XXVIII.24). The path in question is paved *providentially* as a human “street” that is devoid of middle properly because its *incipit* and its *terminus a quo* coincide *in man*: the “divine forest” is a poetic stage for reflection, an “earthly paradise” that can be none other than the *silva* in which the poet “finds himself anew” or reinvents himself (*mi ritrovai*, he says in *Inferno* I.2, thereby signaling the *trobare* or *invenire* of troubadours). Not accidentally does Statius appear in *Purgatorio* in direct anticipation of the *selva antica*. What more appropriate final preparation to enter the ancient *selva*, that is, the *Silva* of Roman antiquity, than the ancient author of the collection of poetic compositions titled *Silvae*! Through Statius’s illuminating intervention, the wilderness that in *Inferno* I had appeared obscure or obscured *since* the upright way was marred (*ché la diritta via era smarrita*, anticipating *Inferno* XIII.24: *Io tutto smarrito m’arrestai*) or lost in vice, emerges in its pristine beauty as a poetic stage for *true* divination or for the philosophical interpretation of the true theology of the Christian *Paradiso*.

Our vision of the wilderness or nature introduced in *Inferno* I had been obscured insofar as the *diritta via* was marred or corrupted (and

thus “bent,” *torta*), where the cause of this marring could be none other than an abandoning or “handing-over to auction” (*abbandonare*, from the Provençal *bandon*—whence the Germanic *hand*—in the sense indicated by the expression, *vendre a bandon*; compare *Purgatorio* XXI.102) of the truthful or genuine way (*la verace via*, *Inferno* I.12; compare I.55, XVI.61–62, XVIII.7; *Paradiso* XXVI.40, XXXI.107: whereas Virgil is *verace duca* and *padre verace*—truthful paternal leader—the “voice” or *voce* of the Mosaic God is *verace autore*, just as Christ is *Dio verace*): Dante suggests that he entered into his *selva* as he would enter a dream (10–12). Following Poliziano, we might identify Dante’s *selva* or “wilderness” with the *Comedy* itself (compare *In Statii Sylvas tumultuaria commentatio* [Tumultuous meditations on Statius’s *Silvae*]: *Vita Statii* [Life of Statius], par. 8; and *Andria Terenti*, in Roselli [1973], 3–15): in the wild *apparent* confusion of a literary *selva*, the poet finds a perfect environment to articulate arguments—both *consuetudine congrua* and *dissimulationes*—illuminating, as “a mirror of everyday life” (*cottidianae vitae speculum*) or “a mirror of truth” (*speculo veritatis*), the original nexus between the heroic subject of tragedy and the *vulgate* or *dēmos*, thereby leading us out of the latter’s sleep—*a somno*, or *apo tou kōmatos*. Accordingly, in *Inferno* I Dante indicates that he entered his (poetic) *selva* by handing over to others the *verace via* (compare 2–3, 10–12, and *Purgatorio* XXXII.67–69), the truthful/genuine way or upright desire that gathers sensory motion upward in the mind/intellect as its formal good (*il ben de l’ intelletto*, *Inferno* III.18). Has the poet *willfully* abandoned his will in an act of sacrifice—an act otherwise evoked in the very last verses of *Paradiso*, where the poet’s will yields to the divine providence that moves celestial bodies in harmonic circles? Does the *Comedy* end by pointing back to a prologue in which the poet descends, or rather “condescends” (after *Paradiso* IV.42–45 and 49–51), to the sensitivity of the common reader so as to awaken him, ever so gently, from his moral slumber (*Purgatorio* XXXIII.91)?

For the sake of recovering the *verace via*, the pilgrim of the *Comedy* needs the guidance of Virgil—the Homer of ancient Italian poetry—whose voice has long remained smothered, as a sun that is hushed (compare *Inferno* I. 60, 63, and *Purgatorio* XXI.101). Yet Virgil’s guidance requires a final verification, which is provided by Statius, the “ancient spirit” (*antico spirto*, 122) or author of *Silvae*, ancient guides to an adequate understanding of the relation between nature/reality and art/appearance.²

² For a review of the classical literary valence of the term *selva*, see Bright (1980), 20–49, esp. 42–45.

The pilgrim of the *Comedy* presents Statius as a poet who took away strength (*togliesti / forza*) from Virgil “in singing of men and of gods” (*a cantar degli uomini e de’ dei*, 125–26). Statius may not have merely borrowed Virgil’s poetic strength; he may have also taken away strength from his predecessor’s song by making it less credible, or by calling it into doubt, or rather by calling into doubt Virgil’s famous persona as apologist of imperial authority.³ Most importantly, Statius’s apparent and notorious flattery of authorities—a stance made blatant by verses 130–36—makes it extremely difficult for us to miss the fictitious or poetic character of the divinity of emperors. The difficulty is exacerbated by the “secret” Dante reveals of Statius’s baptism into Christianity while living under Domitian, Christianity’s brutal persecutor.⁴

³ See Ahl (1984). Ahl notes with irony that since the supposition of almost all critics of Flavian literature is that Statius could not possibly be criticizing Domitian—that would be ‘unthinkable’—the effect must be explained as having occurred unintentionally, even against the wishes of the poet.... The effect, [modern scholars] conclude, is caused by the poet’s incompetence and poor taste. This is why modern scholarship is at a loss to explain Statius’ immense popularity in the Middle Ages, when readers were well aware of, and still practiced, such forms of rhetoric.... We are readier to impute incompetence and lack of taste to a great poet than to question the presupposition that criticism of the emperor was unthinkable. In short, we read Statius the way Domitian probably tried to read him, if he ever really bothered to look at the *Silvae*.... Like their counterparts in the nineteenth and twentieth century theater, Greek and Roman writers found in figured language a means of coping with imposed restrictions, of expressing themselves with relative security. The punishment for failure, of course, was more terrible for the Roman than the Victorian, but not necessarily worse than for the writer caught in subversion by Hitler or Stalin. (206–8)

See also Newlands (2002). Newlands notes that “the extravagant language of the *Silvae* not only expresses the poet’s intense appreciation for his object of praise; it also admits doubts and reservations and draws attention to the wider cultural significance of the original occasion. For praise, as recent work on panegyric has demonstrated, can encompass advice, admonition, criticism, even anxiety, as well as celebration. Extravagant speech is also capacious speech; it functions as a strategy for conveying the wealth, the grandeur and the majesty of Empire as well as the complex emotions that such enormous power aroused” (3). Newlands agrees with Ahl that in imperial Rome, “addressing the emperor becomes a subversive activity, a clever encoding of oppositional points of view.... If we accept Ahl’s view of the *Silvae* as cleverly coded documents of subversion, we must also accept Tacitus’ and Pliny’s assessment of Domitian as a psychopathic monster who could only be properly addressed by covert means.... The figured speech of panegyric, to which Ahl rightly draws attention, serves more complex purposes than either fantastic flattery or mockery, as ancient thinking about panegyric demonstrates” (19).

⁴ This is not to say that Virgil’s own singing of the virtues of emperors had been devoid of irony. In *Inferno* I.71–72, Virgil had introduced himself thus: “I lived in Rome under the good Augustus / in the time of the gods false and deceiving” (*vissi a Roma sotto ’l buon Augusto / nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardi*). Is Augustus’s alleged goodness not brought into doubt by the suggestion that the divinized emperor himself lived in an age of false and deceiving gods? Echoing Virgil’s early self-introductory remarks, Statius reveals himself as having lived in “the time in which the good Titus [was] aided by the supreme king” to destroy Jerusalem (82–83). Statius does not state that he lived “under” Titus (who ruled for only two years between AD 79 and 81), since the poet lived more significantly under Titus’s

In Canto XXI.89, upon “falsely” introducing himself as Toulousain, Statius “imitates” Virgil by stating: “to itself dragged me Rome, / where I deserved that the temples be adorned with myrtle” (*a sé mi trasse Roma, / dove mertai le tempie ornar di mirto*; in his *Vita Statii*, par. 7, Poliziano places on the same level of falsity the suggestion that Statius was a Christian and the traditional ascription to Statius of the birthplace of the Gallic Statius Surculus, who lived under Nero). Once again Statius is distancing himself from the authority that crowned him superlative poet, namely Domitian, the persecutor of Christians (compare 85 and 91). A further echo of Virgil’s words from *Inferno* I follows: “I sang of Thebes, and then of the great Achilles” (92); whereas, upon mentioning “gods false and deceiving” (*dèi falsi e bugiardi*), Virgil had stated: “I sang of that just / son of Anchises who came from Troy, / after proud Ilion was cremated” (*cantai di quel giusto / figliuol d’Anchise che venne di Troia / poi che ’l superbo Iliòn fu combusto*, 72–75). Are Statius’s words “nourished” by Virgil’s in the manner in which Statius’s *Thebaid* was “nourished” in its sweetness by Virgil’s *Aeneid* (*Purgatorio* XXI.88 and 97–98, where the repetition of *fummi* in a poetic context, or *poetando*, is reminiscent of the pun at *Inferno* VII.121 and 123 on *fummo* as both “were” and “smoke”)? The light or “divine flame” (*divina fiamma*) shining upon and lovingly heating (95–96, 134, and XXII.10–12) Statius and many others (*più di mille*) from Virgilian heights (with an *illumare* distinguished from *illuminare*, as in XXIV.151) appears to leave Statius with the “seed” (*seme*, XXI.94) allowing him to purge himself even beyond necessity (100–102, where *sole*, “sun,” indicating a “solar year,” is mentioned in tandem with Virgil’s name).

Virgil’s retracing of Augustus’s glory back to Trojans has seemingly laid the poetic groundwork for Statius’s account of Thebes’s victorious resistance in inter-Greek warfare (*Thebaid*) and of the Greek conquest of Troy (*Achilleid*, the unfinished work that would have perhaps accounted for Achilles’s heroism beyond mortal spoils: see I.7). Statius’s poetry treads entirely upon that of his predecessor (*Purgatorio* XXI.99, where *sanz’essa non fermai peso di dramma*—“without it [in verse] I did not set weight by a coin”—may allude to the gravity of the *canto fermo* of Gregorian chants).

father, namely, the “supreme king” (*sommo rege*) or emperor-god Vespasian who assigned his son (generally regarded favorably by Roman historians) to overtake Jerusalem (AD 70) only at the end of a conflict protracted for several years (from AD 66). With the exception of Titus’s two-year imperial mandate and the “Year of the Four Emperors” in AD 69, Statius lived his adult life first under Nero, then under Vespasian, and finally under Vespasian’s second son, Domitian, the infamous persecutor of Christians (XXII.83). Especially in the light of the “secret” he has held for hundreds of years, and which he is about to disclose to our traveling poets, Statius could hardly have stated that he lived in Rome under a good emperor.

Differences in formal subject matters notwithstanding, perhaps Statius and Virgil share identical aims. Indeed, Statius suggests that he would rather have lived “beyond, when Virgil / lived” (*di là quando / visse Virgilio*)—and thus before the coming of Christ—even if he had had to stay in Purgatory one solar year (*un sole*) longer than his duty now calls for (100–102; Dante’s *uscir di bando*—close to the term *abbandonare*—suggests an exiting of exile from *Paradiso*). Upon hearing *these* words Virgil warns his student not to reveal Virgil’s presence to Statius. Does Dante find it timely to interrupt Statius lest he say too much? Would Statius have preferred knowing Virgil to knowing Christ? Would he have preferred living before he did, so as to be able to write—as Virgil would under the first Augustus—of a time *following* the demise of Troy, the burning of which anticipated the rise of Rome? And if Statius’s work recounts the “prehistory” of the *Aeneid* which it *imitates*, are we to understand the demise of Troy (never actually recounted by Statius) as a prophecy of the demise of Rome, just as Virgil’s *Aeneid* would come to be read as prophecy of the coming of Christ? Perhaps even more importantly, would Statius have preferred Roman imperial authority *before* Christ, to an AD counterpart established once Christ’s intervention was begged for? Would Statius have preferred to “sing” (*cantare*) in anticipation of a pagan Caesar Augustus, rather than in anticipation of a lineage of Christian emperors? Be this as it may, Statius’s words “turned” (*volser*) Virgil towards his student “with a glance that, hushing, said ‘Hush’” (103; compare the “hushing sun” of *Inferno* I.60).

The hushing of the sweet, comforting light of Virgilian poetry invites restraint in speech given that “virtue cannot [achieve] all that it wills” (*non può tutto la virtù che vuole*, *Purgatorio* XXI.105). Insofar as their power falls short of their will, poets must rely upon a suprapoetic or supra-human counterpart—a divinity whose power matches its own will (see, e.g., *Inferno* III.95–96 and V.22–24). Without the support of imperial-like divinity or of divineline imperial authority, poets remain hapless and unconvincing: left to themselves, or deprived of a fulminous “divine flame,” they remain powerless and thus by and large unconvincing (consider Dante’s expression in *Purgatorio* XXI.82–83, where the aiding “supreme king”—*sommo rege*—could be either Vespasian or a self-vindicating biblical God).⁵ To sever the nexus between the poet and the object of public reverence is to dispel the aura, even the anesthetic “smoke” (*fummo*), through which Virgilian poets make their audience forgetful of its mortality, thereby distracting it from its

⁵ For a parallel ambiguity in Statius’s *Silvae*, see Dominik (1994), 149–50.

earthly pursuits, or sparing it a life consumed by the love of “vain goods” (*ben vani*, *Inferno* VI.79). Not recognizing its limits, in vain does immoderate poetry feign itself supreme master over human emotions, ignoring the fact that in children as in the vulgate (“those who are most genuine”) emotions stem from passion, rather than the will (*Purgatorio* XXI.106–8). The human will unaided by divinity fails to conquer or replace human passion in those who are most genuine (*veraci*).

