DEMOCRACY’S GREAT OPPONENT:
THE PROBLEM OF OLIGARCHY IN
ANCIENT AND MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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To Sharon
For the Shape of Her Heart
CONTENTS

PREFACE: “Why and How We Should Study Oligarchy” .................. 1

CHAPTER ONE: “Investigating Michels’ Iron Law” ........................ 10

CHAPTER TWO: “Plato on the Oligarchic Soul” .......................... 20

CHAPTER THREE: “Aristotle on Oligarchic Regimes” ................. 43

CHAPTER FOUR: “Hobbes and Locke on Acquisitiveness and Oligarchy” .................. 76

CHAPTER FIVE: “Montesquieu on Oligarchic Republicanism” ...... 104

CHAPTER SIX: “The Federalist and Oligarchy in America” .......... 135

CHAPTER SEVEN: “Recovering Lost Insight” .......................... 160
WHY AND HOW WE SHOULD STUDY OLIGARCHY

I. Why We Should Study Oligarchy

a. Starting with Liberal Democracy

This work seeks to address and clarify the problem of oligarchy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, oligarchy is "government by the few" or "a form of government in which a few persons or families hold power" (OED 1989). But etymology does little to clarify the nature of oligarchy because it does not say who constitutes "the few", nor why those "few" desire to rule, nor whether they deserve to rule. More importantly, the word itself does not explain why contemporary political scientists should care what oligarchy is.

As James Ceaser points out, "liberal democracy is home to most political scientists, and most political scientists make liberal democracy -- or some aspect of it -- the focus of their life's work" (Ceaser 1990, 1). As political scientists, understanding and improving liberal democracy are our most immediate concerns. But Ceaser also notes that "to say that political science may assist liberal democracy in no way means that this task exhausts its purposes or constitutes its only or highest horizon" (Ceaser 1990, 3). The purpose of political science is, in other words, not merely politically salutary. Rather, as Christopher Bruell argues, political science at its most comprehensive seeks to gain a rational understanding of the political mathemata, the most important of which is the idea of nobility embodied in justice (Bruell 1987, 105, 109). For justice is the one thing unique to political action and discourse. Rightly understood, then, political science is first and foremost the study of justice.

As contemporary political scientists, therefore, our first concern should be with investigating the principles of justice at the core of our liberal democratic regime. This engagement with liberal democracy is not simply parochial. According to the argument made

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1 As a number of contemporary commentators have pointed out, liberal democracy tries to hide its "regime character" by burying the question of justice or the right way of life underneath a concern with life simply (see, for example, MacIntyre 1988; Beiner 1992; Fukuyama 1992). But as Michael Sandel observes, disputes over justice within liberal democracies cannot be limited to procedural matters. They inevitably raise substantive questions about what is right or just action, and thereby what is the right or just way of life (Sandel 1982, ch. 1).
prominent by Francis Fukuyama, it is demanded by the fact that while "the current wave of democratization has probably crested, and we will be in for a period of retrenchment over the next few years", nevertheless "all of the major systematic alternatives to liberal democracy have collapsed, one by one" (Fukuyama 1991, 664). According to these observers, "there are no serious ideological competitors left to liberal democracy" outside of the theocratic politics espoused in parts of the Islamic world (Fukuyama 1992, 211). Hence for many analysts like Fukuyama, modern liberal democracy is the dominant force shaping politics around the world. Oligarchy is dead, along with the other opponents of liberal democracy -- from Filmer and the divine right of kings to Marx and scientific socialism. They have all been defeated because of the appeal of liberal democracy's central ideas, the core of which is individual and collective self-government based on natural or human rights (cf. Fukuyama 1992, 211-12). Given the apparent triumph of liberal democracy, why then should we study oligarchy, which seems to have gone the way of the dinosaur?

b. The Return of Oligarchy?

