

# The Blessings of Liberty: Reminders from Aristotle and Livy For Our Troubled Times

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. . . Let [the reader] follow in his mind how, as discipline broke down bit by bit, morality at first foundered; how it next subsided in ever greater collapse and then began to topple headlong in ruin—until the advent of our own age in which we can endure neither our vices nor the remedies needed to cure them. . . . Recently wealth has brought greed in its train, manifold amusements have led to people’s obsession with ruining themselves and with consuming all else through excess and self-indulgence.<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who are anxious about the health of Western society might imagine these words to have been written about our own times. This is a sobering thought, since Livy began his history shortly after Augustus, with the grateful acquiescence of the Senate and People of Rome, had effectively ended the Roman Republic. Our loss of character might tempt us similarly to despair of our democratic republics. Those who have been liberally educated are particularly susceptible to this melancholy. History invites us in imagination to become citizens of other places and times, but can also encourage us to indulge in nostalgia for a past we never knew. Philosophy leads us to critique real regimes according to an ideal form of government discovered through abstract arguments, one that might not be possible or desirable in reality.

Truly liberal education confers many blessings. It frees us from our cultural assumptions so that we can see other ways and other principles and so judge our own

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<sup>1</sup> Livy, *The Rise of Rome, Books 1-5*, trans. T.J. Luce (Oxford University Press: 1998), 4



fruitfully. This is particularly important today, when the fundamental tenets of freedom and equality reign unchallenged in reality and even in imagination. Yet despair and nostalgia too frequently turn to condemnation, especially among the young, who easily blame the very freedom of our institutions as the source of the license that dominates their contemporaries. Plato and Thomas present monarchy as ideal, under which light only fear of tyranny seems to justify our constitutional systems. This can undermine the affection we have for the political liberty that we enjoy.

Is there more to be said for free institutions that would inspire in our young the love for and devotion to liberty that animated our fathers? Or have we been deceived in thinking that liberty deserves our devotion? Perhaps a look back to times when freedom was in question will help us see whether we should despise freedom, adore it or consider it a matter of indifference. Aristotle, the philosopher, and Livy, the historian, both lived in times when political liberty had recently been lost. Livy clearly laments its loss. They both see political liberty as ideal—it fosters the full development of human virtue. Yet they also recognize that it is difficult to maintain. It demands virtue. Not every people is capable of enjoying the blessing of liberty. Such people might need monarchical government, but its function should be to prepare them for the day when they can be truly free.

### I. Aristotle

Aristotle lived in a time when the small democracies and independent states of Greece had failed, succumbing to the enforced unity provided by Philip of Macedon. It was a good time to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of government, and in particular to consider the blessings of monarchical rule. Aristotle



consistently argues that monarchy is not the best form of government for a people whose members are capable of sharing in the same kind of virtue.<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle focuses his consideration by telling his readers that not everyone who goes by the name of “king” really is a fundamentally different kind of governor from those found in a constitutional republic. The Spartans had “kings,” but these men were merely leaders in battle, whose power was unlimited in war but very limited inside the city. A real king, Aristotle says, is one who rules a political community in the way that a father rules his household. No law binds a father; no one can really challenge a father’s decisions, except by appealing to the father’s love. Similarly, a real king is one whose will is law, whose decisions are appealable only to him, who can change his determinations at any time. As Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* says when explaining his change of mind: “The cause is in my will: I will not come; / That is enough to satisfy the senate.”<sup>3</sup> (2.2.70)

Plato and Aquinas seem to suggest that when a wise king rules his people with a father’s love and a shepherd’s care, society is most blessed and most unified. Aristotle, however, criticizes even idealized kingship as unjust, alienating, and demeaning. It hampers the development of goods central to the flourishing of human excellence. He also gives reasons to think that it fails to provide the best governance.

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<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, close attention to his doctrine in the *Politics* reveals why Hobbes considered Aristotle an enemy to his *Leviathan*: “From Aristotle’s civil philosophy, they have learned to call all manner of Commonwealths but the popular (such as was at that time the state of Athens), tyranny.” Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or, the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (George Routledge and Sons, 1886), 306

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay, I make references to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, which I have found helpful in coming to understand the problems that Livy and Aristotle both faced. My ideas about monarchy, liberty and political character in the play are developed in an essay entitled, “Cassius and the Tragedy of Rome,” contained in the Ignatius Critical Edition cited in the bibliography.