In response to Virgil’s warning to hush, the honest pilgrim of the *Comedy* (*Inferno* II.113) manifests his passion in an instantaneous smiling “wink” of the eyes, prompting Statius to hush (*si tacque*) and seek his interlocutor’s true intent in his semblance or “façade” (*sembiante* as *faccia*, *Purgatorio* XXI.109–11), albeit in vain; for in our eyes we do not “stick” (*si ficca*) a conclusive intention, but merely a sign inviting doubt (111–14; compare XXIII.1–2, XXXIII.126, and *Paradiso* VII.94: that which the eye “sticks” into coincides with the semblance that is “stuck” into the eye). Statius’s subsequent words suggest that poetic purging-labor is summed up in a good irreducible to semblances or faces (*Purgatorio* XXI.112–14): the “demonstration” of the good intended by ancient poetry remains fulminous, as opposed to being well argued (114, after 109; compare *Paradiso* XXVI.38).

Our pilgrim emerges as standing between hushing and speaking (115–17). Virgil teaches him not to be scared, but to answer Statius’s *test* “with much care” (*con cotanta cura*, 120): Virgil seems to have understood Statius’s words as the poet’s way of testing Virgil’s student’s capacity to speak with care, or to avoid saying either too much or not enough. We are, after all, on the terrace of *Purgatory* dedicated to avarice and prodigality—to those who either withhold or give too much, be it material riches or words.⁶

Responding to Virgil’s encouragement, Dante’s persona indicates that he wants Statius to rise on his own (*vo’ che ti pigli*) from (a) a state of ancient wonder or marvel at visible signs (*che tu ti maravigli / antico spirito*)⁷ to (b) admiration (*ammirazion*) for Virgil (121–26), since Statius took

⁶ See Fortin (2001), 112, 115. Fortin reads Dante as suggesting that whereas Statius (supposedly, a secret Christian living in pagan times) spoke too much as a pagan, but not enough as a Christian, Dante (as a secret pagan living in Christian times) was able to speak with just measure by speaking *between the lines*.

⁷ On the distinction between ancient signs and Christian signs, see *De Monarchia* II.4.xi: “Such things was it fitting to work out directly for *the One* who saw all in advance from the eternal under the beauty of order, since he who, when visible, was going to show miracles for invisible things, as invisible would show them for visible things” (Sic Illum prorsus operari decebat qui cuncta sub ordinis pulcritudine ab eterno providit, ut qui visibilis erat miracula pro invisibilibus ostensusur,

his poetic strength away (*tu togliesti / forza*) from Virgil's own poetic aura (*quel Virgilio*), which guides his student's gaze upward (*guida in alto gli occhi miei*, 124–26): wonder in fortuitous signs (compare 114 and 121) is to yield to admiration for poetic virtue. Without denying the paramount importance of divinity, poetic words or the human will ordering them ought to be believed as “true occasion” (*cagion...vera*) for our emotional response to the authority sustaining poetry, so that poetry may guide our vision to an authority not susceptible to decay (127–29).⁸ Yet, as we learned in verses 106–8, emotions commonly stem from passion, rather than poetry: poetry merely responds to the passion whence stem emotions. Realizing that he does not possess divine power over our emotions, the truthful poet governs our emotion in coordination with the passion whence they spring, recognizing passion as a divine occasion for poetry itself, and thus for the poetic illumination of the order latent in passion, or of the reason hidden in the occasion for our emotions. The belief that emotions stem from poets or their words is beneficial only to the extent that it silences suspicion against emotions, lest suspicion interfere with the humanizing labor of true poets who find (in the sense of *trobare*) the good object of desire within the *selva* of our passions (compare 112–14 and *Inferno* I.8): the true poet conserves our emotional life within human limits, or within a civility pointing directly (as *diritta via*) to a divine good transcending all vain goods.

The distinction between human poetry and divine poetry animates the equivocation at play throughout the whole of Canto XXI of *Purgatorio*, from the appearance to the pilgrim/reader of Statius as Christ to the

idem invisibilis pro visibilibus illa ostenderet). Among the ancients, the divine source of miracles was invisible or hidden, whereby miracles would point to visible things: they would direct men's attention to political problems (i–x). Among Christians, since the divine is already visible, miracles point to what is invisible or otherworldly. Has divinity replaced that which the miracles of antiquity would direct men's attention to? Has the Christian revelation distracted Christians from political things? Has the Christian God supplanted political things so that men could flee the political in search for what is above the political? Is the price for ascending above the political, forgetfulness of the political (or loss of commemoration of political heroism—*ad gloriam...commemorant*, 11), and thus of our own political nature? Or does Christianity stand as heavenly reminder of the need to return to genuinely political things at a point where pagan miracles have already fallen in disrepute? Is Christianity a divine *vindication* of ancient religion in its pristine, civilizing function? **Is Christianity best understood as vehicle for the rediscovery of or reawakening to the life of virtue as understood by the best men of classical antiquity?**

⁸ Compare Poliziano, *In Statii Sylvas tumultuaria commentatio: argumentum epistolae*, explanation of the term *autoritate*: “We say that the true author of the *Aeneid* is Virgil, since he is the one who made it; in that same sense, we also speak of the author of peace and war. Sometimes author indicates not he who makes, but he who stands at the beginning and helps to bring into being.” (Verum autorem Aeneidos dicimus Virgilium, ipsum videlicet qui illam fecerit; etiam autorem pacis dicimus ac belli in eadem significatione. Aliquando auctor is dicitur non qui facit, sed qui princeps est et fieri iubet.)

appearance to Statius of Virgil as divine. In both such cases, the equivocation is playful, and no sooner is it presented than it is dispelled. As three actors in a drama, Virgil, Statius, and Dante all give indications of being fully aware of the context of their dialogue, not least where Statius responds to Virgil's suggestion that the Neapolitan may have mistaken the Mantuan's shadow (*ombra*) for a real body (indeed both Statius and Virgil are shadows in Dante's memory/imagination, rather than bodies in God: 130–32 and 135–36). Statius's response bear witness to his awareness of the difference between idolatry and genuine human affection or *affezion* (133–34 and XXII.15): his apparent forgetfulness of human mortality or vanity (*io dismento nostra vanitate*, XXI.135) has a poetic justification insofar as it is meant to contain a moral lesson for those who are heated by love beyond the limits of humanity (133–36; compare XXIX.61–63).

Echoing Statius's surging (*ed ei surgendo*) sustained by the understandable or limited heat of love for Virgil's persona upheld as heavenly (133–36), Canto XXII opens with an angel that had remained "behind" our poets (*dietro a noi rimaso*, 1), reminiscent of the Statius who had come forth from behind Virgil and Dante (*dietro a noi venia*) in the opening verses of the preceding canto. The Neapolitan poet's appearance presupposes an angelic remainder, thanks to which the pilgrim of the *Comedy* is allowed to turn upward by having "shaved" from his sight (*viso*, an appearance or *faccia* gathered in one's eyes) one *P* sign of sin. (Compare *Inferno* VIII.117–18, where, in preparation for the coming of an angel [130 and IX.9] Virgil has his "eyes to the earth and his brows shaved / of every boldness": do angels shave sins off of the faces of poets whose faces are already inwardly "shaved"? Do angels serve the purpose of making manifest to nonpoets the legitimacy of poetry, or of confirming publicly the intimate or original innocence of public-spirited poets?)

Dante emerges anew in the light of heavenly things, or as naturally tending towards them as one of "those who have to justice set their desire" (*quei c'hanno a giustizia lor disiro*) and of whom it is said that the angel "had called them blessed" (*detti n'avea beati*) furnishing "without further ado" (*sanz'altro*) those thirsting for justice (4–6). The object of natural thirst that in Canto XXI.1–3 had appeared to be grace is now introduced as justice. Are we then to identify the justice we naturally desire with the grace that alone can satisfy our thirst?

The term Dante uses to indicate "those thirsting" is the Latin *sitiunt* ("they thirst for") drawn from Matthew 5:6, where "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice: since they shall be satiated"

(*Beati qui esuriunt et sitiunt justitiam: quoniam ipsi saturabuntur*). Dante's Latin-speaking angel is announcing an "undiluted" heavenly justice—which *Inferno* VII.73–90 and IX.100–102 vividly portray as deaf to human moral particularities. However, the angel's citation remains incomplete; Dante hears its completion only at the end of *Purgatorio* XXIV, or beyond gluttony, by standing *behind* Virgil and *Stattus*, his learned predecessors (*miei dottori*). Now Matthew's words are paraphrased in vernacular (Italian) to indicate human justice, or justice as the virtue of moderation, entailing avoidance of extremes in those whose chest is not clouded, or rather "fumigated," by too much desire or *troppo disir*, "hung'ring always for what is just" (*esuriendo sempre quanto è giusto*, where *giusto* echoes the *gusto* of 152).

Thanks to the mediation of his ancient poets, Dante comes to "hear" divine justice as human. Yet it is the initial annunciation of justice as divine that allows our pilgrim to be lifted from the weight of words unduly withheld, so as to rise effortlessly (*sanz'alcun labore*) to other "estuaries" of poetic speech or *following* his two ancient poetic precursors unfettered by mortal spoils (*foci...seguiva in su li spiriti veloci*, XXII.7–9 and XXI.135).

Virgil leads the way introducing his student to the subject of "Love / lit of virtue" (*Amore / acceso di virtù*, 10), illuminating at once Canto XXI.95 and *Inferno* V.103–6, where Francesca of Rimini's ill-intended love (*amore*) coincides with death (*morte*): "Love, that to none loved loving pardons, / pleasure of that-one overtook me, so strong / that, as you see, even now it does not abandon me. / Love led us together to one death" (*Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona / mi prese del costui piacer sí forte / che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona*; on love, *amore*, as leading quite literally "to death" or *a-morte*, see further *Inferno* I.7). Francesca is traditionally supposed to be referring here to an otherwise unnamed Paolo, but the maiden's phrasing is open to an alternative reading on account of which Francesca's "that-one" (*costui*, a term possessing a disparaging undertone) is none other than a projection of Francesca's own love—hence the indication that pleasure took her alone. In the light of *Purgatorio* XXII.10–12, XXI.95, and *Inferno* IV.10–14, it is reasonable to read Francesca's love as one that does not concede us the gift (*dono*, entailed by her *perdona*) of our being "abandoned" by the compulsion of loving someone or, indeed, any one person.⁹

⁹ Francesca's *forte*, "strong," follows after several incidents of *Inferno* in which the term indicates the forceful bondage of affection. See *Inferno* I.5, III.44, 107, 131, IV.18, V.44, and 87. Prior to Francesca's intervention, *confortare*, cognate of *forte*, appears thrice: in *Inferno* II.28–30, St. Paul strengthens the Christian faith; in Canto III.19–21, Dante gleefully strengthens himself through Virgilian poetry for the sake of accessing things hidden beneath the harsh "letter" of eternal law, comparing 10–12 and

Francesca of Rimini has taught us that there is at least one case in which abandonment is desirable, namely, where we are abandoned by compulsion (on “abandoning,” compare I.12 and II.34: the pilgrim fears it is foolish to attempt a recovery of the abandoned “truthful way” by abandoning himself or by giving his freedom away). Lest compulsion *not* abandon him, our pilgrim is well advised to let go of every suspicion, or to understand his fear as fueled by unreasonable suspicions (compare II.36 and III.14–15). By aiding its student in strengthening himself, Virgilian poetry allows us to recognize that which appears “outside” (*fore*) of our desire as coinciding with a projection of virtue (compare III.14–15 and *Purgatorio* XXII.10–12: the auspicated death of “vileness” or *viltà* opens the door to *virtù* itself). Once we virtuously recognize the true nature of the object of our love, must we not naturally envision such object as all loving? Conversely, is it not fitting for the one who is loved because of virtue to love the lover in return? Such is the lesson Cristoforo Landino (2001) introduces beyond mere “carnal love” (*amor carnale*) as he comments on *Purgatorio* XXII.10–12: “if one loves another for virtue, which he see in him, it is fitting that the loved one love the lover” (*se uno ama un altro per virtù, che veggia in lui, conviene, che quello amato ami l'amato*; Landino’s comment on verses 13–18 confirms that virtuous love loves what is beyond vision).

In full recognition of the relation between virtue and the object of love, Virgil notes that Statius’s affection for him had become manifest (*palese*) to Virgil “from the very hour that among us had descended / in the limbo of the underworld Juvenal” (*Onde da l’ora che tra noi discese / nel limbo de lo ’nferno Giovenale*, 13–14). The intervention of the satirist Juvenal—exiled in all likelihood by emperor Domitian—marks the beginning of the clarification of the nature of Statius’s affection for Virgil. In the unburdening light of satire (18, after XXI.101–102), speaking to Statius openly, as a genuine friend in virtue and reason (XXII.16–21), Virgil invites his admirer to explain how (*come*) avarice might have ever found a place inside his breast (*seno*), “amidst so much sense” (*tra cotanto senno*) as he was full of thanks to his care (*cura*, traced by ancient etymologists to *cor*, “heart,” 22–24).

Statius’s response to Virgil, aptly introduced by “some laughter” (*un poco a riso*, 26), confirms once again the ironic character of the poets’ exchange: “Every love saying of yours is a dear nod to me” (*ogni tuo dir d’amor m’è caro cenno*, 27). Statius is echoing XXI.15, where Virgil had

IX.61–63; in Canto IV.16–18, Dante indicates the conditions for poetry’s success in strengthening the pilgrim on his way.

noddod to the peace-wishing shadow. The silent nod or *cenno* is “dear” or *caro* to Statius insofar as he hides it in his heart, if not under his sleeve (*seno* stems from *sinus*, a pocketlike folding in Roman togas), as “the true occasions, that are hidden” (*le vere cagion che son nascoste*) beyond appearance (28–30, echoing XXI.127–28). Has Statius understood Virgil’s earlier wish for peace as concealing virtuous love or love of virtue?