There does indeed seem to have been a decline in the twentieth century of oligarchy as a political regime. The few "oligarchs" remaining in power in Latin America, Africa, Russia, and East Asia are nearly unanimous in their proclamations of allegiance to democratic principles (cf. Jackson & Rosberg 1982, 5-6; Lewin 1987, 25). At their boldest, the contemporary proponents of undemocratic political systems (e.g. "Asian values" paternalism) argue that democracy must have a different form in their countries, or that it must be realized in a more circumspect manner. They are forced to be hypocritical because no one today seriously claims that oligarchy is a better regime than democracy, liberal or otherwise. Thus while it may be true, as Spencer Wearst notes, that oligarchies are "a historically more numerous class of republics" than democracies, the unquestionable dominance of the democratic notion of justice makes oligarchy seem no longer threatening to democracy (Wearst 1998, 1). As a result, oligarchy no longer appears to deserve urgent study by those interested in contemporary liberal democracy or in politics generally.³

Yet this appearance is deceptive. As Frank Sorauf notes, an increasing number of observers now charge that recent trends have given rise to "a new plutocracy" or even an "oligarchy" within Western liberal democracies, especially in the United States (Sorauf 1994, 367). The

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2 The very refusal of contemporary "oligarchs" openly to assert the oligarchic basis of their authority raises the question whether there are any real oligarchs left (cf. Lewin 1987, 25).
3 In contrast, the Greco-Roman thinkers recognized oligarchy as the great political challenger to democracy. Openly oligarchic revolutions were not uncommon, as we learn from ancient writers such as Thucydides and Polybius (cf. Orwin 1994, 71-72; Syme 1988, 56-7).
commentator Kevin Phillips claims, for example, that liberal democracy is veering away from its economic and political principles and becoming more oligarchic. In his view, "declining manufacturing competitiveness, stagnant real wages, and increased economic polarization" translate into a growing division within liberal democratic societies between "haves" and "have-nots" (Phillips 1994, 17). John McCloughry worries that these economic divisions eventually will entail political divisions that will give rise to the rule of the few over the many, who will be "the prisoners of a parasitical class that exists to manipulate government to transfer wealth into the favored pockets of a few" (McCloughry 1998, 93). Michael Patrick Allen's study of wealth concentration and political influence purports to show that liberal democracy is in fact increasingly marked by the presence of "a super-rich class" who "exert a pervasive influence in social and political affairs at both the local and national level" (Allen 1987, 3). In the view of these observers, liberal democratic practice is in danger of becoming irredeemably oligarchic.

This possible trend toward oligarchy may be exacerbated by emerging world-wide social and economic forces, especially the global economy. According to Robert Kaplan, it is becoming more and more possible "that the democracy we are encouraging in many poor parts of the world is an integral part of a transformation toward new forms of authoritarianism; that democracy in the United States is at greater risk than ever before, and from obscure sources; and that many future regimes, ours especially, could resemble the oligarchies of ancient Athens and Sparta more than they do the current government in Washington" (Kaplan 1997, 56). Indeed, Kaplan contends that given current trends it is "conceivable that corporations will, like the rulers of Sparta and Athens, project power to the advantage of the well-off while satisfying the servile twenty-first-century populace with the equivalent of breads and circuses" (Kaplan 1997, 80). He argues that based on the nature and consequences of economic globalization, "the differences between oligarchy and democracy and between ancient democracy and our own could be far subtler than we think" (Kaplan 1997, 80). He concludes that global conditions are fast making the world ripe for a new rise of oligarchy, raising the serious question whether oligarchy is vanquished or merely biding its time. The very possibility that oligarchy may rise again should make contemporary political scientists concerned with understanding it.

**c. Is Oligarchy a Political Fact of Liberal Democracy? Of All Politics?**

Aside from future concerns, there is an even more urgent reason to return to the study of oligarchy: namely, the charge that the liberal democratic world is already oligarchic at its theoretical core. According to this view, liberal democracies will become increasingly oligarchic not because of hostile global conditions but simply as liberal democratic principles work
themselves out in practice (cf. Macpherson 1977, 108). Jennifer Nedelsky argues that in the case of the United States, for example, the regime is marked by an intentionally "shallow conception of democracy and a system of institutions that allocates political power unequally and fails to foster political participation" (Nedelsky 1990, 1). It is in the nature of the regime that the rich dominate politically and the rest of society is shut out. Is liberal democracy so fundamentally oligarchic that it betrays our deeply-held attachment to its notion of justice, which we have taken to be democratic? Can we in good conscience be supporters of liberal democracy? The only way to explore these questions is to understand what oligarchy is, for then we can compare its notion of justice with that of liberal democracy.

We also need to understand oligarchy for an even more fundamental reason: some political scientists argue that there has been an intrinsic connection between all political systems, not just liberal democracy, and oligarchy. In their view, all politics is or has been the politics of oligarchy. Based on his historical survey of Western governments, Michael Harsgor claims that "l'histoire de toute société jusqu'à nos jours est premierement celle de ses oligarchies" (Harsgor 1994, 7). Javier Tusell adds that "en todos los sistemas políticos, sea cual su funcionamiento, hay una clase política o una élite de poder que desempeña el papel de protagonista" (Tusell 1976, 268).