*Justice*

Justice is the fundamental good proper to the political order.<sup>4</sup> Men form a common society so that they might share in a happiness greater than any they can experience on their own, and they rightly expect to share in the good of the community. To be excluded from the common good is to be treated unjustly.

Even justice in private exchanges binds men in a city together:

. . . Since a city is kept together by proportionate reciprocation. For people seek to return either evil for evil—otherwise they feel like slaves—or good for good—otherwise no exchange takes place, and it is exchange that holds them together. This is why they erect a temple of the Graces in a conspicuous place, so that benefits might be repaid.<sup>5</sup>

But according to Aristotle the kind of justice that distributes honor according to the merit of those who share in society is even more important. Aristotle calls to mind the opening scene of *The Iliad*, in which Agamemnon's violation of distributive justice incites the rage of Achilles. In the violent world of *The Iliad*, prizes acquired in war, including female captives, were distributed to all who participated in the battle according to their importance in the battle. As overlord of the entire Greek expedition, Agamemnon represents an exception to the order—he receives the highest prizes, not because of his efforts in battle, but simply because of his station among the Greek leaders. Achilles already finds the justice of this order difficult to accept, but Agamemnon destroys the entire order by threatening to claim prizes already distributed. Aristotle quotes Achilles' complaint that he has been treated "like some vagabond without honor"; Agamemnon has alienated Achilles from the Greek nobility.

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle makes this clear: "In all sciences and arts the end is a good, and the greatest good and in the highest degree a good in the most authoritative of all—this is the political science of which the good is justice, in other words, the common interest." Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (University of Chicago Press, 1985), III.11

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge University Press, 2000), V.5 1133a1-4



In a civilized society, where the desire for excellence and great action drives the best of its citizens, the prizes of honor are not booty and captives, but political offices. A city honors one of its own by entrusting to him offices of responsibility for the common good. For someone to be excluded from sharing in governance according to his ability and service is an injustice that bites deeply, making him feel like he is not even a citizen in the fullest sense. “One who shares in prerogatives is in particular spoken of as a citizen—thus, for example, Homer’s line ‘like some vagabond without honor.’ For one who does not share in prerogatives is like an alien.”<sup>6</sup> But a kingship includes really only one office—that of the king. All others who work for the community are his appointees, dependent solely on his will for their continuance in office. Only those favored by the king receive appointment, leaving the rest of the citizens as “vagabonds without honor.” Even his appointees act as his instruments, so that the honor they earn belongs properly to him. But a society of men of comparable capabilities demands that all have some share in the offices.

### *Affection*

Injustice is a great evil, and it has evil effects. Those treated unjustly become disaffected from the regime that oppresses or ignores them. As the twentieth-century victories of democratic republics over enormously powerful tyrannies have shown, affection for a regime holds a political society together during difficult times and makes it thrive in good times. In an early speech,<sup>7</sup> Abraham Lincoln called the affection of the people the “strongest bulwark of any government.” Aristotle also recognizes the crucial importance of cultivating affection among the citizens: “For we suppose affection to be the greatest of good things for cities, for in this way they would least of all engage in factional conflict; and Socrates praises above all the city’s being one, which

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, III.5, 1278 a35-38

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Great Speeches*, “Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum” (Courier Dover Publications, 2012), 4



is held to be . . . the work of affection.”<sup>8</sup> In the *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates expresses the view that affection is undermined by contention over private goods like property and family. He thinks that eliminating any sense of property should promote unity. Aristotle holds that, on the contrary, loss of property will undermine the unity of society by undermining affection, because no one will care for what is not his own. So the key to a unified polity is developing the sense among citizens that the city belongs to each of them. “For there are two things above all which make human beings cherish and feel affection, what is one’s own and what is dear. . . .”<sup>9</sup> Participating in the governing process is the surest way to ensure that sense of belonging. What I work for becomes for me an object of love. Being excluded from participating in political decision-making undermines affection and, when coupled with the sense of injustice at being excluded, encourages the formation of an enemy population within the city itself. For these reasons, a wise political ruler will do what he can to find governing roles for all the members of a city: “Solon seems, at any rate, to have granted only the most necessary power to the people, that of electing to offices and auditing; for if the people did not even have authority over this, they would be enslaved and an enemy.”<sup>10</sup> A citizen becomes attached to the government because of his personal involvement; unity with his fellow citizens develops as he works with them to achieve what is in the interest of all: “. . . A city is said to be in concord when people agree about what is beneficial, rationally choose the same things, and carry out common resolutions.”<sup>11</sup> The horrors of the Peloponnesian War, in which revolution and counterrevolution led to the most hideous brutalities, were still alive in the memory of Aristotle’s contemporaries. They had experienced for themselves the horrors of having an enemy within their