The nod with which Virgil had introduced his response to Statius in Canto XXI is now replaced by some comforting laughter (in anticipation of *Paradiso* XV.70–72), with which Statius introduces his response to Virgil, noting that the belief that Statius was avaricious is false, concealing as it does his having expended too much as he spread his poetic wings to rule over “the appetite of” mortals as a “sacred hunger” (*sacra fame*, 32–44, after XXI.97–99; on poetic wings, see *Paradiso* XV.72). Dante “imitates” (Landino) in Italian a passage from book III of the *Aeneid*: *quid non mortalia pectora cogis, Auri sacra fames* (56–57). Whereas Virgil addresses hunger of gold as “cursed” (*sacra*, in the sense of “consecrated to the underworld”) agitator of passions in human hearts, Dante’s citation, rhetorically or not, invites “sacred hunger of gold” as ruler or rectifier of our mortal appetite (Dante replaces Virgil’s *cogis* with the Italian *regge*, akin to *rectus* or “upright”). Does Dante know of a “gold” that is supposed to govern our appetite—a gold Virgil would not have had at his disposal?

Statius’s poetry has fallen short of inducing in his readers a “sacred hunger” that alone would seem to be capable of rectifying mortal appetite. Recalling Virgil’s question to Statius, we are invited to wonder “how” (*come*) it might have been that Virgil succeeded there where Statius, in the light of the Christian Golden Age, failed. Were Statius’s words wasted by the advent of Christianity, or insofar as the sacred or hidden valence of appearances had already, if only latently, gravitated under the dome of a *pax Christiana* (*Purgatorio* XXII.76–78) beyond the reaches of “grim joustings” (*giostre grame*, 42, after *Inferno* VII.35)? Could pagan poetry under Domitian have ever served the function that Virgilian poetry might still have served under “the good Augustus”? What is more, does the rise of Christianity as religion of the Roman Empire not signal the necessity for sacred poetry to be Christian, lest it appear *cursed*? Must not Dante’s *Comedy*—which in *Paradiso* XXV.1 the poet invokes as “sacred poem” or *poema sacro*—be Christian, lest it waste its words in the “prodigal” attempt to educate mortal appetites without the weight of law (compare XXI.99 and XXII.44, reading *spendere* from the Latin *pendere* or “weighing” in gold-coin transactions)? What is at

stake is the *capacity* of poetry to overcome mortality, or to make us forgetful of our mortality. How could poetry achieve this much without a credible support? How much better than Virgil's pagan poetry would Dante's counterpart seem to fare in the light of Christianity's eternal law (*Inferno* III.1–12)!

The fact that the advent of Christianity does not constitute a solution to the problem of lending credibility to truthful poetry is confirmed at once by Virgil's echoing *Inferno* VII where clergymen (*cherici*), including "both popes and cardinals" (*e papi e cardinali*, 47), remain trapped in a vicious, vain, even hair-splitting cycle of defacing contradictories (25–57, comparing 52 and 79, and XXVII.117): the clergy moves in a circle by continuously missing the middle in expenditure, and thus too in weighing value (VII.42, 61–66). Vice is reflected in delusive speech, as words are treated on par with monetary currency, until the "logic" of argumentation is completely obscured by the meanness of "black cherubs" (*neri cherubini*) presiding over "fraudulent counsel" (*consiglio fraudolento*, XXVII.113–23). The corrupt logician (*lōico*, 123) has confused the upright path of argumentation with the circularity of a divine Logos, applying upright maxims *ex machina*, to everything except for the mortal hand instrumentalizing speech (118–20; VII.55 and 57). It is to the logician in question that *Purgatorio* XXII returns by way of exemplifying the ignorance owing to which poets may sin unrepentant of prodigality (46–48 and *Inferno* XXVII.117–18).

Unlike the clergymen of the underworld, Statius repents (*Purgatorio* XXII.44). But how could he have repented if he had been affected by the ignorance that does not allow others to repent (46–48)? If appearances are deceiving, perhaps we are to intend that Statius was prodigal by association with prodigal people (52)—and indeed, what more prodigal emperor could one indicate than Domitian! Statius is now capable of purging himself through prodigality's contrary extreme (52–54), by withholding speech and thus by feigning ignorance. Having wasted his words as a pagan, he withholds his words for hundreds of years until the coming of Dante. In all likelihood, Statius approaches Dante as a providential opportunity to resurge as a poet, or to vindicate his poetic virtue (XXI.6). In consideration of Statius's indications about encountering contraries, are we not to intend his encounter with Dante—one fraught with equivocations—as concealing a reversal of positions, whereby at heart Statius would be encountering Dante as Luke's Christian might have encountered a resurrected Christ on the way to Emmaus (7–10)?

Statius's virtuous failure to abate the vicious excesses of his times (55–56: Oedipus's warring sons, whose ordeals are narrated in the *Thebaid*, could serve as mirrors of Titus and Domitian)¹⁰ points, not merely to Virgil, the poet of Saturn's bucolic peace (57), but to Dante, the poet whose "well doing" (*ben far*) backed (*di retro*) by the authority of St. Peter is in principle sufficient to save men from vice (59–63). However, Virgil—especially his *Bucolic* IV, vv. 4–7, which *Purgatorio* XXII.70–72 cites in Italian—remains pivotal to Statius's turn to Dante. Virgil had indicated that in the latest age (*ultima aetas*) announced by the Sybil of Cuma, "the great order of the centuries is born as in the beginning; / And already returns the Virgin, return Saturn's reigns, / already the new progeny descends from the heavens on high" (*magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo. / Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna, / iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto*). Dante renders the Sybil's prophecy (her "poetic verse" or *carmen*) thus: "The century is renewed; / returns justice and the first human time, / and the progeny descends from the heavens new" (*Secol si rinova; / torna giustizia e primo umano tempo, / e progenie scende da ciel nova*). Evidently, Dante's citation omits Virgil's central references to the Virgin, to Saturn's Golden Age, and thereby to the ancient "cyclical" reading of ages beginning with Saturn's recurring mythical peace.¹¹ By omitting explicit references to pagan divinities, Dante facilitates a Christian reading of Virgil, which reduces the ancient myth of recurring ages to a credible account of *one* human age (extending from the First Adam to Christ's birth naturally open to a Final Judgment). Although Dante's narrowing of the import of Virgil's words eclipses their original context, it helps render Virgil's words universally credible; consequently, it makes it possible to take Virgilian poetry seriously as a guide in the understanding of *pax Christiana*.

What convinced Statius to remain silent—nay, to hush—until Dante's arrival was Virgil's capacity to initiate Statius to the hidden way of poetry's Muses (*Tu prima m'inviasi / verso Parnaso a ber ne le sue grotte*, 64–65) and thereupon to cast upon his reader the light of the Christian God (*prima appresso Dio m'alluminasti*, 66). Statius's confession comes in

¹⁰ See Dominik (1994), 148–55. Dominik notes that where in Statius "specific correspondences between the courts of Thebes and Rome emerge...fear of imperial reprisal did not prevent Statius from inviting...unflattering associations to be made between the Principate and events and characters in both the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae*. It matters little whether there was actually any animosity between Domitian and his brother. The mere rumor of a rift invites an audience to make an immediate comparison between them and the Theban brothers" (148–49). For an intransigent denial of the connection in question, see Vessey (1973), 63–64.

¹¹ For further discussion of Virgil's cosmology, see Klein (1985), 275–84.

response to Virgil's question about "which sun or which candles" (*qual sole o quai candele*, 61) had allowed Statius to "repent."

For Statius, Virgil is not the sun, but the carrier of the sun "in the night" (*di notte*): in the night of paganism Virgil carries the sun "behind" (*dietro*) himself without aiding himself (68), aiding rather the followers of the sun that makes men into persons learned in sacred doctrine (*fa le persone dotte*, 69). The light that Virgilian poetry carries behind itself to aid nonpoets in overcoming nocturnal fears (compare *Inferno* I.20–21) may induce nonpoets to become not poets confiding in and aided by muses (*Purgatorio* XXII.58 and 65), but personalities learned in messages of the eternal reign (*li messaggi de l'eterno regno*, 78; the fact that said messages are not always propitious is confirmed already in *Inferno* III.1–9).

Unlike the "new preachers" (*nuovi predicanti*, *Purgatorio* XXII.80) of Christianity, Statius read Virgil in a poetic context, or as a poet in the making: he did not apprehend Virgil's solar signs out of their Apollonian or civil context, forgetting Clio, the muse of historians (compare 58 and 79: Virgil "touches" Statius as a muse). In fact, Statius might have gone as far as mistaking Virgil for the sun itself (XXI.94–101 and 130–36; on the dangers of excessive reverence, see XXXIII.25 and 75). Certain it is that he upholds Virgil as capable of casting light on men *from above*: Statius's Virgil does not merely "illuminate" things from within, but *alluma* in the manner of divine grace itself (compare XXI.96, XXII.66; XXIV.151–152; *Paradiso* XV.76; XX.1; XXVIII.5, where the muse Beatrice shines upon Dante from behind by way of introducing his mind to Paradise; in *Purgatorio* XI.81, *alluminare* is the art of Christian "illuminations").

To the extent that the *sound* of the new preachers was compatible with Virgil's words, Statius acquired the habit of visiting the preachers (80–81): "then they came to [him] appearing so saintly" (*vennermi poi parando tanto santi*, 82). So says the poet who has already intimated that "truly several times appear things / that give to doubt false the matter / due to the true occasions that are hidden" (*veramente più volte appaion cose / che danno a dubitar falsa materia / per le vere cagion che son nascoste*, 28–29; *danno*, "give," contains the sense of "gift," *dono*, and indeed throughout the *Comedy*, although most notably in *Paradiso*, "doubting" serves as blessed vehicle for the understanding; Landino's gloss on Dante's verses reads, "often men are deceived by false conjectures and signs" [*spesso gl'huomini sono ingannati di false conjecture et segni*]). This would not be the first time that in Canto XXII the appearance of things invites doubt as regards sensory matter, for the

sake of well intending its hidden true occasions. The appearance of saintliness emerges in the context of Domitian's persecution (compare *di là* at 85 and at XXI.100), and thus in the bleak context of horribly corrupt customs, in comparison with which the customs of preachers of the Christian sect appear upright (86–87). Indeed, the preachers were followers of a sun that, as poet, Statius carried behind himself in the darkness of the times. As a Virgilian poet, Statius succors Christians (*io li sovvenni*, 86, after 68: the inversion of roles is mirrored by the inversion of verse digits); their wailings (*pianti*) never lacked the poet's shedding tears (*mio lacrimar*). Statius leaves open the possibility of his shedding tears that were not accompanied by Christians' wailings. But is it in fact to be taken for granted that the poet sheds tears in the identical sense in which Christian preachers wail? Must we not read the poet's tears poetically, especially in consideration of ancient historians speaking of stones or, more generally, "mortal things" shedding tears that "touch" our memory or imagination? (Compare *Purgatorio* XXII.58 and 79; before the temple stones of Eusebius's *De martyribus Palestinae* IX.12 began weeping at the sight of Diocletian's horrid persecution of Christians, *Aeneid* I.462 evokes "the tears of things that [being] mortal touch the mind" [*lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*]). In the light of a simile evoked in *Purgatorio* XXII.51, we might ask if Statius's "tears" are *things* appearing mortal in verse as their "green" color fades (compare XXIII.1 and XI.92). Is Statius shedding tears as he is spilling ink or words, lamenting the moral obscurantism in which Christian preachers appeared "saintly" (*santi*, XXII.82), or "rendered sacred," perhaps even "cursed" by Domitian—following Virgil's reading of *sacra* in the previously cited verses 56–57 of *Aeneid* III? Are the wailings of persecuted Christians not to be understood in the context of the general lamentable state Roman customs had fallen into under Domitian's despotic thumb—a state for which Statius had apparently wasted so many words?

Statius claims to have been baptized—that is, to have received the sacrament of purifying "immersion"—prior to his having "poetically" (*poetando*) led *his* Greeks (109) to the rivers of Thebes (88–89), where Greek armies would have clashed against each other (the rivers are the Ismanis and Asopus; the literary reference is to *Thebaid* IX). Statius's poetry or its virtue had been, as it were, bathed in Christian waters before bathing its own characters in a river of blood and so prior to the death of Statius's pagan heroes (a death intimated by Greek armies' reaching Thebes's rivers). Thanks to Statius's "immersion" into Christianity, his heroes could live on beyond their pagan manifestations, just as ancient poetry had lived on well beyond Greece, into imperial Rome. Far from marking the end of pagan heroism or of the

poetry that breathed life into it, Christianity “saves” pagan heroism outside of its mortal spoils. In more than one sense, the poetry of Statius was conserved long after the demise of his Greek peoples—whether these are understood as poets or as poetic characters (106–11)—whose heroism could live on, not merely in Roman togas, but also under Christian waters (91 and 109; compare XXXII.52–57). Ancient poetic heroism lived on by adapting to new environments, shedding its old skin in order to “resurge” as a new persona (I.7, 9, 107; IV.134; VII.121; XVIII.71; XIX.35; XXI.59, 133; in spite of XXII.46). How else could Statius’s poetry have survived *as pagan* long after the defeat of his own *Romans*, if not by being Christianized, or by Statius’s being “closed” in a Christian garb! (Compare *chiuso...fu’mi* at 90 and at 99; on Statius’s Christian garb, see Battles [2004].) Perhaps then we are to intend Statius’s “habit” (*usata*) of visiting “the new preachers” in the context of *their* going to his poetry (*vennermi poi parendo tanto santi*, 80–82). Or rather, by being “closed” under Christian waters (88–90; compare XXIII.61–62)—not unlike the Ulysses who in *Inferno* XXVI.142 recalls how by divine pleasure, “finally the sea over us was closed again” (*infin...’l mar fu sopra noi richiuso*)—Statius’s poetry comes to be read in a Christian context, serving as steppingstone for the sanctification of Christian readers. Statius’s Virgilian “heat” (XXI.144, XXII.10–12, 61) would then have been made “tepid” by Christian water. Is the *Christian* Statius a “watered-down” version of the pre-Christian Statius? So as to survive in Christian “waters,” was Statius’s poetry forced to pay a hidden price? Was the “salvation” offered to the Roman’s poetry qualified by the need to pay a ransom, and thus to save poetry from its very savior? Did Statius *allow himself* to be saved by Christianity *for the sake of* resurging in a distant future?