Those who accept the historical fact of oligarchy have generally reacted in one of two ways. Progressive or revolutionary political scientists accept "hidden oligarchies" as the truth about the past and present, but they believe that a truly democratic politics is possible if political organizations are gutted of their oligarchic core (cf. Wolfe 1985, 386). They need to study oligarchy in order to know how to overcome the stumbling block of all previous attempts to realize democratic aspirations. Other political scientists deny the possibility of any such reform. For example, C.W. Cassinelli contends that oligarchy is an historical fact because it is the effectual truth of democracy and of all political systems (cf. Cassinelli 1961). Unfortunately, if all political systems are necessarily oligarchic, the oligarchic character of liberal democracy is neither surprising nor shocking. It is simply like all other regimes. At worst, liberal democracy is a deliberate deception that can be seen as such once we understand the true (i.e. oligarchic) character of politics. At best, our regime must be excused as a noble but vain effort to create an altogether new but ultimately unrealizable kind of politics. But to know if this sobering argument is true, we must first study oligarchy. Thus no matter how we react to the historical fact of oligarchy, we cannot neglect its study.

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4 Others such as C.B. Macpherson argue that the United States is only the most extreme example of this general problem in liberal democracy (Macpherson 1977, 109).
In either case, the importance of oligarchy implies that contemporary political scientists -- whether we study liberal democracy or other political systems -- must be concerned with understanding "government by the few". We must investigate oligarchy in order to understand whether all politics -- including liberal democratic politics -- is oligarchic, for only then can we see more fully the possibilities and limitations of our politics and of politics *per se*. For if politics is necessarily oligarchic, can we be devoted to "democratic" politics or even to politics at all? Can such political devotion satisfy our desire to find a complete understanding of justice on which to base our lives? A renewed study of oligarchy thus promises three fundamental benefits to contemporary political scientists: first, we can better understand a regime that has been the great historical rival of democracy; second, we can better understand why oligarchy may challenge liberal democracy in the future; and finally, we can recover some neglected insight into the nature of our own regime and its prospects for reform and improvement. This last point is especially important in the search for a full and compelling notion of justice on which to found our individual and collective ways of life.

II. How We Should Study Oligarchy

a. The Current Approach

As we have limned it, understanding the problem of oligarchy calls for a specific method of analysis. We have chosen to interpret several major sets of philosophical writings -- those of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbess, Locke, Montesquieu, and *The Federalist*. Thus our investigation of oligarchy belongs fundamentally to political philosophy and not to comparative politics or some other field of empirical study. We hope, however, that this work can affect the way in which those studies are conducted by providing new principles of inquiry to guide empirical research.

5 Of course, it is possible that the study of oligarchy will not dissolve political loyalties but transfer them to non-democratic politics. According to Alford, this happened to Robert Michels, the greatest modern student of oligarchy, who "toward the end of his life" embraced "elitism, and ultimately fascism" (Alford 1985, 295).

6 Although this approach may seem unusual, it is wholly consistent with the original character of political science. As the founder of this science, Socrates attempted to ascend from the opinions about justice and nobility given by the democracy of his day by taking seriously rival notions of the just and noble offered by the opponents of democracy, prominent among whom were the oligarchs. This work represents an attempt to bring the spirit of Socratic dialectic to bear on the question of oligarchy.
Given the current method of most oligarchy studies, this choice in favor of political philosophy must be justified. According to Julie Fisher, the dominant mode of studying oligarchy today is the comparative-historical-empirical study (Fisher 1994, 129). Clearly, these studies are helpful in gathering important data that illuminate the empirical workings of oligarchy. But they do not seek to understand oligarchy with a view to grappling with what is good and bad in it. They avoid the moral component of oligarchy because they refuse to incorporate "value-judgments" into their analysis. For example, even though Fisher explicitly admits that justice is a fundamental concern of politics, she does not believe that we can learn anything decisive about oligarchy by examining its notion of right and wrong (Fisher 1994, 129). Her refusal, like those of others, rests on the assumption that the central concerns of politics such as justice are not open to scientific or rational investigation. As a result, she and many others (e.g. Alford 1985, Hutchcroft 1994) deny that we can learn anything about oligarchy as a political entity: that is, as something which by their own admission embodies and generates social values. Unfortunately, as Ceaser notes, political science cannot be "value-free" without becoming merely an exercise in intellectual curiosity devoid of any real practical guidance for our lives (Ceaser 1990, 5). As such, it loses the very power that makes it so attractive to liberal democrats seeking to understand how to best order contemporary social and political life.