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, II.4, 1262b7-12

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, II.4, 1262b21-24

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, II.12, 1274 a15-18

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, IX.6, 1167a22-24



walls.<sup>12</sup> Reversion to a monarchical form of government, by excluding active citizens from real participation, runs the risk of developing civil animosity.

### *Virtue*

The political community provides opportunities for great activity that rarely if ever can happen outside of it. The closest Aristotle comes to a serious defining expression for man is when he says in Book I of the *Politics* that “Man is by nature a political animal,” to which he might add “that speaks of the just and advantageous.” Beasts and gods do not need a city, the former because they are incapable of happiness, the latter because their happiness depends on no one else. But man is essentially destined for political life, because only as a part of a city can he attain to the happiness that is his birthright. Sharing in city life does not merely provide one a safe haven in which to pursue private interests; it is participating in divinity.<sup>13</sup> Cities can attain a temporal immortality that no human being can. To share in that and in the other great actions that only a city can achieve provides a possibility of happiness no barbarian can dream of.

The good of any part depends upon fulfilling its proper role in the whole. Because his good is so bound up with the city’s, a man must participate in governing to be virtuous. Though Aristotle understands the desire to live a private life and the feeling that only people who have a passion to meddle in the affairs of others get involved with politics, he insists that every man needs to understand how the affairs of his own household relate to and contribute to and enhance the whole society. For this

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps they wept when they heard the opening lines of the *Iliad*: “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles, and its devastation, which put pains thousand-fold upon the Achaians, hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting of dogs, of all birds. . . .” [The *Iliad*, Richard Lattimore, trans., Book I.1-4]

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics* I.1



reason, he holds that political prudence and personal prudence are really the same virtue.<sup>14</sup> But since the prudence necessary for excellence can only develop through the experience of decision-making, simply obeying laws is not enough. “. . . Prudence is not a virtue of one ruled, but rather true opinion; the one ruled is like a flute maker, while the ruler is like a flute player, the user.”<sup>15</sup> So Aristotle concludes that to be a citizen, which is to be fully a man, one must share in both ruling and being ruled. But in a monarchy, the king makes all the decisions. He alone bears the responsibility and praise or blame for the outcomes of his decisions. All others under him are like children who can make requests and even counsel their father but in the end must simply submit to his decisions.<sup>16</sup> Only when a child leaves his father and mother does he enter into the realm of responsibility that leads to real prudence and virtue. The case is similar in a political society.

Shakespeare’s Cassius expresses this view when passionately denouncing Caesar to Brutus. Brutus fears that Caesar might become a tyrant. For Cassius, the real problem is that, tyrant or no, if he holds all authority, Caesar is really the only man in Rome: “When could they say till now, that talk’d of Rome, / That her wide walls encompass’d but one man? / Now is it Rome indeed and room enough, / When there is in it but one only man.” (1.2.153-157)

### *Governance*

Aristotle thinks that sharing in ruling is necessary for each citizen to be treated justly, to be attached to his government, and to develop virtue. But some like Plato might counter that a sole ruler will at least provide much better governance, just as a

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics* VI

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* III. 4, 1277 b27-29

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics* VIII.11, 1161a15





physician knows better how to heal than the multitude of his unschooled patients.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle challenges that position, arguing that universal involvement makes for better laws and better government:

Any one of them taken singly is perhaps inferior in comparison [to the best man]; but the city is made up of many persons, just as a feast to which many contribute is finer than a single and simple one, and on this account a crowd also judges many matters better than any single person. Further, what is many is more incorruptible: like a greater amount of water, the multitude is more incorruptible than the few. The judgment of a single person is necessarily corrupted when he is dominated by anger or some other passion of this sort, whereas it is hard for all to become angry and err at the same time.<sup>18</sup>

