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Xenophon's Political Realism: The Opening of the *Cyropaedia*

Dana Jalbert Stauffer
University of Texas at Austin[*]

The resurgence of interest in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* in the last fifty years, after several centuries of neglect, has entailed lively debate about how we ought to regard the Cyrus presented in that work. Is he meant as a model of an ideal ruler?[1] Is the work an expression of political idealism?[2] Or is the story of Cyrus a cautionary tale? If so, what is the danger against which it cautions? Is the work a critique of imperial rule—an explanation "of how to found an empire, and of why not to found an empire?"[3] Or is it a critique of political life altogether?[4] Those who incline toward the view that it is a celebration of Cyrus point to the incredible scope and scale of his achievement; those who incline toward a view of the work as critique point to the disappointing disintegration of that achievement in the work's final chapter. But about this, too, there is disagreement, for it is hard to know how to interpret the unraveling of Cyrus's empire after his death. Is it his fault? Does it reflect poorly on Cyrus that he failed to plan adequately for the future? Or does the collapse of his empire simply underscore his singular excellence as a ruler?[5]

The conclusion of the work is simply too ambiguous, too open to interpretation, to settle the question of what Xenophon meant to convey in recounting the story of Cyrus's life. Thus, the ambiguity of the end of the work propels us back to a reconsideration of its beginning. At first glance, the opening chapter of the work is a straightforward preliminary reflection on the challenging nature of

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political rule and on the extraordinariness of Cyrus and his achievement. However, when read in hindsight, with an understanding of the work that follows, this deceptively simple introduction comes to light as much more. The chapter indicates and, indeed, encapsulates the argument of the *Education of Cyrus* regarding the reasons for Cyrus's success as a ruler. Moreover, it subtly indicates what led Xenophon to the study of Cyrus: extravagant hopes stirred by the grandeur of Cyrus's achievement. The chapter further suggests that those hopes did not survive his study of Cyrus. In this way, the introductory chapter indicates that properly interpreted, the *Education of Cyrus* undermines idealistic hopes about politics—particularly the hope most closely associated with Socratic political philosophy.

An Unusually Personal Opening Reflection

Xenophon could have begun a discussion of the founder of the Persian Empire without any prologue. In the ancient world, the worthiness of Cyrus the Great as a subject hardly required justification.[6] Nevertheless, Xenophon begins the *Cyropaedia* with a description, spanning the first chapter of that work, of the thoughts that led him to that study. He describes having thought about something; having reached a conclusion about it; having been turned away from that conclusion; and, finally, turning to an examination of Cyrus's life as a response to that experience. The *Cyropaedia* is the only work that Xenophon begins by foregrounding his own psychological experience in such detail, recounting his own multistep thought process.[7] Xenophon (or rather, the narrator, who appears, by all accounts, to be Xenophon) references himself fourteen times.[8] Xenophon writes:

> This reflection once occurred to us: How many democracies have been brought down by those who wished the governing to be done in some way other than under a democracy; how many monarchies and oligarchies have been overthrown by the people; and how many who have tried to establish tyrannies have, some of them, been at once brought down completely, while others, if they have continued ruling for any time at all, are admired as wise and fortunate men. (1.1.1)[9]

Most scholars frame this opening reflection as a meditation on the perennial problem of political instability.[10] But this is not quite accurate. Xenophon is not meditating on a universal problem of political instability, for he speaks of some tyrants who do manage to hold onto power. And if the problem he describes is nearly universal, it is not confined to politics. For he continues: "We thought we also observed many in their very own private households—some indeed having many servants, but others with only very few—and nevertheless they, the masters, were not able to keep even these few at all obedient for their use" (1.1.1). In contrast to Aristotle, who begins the *Politics* by asserting the distinctiveness of political authority, Xenophon speaks of household rule in the same breath as political rule and points out that they are subject to the same difficulty. The same fact about human nature expresses itself in the household and in political life: people do not often willingly obey one another.

Next, Xenophon reflects on the relative ease with which cattle and horses submit to rule. Animals willingly follow the directions of their herdsmen; they eat where they are directed to eat; they abstain from what they are directed to abstain from. Animals not only readily follow orders but do not begrudge their rulers whatever profits accrue to them from their rule (1.1.2). They do not rise up against their rulers, either in rebellion against the rule itself or in protest against the rulers' profiting from their rule. On the contrary, animals are harsh to outsiders rather than to their own rulers, whereas human beings "unite against none more" than those who would attempt to rule them (1.1.2).

This list of things animals do not do underscores the distinctiveness of human behavior. For human beings do not always follow commands about what to eat and what not to eat. They do not always accept being ruled, and even when they do, they sometimes object to their rulers' profiting from their rule. Xenophon sums up his line of thought with this seemingly unimpeachable logic: "Now when we considered these things, we inclined to this judgment about them: It is easier, given his nature, for a human being to rule all the other kinds of animals than to rule human beings" (1.1.3). Human beings, given their nature, are singularly difficult to rule over.