b. The Need for Political Philosophy

Ironically, at the same time that contemporary political scientists neglect to study the values at the core of oligarchy, they often presume that oligarchy is unjust. Fisher, for example, repeatedly calls oligarchy "selfish" and treats it as manifestly exploitative (cf. Fisher 1994, 129). In fact, contemporary studies often label a system as oligarchic and then presume -- without further argument -- that its injustice has been demonstrated. In this respect, "value-free" studies are actually "ideological": that is, attempts to demonstrate the goodness of their political opinions by appealing to standards they embrace but do not in fact justify. There are, of course, openly ideological studies of oligarchy that acknowledge their embrace of values and value-judgments (cf. Wood and Wood 1978). While such studies may provide helpful analysis of oligarchic values, they still assume the goodness of their own perspective. As a result, ideological studies -- whether they are open about their character or whether they hide behind value-free analysis -- cannot yield any insights from their encounter with oligarchy that would force contemporary political scientists to re-think and deepen their own values. Yet it is precisely

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this goal that makes the study of oligarchy compelling for liberal democrats perplexed by the claim that their regime is unjust and unworthy of their study or devotion.

To do justice to the reality of oligarchy, then, we are left with political philosophy. In contrast to the value-free and ideological approaches, political philosophy seeks to provide a normative yet scientific understanding of regimes, including oligarchy (cf. Bruell 1987, 91). This task requires us to engage in an investigation of oligarchy which, while not assuming what a fully healthy politics looks like, will not rest content with mere descriptions of fact nor judgments of value. We must seek to understand oligarchy as an empirical and value-laden fact of the political world.

III. The Organization of this Work

a. The Division of Chapters

Even if political philosophy is the correct way to study oligarchy, the question still remains why this approach requires our particular selection and division of authors. The debate between ancients and moderns sets the framework for our investigation of oligarchy because liberal democrats believe (or used to believe) that modern political institutions have overcome what the ancients saw as the intractable problems of politics, including the problem of oligarchy. If the critics have shaken our confidence that liberal democracy has vanquished oligarchy, we must return to the source of our political science and recover the insights of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and The Federalist.

Despite the diversity of authors, there is a clear path in this work from Plato to The Federalist. In chapter one, we introduce the subject of oligarchy in greater detail by examining its contemporary study, especially as rooted in the work of Robert Michels. Chapter two begins our study of the great texts of political philosophy. In this chapter, we examine Plato's account of a conversation in which Socrates, the founder of political philosophy, discusses the oligarchic soul. Chapter three investigates Aristotle's critique of oligarchy, which enlarges and refines Socrates' discussion by applying his treatment of the oligarchic soul to the world of actual regimes. With Plato and Aristotle we have, as Sir Ronald Syme notes, the two ancient treatments of oligarchy that served as authoritative models for many subsequent thinkers, including the most important medievals such as St. Thomas (Syme 1988, 56).

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8 For Thomas' Aristotelian classification of regimes (including oligarchy), see his essay On Kingship, chapter one (Aquinas 1988, 266).
Chapter four starts our section on the moderns. We begin with Machiavelli, the author of the modern break with the ancient and medieval political tradition. We turn next in the chapter to Hobbes and Locke. Working within the modern intellectual framework created by Machiavelli, Hobbes articulates a new and decisively different understanding of the political psychology of acquisition, one explicitly based on a rejection of Aristotelian and Scholastic political science. Locke refines Hobbes' political psychology in order to transform the Hobbesian power seeker into the "industrious and rational" person who is the foundation of liberal democratic politics and the antithesis of the old-fashioned oligarch. In chapter five, we analyze the thought of Montesquieu, who modifies and applies Locke's teaching on the acquisitive psychology to produce a liberal political science that can guide legislators in their study and reform of oligarchies as well as their establishment of new liberal republics. Chapter six is an analysis of The Federalist, where we find the first and most important application of the liberal principles of Locke and Montesquieu to the actual founding of a new system of republican government that claims to have overcome the theoretical problem of oligarchy. The Federalist's presentation of the American regime is, in this respect, the "case study" in our examination of the problem of oligarchy in ancient and modern political thought. Chapter seven concludes with a discussion of whether the ancients or moderns provide more insight into the problem of oligarchy.