Although it is tempting to think that an expert would make the best laws, Aristotle questions whether one man can make better laws than a multitude, who can share their various experiences with what works and what doesn't. More importantly, when a multitude is the source of governance, then reason has a much better chance of being the real ruler. For though some will be passionately involved in any particular matter under discussion, the majority of a multitude is less likely to have their personal interests aroused. "One who asks law to rule, therefore, is held to be asking god and intellect alone to rule, while one who asks man adds the beast. Desire is a thing of this sort; and spiritedness perverts rulers and the best man. Hence law is intellect without appetite."<sup>19</sup>

### *Natural Monarchy*

For all these reasons, Aristotle rejects kingship as a proper form of government for civilized society.

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, III.16

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, III.15, 1286a27-33

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, III.16, 1287a



[It] is evident among similar and equal persons it is neither advantageous or just for one person to have authority over all matters, regardless of whether there are laws or not and he acts as a law to himself, whether he and they are good or not, even whether he is better in respect to virtue, unless it is in a certain manner. . . .<sup>20</sup>

In this passage, Aristotle qualifies his rejection of kingship: “unless it is in a certain manner.” He explains why in his fascinating, seemingly irrelevant, extended consideration of the man who by nature is no part of the city because his excess of excellence makes him independent of it. Such a man is self-sufficient for happiness, which means that he must be god-like compared to even excellent men of human virtue. This causes no problem if he lives isolated from others. But if he is found among an established people, his presence will cause uncertainty and he will be a huge problem. His excellence will attract many to him and will make the leaders of the city, even the city itself, look deficient. What should be done about him? Aristotle presents exile as an understandable solution. All men want to share in government, and so they will get rid of one who threatens them. But this is hardly just. The only just course is that the whole city should submit to him.

For surely no one would assert that such a person should be expelled and banished. But neither would they assert that there should be rule over such a person: this is almost as if they should claim to merit ruling over Zeus by splitting the offices. What remains—and it seems a natural course—is for everyone to obey such a person gladly; the persons of this sort will be permanent kings in their cities.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps here Aristotle has in mind a hero like Achilles or a man like Socrates. A Christian might think of Jesus. Still, it illustrates an important point in Aristotle’s

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, III.17, 1287 b37-1288a2

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, III.13, 1284 b25-30



consideration of monarchy. Monarchy is only a natural rule, a just rule, when the king exceeds his subjects by nature, when his opportunity for excellence is of a completely different order from his subjects. This is why the king's rule is like that of a father—no matter how much experience children have, as long as they are children, they can never have prudence or virtue to compare with his. And so, for their good, they need to submit themselves to his direction: "For by nature, the king should be different, but he should be of the same stock; and this is the case of the elder in relation to the younger, and the one who generates to the child."<sup>22</sup> This difference in nature is so important for kingship that, when it does not really exist, kings try to conjure it through art, clothing the king with elaborate dress, pompous titles, and striking "prerogatives."<sup>23</sup>

From this entire consideration, we see that Aristotle, far from being a monarchist, argues strongly that, in a city of men, kingship is neither necessary nor desired. This is not because of what the king might become, but because even a good king is the sole ruler, the one who rules society in the way that a father rules his household. In addition to being unjust, the exclusion of all others from governance undermines the affection of citizens, hinders the development of the fullness of human virtue, and invites desire and preference to rule over reason and the combined wisdom of the citizenry.

## II. Livy

Aristotle formed his general views on the best form of government after a thorough examination of the constitutions and histories of many city-states and empires. Livy gives a remarkably sympathetic historical account. Livy devotes his account of republican Rome to "the history of a free people" which, having shaken off the Tarquin tyranny, was now able to begin enjoying the "excellent fruits of liberty."