This passage prompts us to consider this question: How should we regard the human resistance to being ruled? Political instability and disorder are obviously problematic. But, again, as noted, Xenophon is speaking not only of politics but of the general human resistance to domination. What lies behind that resistance? Is it a deviousness? Or moral weakness? Is it an unreasonable desire for freedom and autonomy? Recapping Xenophon's point, Newell writes that human beings "plot incessantly against anyone who tries to rule them," implying that their behavior is somehow objectionable.[11] While it is certainly true that human beings might resist rule unreasonably, that does not mean that such resistance is always unreasonable. Consider the specific instances of resistance that Xenophon cites. If human beings are less inclined than animals to follow orders about where and when to eat, why is that? It might be because temptation overwhelms them. But it could also be because they are able to think for themselves about their own needs and about how best to meet them. Unlike animals who graze where they are told, human beings can compare one pasture, so to speak, with another. Sometimes the grass truly *is* greener on the other side, and when it is, human beings can see that it is. Similarly, if human beings often object to their rulers' keeping the profits from their rule, it might be because they fail to understand that their rulers deserve the profits they receive. But it could also be because they understand that rulers sometimes exploit their power. Human beings can see that their own good and the good of their rulers are distinct, and a conflict of interest may arise between them.

Xenophon notes that human beings sometimes object to the profits their rulers derive from ruling, and sometimes they rise up in rebellion against rule itself. They object, in other words, not only to being exploited but also to being ruled even if they are not being exploited. Why would that be? The answer is that whereas animals need and want only food, safety, and shelter, human beings see value in rule itself, and they want it for themselves. This is because they see value in higher and more complex goods, such as power, honor, and glory. For them, rule is not just a burden but a prize.

Even if power brings them no concrete profits, human beings want it (and want to take it from others). So attractive are the fruits of rule that the desire to unite against their own rulers eclipses the desire to unite against outsiders—the latter a move that seems to make more obvious sense for the sake of security.

If human beings resist being ruled, then, it is not necessarily because they are naturally disputatious or governed by their passions. It is not because they are *not* rational that they often resist rule but because they *are*. Having a higher level of self-awareness than animals have allows human beings to (a) understand themselves as distinct beings with their own distinct interests and (b) understand their own interests in higher, more complex ways than as the mere meeting of basic needs. And so, while political instability is problematic, its causes in human nature are far from simply regrettable. Some causes of human resistance to rule lie in the highest and best capacities of human beings.

A Change of Mind Compelled by Cyrus

Xenophon reports that having arrived at the judgment that it is easier to govern animals than human beings, he had an experience that undermined it.

> But when we reflected that there was Cyrus, a Persian, who acquired very many people, very many cities, and very many nations, all obedient to himself, we were thus compelled to change our mind to the view that ruling human beings does not belong among those tasks that are impossible, or even among those that are difficult, if one does it with knowledge. (1.1.3)

This passage is strange for several reasons. First, it is not clear how Cyrus prompts this thought process in Xenophon. Why does the mere thought of the size of Cyrus's domains lead to the thought that ruling is not impossible, or even difficult, if one has knowledge? To put the question another way: Why does the example of someone who did something difficult give rise to the thought that

his accomplishment was not, in fact, difficult at all? Second, Xenophon uses strangely strong language to describe how the thought of Cyrus operated on his psyche. He says, "[W]e were forced to change our mind" (ἠναγκαζόμεθα μετανοεῖν). Third, it is not clear how this statement connects with the rest of the *Cyropaedia*. The story that follows is much more about how Cyrus comes to power than it is about his possession of that power; thus not until the penultimate book do we see that he has become emperor. And in no part of the story, either in his rise to power or in his maintenance of it, does Cyrus's task seem easy. On the contrary, once he and his men have taken power, described in Book Seven, he explains to them that maintaining power will require constant exertion and vigilance (7.5.70–86). And finally, aside from whether Cyrus's task is best characterized as difficult or easy, how his success is attributable to knowledge remains unclear. Cyrus is smart, daring, and charming. He has the advantage of being born to two royal houses. He has shrewd parents. He is good at seizing opportunities and at helping people resolve disputes. He is savvy and generous. It is by no means obvious that he succeeds because he possesses any particular knowledge.[12]

But in addition to these ways in which Xenophon's first reflection about Cyrus is puzzling, it is puzzling, most of all, because it seems wrong. That is, the thought to which Cyrus's example compels Xenophon seems incorrect. While it is true (and indeed, hardly admits of dispute) that ruling human beings is possible, it is not true that ruling human beings belongs "among the tasks that are not difficult," whether one has knowledge or lacks it.[13] Consider the most comprehensive knowledge one could have—knowledge of the human good. Such knowledge would certainly make ruling easier. But would even this remove all the difficulties of leadership? For the possession of knowledge to make rule easy, it would have to be the case that the only source of difficulty in ruling human beings is ignorance or confusion. There would have to be no truly problematic facts or realities that make presiding over a large group of human beings difficult. But, of course, such facts do exist. Consider the fact from which Xenophon began, of the tendency of

human beings to dislike and reject subjection. Would the possession of knowledge do away with that problem? Human beings want to decide things for themselves, and they disagree about what is good and what is fair. These disagreements do not evaporate in the face of authoritative knowledge. There is also the fact that human beings can understand the possibility that their rulers are exploiting them. Would a ruler's possession of knowledge prevent his subjects from wondering about that? Perhaps we can imagine a ruler who knew how to avoid exploiting his subjects *and* how to avoid ever being suspected of doing so. What of the problem that human beings want the honor and prestige that comes from rule for themselves? Would not even the wisest ruler in the world face the problem that by keeping power and authority for himself, he deprives others of that same privilege?