b. The Problem of Oligarchy: Ancients vs. Moderns

Despite their common foundation in the Western tradition of political philosophy, we must note from the outset that the ancients and moderns neither agree on how serious a disease oligarchy is nor on what causes this sickness. Plato and Aristotle see the political ambition of the wealthy and acquisitive as an expression (albeit a distorted one) of the human need for the noble that finds an outlet in exclusive political authority and honor. Because they believe that acquisitiveness has an inherently political element, they maintain that the rich and acquisitive inevitably turn to political activity. Oligarchy is therefore a permanent political problem that can be tempered but not exorcised from the city. Beginning with Machiavelli, the moderns contend that acquisitiveness, not a desire for nobility or justice, is the fundamental political passion. For Machiavelli, the acquisitive few are not inescapably moved by a noble desire but by a desire for

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9 The disagreement between the ancients and the moderns over the problem of oligarchy illustrates the decisively different character of their political philosophy. The ancients consider their analysis of oligarchy to be most important as part of a treatment of regimes that leads to the circumscription of the political life in favor of a higher life, that of contemplation. For them, the highest value of a study of oligarchy is that it helps to shed light on the defective character of politics as such. In contrast, the moderns are united in the view that philosophic contemplation is valuable because of its usefulness for the life of political and economic activity. Their study of oligarchy is part of an attempt to overcome (rather than illuminate) the political problem through a new understanding of Nature and human nature.
command. According to Hobbes, the desire for command is a vanity that can be overcome through the cultivation of the fear of sovereign and the desire to acquire material profit. Locke removes fear of the sovereign and substitutes the desire for rational freedom as the check on political domination by the wealthy and acquisitive few. While disagreeing to some extent with Locke's understanding of acquisitiveness, Montesquieu lays out a liberal commercial order that can overcome the political problems caused by acquisitiveness that tend to undermine both oligarchic and democratic republics. Finally, The Federalist uses much of Locke's political psychology and Montesquieu's political science to create a liberal republicanism designed to protect property and channel political ambition into a commercial way of life.

In this work, we hope to show that the founders of liberal democracy built a science of politics that deliberately incorporated a new view of the political psychology of acquisition. As far as oligarchy goes, this new view is optimistic. Some of the moderns go so far as to suggest that the desire to acquire can be liberated without giving rise to oligarchy. The ancient understanding is more circumspect; it sees an immutable connection in the political psychology of acquisitiveness between the desire to acquire and the desire to rule. Given this fundamental difference between ancients and moderns, the primary focus in the chapters to follow is therefore on understanding how the acquisitive psychology elaborated by the ancients is transformed by the moderns. While they agree that oligarchic acquisition is rooted in a moral passion, they divide on this fundamental question: Is the moral passion underlying acquisitiveness rooted in the need for self-transcendence or self-preservation? By examining the views of the ancients and the moderns on what motivates oligarchs, whether oligarchs can be made less dangerous, whether they must be given a share of political authority, and how the attraction of oligarchy illuminates the deficiencies of democracy, we hope to clarify their more fundamental disagreement on what constitutes justice and the right way of life for human beings, both individually and collectively.

All of these questions are addressed with a view toward illuminating our position as political scientists and citizens trying to understand liberal democratic justice. To the extent that the apparent "oligarchization" of liberal democracy is true, perhaps the moderns have misplaced their confidence in their ability to remove oligarchic aspects from the acquisitive psychology. To the extent that oligarchic tension exists in liberal democratic politics, it may be the result of the attempt to build a regime that accepts and promotes human acquisitiveness without seeing the full political danger lurking in such an endeavor. Given this possibility, our goal in understanding the problem of oligarchy must include helping to foster the self-critical distance necessary for the existence of a truly healthy democratic politics. To begin this task, we turn to the prevailing opinion about oligarchy, for that is what most powerfully prevents us from having a genuine confrontation with democracy's great opponent.
CHAPTER ONE
OLIGARCHY AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCIENCE: INVESTIGATING MICHELS' "IRON LAW"

I. The Importance of Michels' Work

Today's common and authoritative opinion about oligarchy has its roots in Robert Michels' pathbreaking work, *Political Parties*. Written just prior to World War I, the book is an attempt to criticize the argument of democratic movements, especially socialists, that there can be a new kind of truly egalitarian politics that overcomes oligarchy of all kinds. *Political Parties* confronts the democratic argument head on by examining the structure of European socialist parties, especially the German Social Democratic Party (then one of the largest and most influential left-wing parties). Because it purports to show that parties most committed to democracy are themselves hopelessly oligarchic, the book has had enormous intellectual and political implications for democratic politics.