The “tepidness” (*tepidezza*, 92; compare XIX.2) of Statius or his poetry is supposed to have been caused by a “scare” (*paura*, akin to *spaventare*; see further XXIV.133–36: sometimes we scare ourselves to “straighten” our thoughts). At first glance it might seem that Statius was afraid of being persecuted as a Christian, but then *why* would he have waited until Dante’s “Virgilian” arrival before coming, so to speak, out of the closet (XXII.94–95)? The only direct indication Statius gives us of a scary object pertains to the Christian damnation of pagans: Statius’s scare comes in intimation of a Christian damnation to which he suspects—that is, *fears* (compare, e.g., *Inferno* III.14, V.129, IX.51)—all strands of pagan poets were subjected by Christian authorities (97–99).¹² Statius gives no indication of fearing Domitian’s curse,

¹² Referring to the relation between the poets of Limbo (*Inferno* IV) and those of *Purgatorio* XXII,

which the poet had long succeeded in avoiding. The poet or his poetry could easily survive through pagan hands without fear of being hushed by a “sun” greater than the one *Stattus* carried on his own in the night of paganism—as Virgil, no less than as Luciferus—or submerged under the weight of a universal Golden Age.

Stattus's list of names of Roman pagan poets—from the comic poets Publius Terentius Afer, Caecilius *Stattus*, and Titus Maccius Plautus, to the tragic poet Lucius Varius Rufus—is crowned by Virgil's pointing to the satirical poet Aulus Persius Flaccus, himself (*e Persio e io*), “and plenty of others” (*e altri assai*, 100), all abiding in Limbo “with that Greek” (*con quel greco*), that is, Homer, whom, more than any other poet, the Muses nourished with their milk (102 and 105, after XXI.97–98). One tragedian is evoked between three comedians and one satirist, followed by Virgil and “others” including a satisfactory number of poets (reading *assai* from *ad satis*), but *all* are with Homer, the prince or poetic paradigm of all poets—he who more than all others has come to resemble a timeless Muse. Virgil indicates that the poets of Limbo “frequently reason of the mount / that always has [their] nourishing [Muses] with itself” (*spesse fiato ragioniam del monte / che sempre ha le nutrici nostre seco*, 104–5), suggesting a parallel between Homer and the Muses, on the one hand (comparing *con quel greco* at 101 and *nutrici nostre seco* at 105), and between Limbo's Noble Castle (*nobile castello*) and the mount of poetry, on the other. But beyond any comparison between Limbo and Parnassus (the mount of poetic inspiration), a comparison is tacitly invited between Parnassus and *Purgatorio*. Does Homer stand to the Muses as Parnassus stands to a Christian Purgatory? Does Dante not reason of his mount of poetic purgation as pagan poets reason of *their* mount? Does Dante's ascent “behind” Virgil—the Roman Homer—serve as sublime paradigm for all pagan poets' ascent “behind” muses? Whereas the forehead (*la fronte*) of pagan poets would be adorned with laurels, as Dante ascends the Christian mount of purgation, his forehead is “adorned” by an angel with the *P* mark of sins (*peccati*). Whereas the pagan poet ascends to fame, the Christian poet ascends to purge himself of the marks obscuring his poetic merit, not to speak of the poetic way (*via*; compare *Inferno* I.2–3, 91, IV.67, 149).

Baranski (1993, 233) notes that “thanks to the weight given in *Purgatory* to comical writers, [*Purgatorio* XXII.97–108] completes what remained a noteworthy lacuna in the poetic lineup of the infernal episode. Finally, if ‘Varro’ refers, as appears certain, to Virgil's friend, the epic and tragic poet Lucius Varius Rufus, then in verses 97–100 Dante introduces one or more figures for each one of the three ‘styles’: Varro for the tragic and high; Terentius, Caecilius, and Plautus for the comic or middle; and Persius for the satiric or low.”

Having pointed to Roman poets—five named, plus Virgil (*io*) and all others (*altri assai*)—in Homer’s company, Virgil mentions four Greek poets: the tragedians Euripides and Antiphon, the epigram composer Simonides, the tragedian Agathon, “and others in addition” (*e altri piue*, 106–7). After the Greek poets—five named (including Homer), plus “others in addition”—we are given to “see” Greek heroines among the mythical characters of Greek poetry, characters that Statius made his own (109–14): the sisters Deipyle (wife of Tydeus, Polynices’s “competitor” for authority) and Argea (wife of Polynices) appear between the sisters Antigone and Ismene (both involved in the burial of their brother Polynices); then we see (*videisi*) Hypsipyle, who had “shown” the Langia fountain to Thebes’s enemies (*quella che mostrò Langia*, 112; the woman, who was also known to have hidden her endangered father, is recalled in *Purgatorio* XXVI.95 as mother of two); one of Tiresias’s daughters (arguably Historis, known to have allowed Alcmena to give birth to Hercules, by deceiving the goddess Eileithyia);¹³ Thetis, who had concealed her son Achilles; and finally “Deidamia with her sisters” (*con le suore sue Deidamia*), among whom Achilles had remained concealed by his mother (Deidamia is further named in *Inferno* XXVI.61–62).

In interpreting Dante’s list of pagans, numerical considerations may serve as a wedge aiding us in well intending “the hidden true occasions” (*le vere cagion...nascoste*, 30) of *Purgatorio* XXII. Roman poets appearing, as it were, in seven “parts,” precede Greek poets and poetic characters. Reading Virgil’s expression *altri piue* literally as “others plus,” as if he had said “others plus others” (and thus, “others twice”), the Greek poets invoked appear as seven counterparts to the Romans. Moreover, King Lycomedes’s seven daughters (Deidamia plus her six sisters) are mentioned at the end of a list of seven women, only five of whom are mentioned by name, as in the cases of the Roman and Greek poets alike. Here, no less than in Limbo, there are literal parallels between groupings of names. The reason why we do not find peculiarly Roman poetic characters is evident: Statius made Greek heroes his own. By extension, Roman poets *replace* Greek poets, or rather poetry is reborn in Rome even *before* its demise in Greek cities.

Virgil mentions only heroines among poetic characters: the only male counterparts are poets writing in various “styles.” Do heroines serve as muses for “true heroes,” that is, for *poets*? Whether or not we agree that poets place in their own women the capacity to envision “heroic”

¹³ See Father Baldassarre Lombardi’s comments on *Purgatorio* XXII.110–14 (Lombardi [1868], 318–20). In some ancient accounts, Daphne is merely another name for Manto.

men, in the present context women are distinctly “framed” by references to vision and concealment (including burial), and one of them is daughter to the oracle Tiresias, if not an oracle in her own right (109, 112–13). Is Dante suggesting that the capacity of poets to either show or conceal heroism relies upon “women”? Does the heroism of poets not live on in muses long after the poets’ “pagan” or local disappearance (91)? In the light of the classical relation between poet and muse, are we to understand the relation between Greek and Roman poetry as intimating the relation between pagan poetry and its survival under the rule of either Christian emperors or imperial Christians? In Canto XXI, Statius confessed to have been nourished by Virgil’s poetry the way a suckling is nourished by his mother (98, followed up by XXII.102). If muses are poetic fictions in which poets conceal themselves, are we not to discern in the Thetis whom Dante (via Virgil) names in Canto XXII.113—the Thetis known to have concealed her son Achilles—one particular muse in whom poetic heroism conceals itself awaiting a propitious time for being brought to light, perhaps even to be summoned to war as once had been the case with the Greek Achilles summoned by Odysseus to fight against Troy?

Virgil’s account of Greek and Roman poetry leads to the impression that Greek poetry was always solemn poetry. Virgil’s examples of Roman poetry include comedy and satire; Greek examples give no indication of containing laughter. Was there no irony among the Greeks? Or did the transition from Greek to Roman poetry carry with it an eclipse of the ironic character enlivening Greek poetry? Should a comparable eclipse be expected in the case of the transition from Roman poetry to post-Roman poetry? Since Dante’s age surely knows of and cherishes Roman comedy, perhaps the correlation to be drawn is one between the eclipse of Greek irony and the eclipse of peculiarly pagan irony, that is, the eclipse of a pagan critique of paganism, anticipating *Christian* critiques of paganism. In the light of Dante’s earlier *Christian* narrowing of the sense of Virgilian poetry, are we not to wonder at the possibility of pagan critiques of paganism that did not merely anticipate but included and transcended *Christian* critiques of paganism?

Upon concluding his list of heroines, Virgil “hushes” together with Statius. Dante’s verse suggests that poets qua poets hush “anew” or *di novo*, echoing the *nova progenie* of verse 72. But our pagan poets’ hushing further reminds Dante’s reader of the manner in which the pagan Lucan—arguably distinguished from “the last Lucan” (*l’ultimo Lucano*) of *Inferno*

IV.90, understood as intimating Dante himself¹⁴—is called to hush in *Inferno* XXV.94 (“May Lucan hush now at last,” *Taccia Lucano ormai*—though *ormai* could be suggesting “now or never,” i.e., *ora o mai*, insofar as Lucan’s spirit lives on immortal in Dante). A further echo is discernible in the dramatic context of the hushing of Statius and Virgil: our poets hush “attentive to regard the surroundings” (*attenti a riguardar d’intorno*, 116). The phrasing is reminiscent of a scene of *Inferno* X in which the rationalist Cavalcante Cavalcanti “surged to uncovered sight” (*surse a la vista scoperchiata*, anticipating *Purgatorio* XXXIII.102) with regard for Dante’s surroundings (*dintorno mi guardò*), thereupon extinguishing his suspicions (*l’ospecciar fu tutto spento*, *Inferno* X.51, 55, 57; compare further Statius’s references to “uncovering” in *Purgatorio* XXII.94–96). Have Virgil’s words given pagan poets reason to hush? Is our poets’ silence tied to Statius’s earlier suspicion that other Roman poets may have been “damned” (*dannati*) to hell by Christian authorities?

At first, Virgil’s words appear to have extinguished Statius’s fear. As the two poets understand each other without obstacle, or tacitly (115–16), they also see that they have no reason to be scared on the poetic or obstacle-free (un-compulsive) ascent to a sun out of purview (118–20), that is, on the upright way (*drizzando...prendemmo la via*, 120, 125) they are well versed with (123). Yet circumstances have changed since pagan times. The “habit” (*usanza*, 124) that Virgil now points to—echoing the Christian habit Statius alludes to in verse 81 (“I took up the habit,” *presi usata*)—emerges as a sign teaching Virgil and Dante to retain a modicum of suspicion (*l’usanza fu li nostra insegna / ...con men sospetto*, 125). Their suspicion is partially abated by the “assent” Statius gives them insofar as he has retained his dignity (126). If Statius’s spirit has survived for centuries under Christian waters, now it should be possible for Dante, inaugurator of a new generation of poets (on “the new rhymes” or *le nove rime*, see XXIV.50–51), to carry his predecessor’s poetry *above* Christian waters, albeit not before placing himself “behind” (*di retro*, 128, after 1 and XXI.5, 10) pagan poetry, listening to a speech enabling its “reader” not merely to ascend to the sun, but to carry its edifying replica (compare the *soletto*—diminutive of both “alone” and “sun”—of XXII.127 and 118–120, after 67–68).

Since following *behind* pagan poetry is not Dante’s aim, at once his enjoyment of his predecessors’ “sweet reasons” (*dolci ragioni*) is broken (*tosto ruppe*, 130) by one fir-like tree (*come abete*, 133) that our poets

¹⁴ See Butler (2003). Though noting that in the *Comedy* Dante presents himself as a new (Christian) Lucan, Butler falls short of seeing Dante as Lucan *redivivus*.

“found” (*trovammo*, after *trobare*, the “inventing” of troubadours) “in the middle of the paved path” (*in mezza strada*, 132). The upright path paved by pagan poetry finds itself interrupted by the first of two trees that in *Purgatorio* seemingly anticipate the biblical tree of knowledge of good and evil, which Dante introduces in *Purgatorio* XXXII.38. As poetic entities, the two “imitations” of Adam’s tree point to the Earthly Paradise or divine living forest Dante arrives at assisted by his pagan poets (XXVIII.2). How is the poetic or imitative function of Dante’s pre-Earthly-Paradise trees to be understood? Do the “poetic” trees merely intimate the biblical one?