In thinking about these questions, we are reminded of Plato's attempt to work through these problems by envisioning the philosopher-kings of the *Republic*. These imagined rulers possess more knowledge than do any actual human beings, and they have a free hand to order their city as they see fit. Would anyone characterize their task as easy? Socrates argues that even the city of the *Republic* needs precautions to ensure that its rulers remain loyal to the city. To ensure that the city's wise rulers do not exploit their position, they are subjected to total communism of property and family. This is necessary, Socrates argues, to prevent their becoming wolves instead of shepherds (416a–d).[14] They also need an elaborate myth to ensure acceptance of the city's hierarchy (414b–415d). They have to develop a strategy for dealing with external threats (422b–423b), and they must ban innovation (424b). And even that regime, in the end, declines. Now, if Plato's philosopher-kings, an idealized, imaginary group of rulers, face challenges in their rule over a city-in-speech, how many more challenges would confront real rulers? Isn't it, in fact, not only wrong but downright absurd to suggest that ruling could ever cease to belong among the difficult tasks?

The question, arises, then: Why does contemplating the size of Cyrus's dominions pull Xenophon away from the conclusion he had reached about the relative ease of ruling animals in comparison to

humans—a conclusion that seems indisputably true? Why does it compel him to the false opinion that ruling is not difficult if one has knowledge?

Knowledge and Power

One possibility is that the thought to which Xenophon was prompted by the example of Cyrus was primarily a thought not about the ease or difficulty of ruling but about the extraordinary power of knowledge. We find among the ancients an appreciation of the power of knowledge and the special title of knowledge to rule. It is an appreciation shared by Socrates and sophists alike. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates enlists Protagoras to help him prove to the many, who doubt the power of knowledge, that knowledge is both noble and capable of ruling a human being. Protagoras answers him that wisdom and knowledge are the most excellent of all human things (352c–d). In listing the titles to rule in Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger argues, "[I]t's likely that the greatest title would be the sixth, the one bidding the ignorant to follow and the prudent to lead and rule" (*Laws* 690b; see also 875c–d). We find the strongest association of knowledge with authority in the outlook of Thrasymachus, who argues that rulers, insofar as they are rulers, are knowers. Those who make mistakes "on account of a failure in knowledge," he maintains, "are not true rulers" (*Republic* 340e–341a).

Indeed, for confirmation of the special relationship between power and knowledge, we need not look beyond Xenophon's own writings. In the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon reports that Socrates maintained that knowledge is the true title to rule. "He said," Xenophon writes, "that kings and rulers are not those who hold the scepters, nor those elected by just anybody, nor those who obtain office by lot, nor those who have used violence, nor those who have used deceit, but those who understand how to rule." Socrates goes on to point out that "on a ship, the one who understands, rules, while the shipowner together with all others on the ship obey the one who understands" (3.9.11). Farmers, the sick, those seeking physical training, and "all to whom there belongs something needing attention" look to the knower and seek him out in order to obey

him. So strong is the power of knowledge to subvert conventional order, Socrates noted, that "in the spinning of wool, even the women rule the men due to the fact that they know how it should be done" (3.9.12). Here in the *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus's father, Cambyses, advises the young Cyrus as he is setting out on his military campaign that the best way to win willing obedience is to display sufficient prudence that people want to be guided by his wisdom (1.6.22). When people can see that a leader is wise, they often want to follow his instructions.

All these characters seem to agree that nothing other than knowledge truly qualifies one to rule. But what has that to do with Cyrus? Nadon notes that Cyrus's greatness was such as to inspire awe, especially in the politically ambitious young.[15] Maybe Xenophon was sufficiently awestruck by Cyrus, then, that he concluded that Cyrus *must* have been wise. In other words, he did not necessarily have grounds for thinking that Cyrus was wise. But he was so struck by Cyrus's greatness, and he associated knowledge with power so strongly, that his mind spontaneously made that leap. Knowledge is the true qualification for rule; surely the greatest of all rulers was qualified? Xenophon noted in the work's first sentence that those tyrants who manage to rule for some time are wondered at as wise and fortunate (1.1.1). Are they wise? Are they fortunate? Not necessarily. But people attribute those qualities to them. Xenophon seems to have experienced the general human tendency to impute perfection to beings more powerful than ourselves.