Because of its importance, *Political Parties* is considered by many observers to be the standard reference for those interested in studying oligarchy (Fisher 1994, 129). Seymour Martin Lipset claims, for example, that "the status of *Political Parties* as a classic of social

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1 Even before Michels, in the 1880s Gaetano Mosca -- inspired by Hippolyte Taine's analysis of the aristocrats who held power in pre-Revolutionary France -- argued that "if one looks at any country, be it commonly known as a monarchy, a tyranny, a republic, or whatever you will, one inevitably finds that actual power is wielded never by one person, the monarch or head of state, nor yet by the whole community of citizens, but by a particular group of people which is always very small in numbers compared to the whole population" (Mosca 1939, ix). Mosca's conclusion is that "contrary to theories of majority rule... societies are always ruled by minorities, by oligarchies" (Mosca 1939, xv). Mosca understands oligarchy as any "ruling class" (based on military valor, wealth, religion, learning, or heredity) that has effective political control over a country, regardless of whether such a class makes any claim to merit ruling. More specifically, Mosca attributes the rise of oligarchies of the rich to a "series of gradual alterations in the social structure whereby a type of political organization, which we shall call the feudal state, is transformed into an essentially different type, which we shall term the bureaucratic state" (Mosca 1939, 57). This bureaucratic state promotes regular property rules that protect private accumulation and thereby lay the groundwork for a "transformation" in which "wealth produces political power just as political power has been producing wealth" (Mosca 1939, 57). Mosca explicitly claims that such analysis belongs to "the field of political science", not sociology -- which he says has arisen from efforts "to synthesize and co-ordinate" the results of the nineteenth century's subdivision and specialization of political science (Mosca 1939, 2). However insightful Mosca's theory of a "ruling class" may be (and this is open to question, given its lack of analysis of oligarchic values), Lipset shows that as a kind of transition from the traditional political science "founded by Aristotle" to a "truly scientific" political sociology, much of Mosca's influence was eclipsed in the 20th century by the growth of the kind of value-free political sociology inspired by Michels' work (Mosca 1939, 6; Lipset 1999, 21-22).
science has been attested to many times” (Lipset 1999, 21). In fact, he argues that “the seeming accuracy of Michels’ predictions concerning the future behavior of political parties and other voluntary democratic organizations, combined with the fact that he specified the processes responsible for such developments, have made Political Parties one of the twentieth century’s most influential books” (Lipset 1999, 20). It is, Lipset concludes, a work of enduring interest to “those concerned with political action as well as those interested from a scholarly point of view” (Lipset 1999, 20). The book owes its continuing significance to Michels’ contention that there is an “Iron Law of Oligarchy” that governs “every disciplined political aggregate” (Michels 1959, 401).² C. Fred Alford, one of Michels’ foremost contemporary interpreters, notes that the book has spawned numerous attempts over the last 80 years to substantiate or disprove its central thesis that “who says organization, says oligarchy” (Alford 1985, 295).³ Surveying that work, Joel Wolfe concludes that “since Michels’ challenge, democratic theory has never convincingly reasserted” its claim that politics can be democratic (Wolfe 1985, 373). Because of the book’s great challenge for democracy, it is the lodestar for those who desire to understand whether the study of liberal democracy, and indeed of all politics, necessarily requires the study of oligarchy.

II. Michels’ Modern Sociological Method

The full title of Michels’ book -- Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy -- indicates that it is not a work of political science but of sociology. He justifies his sociological approach to politics by saying that the “aim of the present work” is to fill in the gap left by the lack of an adequate “analysis of the nature of party” by those engaged in the study of political organizations (ix). As Michels understands it, sociology is the scientific (rational and dispassionate) study of the forces that shape social life, among which are political organizations such as parties and governments (viii).⁴ According to Michels, a scientific sociological study can explain the effects of political forces, but it cannot attempt to know their causes because politics originates in and remains linked to human values, which cannot be analyzed scientifically. A science of political values is impossible because reason does not have the power to inquire into right and wrong nor to establish principles of justice; as Michels says, there is an unbridgeable gap between social facts and political values, which are “qua political, outside the realm of science” (10). He does not shrink away from the logical

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² Hereafter in this chapter, all parenthetical page numbers refer to Michels 1959.
⁴ For Michels, politics is one force among many in society, not the source of society’s organizing principles.
conclusion that the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" is therefore "like every other sociological law, beyond good and evil" (viii).