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* I.12, 1259b15-17

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* I.2



Yet he quickly shows that enjoying liberty was neither easy nor quiet. Books II-V of Livy's first pentad recount Rome's century-long struggles to remain unified in the face of continual conflict between the senate and the plebeians. The great general Cincinnatus voiced a commonly expressed frustration over these turmoils: "By some mysterious fate, our gods favor us more in war than in peace."<sup>24</sup> When no external enemies distract them, the senate and the plebs behave like two nations at war within. Rome's Etruscan neighbors present sobering examples of the Scylla and Charybdis that could easily have destroyed the young republic: in Ardea, the plebeians turned violently against the aristocracy;<sup>25</sup> in Veii, disgust with the endless class turmoil brought a return of kingship.<sup>26</sup> These examples serve to underscore Livy's ejaculation:

So difficult is it to steer a moderate course in safeguarding freedom. Each man pretends to want equality but strives to better himself at the expense of his fellows; and in taking steps to prevent themselves feeling fear they make themselves feared, and, as if it were necessary either to inflict or to suffer wrong, the injuries we escape we visit upon others.<sup>27</sup>

And yet Rome survived the enormous century-long trials, emerging as a strong, united people ready to subjugate the Italian peninsula. Their internal struggles, resolved through concession, compromise, persuasion, and generosity, led to greater justice and a deeper love for city and homeland.

### *Protecting plebeian liberties*

Livy traces the slow progress of Roman unity. The opening sentence of Book II states that Roman freedom consisted in "the election of annual magistrates and greater obedience to the commands of law than to those of men." Together with the right of

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<sup>24</sup> Livy, *Rise of Rome*, 161

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.9

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, *Rise of Rome*, V.1

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, *Rise of Rome*, III.65



appeal to the people, Livy frequently refers to these as the “safeguards of freedom.”<sup>28</sup> But the existence of these constitutional practices alone did not bring a stable enjoyment of liberty. Annual consular elections allowed the senate to maintain its governing position while granting almost regal power to the consuls for carrying out its decrees. The plebs, however, frequently hated the consuls almost as much as the kings, since they seemed to exercise their office only in the interests of the senatorial class. Internal conflict came to a head in 494 BC. Many of the plebs had become so indebted that they faced imprisonment. However, these same plebs were the soldiers enlisted to fight in the many battles that arose between Rome and its neighbors. The incongruity in risking life and limb for Rome on the battlefield only to be imprisoned for debt upon coming home infuriated the plebs. The senate at first took a factional stance in the dispute; led by Appius Claudius they urged the consuls to inflict the full penalties on the debtors. But the plebeian soldiers withdrew from Rome to the Sacred Mount, determined not to engage as citizens in the common assembly or on the battlefield until their personal liberty was guaranteed. The senate realized it had no choice but to find an approach acceptable to the plebeians. And so the first tribunes of the plebs were created, non-senators who would look after the interest of the plebs.

However, the Romans needed more than factional representatives if they were to establish concord and ultimately maintain their republic. Livy frequently suggests the tribunes caused more turmoil than they prevented by arousing the plebs to seek their own interest against that of the senators. Nor did the rule of law fully exist for the plebs. In Book III, the plebeians complain that, without a written law, the consuls act like kings and simply judge according to whim.<sup>29</sup> After more than a decade of agitation, the plebeians finally won their point. A delegation sent to learn about the laws and customs of the Greeks returned, and a board of ten men proposed ten tables of laws.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., e.g. III.39.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., III.9



No plebeians were allowed to be one of the decemvirs, but the decemvirs actively sought plebian advice about their laws. Livy's explanation of this is reminiscent of Aristotle, who saw that citizen involvement in government produces better governance and deeper commitment: "When many people contribute talent and suggestions, the better the results. The legislation would then seem to be what the Roman people as a whole had decided for itself rather than accepted from others."<sup>30</sup>

### *Full participation*

Books II & III of Livy's history show that the plebeians cared more to protect their private interests through equal protection offered by magistracies and laws than to gain the honor associated with having a role in governing. The senators, on the other hand, were jealous of their honor as members of the governing class. For this reason, the censors, who determined membership in the social ranks, wielded tremendous power: "Eventually to [the censor] fell complete control over morals and behavior, the right to honor persons by enrolling them in the senate and in the centuries of knights or to dishonor them by expulsion."<sup>31</sup> Still the plebs did share in governing to some extent; participating in the popular assemblies, electing magistrates, serving as tribunes, and judging appeals were essential to safeguard their liberties and made them feel they had a share in the good of Rome. By the end of Book III, they find courage in the thought that they are for the first time fighting as free men for a free Rome.<sup>32</sup>

However, the new laws codified the customary ban on class intermarriage, which insulted the plebeians and ensured internal turmoil for another decade. Livy begins Book IV by recounting how the tribunes proposed laws allowing class intermarriage and opening up the consulship to plebeian candidates. The senate was