But Xenophon's awe not only led him to impute wisdom to Cyrus; it also led him to the further thought that knowledge makes rule easy. It led him not only to an inflated view of Cyrus but also to an inflated view of the power of knowledge. Why did it have this effect on Xenophon? In this connection, it is particularly interesting to consider Whidden's suggestion that the "we" referenced in Xenophon's narration refers to Socrates's students.[16] If an appreciation of knowledge was characteristic of the Socratic circle, might that appreciation have sometimes veered into glorification? Might it have led to an unreasonably high estimation of what knowledge

can do?[17] In their enthusiasm for the union of knowledge and political power, perhaps this group sometimes fell prey to the belief that under the right circumstances, if philosophic knowledge at last had its day, all of the world's difficulties, political or otherwise, could wither away.[18] Socrates's statement in the *Republic* that until "philosophers rule as kings," or kings become philosophers, "there is no rest from ills for the cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I think for human kind," does not quite amount to an assertion that philosophic rule would bring about such rest, but it strongly implies it. And even if that does not turn out to be the true teaching of Plato's *Republic*, it is not difficult to see how, to some, it might seem to be the work's teaching.

Whether the thought process Xenophon recounts was one that he had by himself or as a member of the Socratic circle, nevertheless, by Xenophon's own account, Cyrus's greatness seems to have bewitched Xenophon. It made him believe, at least for a moment, that a problem-free politics was possible. Having described how Cyrus bewitched him and caused him to experience an extravagantly idealistic hope, Xenophon turns to an elaboration of the scope of Cyrus's power. He describes the vastness of the domains that Cyrus ruled and the diverse peoples he governed. Nearby kings were content to rule only their own peoples, with no thought of expansion (1.1.4). Cyrus, by contrast, "set out with a little army of Persians" and came to rule many others, some willingly and some by force (1.1.4). He made himself secure from threats. And "he was able to implant in all so great a desire of gratifying him," Xenophon concludes, "that they always thought it proper to be governed by his judgment" (1.1.6). Having emphasized one more time how big the empire was, Xenophon concludes, "[O]n the grounds that this man was worthy of wonder, we examined who he was by birth, what his nature was, and with what education he was brought up, such that he so excelled in ruling human beings. Whatever we have learned, therefore, and think we have perceived about him, we shall try to relate" (1.1.6).

Now, at first glance, Xenophon seems here to be simply elaborating on his initial description of Cyrus's immense power. But in

fact this account is more than elaboration. In this passage, Xenophon indicates the foundations of Cyrus's power in things other than knowledge, including force, awe, gratitude, and fear. It constitutes a pulling back from, or revision, of his initial characterization of Cyrus's greatness as rooted in knowledge. This shift in the account is subtle and easy to miss. It becomes much easier to discern once we have read the rest of the work. We therefore turn to a few key aspects of Xenophon's account of the sources of Cyrus's power, as described later in the work. Then, we will return to the introductory chapter, in a better position to appreciate the meaning of Xenophon's opening description of Cyrus's power.[19]

The Character of Cyrus's Success

To undertake here a comprehensive review of Cyrus's leadership as described in the *Cyropaedia* would be impossible, as it is the subject of virtually the entire work. But it is necessary to take note of a few critical points. After the first chapter of Book One, the theme of the difference between ruling human beings and ruling animals recedes into the background until the final chapter of Book One, emerging again when Cyrus's father advises him on how to lead. When Cyrus asks Cambyses how he can best get the advantage over his enemies, Cambyses tells Cyrus that he must be "a plotter, a dissembler, wily, a cheat, a thief, rapacious, and the sort who takes advantage of his friends in everything" (1.6.27). He tells him that it is by deceiving that he will be both just and lawful. Cyrus is shocked. This seems to contradict everything he has been taught. Cambyses points out that this is not so. Cyrus has all along been taught to hunt and to practice trickery and deceit in hunting animals. Cambyses explains that the training Cyrus received in deceiving and tricking animals was meant to prepare him for war against human beings down the road. Cambyses thus encourages Cyrus to approach human adversaries just as he would animal ones, breaking down his sense that human beings and animals merit fundamentally different treatment. After he gets over his initial shock, Cyrus goes on to achieve some of his most important military successes through deception and manipulation (3.2.8; 4.2.23; 5.3.12–19; 7.5.21ff.).[20]

Now, in his explicit recommendations, Cambyses argues that it is just and lawful to use deceit and trickery only against one's enemies, not on human beings as such. But he implies more than that (1.6.31). He speaks of a teacher once employed by Persia who taught the young that justice sometimes entails deception, not only of enemies but also of friends. This teacher's methods were rejected on the grounds that they led the young to take advantage of their friends. Persia put an end to these teaching methods so that the citizens would grow up to be tame citizens. Only later, once they were fully grown, would the citizens hear "what was lawful toward enemies" (1.6.34). Cambyses thus explains how Persia acted to protect the moral character of its citizens. But he never suggests that the teacher's teaching about justice was wrong, only that it was harmful to the development of Persian citizens. He therefore leaves Cyrus with the impression that it may be just to deceive one's friends if it is done for a good result.[21] Cyrus absorbs this lesson, for he goes on to make use of deception against friend and foe alike when it serves his purpose. He tricks his own troops, telling them the Armenians are only pretending to flee; he tricks his troops into thinking that Araspas betrayed him and left in shame.[22] And in addition to these outright deceptions, in his dealings with those close to him he practices a careful form of selective truth-telling. He neglects to tell Cyaxares when the Hyrcanians offer to join his campaign. He lets Panthea and Abradatas believe that his determination to protect Panthea cost him a dear friendship, when in fact, Araspas's friendship was not only strengthened by the Panthea episode but turned to great utility for Cyrus (6.3.14–25).[23]

By introducing the theme of deception *via* a discussion of hunting, Xenophon connects the use of deception with the blurring of the line between human beings and animals. Cyrus initially thought deception was not appropriate to human beings because he had a sense that human beings merit more dignified treatment. His father's advice undermined that thought. Cyrus gradually stopped thinking of his friends as beings who can and should think for themselves, and he started to do their thinking for them.