Despite his attempt to use a value-free approach, Michels wants to understand oligarchy for a value-laden purpose: to uncover and help address "the problem of democracy" that has arisen in "the last hundred and fifty years" (vii). Since the French Revolution, democratic hopes have become powerful but have been frustrated by oligarchic social forces whose "causes... may have been handed down to us from an earlier epoch", but whose effects have only become deeply problematic as democratic aspirations have grown (vii). In short, the "problem of democracy" is the gap between our democratic aspirations and our oligarchic reality. Because this reality is not the product of time-transcending values but of changing social forces, oligarchy must be studied through a new sociological method if there is to be any hope of realizing even some of our democratic goals. Hence in Michels' view, the pre-modern, pre-sociological understanding of oligarchy cannot provide "a more precise formulation" of the problem because shifting socio-economic conditions have changed the problem so dramatically that earlier philosophical insights have become obsolete (vii).⁵

III. Michels' Understanding of Oligarchy

a. What is Oligarchy?

How then does Michels' sociological approach understand the problem of oligarchy? If we start with his use of the word "oligarchy", we see that Political Parties uses some derivative of it nearly a hundred times. However, it does not once offer a formal definition. Generally speaking, Michels assumes the sufficiency of the word's literal meaning; for example, he calls oligarchy

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⁵ In this regard, it is worth noting the epigraph to Michels' last chapter taken from Rousseau's Du Contrat Social: "A prendre le terme dans la rigeur de l'acception il n'a jamais existé de véritable démocratie, et il n'en existera jamais. Il est contre l'ordre naturel que le grand nombre gouverne, et que le petit soit gouverné" (Michels 1959, 400).

⁶ Michels suggests that oligarchy manifests itself most under modern social and economic conditions that give free rein to the forces that lead to its formation. While he admits that these oligarchic forces are rooted in "human psychology", he contends that this psychology can only be seen clearly under modern conditions, when its susceptibility to "oligarchical tendencies" is brought out fully (vii). But how can Michels be confident that there is no distinctly modern oligarchic psychology (or pre-modern, for that matter)? He implicitly rejects this possibility, but he attempts no comparison of modern and premodern understandings of the psyche nor any comparison of ancient and modern views on the political psychology of oligarchy and democracy. Without such a discussion, however, it is difficult to see how Michels can demonstrate that oligarchy is peculiar to modern democracy. His treatment leaves open two possibilities: either human psychology is historically conditioned (and hence there is no transhistorical "Iron Law of Oligarchy") or oligarchy is not limited to modern conditions (and hence the "Iron Law" can and must be supplemented and modified by insights from early modern and pre-modern analyses of oligarchy). In either case, Michels' sociological method stands in need of supplement by political philosophy.

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the "heaping-up" of power "in the hands of a few" (13). At various times, however, he also equates oligarchic rule with "absolute monarchy" (1), "aristocracy" (2), "conservative" principles (3), "bureaucratic tendencies" (35), and even government by "elected representatives" (221). And within an oligarchy of the wealthy, there are the "landed gentry" of traditional privileges (6) as well as the "bloated plutocrats" of modern capitalism (4) who are the "great bourgeois princes" forming an "aristocracy of millionaires" (17). In modern times, then, all of these are forms of oligarchy, which can be anything from an hereditary feudal system to a clique of robber barons to a military junta to the Department of Motor Vehicles.8

According to Michels, so long as a few people in an organization exclusively hold power over the rest, it is an oligarchy. Oligarchies as such are hierarchies of power fundamentally opposed to the democratic principle of "self-government", by which Michels means the rule of all by all (1). Is it adequate, however, to define oligarchy negatively -- as simply any form of rule that is not or does not aspire to be democratic? Given Michels' own admission that that political entities rest on and embody certain values, do we not need to understand the values peculiar to oligarchy in order to understand all of its various forms? Does the definition of oligarchy not require laying out the values that make oligarchy what it is?9