In *Purgatorio* XXXII, the tree of knowledge of the principles of morality spreads out like the heavens, not to say in imitation of the heavens, thereby serving as a conduit between human and divine wisdom (see Landino’s [2001] comments on 40–42). The tree’s branches have been stripped of all foliage by Eve’s having believed in “the snake”: the only leafage or green remaining is inaccessible to man as man (31–32). Has Eve’s error made *human* knowledge or science impossible? Has it made divine knowledge completely inaccessible to man? Fortunately for men, the “gryphon” (*grifon*) has not descended into vice with the First Adam (37 and 43–45). The gryphon is Christ himself, the *true* Adam, whose nature is dual: the *animal binato* (47) is born and lives both in the flesh (earth) and in the spirit (heavens), promising us that thanks to him, the seed of every just thing or human being is conserved (*si conserva il seme d’ogni giusto*, 48). The twice-born (*binato*) gryphon—not merely the earthly snake that Eve sensed in her ignorance—is supposed to have let go of the wooden shaft or helm (*timo*) of the upright life, tying it to the biblical tree and thereby allowing for a future spring (*primavera*) in which the green sap of the “widowed” tree, as of a ship of state guided by fortune alone (VI.112–14, 118–23; *Paradiso* IV.67–69, VII.61–63, and XXVII.139–41 after the lesson Marco Lombardo offers in *Purgatorio* XVI.97–103), might flourish anew, even on earth (XXXII.49–60).

Does the Christian provisional bonding of the upright way of life to its biblical model signal that ancient poetry ought to be tied to the authority of revelation, or to a ship of state governed by laws alone (XXXII.49–60; compare *Inferno* VII.67–96)? Could a Christ’s “vindictive” return to his Apollonian chariot (*Purgatorio* XXXIII.34–36, 44–45) with “new Muses” (*nove Muse*, *Paradiso* II.9, after I.13–15: “Oh good Apollo, for the final work / make me of your valor a vase so made / as you demand for giving [in gift] the beloved laurel” [*O buon Apollo, a l’ultimo lavoro / fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso, / come dimandi a dar l’amato alloro*]) free pagan poetry from passive

subservience to a higher authority, thereby restoring poetry to its original Orphic function (compare *Purgatorio* XXII.8–9: Dante has yet to take up his predecessors' labor)? The fundamental conditions for the restoration of pagan poetry would seem to be in order since, beyond mortal Ulysses, in the true Adam who is at once the "true Augustus" (*vero Augusto*, XXIX.116), the mythical "golden-age" innocence of human nature (XXVIII.142, after XVI.103–5) is always (*sempre*) in bloom and fruitful (XXVIII.143–47).

Now, the fir-like tree interrupting the pleasures of ancient poetry in *Purgatorio* XXII carries fruits (*pomi*) imbued with pleasant or sweet and good odor (*a odorar soavi e buoni*, 132, anticipating XXIII.68: *l'odor ch' esce del pomo e dello sprazzo*). The tree appears to be sweeter than the "sweet reasons" of ancient poets. Or should we rather say that the tree appears within the context of poetic reasoning? Does the stream of poetic reasoning coalesce in a plant whose fruits we surmise to be sweeter than pagan verses, judging by the odor that accompanies them?

One characteristic of poetic fruits is illuminated in stanzas 19–20 of Dante's poem "Three dames around the heart have come to me" (*Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute*, Rhyme CIV), where the fruits are accessible only to the "friend of virtue" (*amico di virtù*) who begs poetry for wisdom. In response, poetry takes up "new colors" (*color novi*), so as to make its lovers desire wisdom (*fa disiar ne li amorosi cori*). By way of resembling the object of desire, poetry blossoms in new or living colors; it must be, so to speak, "flowery." For the flower is the external beauty of the "plant" of poetry (*l'fior, ch'è bel di fori*), whereas poetry's fruits (*pomi*) are its words (*parole*), which, when held "not very far" (*non molto lontani*) before their reader, appear to him to stretch out of the poet's mind as "pregnant and lively branches" (*rami gravidi e vivaci*, *Purgatorio* XXIV.100–104). If the verses of ancient poetry are resurrected as the fruits of Dante's branches of eloquence, by gaining the color of wisdom, does the difference between ancient poetic styles and Dante's own "sweet new style" (*dolce stil nuovo*, *Purgatorio* XXIV.57) depend only on the fact that Dante's verse holds itself closely "behind" (*di retro*) the sweet appearance or flower of wisdom, whereas—as we have seen in the case of Virgil—ancient poetry held its "sun" *behind* itself (58–62)? Could ancient poets tread under "no heading" (*scoperchiati*, after *Inferno* X.52 and *Purgatorio* XXII.94), whereas Dante must now tread behind the color of wisdom? Does Dante's poetry surpass ancient poetry merely with respect to the Florentine's superior, almost angelic sweetness, now required to awaken the desire of students living under altered circumstances (XXIV.145–54 and

XXXIII.143–44; compare 147–48 and XXII.131–32: the *mezzo*, “middle,” of Dante’s paved path seems to be correlated with the middle of his “forehead”)?

If poetry’s virtuous fruits remain unchanged throughout the centuries, then the superiority of Dante’s verses over those of his pagan predecessors would seem to be due to the flowers and water in which poetic fruits are now nested. In this case, the aroma that accompanies the fruits of Dante’s poetic plant would be due to the flowers and water out of which the pomes themselves flourish.

Dante’s fir-like tree differs from ordinary or “physical” firs by pointing downward, and thus by having its roots in the heavens (133–34: is Dante’s plant a Platonic “soul”?). The tree credibly (*cred’io*) gains “personality” towards its earthly vertex, or its fruits seem to become increasingly inaccessible to any “person” (*persona*) attempting to move upward toward the plant’s roots (133 and 135). Perhaps more importantly, Dante indicates that from outside of the poetic pathway (*l cammin nostro*), “from the lofty rock fell a clear liquid / and it expanded throughout the leaves upward” (*cadea de l’alta roccia un liquor chiaro / e si spandeva per le foglie insuso*, 136–38; compare XXXIII.98: the mind’s original clarity is signaled by its “oblivion”). As Dante’s two pagan poets (*li due poeti*, XXII.139) approach the tree, “a voice from within the foliage / cried: ‘Of this food you shall be deprived’” (*una voce per entro le fronde / gridò: ‘Di questo cibo avrete caro,’* 140–41)—where the “food” in question must be merely water, albeit that of divine grace invoked already in XXI.2–3.

The “voice” of Canto XXII clarifies its oracular pronouncement by recounting five scenarios from the recorded past. In the first, from the Christian Gospels, in interceding for the miraculous transformation of water into wine, Mary thought about civil-minded virtue more than about her mouth (*bocca*), “which now for [the poets] responds” (*ch’or per voi risponde*, 144). The voice speaking seems to stem from the poets’ own mouths, which would then be responding to their own wills (consider the *labia mea* of XXIII.11).

In the second recounted scenario, ancient Roman women were content with drinking water (145–46). Evidently their desire was “contained” without the intervention of grace. Natural considerations, including practical knowledge of the difference between the taste of water and that of wine, sufficed to allow Roman women to leave wine to their men.

In our third scenario, Daniel, from the Hebrew Bible, regarded common food as inherently worthless (*dispregiò cibo*), thereupon acquiring knowledge or science (*acquistò sapere*, 146–47): seemingly reducing earthly things to heavenly things, Daniel appreciated heavenly things disproportionately more than earthly things.

Echoing verses 70–72—where Statius had evoked Virgil’s oracular verses—our fourth scenario pertains to “the first century [that] was beautiful as gold” (*lo secol primo, quant’oro fu bello*, 148). Then men, driven by unregulated hunger and thirst, lived as beasts savoring acorns as if these were wisdom, and spring water as if it were nectar (compare *savorose* at 149 and *savere* at 147): their wisdom was human folly. Having yet to be guided by Orphic poetry, the men living in Saturn’s Golden Age mistook the earthly for the heavenly, or they collapsed the heavenly into the earthly. Since they were unaccustomed to the sweetness of poetry, their only viands (*vivande*, 151) were the pomes (*mele*) and locusts (*locuste*, akin to “loquacious”) “that nourished the Baptist in the desert; / for he is glorious and as grand / as, through the Gospel, is disclosed” (*che nodrido il Batista nel diserto; / per ch’egli è glorioso e tanto grande / quanto per l’Evangelio v’è aperto*). Drawn from the Christian good, or angelic, “news” (*angelion*, akin to *angelos* or “angel”), the final recounted scenario—“disclosed by an angel”—presents at least two problems: (a) Is the example of John the Baptist nourished by forage in the desert intended as intimation of the case of unbaptized poets (89) deprived of human “food” during their Christian exile? (b) Does the glory and greatness of John the Baptist depend entirely on the eloquence of Christian oracles?

Canto XXII opens with the angel that had remained behind our poets (*l’angel dietro a noi rimasto*, 1), among whom stands Statius, the baptized pagan (89). Does the canto close with the same angel’s “opening” glorification of poets in the persona of John the Baptist? Are the canto’s five ending scenarios not uttered by the mouths of the two poets approaching Dante’s poetic tree—of *pagan* poets seemingly speaking, even reasoning, about poetry itself in the light of the Christian revelation? In the light of verse 115, where both poets hushed (themselves or each other) together (*tacevansi ambedue già li poeti*), are we not to intend the “voice” of verse 140 as resulting from “the two poets [who] approached the tree” (*li due poeti a l’alber s’appressarono*, 139)? Is the voice of pagan poetry placing its own “true occasions” (*vere cagion*, 30) in a Christian “frame” (literally, between Mary and John the Baptist) so as to best disclose what remains hidden in the midst of “false matter” (*falsa matera*, 29), namely, the relation between Daniel’s

intransigence, on the one hand, and, on the other, the capacity of poets to contain desire within human proportions (145–47)? Has Dante's Daniel not underestimated the inherent worth of earthly things? Does Mary not point beyond Daniel's disparaging of earthly food when she thinks of virtue more than of "her mouth"? Indeed, in the biblical account of Cana's nuptial gathering, Mary cares for *others'* mouths. By taking care of others' mouths, Mary would succeed in having "weddings honorable and wholesome" (*nozze orrevoli ed intere*, 143). But whose mouths could make nuptial celebrations truly honorable and wholesome if not the mouths of genuine poets (*Inferno* IV.72)?

If the verses "Love / lit by virtue, always another lit, / so that its own flame appear outside" (*Amore, / acceso di virtù, sempre altro acceso, pur che la fiamma sua pareses fore*, 10–12) refer, as they must, to poetic love (XXI.94–96 and 133–35), and since the "flower" of poetry is poetry's "outward beauty" (*bel di fori*), is it not by bathing in Christian waters that Statius's poetry can resurge? Yet how can it resurge if it already has been "saved" in grandiose figures exiled in the desert and robbed of their own "sun"? How could pagan poetry be saved from its heavenly exile, or heavens in which it might be exiled (consider, e.g., the ironic case of St. Thomas being alienated in the heavens, in *Purgatorio* XX.69)? One clue is offered in Canto XXII by Virgil's indication that muses "always" (*sempre*) nourish poets reasoning about poetry, in Limbo (14, 104–5).

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David Hume's Two Interpretations of Cartesian Doubt

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Hume presents his observations regarding Cartesian doubt while explaining the kind of skepticism he considers necessary to prepare one for the philosophic pursuit of truth (“antecedent skepticism”). He expresses conflicting assessments of Descartes’s recommendations concerning such skepticism. Hume condemns extreme Cartesian doubt as absurd, but asserts moderate Cartesian doubt to be indispensable. Both ways of understanding “antecedent skepticism” can be found in famous writings of Descartes.

According to Hume, radical Cartesian doubt recommends “an universal doubt, not only of all our former opinions and principles, but also of our very faculties; of whose veracity, say they [the Cartesians], we must assure ourselves, by a chain of reasoning deduced from some original principle, which cannot possibly be fallacious or deceitful.” Hume emphatically rejects this. “But neither is there any such original principle, which has a prerogative above others, that are self-evident and convincing; *or if there were, could we advance a step beyond it, but by the use of those very faculties, of which we are already diffident.* The Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be completely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject” (Hume 1902, 149–50; emphasis added).

One can appreciate the force of Hume’s objection by contrasting Descartes’s doubts of the validity of clearly and distinctly understood rational inferences, doubts to which Descartes succumbs toward the end of Meditation 1, with the way Descartes purports to overcome these doubts: proofs consisting of a connected chain of such rational inferences, proofs that

he admits are “rather long” (*longiusculae*), and that he claims are at least as difficult to understand as the famously difficult proofs of Apollonius, Archimedes, and Pappus (AT VII 4–5).¹ Descartes’s contemporaries were not slow to react. The central difficulty has come to be known as “the Cartesian circle” and is concisely formulated by Arnauld: “My only remaining difficulty is how he can fail to commit a vicious circle when he says that ‘we can be sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.’ But we cannot be sure that God exists unless it is clearly and distinctly perceived by us; therefore before we can be sure God exists, we ought to be sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (AT VII 214). If one bears in mind that a God who could make clear and distinct ideas untrue could also make the clear and distinct idea of God untrue, thereby rendering it incapable of serving as a basis for overcoming the doubts of Meditation 1, one can understand why Leibniz (1956, 634) could say: “And if this doubt could once be justly raised it would be straightway insuperable; it would always confront Descartes himself and anyone else, however evident the assertions presented by them.”