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., III.34

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., IV.8; see also IV.24

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., III.61



greatly alarmed by these proposals, detesting the pollution of blood and fearing the complete loss of their power to the multitude. The plebs felt deeply the disdain implied in the ban on intermarriage. They came to see that only those who can share in ruling can be real partners in the commonwealth, as Gaius Canuleius expressed in terms reminiscent of Aristotle:

And so I say to the consuls that the plebeians are ready to go to war now . . . but only if you restore the right of intermarriage and at last make our country whole again, only if we plebeians become one with you . . . only if there is full partnership, equal participation in the running of our country, only—and this is the mark of equality before law—if one may be a citizen obedient to his elected officials and then in turn become one of those officials himself.<sup>33</sup>

The senate objected that plebeians could not fulfill these magistracies because they involved leading religious rites; the tribunes cried out that this implied plebeians were despised by the gods as well as by the senators.

As in all these early struggles for freedom and equality, the senate ultimately granted the plebeians the “freedom and dignity”<sup>34</sup> they demanded, recognizing the preeminent need for concord between the classes. It knew that concord between the classes gave Rome the strength to overcome the world. In the culminating book of his first Pentad, Livy shows a unified Rome emerging victorious from its fierce death struggle with Veii, recounts Roman resiliency in beating back the fierce but wild Gauls after their sack of the City, and describes the Romans formally recommitting themselves to their homeland under the leadership of Camillus.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., IV.5

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., IV.6



*Virtue and freedom*

The story of the early Roman republic is the story of class struggles that made the Romans a fully free people through constitutional adjustments leading to a more equal participation in governing for the plebeians. Aristotle believed that involvement in governance was essential for the full development of human virtue. Livy witnesses to this. Acts of generosity and restraint were crucial for binding together the orders of Roman society. Leaders arose who upbraided their own orders and led them to recognize the just claims of the other class. In the middle of one dispute, the great Quinctius Cincinnatus was elected consul; the plebs feared he would be partisan. Yet “he proved from the tribunal to be more vehement in castigating the senate than in restraining the plebs. . . .” He charged the senate with failing to exercise leadership; he charged the tribunes with factionalizing the plebs into “a second country.” Both plebs and senate responded to his leadership.<sup>35</sup>

The plebeians, too, needed to restrain themselves: as they enjoyed more of the blessings of liberty, abuse of liberty became a growing concern. Appius Claudius upbraided the plebeians for balking at the demands of the war with Veii: “In short, freedom at Rome has come down to this: freedom to scorn the Senate, magistrates and laws, freedom to flout tradition and the institutions of our ancestors, freedom to subvert military discipline.”<sup>36</sup> Acts of generosity between the classes fostered devotion to the common good. The senate volunteered to pay plebeian soldiers, the plebeians elected only patrician magistrates when they were first allowed to elect plebeians, and the knights too showed their commitment to the common good:

. . . Each senator signified by words and gestures to the crowd assembled below the nation’s delight, calling Rome a city blessed, invincible and eternal because of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., III.19-20

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., V.6





this marvelous cooperation, praising the knights and the plebs, calling it a red-letter day in Rome's history, and confessing that what had just been done surpassed the goodwill and generosity of the senate.<sup>37</sup>

Livy shows the blessings of liberty at work in the early Republic. The plebeians found justice as their interests were safeguarded and they attained greater participation in governing Rome. As justice increased, concord grew. As concord grew, virtuous actions on behalf of the commonwealth increased. The rule of law was extended; persuasive reason was continually exercised in the public assemblies. In all these ways, Livy's history supports Aristotle's philosophical account of the ideal form of government.<sup>38</sup>

### III. A Time for Monarchy

According to his preface, Livy savored the work he did on the early Republic. It enabled him to turn away from his own times and look at a past filled with a wealth of excellent moral examples. He knew that as his story approached his own times, sorrow and anxiety would fill his mind while chronicling how "a mighty people has long been bent on its own undoing." Yet he wanted his readers to see that it was the loss of moral discipline that had brought the great people to the complete ruin he witnessed, "in which we can endure neither our vices nor the remedies needed to cure them."

