

Disclaimer

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Hope and Hemlock

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Do you know the Moirai's work? Do you know the Keres' claws, Phobos and Deimos' shadows? Do you know the taste of hemlock? You who have guided me to realize a utopia that I have no place in; you know.

Our ancestors were men born free and wild, but they united forces and entered the civil state because an individual's subsistence was no longer possible in the state of nature (Rousseau 60). They gathered as a people to pursue a common good¹. The emergence of a political body shall be to lead the aggregated forces according to the general will for the common good. It shall exercise its sovereignty for the public welfare but nothing more. Our ancestors had trusted Aeneas, yet he was a robber in a sentry's disguise. He and his men possessed the natural power of materials and strength, and once they obtained the political power to mobilize the people too, they dropped their glamour and preyed on the helpless people to further their own interests. If a government cannot maintain peace among the people

1 The common good is the public interest, the highest common factor of all individuals' particular interests without the conflicting parts (71). To quote a noble named Rousseau, "[R]emove from these same wills (mine: private wills that consider private interest) the pluses and minuses that cancel each other out, and what remains as the sum of the differences is the general will" (71). Thus, in a civil state where the general will belies any public matter, everyone's interests can be equally protected.

and cannot fulfill the purpose of the association of the people, then it is illegitimate. Our ancestors would have run away, but they had nowhere to go, for surviving in the state of nature was no longer possible. So they protested, and were silenced; they resisted, and were suppressed.

Our history has no shortage of legendary warriors who overthrew a dynasty. But in the end, they were merely lusting for power. The new king would impose laws upon laws to reward his supporters and punish his challengers to stabilize his rulership. Yet heavy laws never bring political and social stability. As the number of laws increases, the king's power swells, the people's control over their lives shrink, giving usurpers all the more reasons to topple the government (黃宗羲 36). Kings rose and fell, like smokes on a rolling wheel, crashing over those of us on the ground and painted a glorious trail with our cheap gore.

We rebels dared not hope for a ruler instead of a rogue; we dared not hope for peace and prosperity instead of suppression and slavery. All we wanted was rightful retaliation. But you, shrouded in mystery, came to us and spoke of the coming of a legitimate ruler, an altruistic character who strived not for his own interest, but for the welfare of all-under-Heaven (31). You bestowed me the Ring of Gyges, which granted me unlimited power for 100 days. For the first time, we dared hope. I willed; the tyrant collapsed, his armies crumbled. Shackles were shattered and peasants ran wild in joy. The people tore down the golden veil of our broken city, shattered the pensive looks on the tympanums with their dirty feet. Sickles and scythes reaped no crops; they reaped the fruit of righteous vengeance, ripe with the ichor of aristocrats; but they also reaped the fruits of sinful avarice, heavy with the blood of the defenseless.

I stopped those who listened and slew those who did not. My name was no longer chanted; it was a prayer murmured by dying nobles and hopeless mothers; it was a sneer, a curse, a scream, on the lips of my old comrades. I am Adrestia, the handmaiden of Nemesis, the bringer of just retribution. For fifty days my wrath scorched the city, until you came again in an incandescent storm of light and fire, and wrenched my vengeful heart from my chest. Just or not, Adrestia was a savage warrior, a perpetuator of the state of nature like any other brutes in this city, which had been turned into the battlefield of discrete aggregations of private interests. It was time to bring the people into a true civil state, to guide them to form their general will for their common good, and to give them a legitimate ruler.

I forced everyone into the agora for a public deliberation; the shaky aristocrats and the sobbing children, the rabid wolves and the ravenous vultures. I saw, for the first time, the wolves' fear of betrayal and the vultures' fear of starvation. The predators' eyes reflected the same despair in the prey's, even as their owners barked and shrieked at me. I silenced them with a bleeding heart, so I could speak of the urgent matter of electing a legitimate leader.

Hesitantly, a noble noted that putting our city's fate on a person's virtues and wisdom is too risky, for it is human nature to laze off and concern only self-interests (31). Indeed. Though the fear of our ancient deities has kept some of our rulers in check and granted them legitimacy among the people, there are often conflicting interpretations for the same religious dogma, and there is no telling if the meanings will be twisted by the ruler for personal purposes. There must be other ways, besides blind trust and religion, to keep in check a leader's power. Another noble named Rousseau proposed the

separation of authoritative power and legislative power, lest the legislator creates unjust laws to his personal ends (82). His idea was supported by a smith, who claimed that the separation of power into different branches also enables a more efficient running of the government, just as the division of labor improves the dexterity of workers and prompts inventions of new means to streamline a branch's operation (Smith 135).

But what if the government branches collaborate to abuse power? There must be an external safeguard. Huang, an Eastern scholar, suggested that scholars at school shall be encouraged to put the ruler under scrutiny and offer him advice (45). I was dubious. Can we trust the elites represent all-under-Heaven and not just themselves? Doubtlessly they are well-educated, but will they always be correct? While the school members may be allowed to discuss politics in the government's grace, will the government take their advice? I realized then, our political system should grant every citizen certain power to supervise, change, and possibly replace a government.