Hume’s favorable remarks on Cartesian doubt immediately follow his unfavorable ones:

It must, however, be confessed, that this species of skepticism, when more moderate, may be understood in a very reasonable sense, and *is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy*, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments, and weaning our mind from all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion. To begin with clear and self-evident principles, to advance by timorous and sure steps, to review frequently our conclusions, and examine accurately all their consequences; though by these means we shall make both a slow and a short progress in our systems; *are the only methods, by which we can ever hope to reach truth, and attain a proper stability and certainty* in our determinations. (1902, 150; emphasis added)

Hume’s favorable comments express his understanding of the four rules of method advanced by Descartes in the second part of his *Discourse on Method*. Hume accepts them despite the well-known differences to which applying them will lead the two thinkers. Descartes, for his part, credits his obeying these rules with the discoveries he published along

¹ The translations of Descartes’s philosophical writings by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, as well as the ones by Donald A. Kress and Roger Ariew, provide cross-references to the corresponding pages of the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes’s works. This writer has therefore felt free to refer to passages in Descartes by citing that edition, which is available online at http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Ceuvres_de_Descartes/Édition_Adam_et_Tannery.

with the *Discourse*. According to Descartes's presentation of himself in that work, his own path to his discoveries was preceded and accompanied by what Hume describes as the moderate version of Cartesian doubt. That version demands setting aside and reconsidering the prejudices one acquired before one's reason had matured: "as regards all the opinions to which I had until now given credence, I could not do better than to try to get rid of them once and for all, in order to replace them later on, either with ones that are better, or even with the same ones once I had reconciled them to the norms of reason." It even includes a period during which Descartes compares himself to "a man who walks alone and in the dark" (AT VI 13–14, 16). That version most definitely does not require doubting what we clearly and distinctly understand, mathematical truths, or our ability to rationally demonstrate such truths as well as other truths.

Readers of the *Discourse* are familiar with the steps Descartes describes taking before carrying out the requirement to rid himself of prejudices. Initially, he puts off doing so: "Nor would I begin rejecting completely any of the opinions that may have slipped into my mind without having been introduced there by my reason, until I had spent enough time in planning the work I was undertaking and in seeking the true method of attaining the knowledge of everything within my mental capacities" (AT VI 17). Even after devising his method for acquiring genuine knowledge and, as he claims, making important discoveries thanks to it, he was not yet ready, at age twenty-three, to try to replace the uncertain principles of the existing philosophy with new, certain ones. As further preparation for doing this, which he declares to be the "most important thing in the world," Descartes lists three more requirements: "uprooting [*déracinant*] from my mind all the wrong opinions that I had previously accepted"; "amassing a variety of experiences to serve as the subject matter of my reasonings"; and "practicing constantly the method I had prescribed to myself in order to strengthen myself in its use" (AT VI 21–22). At the end of the third part of the *Discourse* we encounter a Descartes who is now nine years older. Each of these requirements reappears. He now claims to have fulfilled all three during the intervening period.

First, we learn that "in all the nine years that followed I did nothing but wander here and there in the world, trying to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies played there; and reflecting particularly in each matter on what might render it suspect and give us occasion for error, *I uprooted from my mind during this time all the errors that had previously been*

able to slip into it" (AT VI 28–29; emphasis added).² Moreover, we are told that "just as in tearing down an old house, one usually saves the wreckage for use in building a new one, similarly in destroying all those of my opinions that I judged to be poorly founded, I made various observations and acquired many experiences that have since served me in establishing more certain ones." Third, we see Descartes declaring: "I continued to practice the method I had prescribed for myself, for, besides taking care generally to conduct all my thoughts according to its rules, from time to time I set aside some hours that I spent particularly in applying it to mathematical problems or even also to some other problems that I could make, as it were, similar to those of mathematics by detaching them from the principles of all the other sciences, which I did not find sufficiently firm, as you will see I have done in many problems that are explained in this volume" (AT VI 29–30). Having now met the conditions he considered necessary for attempting to replace the commonly accepted philosophy with one based on sound principles, Descartes, after some hesitation, proceeds to undertake this.

In the *Discourse*, the "uprooting" of prejudices is completed before Descartes undertakes establishing the metaphysical foundations of a new philosophy: "Nevertheless, these nine years slipped by before I had as yet taken any stand regarding the difficulties commonly debated among the learned, or begun to search for the foundations of any philosophy more certain than the commonly accepted one" (AT VI 30). The skepticism that Descartes claims freed him from all his prejudices and prepared him to reform philosophy is the moderate antecedent skepticism that Hume speaks of and that Hume considers necessary. The extreme doubt Descartes employs while establishing the principles of his metaphysics does not, in the *Discourse*, serve the purpose of eliminating previously acquired prejudices. Eliminating them is something he claims to have accomplished before attempting to establish metaphysical principles.

The antecedent skepticism Descartes tells readers that he employed himself differs from the antecedent skepticism he requires of those to whom he is introducing his new foundations in the *Meditations*. Both are undertaken in order to achieve firm and lasting knowledge in the sciences. Both require ridding oneself of prejudices acquired before one's reason was

² The italicized phrase reads in the original: "Je déracinai cependant de mon esprit toutes les erreurs qui s'y étaient pu glisser auparavant." Gilson's (1987, 267) commentary on this passage explains "cependant" as "pendant ce temps-là." The Latin translation renders this phrase: omnes paulatim opiniones erroneas quibus mea mens obsessa erat avellebam.

mature. The *Meditations*, unlike the *Discourse*, requires doubting clear and distinct ideas, and hence even the simplest truths of mathematics as well as our ability to rationally demonstrate truths. As we noted above, Descartes claims to overcome these doubts by means of long and difficult rational demonstrations. This gave rise to legitimate objections such as those of Arnauld and Hume. In Meditation 5, and in his responses to such objections by others, Descartes claims that he had not been correctly understood. He now says that he never denied that knowledge and certainty result when he actively considers something he perceives clearly and distinctly, or any long demonstration made up of such perceptions. What he regards as open to doubt is our memory of having previously demonstrated a conclusion while we are not actively considering the demonstration of it. Only first proving that God exists and is not a deceiver, Descartes now claims, supplies the assurance of the adequacy of our memory of previously demonstrated truths for the indispensable use that must be made of it in the reasoning of mathematicians and physicists. Accordingly, Descartes continues to insist that knowledge of God must precede lasting knowledge in mathematics and physics.

Descartes scholars have long questioned the adequacy of this clarification (Wolz 1950, 480–81). They ask whether the assurances to memory that such proofs supply can be invoked, without circularity, when one is trying to remember them while thinking of other matters. That there might be some difficulty in doing so is indicated by the following passage in the *Meditations*, a passage that immediately follows what Descartes claims is a valid proof for the existence of God: “Indeed there is nothing in all these things that is not manifest by the light of nature to one who is diligent and attentive. But when I am less attentive, and the images of sensible things blind the mind’s eye, I do not so easily recall why the idea of a being more perfect than me necessarily proceeds from a being that is more perfect so that it is appropriate to ask further whether I myself who have this idea could exist if no such being existed” (AT VII 47–48).

Another scholar has more recently thoroughly reexamined the argument of Meditation 5 regarding remembered demonstrations as it is commonly understood and has shown again that, so understood, that argument is circular:

But given that it has been demonstrated that God exists and that He guarantees memory: still, it cannot be supposed that it would then be sufficient, whenever God’s guarantee is required, merely to recall that these things have been demonstrated. For it is precisely the

dependability of recollections of this sort which is in doubt when God's guarantee is invoked, and to assume the accuracy of such a recollection would be to generate a new circle. When the reliability of memory is doubted, it is also necessary to doubt the reliability of the recollection that memory has been shown to be guaranteed by God. It would obviously be circular for Descartes to validate a memory on the ground that he remembers having proven that God guarantees memory. (Frankfurt 1962, 508; see Frankfurt 2007, 219)

It should be noted that this scholar also denies that the view he has criticized should be attributed to Descartes. Central to that scholar's fallibilist interpretation of Descartes's thought is the following claim: "Often hindering a correct understanding of Descartes's problem is the erroneous notion that when he says something is indubitable, this is tantamount to his saying it is true" (Frankfurt 2007, 224). He makes no exception in this regard even for the certain truth of the cogito. Those who, like this writer, understand Descartes to have claimed to possess true and certain knowledge of his own existence find themselves obliged to offer a different explanation of the presence of these two circular arguments—one conspicuously circular, the other more subtly circular — in the *Meditations*.

The most sweeping rule of the provisional moral code by which Descartes tells the reader of his *Discourse* he will conduct himself while doubting his prior moral opinions is to obey the laws and customs of his religion and his country. As the sequel makes clear, adopting this broad rule does not dispense him from having to make additional choices. This can be understood to mean that there may be disagreements among those who accept these laws and customs and that one may be faced with the need to decide to which one will give one's support. Though no examples are provided to begin with, Descartes proceeds to explain how he will arrive at that decision. In the course of setting forth his second maxim, Descartes even considers what he must do if faced with the need to choose an opinion to support when nothing of which he is aware makes choosing it preferable to choosing one of the alternatives to it. He prescribes as the necessary course of action under such circumstances making a choice and persisting in it without vacillation, even though, as he makes abundantly clear to the reader, nothing in his thought favors the opinion supported any more than it does the ones not supported. One cannot avoid concluding from what Descartes himself tells the reader about the opinions he will support while seeking better moral knowledge that many of them do not, at least as yet, correspond to what he believes: "for since God has given each of us some light to distinguish

the true from the false, I would not have believed that I ought to rest content for a single moment with the opinions of others, had I not proposed to use my own judgment when there would be time; and I would not have been able to free myself of scruples in following these opinions, had I not hoped that I would not, on that account, lose any opportunity of finding better ones, in case there were any" (AT VI 27–28). If one bears in mind the fact that "following" in Descartes's day included what one said as well as did, in the passage quoted Descartes is frankly telling his readers that he will sometimes say things he does not believe. In the light of this, it is not clear whether in speaking of insincerity or deception on Descartes's part one does enough justice to how frank Descartes has been with his reader.

The foregoing informs the reader of what Descartes would do when compelled to voice approval of things he has not yet made up his mind about. We were not told what he would do if a conflict were to arise between his rational convictions and the views of the authorities to which he defers. The opening of part 6 of the *Discourse* sheds some more light on this. After providing an ample summary of a work in which he intended to present his physics to the public, Descartes explains why he suddenly withdrew it from publication:

But it is now six years since I arrived at the end of the treatise that contains all these things and began to review it in order to put it in the hands of the printer, when I learned that some people to whom I defer and whose authority over my actions can hardly be less than that of my reason over my thoughts had disapproved of an opinion in physics, published a short time earlier by someone else concerning which I do not want to say that I was in agreement, but rather that I had not noticed anything in it, before their censuring of it, that I could imagine to be prejudicial either to religion or to the state, nor, as a consequence, had I found anything that would have prevented me from writing it, had reason persuaded me of it, and this made me fear that there might likewise be found among my opinions one in which I have been mistaken, notwithstanding the great care that I have always taken never to accept into my beliefs any new opinions for which I did not have very certain demonstrations and never to write anything that could turn to anyone's disadvantage. (AT VI 60)

Descartes submits to the authority of those who condemned Galileo by withholding his work from publication. The actions over which that authority exercises control manifestly include public speech. Descartes's private thoughts, however, are said to be subject to an authority that is equally

great, that of his reason.³ Descartes does not divulge his agreement with the condemned belief in the motion of the earth, though his private correspondence, and the withheld work itself, leave no doubt that he did agree with it. He does make clear that his reason would not have prevented him from adopting it before he learned that it been condemned. His private correspondence makes clear that Descartes hoped for a reversal of the condemnation. When none was forthcoming, in a later work, *Principles of Philosophy*, which was written to be a handbook of his philosophy for use in colleges, Descartes put this as the heading of section 19 of part III: "I deny the motion of the earth with more care than Copernicus and more truth than Tycho." The body of the section reiterates the denial. It would seem, then, that Descartes, in conformity with his first rule of conduct, bowed, in what he said publicly about the subject, to the authority of the church. A careful analysis of what he says about planets and the sun in part III of the *Principles* discloses that his understanding of the solar system has not changed, even though the words he now uses to express them have. In his *World* Descartes explains motion as "that by which bodies pass from one place to another and successively occupy all the spaces in between" (AT XI 40). The *Principles* (II §25) replaces this "common" and "vulgar" understanding of motion with what Descartes calls a more strict and true understanding according to which motion is "the transfer of a part of matter, or of a body, from the vicinity of the other bodies, that immediately touch it, and that are considered at rest, to the vicinity of other bodies." A passenger asleep in his cabin on a ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean would be, under this definition, at rest, even though the ship on which he is traveling is not. Descartes now claims that the earth likewise is at rest in relation to the vortex that carries it around the sun, and that the planets also do not move for the same reason. Koyré observes: "It is not surprising that this attempt, so subtle and at the same time so naïve, of the 'trop précautionneux philosophe,' as Bossuet called him, to dissociate himself from Copernicus and Galileo, did not deceive anyone, except some modern historians. Yet it worked." The *Principles*, Koyré further notes, was placed on the Index of prohibited books in 1664 not because of what Koyré calls Descartes's "obvious" Copernicanism, but because of doubts concerning the compatibility of Descartes's physics with the sacrament of transubstantiation as understood by the church (Koyré 1965, 81–82).

Students of Descartes's physics have long known that his new definition of motion is incompatible with his principle of the conservation

³ Contrast Montaigne, *Essais* I 56, beginning.

of the quantity of motion and the laws of collision he also sets forth in the *Principles*. Koyré explains: “for it is evident that if one attributes—something which cinematic relativity would give us the right to do—*the same speed* now to a big, now to a little body which approach or recede from each other, one will obtain very different *quantities of motion*. Now, one cannot admit that Descartes would have remained unaware of contradictions as flagrant as this, or that he could have failed to notice them.” According to Koyré, Descartes adopts the new definition “only to be able to reconcile Copernican astronomy, obviously implied by his physics, with the official doctrine of the Church” (Koyré 1966, 339). Gaukroger, in his intellectual biography of Descartes, arrives at the same conclusion concerning these contradictions after supplying additional grounds for coming to it: “I believe that it is difficult to explain Descartes’ advocacy of the relativity of motion other than as an attempt to throw a smoke screen around his heliocentrism” (Gaukroger 1995, 372–74; see also 12, where Descartes’s “doctrine of the relativity of motion” is described as “completely spurious”).