An openness to deceptive tactics becomes one element of a comprehensively paternalistic approach to leadership. Cyrus, we learn in Book Eight, was called "father" after he died (8.2.10).

Since it is premised on the hierarchy inherent in the father-child relationship, paternalistic rule strains appropriateness when the subjects of rule are themselves capable of reaching full maturity. What did Cyrus's paternalism entail?[24] "An argument of his is remembered," Xenophon writes, "that says that the functions of a good shepherd and a good king are similar, for just as the shepherd ought to make use of his flocks while making them happy (in the happiness of sheep, of course), so a king similarly ought to make use of cities and human beings while making them happy" (8.2.14). It seems that Cyrus figured out that human beings would not necessarily object to their rulers' profiting from their rule, or "making use of them," if they were made happy by that rule. In this way, the ruler-ruled relationship could be a common good to both ruler and ruled. But in Cyrus's own formulation, sheep under the rule of a good shepherd enjoyed "the happiness of sheep." What does this say about the happiness enjoyed by Cyrus's subjects?[25]

Xenophon sought to rule paternalistically by elevating himself to a status above his subjects. He sought to make himself worthy of his position of superiority. He also sought to truly benefit those he ruled. He enacted moral reforms to make his army fairer, and he modeled virtuous behavior that his subjects could admire (8.1.12).[26] As a benefactor, he inspired gratitude. This was a crucial part of his ability to overcome the human resistance to being ruled. People had the sense that they owed him for his benevolence. Their sense of obligation overwhelmed the natural human impulse noted earlier, to think for oneself about the good and how to achieve it.[27] But as much as he tried to be just and benevolent, he could not rely completely on his subjects' love and respect for their obedience. He wore makeup, fancy robes, and platform shoes, believing that he needed to bewitch his subjects (8.1.40–44). And he made liberal use of fear. "Fear is the most rudimentary and essential of the passions Cyrus deploys as a ruler," Pangle writes, "and he wields it through shrewdness, military skill, and great but never reckless

daring."[28] When necessary, he used violence and the threat of it to compel people to do what he needed them to (5.4.21; 8.1.22; 8.2.12).[29]

In these ways, Cyrus dealt with the natural human tendencies that lead people to resist rule. What about the concerns with honor and glory noted earlier? Cyrus dealt with these in two ways: First, he did so by choosing for himself allies who had been isolated or deprived of natural ties, who were weak and dependent, and who were motivated by revenge rather than ambition. Cyrus did not ally with Gadatas and Gobryas so much as he took them in, as one would take in strays. They were the type of men he could help without worrying that they would pose a threat to him. Their loyalty to him became especially strong. As Pangle observes, "The deepest gratitude is felt not by the strong, confident, and self-sufficient, but by the most vulnerable. A ruler ambitious for love and gratitude needs followers hungry for protection and even forgiveness."[30] Second, Cyrus knew that he could not maintain a populace, and certainly not a ruling class, entirely of Gobryases and Gadatases. We learn that he was especially concerned with those who might have enough ambition to want to seize rule for themselves. He dealt with them by keeping them too distracted by rivalries with one another to unite against him (8.2.26–28).

To sustain his superiority, Cyrus had not only to elevate himself but also to lower his subjects. He turned into subordinates those who began as his equals, the Persian Peers. They came to serve him as they once served the laws of Persia (8.3.14). Others he lowered in a different way, by encouraging them to be satisfied with the goods he could provide. The primary example of this is his uncle, Cyaxares. Cyrus encouraged him to focus on the food, wine, and women he gained access to as a result of Cyrus's conquests, rather than on the power and dignity of which he was deprived by Cyrus's rise. Only in this way could Cyaxares resign himself to being humiliated and supplanted by Cyrus.[31]

And so, when we hear that Cyrus was called "father" after he died (8.2.10), we must appreciate that that distinction is, if not dubious, certainly mixed. On the one hand, he was a generous and

benevolent ruler who provided his people with many genuine goods. He made peace among many warring peoples; he created a stable and orderly political existence in which moral virtue was encouraged and valued.[32] But on the other hand, he ruled through rewards and punishments, as one would with animals or children.[33] He was the "seeing law" (8.1.22). He made all the important decisions. In sum, his rule was dehumanizing. If he was "father," then his subjects were children.[34]

Chapter One Reconsidered

With all this in mind, we revisit Xenophon's description of Cyrus's rule in Chapter One. Describing the scope of Cyrus's power, Xenophon says that Cyrus ruled some willingly. He says that many obeyed him even though they had never seen him and knew that they never would (1.1.3). On the one hand, this underscores how vast his territories were; on the other hand, it also underscores that he was an image or an idea in his subjects' minds. Many of his subjects were in awe of him from a distance. Xenophon says Cyrus made neighboring rulers happy to cling to what they inherited (1.1.4). Cyrus suppressed their inclination to expand their power. He tamed them as one would wild horses. It is hard to see that he did them a favor in this regard, especially if we take his own conduct into consideration. Xenophon says that Cyrus ruled places where people did not speak his own language or that of one another (1.1.5). Again, this underscores the size of his empire, but it also reflects the fact that many of its peoples did not communicate directly with Cyrus, much less share in deliberation with him. If they appreciated his wisdom, they did so at a certain remove. "He was able to extend fear of himself to so much of the world that he intimidated all, and no one attempted anything against him" (1.1.5). We have now moved very far indeed from the ruler whose prudence is so evident and compelling that his subjects willingly obey him.