What is the remedy that the Romans could not endure? Was it perhaps Augustus' enforced concord after a century of civil wars? Luxury and greed undermined the moral character that forged and led a united, free Rome to the height of glory; without a return of that character, must Rome remain united but enslaved? Perhaps the Roman

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., V.7

<sup>38</sup> Livy goes even further than Aristotle in identifying common love of the land and religious devotion to its gods as central to the success of the Roman republic.



people could be reformed. Livy's first book reveals how monarchy once had a crucial role in forming a people worthy of liberty; perhaps it could again?

As we have seen, Livy is an unabashed trumpeter of the blessings of liberty, but he recognized that those early monarchs were absolutely necessary to prepare the rough, barbaric Romans for its enjoyment:

Nor is there any doubt the same Brutus, who won so much glory in expelling Superbus, would have done a grievous wrong to the state if out of a premature desire for liberty he had wrested rule from one of the earlier kings. The plebs were a mixture of shepherds and adventurers who had fled their own lands.<sup>39</sup>

The plebeians (and perhaps even the senators) needed to be cowed by the king, allowing time for love of the common life to develop.

What would happen to them when they won immunity if not liberty under the sacred protection of asylum? Uncowed by the absolute power of the king, they would have been stirred up by tribunician agitation and would have begun battling with the senators in a city not their own, before they became united in spirit by commitment to wives and children and by love for the soil – a love which takes a long time to develop. The nation not yet grown up would have been torn apart by dissension. But as it was, a calm and moderate exercise of governmental authority fostered and nourished it so that when it matured and grew strong, it was able to enjoy the excellent fruits of liberty.<sup>40</sup>

Aristotle also recognized that historically and naturally uncivilized peoples have needed kings and have benefited from them. Kings arise naturally because their rule is most like a father's. All men have experience of paternal rule, but the uncivilized don't know anything else. So as men move into collectives that reach beyond the kinship ties characteristic of tribes and villages, they gravitate around men of unusual leadership abilities. Around these men, peoples form and learn to submit themselves to a governor. They begin to gain a taste for the blessings of the common life, and the experience necessary to make it work. They become civilized. And they need it.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., II.1

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., II.1



. . . Laws of ancient times were overly simple and barbaric. For the Greeks used to carry weapons and purchase their wives. . . . In general, all seek not the traditional but the good. The first [human beings], whether they were earthborn or preserved from a cataclysm, are likely to have been similar to average or even simple-minded persons today, as indeed is said of the earthborn; so it would be odd to abide by the opinions they hold.<sup>41</sup>

Livy highlights the “barbaric” origins of the Roman people. Yet, uniquely, they did not arise from any particular tribe. Their origins lay in the shepherds and refugees who gathered around Romulus and Remus, followed by the famous union with the Sabine tribe. “[Romulus] therefore selected a site for an asylum. . . . A motley mob from the neighboring peoples flocked to the spot, with no distinction made as to whether they were free or slave, and all eager for a new start in life. These men were the beginning of the real strength of the city.”<sup>42</sup> The people gathered together in this way were free from common tribal traditions and loyalties, yet they also lacked the unity that comes from natural connections. They needed laws to rule them, laws that would form the beginnings of the bonds of unity. Yet the principal source of unity remained Romulus himself. For which reason, as Aristotle might have advised him, Romulus “thought that the rustics would feel bound to observe the laws if he made his own person more august and imposing by adopting various insignia of power, both in his dress and particularly by the addition of twelve lictors to accompany him in public.”<sup>43</sup> Romulus through his personality, his governance, and his enhanced presence made himself a real king. Livy points out that Romulus succeeded in making his people look to him as a father, and even as a god, at his death “hailing him with one accord as a god born to a god, king and parent of the city of Rome.”<sup>44</sup> They felt themselves orphaned, and looked for a new parent, whom they found in Numa. In order to control their aggressive

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, II.8, 1268b38-1269a7

<sup>42</sup> Livy, *Rise of Rome*, I.8

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, I.8

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, I.16



character, Numa encouraged devotion to the gods, which became the chief Roman characteristic.<sup>45</sup>

Through succeeding kings, Rome continued to grow by conquest and immigration, yet it also became more unified through common laws, religion, and battle. The sixth king, Servius Tullius, following the Aristotelian program, took the final step necessary for establishing a people ready for freedom.