Descartes tells his readers how he would act and speak publicly if compelled to support an opinion concerning which he had not yet made up his mind and which he did not believe. He does not tell his readers how he would act and speak publicly if his reason convinced him of a truth that the authorities to which he deferred condemned. From the example of such a conflict that we have been considering we can see that Descartes would be willing to contradict himself in order to be able to say the required words—the earth does not move—while continuing to expound the conclusions he had reached regarding how planets move around the sun, as well as his principle of the conservation of motion and his laws of collision. He did not tell readers, as frankly as he previously had, that this would be what he would do. He could hardly do so without violating the first rule of his provisional moral code.

The arguments to which Arnauld and Hume object would have the effect of making knowledge of God the indispensable gateway to any firm and stable knowledge in the sciences. This was a result Descartes was anxious to achieve after the condemnation of Galileo by the church and the attacks on Descartes’s thought, in the name of religion, in Protestant Holland. If the justice of Arnauld’s criticism is acknowledged, the clear and distinct ideas made use of in the demonstration of the existence of God are validated by the cogito rather than by that demonstration. Instead of conceding that Arnauld is right and by doing so surrender the wished-for priority

of the knowledge of God, Descartes offers the argument of Meditation 5 concerning remembered demonstrations. This contrived clarification removes, for the time being, the appearance of gross inconsistency from Descartes's effort to overcome the doubts he raised concerning his ability to demonstrate by means of demonstrations. It permits Descartes to claim that we can know that such demonstrations are true as long as we actively consider them. This argument, though no less circular, is less obviously so than the one Arnauld criticized. Once its circularity is seen, however, one is again forced back to the criterion of certain truth that the cogito supplies.

Descartes claims that the moderate Cartesian doubt, or "antecedent skepticism," of the *Discourse* enabled him to "uproot" all his previous errors. That uprooting is part of his preparation for dealing with the grave matters to which his *Meditations* will later be devoted. Descartes makes a point of strongly denying that he had as yet arrived at any firm philosophical conclusions concerning these subjects, though he makes clear that he objected to some of the firm conclusions others claimed to have reached. In the *Meditations* the situation is entirely different. The opening words of the body of the work make clear that the individual to be initiated into Cartesian philosophy still needs to have previously acquired prejudices removed from his or her thought. The conspicuous subjects of the *Meditations*—God and the soul—obviously are of great importance to those concerned with religion. Descartes underscores this in his letter of dedication to the theologians of the Sorbonne. In the *Meditations*, someone "who is only first beginning to philosophize" is initiated into Cartesian philosophy (AT V 146). The authorities are shown what Descartes claimed the result of such an initiation would be. He hoped that they would find what they saw reassuring and cease considering the new natural philosophy as a threat to religion.

The Descartes who considered self-contradiction regarding what motion is not to be too high a price to pay for agreeing in speech with the church's condemnation of the view that the earth moves, would not have considered circular reasoning too high a price to pay for making the knowledge that God exists and that the soul is immaterial—truths of very great importance to religious authorities, both Catholic and Protestant—the precondition for achieving any solid knowledge in natural philosophy. When one considers the hostility that he had seen the new science of nature encounter, in its fragile infancy, from prominent Catholics and Protestants,

his willingness to pay this price is understandable, given his provisional code of morals.⁴

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⁴ For important observations concerning the relation between the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* see Kennington (2004), 153–60.

Reply to Levy: Socrates's Post-Delphic Refutations

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I am very grateful to David Levy for the thought that he has put into his review of my book, *The Ironic Defense of Socrates: Plato's "Apology,"* and for the many kind things he has to say about it (*Interpretation* 38 [3]: 261–69). We agree, I believe, that in grasping what is distinctive about Socrates—and his revolution in philosophic thought that established political philosophy—nothing is more important than the issue Levy focuses on: the purpose, character, and scope of Socrates's "Delphic mission." Levy expresses disagreement with, or at least doubt about, several points in my interpretation of that mission. For this too I am grateful, since I wrote the book in part to expose my interpretation to challenge. But to a considerable degree Levy's challenge is based on misunderstandings of my argument. I therefore welcome this opportunity to try to clear up some of the misunderstandings as well as to address some of Levy's far-reaching questions about the all-important "Socratic turn."

Levy correctly attributes to me the view that "Socrates' attempt to refute the [Delphic] oracle," which leads him to examine and refute politicians, poets, and craftsmen, among others, "is, quite literally, his manner of 'investigating the god' (71)" (264). It is his way of examining the experiences men may point to as evidence of the gods' existence, and at stake in the question of the gods' existence is the question whether philosophy is possible. But having followed me this far, Levy, citing pp. 99 and 100, says that he finds it hard to "follow Leibowitz's suggestion" that there came a time when Socrates "no longer had any need to investigate believers altogether"

or “believers who display typical beliefs” (266). I, however, make no such suggestion. On the contrary, on the cited pages I emphasize Socrates’s need to *continue* his refutations until the end of his life—but with interlocutors, including believers (some, no doubt, with “typical beliefs”), who are able to carry the conversations farther than the politicians and the others he has spoken about so far. I return to this theme a few pages later when I discuss the special importance to Socrates of conversations with the promising young (Leibowitz, 104–5).¹

Levy goes on to say that I describe Socrates’s refutations as being “about the *discrepancy* between believers’ moral views and their beliefs about the gods” (266; emphasis added). On the contrary, my fundamental contention is that Socrates thinks that there is such a profound link between the two that if people’s moral beliefs are radically altered or shaken, their beliefs about the gods—including their beliefs about their own contact with god—will be altered or shaken as well (Leibowitz, 71–72, 92–100).

Citing p. 71, Levy implies that the reader will be surprised to find me arguing on pp. 93–95 that Socrates’s post-Delphic refutations touched on the topic of the gods and not only on morality (266). But in a paragraph that begins on the very page Levy cites, I prepare the reader for

¹ In support of his view of the importance Socrates must have placed on continuing to examine the unpromising, Levy says that he “cannot see why...Socrates would take up the debate with a believer depicted in the *Euthyphro*, which occurs only shortly before the *Apology* takes place, if he had ceased to need such refutations (cf. 92n64)” (266). I do not entirely disagree. As I say in a repetition of my earlier statements, Socrates’s examination of the unpromising “eventually came to an end, or *nearly to an end*” (108n87, emphasis added; consider the “finally” at *Apology* 22c9). I would, however, call attention to what I say on p. 95: “as the *Euthyphro*—and in particular Socrates’ failure to *move* *Euthyphro*—shows, the question ‘What is piety?’ cannot be settled on its own. It must be approached through a question the *Euthyphro* leads up to but never raises: ‘What is justice?’ (cf. 5d, 6b–7e, 9a–b, 11e, and 12c–d with 14d–e).” In other words, the *Euthyphro*, first impressions notwithstanding, is *not* an adequate illustration of Socrates’s “investigation concerning the god.” Rather, it shows us a problem that Socrates’s investigation faces, and it demonstrates an approach to solving it that fails, leaving us to wonder what approach, if any, might succeed. I would add that Socrates, who is familiar with *Euthyphro*, does not initiate the conversation, as we might expect him to do if he felt a need for it. And it is not when *Euthyphro* claims to be a diviner, but only later, when he tells Socrates that he is prosecuting his father on a dubious-sounding charge of murder, that Socrates begins to question him about whether his self-proclaimed knowledge of “the divine things” and “the pious and impious things” is genuine (cf. *Euthyphro* 3c–e with 4d–e). Perhaps Socrates’s chief concern on this occasion is the welfare of *Euthyphro*’s father, or of *Euthyphro*’s family, which disapproves of the prosecution, or of *Euthyphro* himself, who could get in trouble for a prosecution that may widely be regarded as impious (4d9–e1). Although *Euthyphro* undergoes no fundamental change in the course of the conversation, it does dawn on him that “he might lose his lawsuit, which, after all, he would have to win on earth before a human jury” (Strauss 1989, 195–96). (These reflections, I believe, also answer Levy’s implicit question at 267n5.) I agree with Levy, however, to this extent: whatever Socrates’s chief concern in talking to *Euthyphro* may be, it is hard to imagine him failing to take advantage of the limited opportunity the conversation provides to confirm at least *some* of his insights.

this argument. On pp. 71–72, I raise the question of the puzzling relation between Socrates's refutations about morality and his investigation of the god, and say:

A slight indication of Socrates' solution to these difficulties is provided, I believe, by his statement that the god in Delphi could not have been lying, "for that is not sanctioned [or 'lawful' or 'just' (*themis*)] for him" (21b6–7). Perhaps believers, whether they know it or not, expect the gods to be bound by some kind of humanly intelligible law or justice. That is, however much they may think that their moral beliefs derive from their beliefs about the gods, the truth may be that their beliefs about the gods, including the belief that they have had contact with gods, somehow derive from their merely human moral beliefs. In particular, their beliefs about justice may enable and even incline them to interpret certain experiences—certain dreams, for example—as divine. If so, examining these moral beliefs may indeed prove helpful in assessing the deepest part of the "evidence" brought forth by believers. What these examinations reveal will become clearer as we proceed through this section, and clearer still when we consider the passage in which Socrates uses *themis* for the second and last time (30c9).

I do not see how someone who has read this could be surprised to hear me later making the case that in his post-Delphic refutations Socrates must sometimes have brought up the gods. Levy is right to say that according to my account, Socrates's "refutations focused *especially* on believers' moral opinions" (266; emphasis added). But "especially" is not "exclusively."

Levy, drawing on p. 89, wonders "whether Socrates could not have found a way to indicate more precisely that this [sc. virtue or justice and the gods] is the topic of his refutations if he wished to" (266; brackets added). But as I point out on p. 89, there is a "studied vagueness" in this passage and throughout the *Apology* about Socrates's topics of examination. When first describing his refutations, he refers obscurely to a certain politician not knowing "anything noble and good," the poets not being wise in "the other things [than poetry]"—like prophets and those who deliver oracles, they turn out to "know nothing" of what they speak—and the craftsmen not being wise in "the other things, the greatest things." Later, in describing his way of life, he speaks of "virtue and the other things about which you hear me conversing and examining myself and others" (21d3–4, 22c2–3, 22c5–6, 22d7–8, 38a3–5). The precise topics of examination and conversation or refutation are left as what I call a "conspicuous riddle." In trying to solve this riddle, I suggest, with Platonic support, that gods would naturally, so to speak, be counted among the "noble and good" things and "the greatest things" (*Republic*

381c7–9, 377e6–378a1; the mention of prophets and those who deliver oracles points in this direction as well). I also turn to other dialogues—especially the *Republic* and the *Laws*—for help in understanding what his refutations may have looked like (Leibowitz, 92–100). Aware that this second step could be questioned, I let the reader know that much of “what is made explicit in the *Republic* and *Laws* is hinted at in the remainder of Socrates’ first speech in the *Apology*” (Leibowitz, 92n64). And I pick up this thread when I turn to Socrates’s cross-examination of Meletus, himself perhaps a poet—that is, a member of one of the classes subjected to Socrates’s post-Delphic examinations—and say that Socrates “now begins” to make clear the substance of his refutations (Leibowitz, 116–36, esp. 128–30 and 132–34; see also 105–6, esp. lines 4–6 on p. 106, 145n12, 149–50, and 175–81, where I discuss Socrates’s second and last use of *themis*). It would not be misleading to say that Socrates’s cross-examination of Meletus focuses on law, becoming “noble and good,” justice (including moral responsibility), and belief in gods. It seems to me that in this and other ways Socrates *did* find a way “to indicate” with sufficient precision the topics or topic of his refutations. He leaves it for his listeners, and Plato for his readers, to puzzle out how the parts of the topic fit together (compare Leibowitz, 130 with 162–164 on *Apology* 37e3–38a8).

After saying that it “seems plausible” to him that every “serious believer...will be inclined to attribute some kind of justice to god,” Levy goes on to say that “it also seems to [him] that there are some believers for whom god is, so to speak, nothing but love...merciful, but not necessarily just.” If the latter are *not* serious believers, they—and whatever seemingly divine experiences they may appeal to—do not pose a serious challenge to philosophy, as Levy seems to grant (267).² But I note in passing that mercy itself presupposes concern for justice: if god were indifferent to injustice or sin, why would men need forgiveness (cf. Leibowitz, 134)? And a question like this might provide an opening for Socrates to examine a class of believers that Levy considers unserious.

But there is a broader issue on Levy’s mind, which he expresses as follows: “As Leibowitz seems to acknowledge, the refutations he describes ‘do not deal with those who believe that the gods are unjust or unconcerned with justice...’ (95)” (267; restated on top of 268). This, I’m

² He appears, however, to waver on this point. Almost immediately after implying that the unserious believers could be dismissed out of hand, he brings them up again—referring to those who believe that gods are loving “rather than” just—and seems to say that we need to “ask about” them, as well as about serious believers (267).

compelled to say, misses the fundamental point of the book. My argument, throughout, has been that “consciously or unconsciously, the believer [i.e., every sane and even modestly educated believer: 95] raises the claim that god’s commandments and actions are just, and this claim can be examined. At least this is what Socrates suspects and *has* suspected since before he began his post-Delphic refutations” (Leibowitz, 94; brackets and first two emphases added). Hence, even those who “*believe* they believe that they have been spoken to by [immoral or amoral] gods may turn out, upon examination and despite their initial denials, to believe that the gods are just in at least one crucial respect: they speak to those who are somehow worthy—*deserving*—of being spoken to by gods” (Leibowitz, 95; brackets added). It does not require psychological sophistication to recognize the myriad other ways that those who *believe* they believe in (and more importantly for Socrates, claim to have *experience* of) immoral or amoral gods may turn out, upon examination, to believe that the gods in question are *somehow* just after all. As for the issue that Levy raises of belief in “evil deities such as the devil”—who perhaps egg men on to revenge or encourage them to taste forbidden fruit—mightn’t they be subordinate to a just god? Mightn’t they, at least in some cases, even be *sent* by such a god as a test of our righteousness or a punishment for our sins? Or more to the point, mightn’t believers in “evil deities” turn out, upon examination, to have a perhaps buried belief of this sort (see Leibowitz, 99–100 on the “foreboding or anticipation of evil that accompanies guilt”)?