Finally, Xenophon says, Cyrus was able to "implant in all so great a desire of gratifying him that they always thought it proper to be governed by his judgment" (1.2.5). This line perhaps most of

all indicates the true character of Cyrus's success. It indicates that people wanted to be governed by Cyrus's judgment not because they recognized his prudence—the power base of his father's hopes—but because they wanted to gratify him. Obeying Cyrus was their way of thanking him for his benevolence, real or perceived. They wanted to please him, as a dog wants to please its owner.[35]

And thus, when Xenophon concludes that "on the grounds that this man was worthy of wonder, we examined who he was by birth, what his nature was, and with what education he was brought up, such that he so excelled in ruling human beings," he is offering an alternative explanation of Cyrus's success from the one to which he was initially compelled by the sheer brilliance and magnitude of it. He is suggesting that it was not an omnipotent, problem-dissolving knowledge that lay behind Cyrus's achievements but a combination of less remarkable, more intelligible factors.[36] Cyrus was not so prudent that everyone naturally and spontaneously followed his orders. Rather, various aspects of his circumstances and his character enabled him to set himself up as a quasi-divine figure, distant, benevolent, and formidable, worshipped and feared rather than known.

Xenophon eventually came to the view, then, that a combination of birth, nature, and education led Cyrus to succeed as a ruler. But he did not know that at first. Rather, in the grips of the view that Cyrus must have possessed an extraordinarily powerful brand of knowledge, he turned to the study of Cyrus "on the grounds that he was worthy of wonder" (1.1.6). Let us take a moment to reflect on how this formulation contributes to the meaning of the passage. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates praises young Theaetetus's expression of wonder, saying, "[T]his feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy" (155d). We find a similar statement in the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle writes, "It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize . . . he who wonders and is perplexed feels that he is ignorant" (982b). Wonder is, in other words, an experience of ignorance, an awareness of the insufficiency of one's own

understanding. "Wonder need not be positive."[37] Xenophon begins two of his other works, the *Memorabilia* and the *Regime of the Lacedemonians*, from wonder. But in those cases, Xenophon wonders about a question, which he states. Here, he simply says that Cyrus was worthy of wonder.

Xenophon felt, then, that his understanding of Cyrus was insufficient. That is to say, Cyrus compelled Xenophon to believe that under the right circumstances, with knowledge at the helm, there could be a "rest from ills for the cities" and even, perhaps, for "human kind" (*Republic* 473d).[38] Xenophon responded not by attempting to shore up, substantiate, or otherwise cultivate his hopeful view. Instead, he critically examined its basis. Post examination, Xenophon attributes Cyrus's success not to surpassingly powerful knowledge but to birth, nature, and education.

The first chapter ends thus: "Whatever we have learned, therefore, and think we have perceived about [Cyrus], we shall try to relate" (1.1.6).[39] This deceptively simple line is quite important. It tells us that the aim of the work is not to hold Cyrus up as an ideal ruler to be emulated. Nor is it to put him forward as a tragic figure to be lamented or as a villain to be criticized or condemned. The aim of the work is to convey the fruits of Xenophon's examination of the true foundations of Cyrus's incredible political success. This purpose gives the work its shape; it explains why Xenophon does not follow the story of Cyrus's life in a methodical, linear fashion, choosing to focus instead on particular moments of Cyrus's adolescence and adulthood, skipping over whole decades.[40] And because this is the purpose of the work from the very beginning, the first chapter conveys the truth about Cyrus no less than its last chapter does. Xenophon begins the work by highlighting the greater resistance to rule in human beings than in animals, doing so to emphasize the two-sided character of Cyrus's success. In one sense, it is a great achievement to become a successful shepherd of human beings. Human beings are not altogether different from animals in their needs: food, shelter, and security. They need clear rules and a reliable system of punishments and rewards. But at the same time, human beings are not animals. They need dignity and self-respect;

a chance to flex their moral and intellectual muscles, and a chance to aspire and to strive, as Cyrus does. They need a chance to exercise their virtue. A leader who deprives them of such chances, who succeeds in getting his subjects' "animal" aspects to prevail, does not do an unqualifiedly good thing.[41]

Conclusion

If Cyrus's ascension was not an unqualifiedly good thing for his subjects, just how bad a thing was it? Bartlett writes, "One is led to wonder . . . whether Cyrus' solution to the problem of political stability, which is indeed possible and includes the destruction of politics together with a freedom worthy of the name, is not worse than the problem itself."[42] Is freedom, in other words, too important a human good to be sacrificed in the name of political stability? The answer to this question surely varies with political circumstances, and it might well vary in addition from person to person; a Cyaxares might answer it differently from a Chrysantas.