. . . Just as Numa had been the author of the religious system, so Servius' aim was that posterity should remember him as the one who established all the distinctions and ranks in society whereby groups are differentiated from one another by station and wealth. What he created was the census, an invaluable institution for a nation destined to be so great: a man's duties to the state in war and peace would no longer be determined randomly one by one but in proportion to the amount of money he possessed.<sup>46</sup>

The census provided the foundation for a formidable citizen military. The wealthier citizens provided the most substantial arms, and they were compensated by having a leading say in civil matters. Under the previous kings, whenever a vote was required, each citizen had an equal vote. But this violated distributive justice, according to which all should have a role in governing commensurate with their contribution to the state.

Eventually Servius Tullius was assassinated by Tarquinius Superbus. But Livy sees the divine providence governing this atrocity. First, Tarquin's plots were delayed for many years by an infortuitous marriage, a delay which extended Tullius' reign through 43 years, "long enough to lay a firm foundation for the building of Rome's national character."<sup>47</sup> Second, the tragic spectacle of the assassination ensured that "disgust with kings might all the sooner usher in an era of liberty." Livy hints that Tullius himself knew that kingship had served its purpose in preparing the people for liberty by passing along the view that Tullius "intended to abdicate precisely because it

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., I.21

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., I.42

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., I.46



was rule by one man, but that—alas—villainy within his own family prevented him from carrying out his plan to give freedom to his country.”<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion: Monarchy and the New Man

Livy saw in the history of Rome what Aristotle thought was generally true of mankind. The strong, natural unity provided by a monarch prepares the way for the most just, most virtuous, and best form of society in which all citizens are involved in governing. Livy shows dramatically the effort and commitment to the city needed to make a politically free society work for all its citizens. But he also knew that his own times had lost the virtue and the wisdom needed to maintain freedom. Perhaps, though, he had some hope that the moral reforms instituted under Augustine could recall the old magic under Rome’s early kings and make a Roman people once again fit to enjoy liberty. We know that never happened. Yet his life’s work might benefit us today, if we see what can be learned from it to fit our times. As Livy himself wrote in his preface: “The special and salutary benefit of the study of history is to behold evidence of every sort of behavior set forth as on a splendid memorial; from it you may select for yourself and for your country what to emulate, from it what to avoid, whether basely begun or basely concluded.”<sup>49</sup> We can certainly appreciate Livy’s nostalgic pleasure in looking to the virtues of a glorious past. As with Livy, our present must fill us with anxiety over an uncertain future in which we as a people may be able to stand neither our vices nor their remedies. Is the time for monarchy now, or just around the historical corner? We can draw some confidence from the strength shown by our institutions and national character through the disputed presidential election of 2000. Hopefully reading authors such as Livy and Aristotle will inspire us to cherish every bit

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., I.48

<sup>49</sup> Livy, *The Rise of Rome, Books 1-5*, trans. T.J. Luce (Oxford University Press: 1998), 4



of freedom we have and to use it while we have it to fight for a renewal of the character and forms proper to a free people.

Yet, if we are unsuccessful, what will happen when the next political crisis happens twenty years more down the road of the moral devolution of an entertainment-mad people? While Livy might have drawn hope from the success of the early Roman kings, we will likely benefit more from looking to imperial historians such as Tacitus and Gibbon. They offer sobering reflections for those who might consider the blessings of monarchy as a solution to vice: virtue under a monarchy wears a much different face than under a republic. Loyalty to the ruler becomes the key virtue, flattery the most successful means of advancement, dissimulation the only protection for the just. Shakespeare's Julius Caesar expresses the natural distrust even a benevolent military emperor has for those who think independently: "He reads much; / He is a great observer and he looks / Quite through the deeds of men." (1.2.202-204) Caesar prefers men like Antony, who respond, "When Caesar says 'do this,' it is perform'd," and who enjoy the pleasant favors that an emperor can bestow. Antony's love for Caesar is pitifully expressed in his impromptu eulogy at the scene of the assassination. His funeral speech rouses the crowd's love for Caesar to overwhelm Brutus' cry to love Rome more. These are the virtues of the publically virtuous man under a benevolent emperor secure in his power derived from loyalty. Even under such good monarchs, independently-minded men of honor will find it difficult to exercise their virtues and should perhaps be warned to flee the center of attention and turn their virtue in other, less public directions.



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