The paragraph on p. 95 from which Levy quotes concludes: “It is nevertheless true that even Socrates’ approach to the theological problem cannot tie up every loose end. Although he finds no evidence of it, the possibility of revelation from an amoral, willful, or radically mysterious god cannot be ruled out.” Levy would emphasize the last part of the second sentence: “cannot be ruled out.” I would put equal emphasis on the first part of the sentence: not being a dogmatist, Socrates put his hypothesis about the relation between beliefs about justice and so-called experience of god to the test—through decades of examination, including self-examination—and apparently found evidence to support it and none to reject it. True, the possibility of revelation from an amoral god cannot be ruled out. Unable to show that such revelation isn’t *possible*, Socrates had to settle for trying to confirm that it isn’t *actual*. And how one assesses the challenge to philosophy posed by this possibility—or by our inability to establish its impossibility—*changes* when one sees the seeming evidence for it, in the experience of some believers, begin to crumble under scrutiny. (See Leibowitz, 67–68 on a “bare possibility,

unsupported by evidence” and 98 on what Socrates is “confident, though not certain” that he can “in principle” accomplish through refutation.)

If I understand him correctly, Levy thinks that there are “serious” believers who might be shown that god’s so-called justice is *utterly* unintelligible to them that yet would remain unshaken in their belief: “an objection to their understanding of god’s justice would not really cut to the core of their belief (cf. 98–99), which is bound much more tightly to their conviction that god loves” (267). I would describe this as a counter-hypothesis to Socrates’s that should, like his, be tested as fully as possible. In fact, if my interpretation is correct, in testing his own hypothesis, Socrates was of necessity testing such alternative hypotheses as well (Leibowitz, 99–100).

In the concluding pages of his review, Levy points out what he thinks is a contradiction in my argument (268–69). Owing to limitations of space, I will pass over the many small ways that he mischaracterizes what I say—including what I say about the moral man’s confusion about his own motivation (cf. 268 with Leibowitz, 178–79)—and focus on the main point. According to Levy, I say both (a) that belief in morality *presupposes* belief in gods and (b) that belief in morality is a “*basis* for” belief in gods. But I do not in fact say (a). Socrates’s view seems to be, as Strauss puts it in a line I quote, that “moral man as such is the *potential* believer” (Leibowitz, 72n35; emphasis added).³ Not only does the moral man, if he is sufficiently thoughtful, long for a god who will give good men what they deserve, but he *may* believe that he finds *evidence* of such a god in his own moral experience—for example, “in the rush of hopefulness or sense of promise that accompanies the performance of a noble deed” (Leibowitz, 99). I hasten to add that moral “experiences” and moral “beliefs” or “opinions,” although related, are not

³ Levy thinks that by the moral man I mean one who is “confiden[t]” that justice will receive divine reward (268). This reading is incorrect. He quotes me as saying that “virtue has the power we expect—and *if* this power is essential to virtue, virtue can exist—only if there are just gods...gods who ensure that the virtuous get what they deserve” (268; emphasis added). But I present this *not* as the virtuous man’s own view, but as one part of one strand of Socrates’s *reflection* on ordinary virtue. The “if” is in the sentence for a reason. The virtuous man himself is likely to *hesitate* on this point, protesting (1) that the virtuous are virtuous whether or not they receive the happiness they deserve and (2) that, in any case, the happiness they deserve and hope for may come from the practice of virtue itself, or perhaps from some external source other than the gods. As I say at p. 179n8: “At different times—or so to speak, at the same time—we may think (1) that we care more for the noble than for our own happiness; (2) that devotion to, and sacrifice for, the noble *is* our happiness; and (3) that devotion to the noble makes us *worthy* of happiness, a happiness we hope and even expect to receive as reward, though by what agency we may not be sure.” Only under the pressure of Socratic examination are interlocutors—including promising interlocutors—likely to recognize how serious a question it is whether a “virtue” that does not bring happiness is worthy of the name.

the same. My argument is that Socrates knew such possibly divine-seeming experiences firsthand—both in the moral realm and in the not quite distinct erotic realm. And he had found that, when he repeatedly thought through the moral opinions that accompany them—including, but not limited to, opinions about human desert—the experiences gradually faded or at least ceased to seem plausibly divine, a form of direct or indirect contact with god. He then sought to confirm, through refutations, that what he had discovered about his own seemingly divine experience applied to the seemingly divine experience of others as well (Leibowitz, 68–70, 96–100).⁴

At the core of Levy's misunderstanding of my argument is his view that I sometimes contend that our moral beliefs—and above all the common beliefs that the just deserve to be happy and the wicked deserve to be punished—“provide a *basis* for our beliefs in the gods,” meaning a *sufficient* condition for such beliefs (267, 268; he cites Leibowitz, 93 and 96 in support). He then objects by asking, in effect, whether I think “we can come to believe in something *simply* because we feel a need for it” (269; emphasis added). But the premise of his objection is false. I present belief in justice or morality as a necessary, but *not* a sufficient, condition for belief in god and, more importantly, for what might be called religious experience. In both cited passages, my statement is more nuanced than Levy acknowledges. On p. 93 I say that Socrates suspects that certain seemingly divine experiences “arise from beliefs about the noble (what we would call moral beliefs), *or at least come to be interpreted as divine* on the *basis* of moral beliefs” (first emphasis added). And on p. 96 I refer to Socrates's suspicion that a certain seemingly “divine experience, *or the interpretation of it as divine*,” rests on moral beliefs (emphasis added). In other words, I leave open whether—and hence to what extent and how—moral beliefs are the basis of the experiences themselves and rest content with stating Socrates's suspicion that at least the *interpretation* of the experiences as divine rests on moral beliefs.

I then give examples: dreams about divine punishment of the unjust after death, such as those mentioned by Cephalus (Leibowitz, 93–95; *Republic* 330d–e); the “foreboding or anticipation of evil that accompanies guilt” or “conscience experienced as a voice within or as someone watching” (99–100; *Republic* 330e6–8); the “rush of hopefulness or sense of promise that accompanies the performance of a noble deed” (99); and anger “which can

⁴ On the connection between morality and eros, see Leibowitz, 68–70 and 181n10. What Socrates calls his “human wisdom” in the *Apology* (19e–20e, 23a–b) is called his “knowledge of the erotic things” in the *Symposium* (177d) and *Theages* (127e–128b).

make us feel like instruments of righteousness, and which (despite its painful side) fills us with a strange and pleasant hopefulness” (128). Is it hard to imagine that such experiences, or the *interpretation* of them as divine—as having a more-than-human source—might rest on the belief that the unjust deserve to be punished and the virtuous happy? Or that a change in one’s understanding of deserving might, in some of these cases, bring about a change in one’s experience, and in others of these cases, a change in one’s interpretation of the experience as divine? Or that such experiences, broadly understood, might be *the* thing that believers point to as evidence of god, or at least as *the* evidence that can withstand scientific or philosophic challenge (Leibowitz, 66–69; see also 69–70 on eros)? Perhaps Levy would reply that I have failed to give an adequate psychological account of the *origin* of these seemingly divine experiences. But it was never my intention to do so. I merely sought to show how Socrates tried to assess their status as “evidence” and, more broadly, to draw out the implications of his investigation for what it means to be a good human being and to live a good life.

In conclusion, let me again express my gratitude to David Levy for the seriousness of his review. Despite our many disagreements, we share a belief, I think, that understanding Socrates’s Delphic mission is of the utmost importance, not only for the light it sheds on Socratic philosophy, but for the light it may shed on the very possibility of philosophy, understood not primarily as a set of doctrines, but as a way of life—the *best* way of life. Levy himself offers a stimulating and valuable contribution to the discussion of this issue, and fostering such a discussion was one of my chief intentions. I would also like to thank *Interpretation* for generously opening its pages to this exchange.

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Public support for the arts occupies a fraught position in American political life. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the heated public argument over the National Endowment for the Arts, initiated by social conservatives such as Sen. Jesse Helms, that dominated headlines two decades ago. But an age of foreign conflict and economic distress seems to have suppressed, not extinguished, the passions of the culture wars. Periodic revivals—such as the 2010 outcry over the exhibition of “A Fire in My Belly” at the National Portrait Gallery—testify to art’s continuing ability to stoke the smoldering coals of the profound political and cultural divisions in American life.

There is, however, a more fundamental level on which public support for the arts renders American political observers uneasy: important currents in American political thought seem to resist state support for the arts in a number of ways. Our democratic political culture fosters a strong suspicion of an art culture that appears to be made for and by a narrow elite. Our orientation toward markets leads us to question why we should subsidize cultural goods that the market itself will not bear. And our deeply engrained liberalism leads to a public skepticism toward policies that appear inherently “perfectionist,” promoting conceptions of aesthetic and moral worth not shared by all citizens.

Because public art touches on so many important assumptions in our political culture, political philosophy must treat these assumptions carefully when considering this area of cultural policy. The task,

it would seem, would be to engage these assumptions in a serious manner, bringing reasoned reflection to bear on our intuitions on the question of public support for the arts. Lambert Zuidervaart's *Art in Public* is such a work of political theory.

Approaching the problem from the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Zuidervaart's book introduces a fresh and largely compelling perspective into a somewhat stale debate. His argument is grounded on the premise, developed in his earlier *Artistic Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), that art possesses a unique capacity to foster what he calls "imaginative disclosure." Zuidervaart adopts from his study of Adorno's aesthetics the idea that art can communicate propositions of truth, and, as a consequence, that it can orient and reorient our basic outlook on ethics, society, and meaning, and that this spills over to affect even our lives outside of the arts.

Zuidervaart explicitly sees *Art in Public* as a sequel of sorts to *Artistic Truth*, continuing the inquiry by working out the social and political implications of his understanding of the arts. For Zuidervaart, the style of thinking fostered by imaginative disclosure is a necessary support for other forms of rationality—such as those used in markets and the administrative state—which such institutions cannot produce by themselves. Zuidervaart's description of art's role in society then runs along parallel lines with Habermas's concepts of system and lifeworld, as markets and states both depend on and threaten the imaginative disclosure that only art can provide. This point lays the foundation for Zuidervaart's justification of public support for the arts. Civic arts organizations, Zuidervaart argues, play a crucial role in maintaining the social resources necessary to mitigate the more harmful aspects of modernity. At Zuidervaart's most optimistic, he argues that the effects of such organizations, properly subsidized, could help to bring about what he calls "differential transformation" of society, in which states and markets are not only limited in their power to harm but shifted into genuinely just and democratic forms.

Adding to this case is Zuidervaart's consistent and frequently convincing efforts to challenge the tacit assumptions of existing arguments surrounding arts policy. His titular concept of "art in public" is an example of this style of critique, in which Zuidervaart meticulously undermines many of the key assumptions of contemporary views on art and society. Though we often view the creation of art as a private activity, and subsequently ask whether the state should subsidize this activity, Zuidervaart notes that all or nearly all art receives public support in less obvious ways. Even in the absence

of visible forms of support, we subsidize art in the form of tax concessions for charitable giving, intellectual-property guarantees, and free-speech protections. Even apparently privately financed art, then, is bound up with a public system of support. Likewise, while we often view artistic experience as a form of privatized, individual consumption, much art is in fact intended for, and accessible to, a broader set of shared, public meanings. Much of today's art, then, has an important "public character"—it is art in public. With this in mind, a great deal of contemporary political theory's attempts to treat the question of public support for the arts appears quite different.

This form of thoughtful reevaluation of the assumptions of public discourse is typical of *Art in Public*. Zuidervaart considers in turn not only important contemporary political theorists—John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib—but also relevant debates in fields as diverse as economics, aesthetics, and sociology. This comprehensive treatment is both impressive and appropriate—in order to consider arts policy, it is important to understand both policy and the arts. This strength, however, is also a limitation of *Art in Public*. Because Zuidervaart covers so many debates in a relatively short space, the reader may be left at some points desiring a deeper treatment of one or another topic.

Zuidervaart accomplishes all this in an engaging and accessible style, making the book appropriate even for nonspecialists. This is significant because Zuidervaart sees his work as engaged with arts activists as well as academics. Zuidervaart himself is deeply involved with an organization called the Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, an example of the kind of civic arts organization he defends as worthy of state subsidy. He devotes a full section of the book to his experiences with UICA, adding both a sort of practical credibility to his argument and a model for other activists to emulate.

One might raise important doubts about some of Zuidervaart's conclusions (is it conceivable that arts organizations might effect the kind of radical change he suggests?) as well as its practical persuasive power (can Zuidervaart's arguments overcome the direction of our liberal and market-oriented culture?), but *Art in Public* remains a significant contribution to the debate on public support for the arts within political philosophy. *Art in Public* contains not only a powerful new perspective on an old debate, but a thorough and compelling analysis of the assumptions of that debate, an analysis that should inform future attempts to consider arts policy.

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