Even if this trade-off would be choiceworthy for many people in many circumstances, that is far from suggesting that anything could make politics problem-free. If Cyrus's example initially gives rise to unrealistic hopes of "a rest from ills for the cities," or maybe even for "human kind," upon careful study, it does not support those hopes.[43] On the contrary, the *Cyropaedia* suggests that politics—indeed, human life—is fraught with trade-offs and conflicts of interest, as human beings contest for the greatest of goods. And thus, we cannot follow Sage in maintaining that at the end of the work Cyrus appears "no less worthy of wonder."[44] On the contrary, if we are as full of wonder at Cyrus at the end of the *Cyropaedia* as we were at the beginning, we have missed the point. Wonder is the beginning of philosophy; it is not the end. If we are initially blinded by the brilliance of Cyrus's greatness (as we should be), we can regain clarity and bring ourselves back down to earth, as Xenophon did, by reflecting long, hard, and carefully on the true character of Cyrus's success. Xenophon indicates as much in the work's first chapter.

Notes

1. Gabriel Danzig, "Big Boys, Little Boys: Justice and Law in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and *Memorabilia*," *Polis* 26, no. 2 (2009): 242–66, 242; Bodil Due, *The "Cyropaedia": Xenophon's Aims and Methods* (Arhaus, Denmark: Aarhaus University Press, 1989), 19–20; Deborah Levine Gera, *Xenophon's "Cyropaedia": Style, Genre, and Literary Technique* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 280; Rodrigo Illarraga, "What the Rulers Want: Xenophon on Cyrus' Psychology," *Classical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2021): 170–82; Jennifer O'Flannery, "Xenophon's 'The Education of Cyrus' and Ideal Leadership Lessons for Modern Public Administration," *Public Administration Quarterly* 27, no. 1–2 (2003): 41–64, 41; Phillip Stadter, "Fictional Narrative in the *Cyropaedia*." in *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies. Xenophon*, ed. V. J. Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 367–400, 370; Neal Wood, "Xenophon's Theory of Leadership," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 25 (1964): 33–66, 56.
2. J. E. Lendon, "Xenophon and the Alternative to Realist Foreign Policy: 'Cyropaedia' 3.1.14–31," *Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, no. 126 (2006): 82–98.
3. David M. Johnson, "Persians as Centaurs in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 135, no. 1 (2005): 177–207, 177; see also Christopher Whidden, "Cyrus's Imperial Household: An Aristotelian Reading of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Polis* 25, no. 1 (2008): 31–62, 31.
4. Christopher Nadon, *Xenophon's Prince: Republic and Empire in the Cyropaedia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 164, 178; W. R. Newell, "Tyranny and the Science of Ruling in Xenophon's 'Education of Cyrus,'" *Journal of Politics* 45, no. 4 (1983): 889–906, 904–5; Christopher Whidden, "The Account of Persia and Cyrus's Persian Education in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 539–67.
5. In "Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*: Educating Our Political Hopes," *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 723–38, 724, Laura K. Field writes that Due and Sage take the view that "the austere ending of the *Cyropaedia* highlights the justice and excellence of Cyrus' life by contrasting it with the chaos that ensued after his death." See Bodil Due, *The "Cyropaedia": Xenophon's Aims and Methods*, 19 and 237; and Paula Winsor Sage, "Dying in Style: Xenophon's Ideal Leader and the End of the 'Cyropaedia,'" *Classical Journal* 90 (1994–95): 161–74.
6. *Alcibiades* I 105c4–6; *Oikonomicus* 4.16. See also Christopher Bruell, "Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*" (Chicago: University of Chicago,

ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, 1969), T-17641, 1–2; and Gera, *Xenophon's "Cyropaedia": Style, Genre, and Literary Technique*, 7–8.

7. For an in-depth discussion and comparison of the opening of all Xenophon's works, see James Tatum, *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction: On the Education of Cyrus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 36–66.
8. Due, *The "Cyropaedia": Xenophon's Aims and Methods*, 29n3. On whether Xenophon is the narrator of the *Cyropaedia*, see Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire, "Cyrus' Beehive: Ruling Eros and with Eros in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Polis* 39 (2022): 99–122, 121n55; William H. F. Altman, "Rereading Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Ancient Philosophy* 42 (2022): 335–52, 339. Scholars have doubted that Xenophon is the narrator because the story that follows seems to be in tension with the statements made by the narrator in 1.1. However, there could be many other reasons for that tension. Another important question related to the narration is why Xenophon uses the first-person plural to refer to himself. This will be taken up later in the essay.
9. Unless otherwise noted, all references are to Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, trans. Wayne Ambler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
10. Due, *The "Cyropaedia": Xenophon's Aims and Methods*, 17; Nadon, *Xenophon's Prince*, 2001, 26; John Ray, "The Education of Cyrus as Xenophon's 'Statesman,'" *Interpretation* 19, no. 3 (1992): 226–42, 225; Lorraine Smith Pangle, "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 2 (2017): 308–21, 308–9; Newell, "Tyranny and the Science of Ruling," 892; Tatum, *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction*, 60; Robert C. Bartlett, "How to Rule the World: An Introduction to Xenophon's 'The Education of Cyrus,'" *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (2015): 143–54, 144.
11. Newell, "Tyranny and the Science of Ruling," 891; see also Tatum, *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction*, 61.
12. For arguments that Cyrus's excellence can be understood as rooted in knowledge, cf. Leslie G. Rubin, "Love and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Interpretation* 19, no. 3 (1989): 391–413, 408; Pageau-St-Hilaire, "Cyrus' Beehive," 100; Illarraga, "What the Rulers Want," 179–80; Whidden, "Xenophon's Imperial Household," 33.
13. Bruell writes that if the solution offered by Cyrus to the problem of rule "should prove to be unsatisfactory, we would be left with the conclusion that ruling human beings is among the difficult or impossible things," "Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*," 4.