While a stable political structure bestows the government the license to mobilize people, the right to freedom enables the public to resist the government's power. A strange traveller with two tiny windows on his nose said in his homeland, while natural liberty stemming from force is what topples a government, such civil liberties as freedom of expression and participation rights underlay any subversion that leads to the ultimate downfall of a government. But unregulated liberty is not the answer to social stability. It was the unbridled natural liberty of the rulership which contributed to Aeneas' arbitrary government, yet on the other hand, it is self-contradictory to suggest any form of stability can be achieved by the people's full freedom to overthrow a government. There is no clearer evidence than the gruesome atrocities committed by some of our people

after the fall of our past leaders. Hence, the government's license and the civilians' liberty should balance each other. One shall not exist without the other, or it will expand indefinitely and revert the civil state to the state of nature. But the powers of the people and the government need not be enemies. Rights to participate in politics, for example, encourages people to express their opinions for the government to improve its stability, who can use the subsequently increased power to reinforce citizens' right to freedom. Laws shall set the boundaries of the liberty of the government and that of the people, but education is required for both parties to know how to use their liberties to their greatest advantages, which is through cooperative efforts for the common good.

Rousseau reminded us, that despite its cohesive vigilance against corruption, there will be tension within the people, for a person's liberty often impairs the other's. Therefore, everyone who is rational will agree only to the same obligations and shall receive only the same rights (59)². A man called Mill proposed the harm principle, which deems it righteous to curb a person's liberty only when it will do harm to others (99). When universalized, the principle fundamentally suggests that everyone has the maximum degree of freedom, legally restrained only where it will do harm to the others. Thus, the tension between citizens' individual liberties can be resolved through equality.

The mobs had calmed down, so I released the silencing charm on them. At that moment, the Ring of Gyges gave us a vision of a prosperous city, where every citizen spoke cautiously and listened humbly, for they

2 His words were such: Whether it is the statement of one man to another man, or of one man to a people, the following sort of talk will always be equally nonsensical. "I make an agreement with you that is wholly at your expense and wholly to my advantage; and, for as long as it pleases me, I will observe it and so will you." (59).

knew the fallibility of their opinions. Speeches of truth and falsity were expressed, and from their collision, a deeper and livelier impression of truth was experienced. Diversity and originality were welcomed, and from them, ingenious ideas grew and propelled various developments (115). The equal right to freedom achieves more than social harmony, but social progress, if every citizen has the respect for diversity, the spirit for improvement, and the deep consideration for the common good. It certainly requires education more than laws to realize this dream³. However, education is only a guidance. Ultimately, the general will may choose to abandon the old common good for a new cause, one that may, possibly, upsets the equal liberty in the state. But then, we should be aware of the fallibility of the utopia we dreamed of, and our future generations must always be allowed to revise their common project and the ideal of their legitimate government.

Anyhow, we yearned to realize the vision. Rousseau reiterated that the association of a people comes before a government, and so a legitimate government must keep the people together and honors the ends to which the people is formed. Mill added that the government shall, with the help of laws and education, secures everyone's equal right to liberty, for it enables social stability and human progress.

The discussion went deep into the night. Our hope towards our future rose with the moon. But then, the people turned to me. They looked at me, and they saw the sister of fear and panic. They wanted this threat gone. Rousseau and Mill tried to calm them down and discuss for a consensus,

3 I wondered if this vision was a prophecy. Perhaps it was! Perhaps our people will be taught of the inseparable tie between social utility and individual utility, so that their personal ends will be planned in accordance with the public welfare. Perhaps the cohesion within our people will arise from the cultivation of human empathy and moral feelings, just as the Eastern scholars preached.

lest there be a tyranny of the majority, but to no avail. There will always be a tyranny of the majority. In our new city, this giant will be restrained by laws, it will be tamed by education, yet still, it will be in its grace that the minority lives. And it has no grace towards me. Before the hordes could advance on me, I soared like an eagle into the night sky. I flew towards the moon, which had sailed to the center of the sky. It marked the start of the first day of our new city. It marked the end of my 100th day. Phobos and Deimos paralyzed my limbs; Keres dragged me down. I screamed out for you, but I did not know your name. I fell.

I thought that was it then. But Atropos' hands are unhurried. Did your ring give a last burst of power and save me? Did you save me? Maybe you did, so that I would find myself looking from behind the bars at Rousseau's face, whose owner would tell me I can choose to be exiled or face death penalty. I pondered. I pursued vengeance, I pursued justice, but now, in the end, I want most a home where everyone is free and equal. I want to be part of our new city. I shall be part of our new city.

They have fetched me my hemlock now. It will be my honor, which I am grateful for, just as I am grateful for your gift. I do not know who you are, but somehow, I know you are looking at me. You are looking at everything.

Farewell, then. Achlys awaits me.

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Teacher's comment:

This is an imaginative piece of work on the reflection of political ideals. With sharp philosophical insights, Tsz Yan comprises a poetic attempt to

illustrate the search for a fair and just human society that counts for the will and power of every citizen. I enjoy reading such aesthetic intervention on the texts of political theory. (LEUNG Cheuk Hang)