14. All references to Plato's *Republic* are to *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
15. Nadon, *Xenophon's Prince*, 28.
16. "The Account of Persia and Cyrus' Persian Education," 541n7, and "Cyrus' Imperial Household," 31n3. One consideration that argues against this suggestion, however, is that Xenophon uses this formulation throughout the chapter, including in the last line ("we shall try to relate," 1.1.6).
17. See also *Laws* 686e: "Everyone who sees something big, with a lot of power and strength, immediately feels that if only the possessor knew how to use such a thing of such quality and magnitude, he would perform many amazing deeds and thus become happy." *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
18. Cf. Sage, "Dying in Style," 164.
19. For a differently reasoned but complementary case that the *Cyropaedia* must be reread to be understood, see Altman, "Rereading Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*."
20. See also Rubin, "Love and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 407–8.
21. Cf. Field, "Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 727.
22. Carol Atack writes, "Cyrus' actions often seem far from ideals of virtuous leadership and instead demonstrate his mastery of power politics, deception and subterfuge," "Ambiguities of Despotic Power in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," *Cahiers Mondes anciens* 17 (2023): 1–16, 1; see also Rubin, "Love and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 404.
23. Cf. Due, *The "Cyropaedia": Xenophon's Aims and Methods*, 237.
24. For discussions of Cyrus's paternalism, see Bartlett, "How to Rule the World," 151; Pangle, "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," 309; Sage, "Dying in Style," 167; Tatum, *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction*, 64–66.
25. Bartlett, "How to Rule the World," 151; see also Johnson, "Persians as Centaurs in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 178; Pangle, "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," 309.
26. Danzig, "Big Boys, Little Boys," 244.
27. See also Rubin, "Love and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 412.
28. "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," 315.
29. See also Danzig, "Big Boys, Little Boys," 261–62.
30. Pangle, "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," 316.
31. For a well-developed defense of Cyrus's treatment of Cyaxares, cf. Gabriel Danzig, "The Best of the Achaemenids: Benevolence, Self-Interest, and the 'Ironic' Reading of *Cyropaedia*," in *Xenophon: Ethical*

Principles and Historical Enquiry, ed. Fiona Hobden and Christopher Tuplin (Boston: Brill, 2012), 384–413.

32. At least among subjects of the higher ranks. On the limitations of this policy, see 7.5.79, 8.1.43–44.
33. Altman, "Rereading Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 349.
34. Cf. Illarraga, "What the Rulers Want," 171.
35. See also Rubin, "Love and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 412; Pageau-St-Hilaire, "Cyrus' Beehive," 121.
36. Cf. Whidden, "The Account of Persia and Cyrus' Persian Education," 542.
37. Johnson, "Persians as Centaurs," 177.
38. For the relationship of this work to the *Republic*, see Gera, *Xenophon's "Cyropaedia": Style, Genre, and Literary Technique*, 12–13; Rubin, "Love and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*," 400; Newell, "Tyranny and the Science of Ruling," 17–18; Danzig, "Big Boys, Little Boys," 244–45.
39. Tellingly, he returns to this language only once in the work. It is a moment in which Xenophon describes how Cyrus thought he needed to appear to his subjects. "We think we learned of Cyrus that he did not believe that rulers must differ from their subjects by this alone, by being better, but he also thought they must bewitch them" (8.1.40).
40. Nadon speaks of the "astonishing brevity" with which Xenophon deals with ostensibly important parts of the story (*Xenophon's Prince*, 28). One interpreter estimates that the time Xenophon focuses on very closely in the work amounts to thirty-nine days (Due, *The "Cyropaedia": Xenophon's Aims and Methods*, 52). On the liberties Xenophon takes with time and space, see Stadter, "Fictional Narrative in the *Cyropaedia*," 380–87; Sage, "Dying in Style," 165.
41. "In trying to become the greatest benefactor, he is perforce depriving everyone around him of both independence and honor," Pangle, "Xenophon on the Psychology of Supreme Political Ambition," 317.
42. Bartlett, "How to Rule the World," 152.
43. *Republic* 473d; Cf. Stadter's argument that the *Cyropaedia* is itself "a utopian vision" of politics, "Fictional Narrative in the *Cyropaedia*," 374–75.
44. Sage, "Dying in Style," 174.