7 Unfortunately, shifting and imprecise terminology is common in studies of oligarchy. For example, despite their welcome refusal to reduce oligarchy to a mere sociological force, Jackson and Rosberg seem to equate oligarchic rule with "personal rule", "institutionless government", and "the conservative characteristics of princely rule" (Jackson and Rosberg 1982, 2, 6, 83). Moreover, they do not explain or critique the foundation of the "informal rule" of a "privileged few" (Jackson and Rosberg 1982, 6). Other authors have made similar mistakes. Sir Ronald Syme's advocacy of the study of oligarchic systems as "a paradigm for political science" is helpful in calling attention to the pervasive political power exercised by the "propertied and educated classes" in the ancient world, especially in Rome's oligarchic "governing order" (Syme 1988, 58, 69). But Syme frequently confuses oligarchies with "aristocracies" and claims that the Roman "nobles... were not inspired by ideals or intent on carrying out a programme" (compare Syme 1988, 60 with 65, and 70 with 71). He simply ignores the possibility that oligarchy -- including that of the ancient world -- is a separate regime based on its own notion of justice and that oligarchs are motivated by a moral passion. Others like M.T.W. Arnheim recognize that "the ancients used 'oligarchy' for the 'bad' type of rule by the few" (Arnheim 1977, 10). Unfortunately, Arnheim refuses to take that classification seriously and says that in his book, "the word 'oligarchy' will be used as a generic term for all types of government by a minority class or group, whether the criterion of membership... is wealth, race, ability, birth, religion or freckles on the nose" (Arnheim 1977, 11). As a result, he classifies aristocracy (the subject of his study) "as a sub-species of oligarchy", thus replicating the problems with Michels' apolitical analysis (Arnheim 1977, 11).

8 This variety in definition is found in other studies of oligarchy, especially "the case study". One prominent example is Linda Lewin's often insightful study of regional oligarchy in Brazil, especially during the Old Republic and Second Empire periods. In her work, Lewin employs the word "oligarchy" to mean "factional politics", "national electoral system" wedded to "extended family clans", and "government based on the patriarchal family structure" (Lewin 1987, 9, 16, 21). She is correct in saying that all of these are forms of rule by the few, but she neglects to say whether each has an unique moral foundation. Hence she labels the legislature of the Brazilian state of Paraiba an oligarchy even though "the incumbents routinely denied that they were an oligarchy" (Lewin 1987, 25). Yet it is a question whether rulers can be called oligarchs if they are unwilling to make the moral argument for oligarchy, which Paraiba's property qualification for office already implied. Because Lewin neglects to even consider the moral aspect of oligarchy, her work -- although useful -- falls short of a comprehensive account of Brazil's oligarchic politics and is an example of the analytical problems generated by the application of Michels' approach to the study of real-world oligarchies.

9 Alford tries to remedy this deficiency in Political Parties by arguing that Michels is concerned with "oligarchies of expertise" and not "another type of oligarchy: the control of the polis by families of great wealth and influence" (Alford 1985, 276). According to Alford, however, we can apply the lessons from Michels' work "to... both kinds of
b. The Origins of Oligarchy

Despite his value-free sociology, Michels actually discusses oligarchic values in his treatment of the origins of oligarchy. According to him, oligarchy is an organizational problem -- "who says organization, says oligarchy" -- with three causes (401). First, human beings lack self-sufficiency, which requires groups of them to organize themselves in a corporate body, the type of which varies depending on the need to be addressed (e.g. criminal gangs, businesses, labor unions, governments) (26-27). Next, organization requires specialization and assignment in order effectively to meet those needs (27-28). Finally, specialization and assignment require hierarchy because someone must determine and assign specialties (31). This hierarchy must be long-standing if those at the top are to have sufficient knowledge of correct assignments. Michels claims that this need for a long-term hierarchy "naturally leads to the development of a cadre of leaders" who become permanently ensconced in office (cf. Alford 1985, 296). In Michels' view, such a permanent structural hierarchy is an oligarchy (32).

But why can long-standing leaders not be replaced before an organization becomes permanently oligarchic? While oligarchic hierarchies are occasioned by organizational imperatives, they are deeply rooted in "the natural endowments of human beings" (361, n. 13). According to Michels, filling a hierarchy of offices by constant rotation cannot solve the problem because human inequality always asserts itself and then ossifies into a permanent organizational hierarchy (cf. Part V, chapter four). The particular inequality most relevant for Michels is psychological inequality. He claims -- in a section entitled "The Need for Leadership Felt by the Mass" -- that the "mass" of people want to be led by permanent, powerful leaders who will take care of their needs (53). "The childish character of the proletarian psychology" leads the masses to "venerate" their beneficent leaders out of a "religious" impulse that survives in the "ruins of the old moral world" (67). The psychology of the masses, then, is defined by their need to adore and be taken care of by their benefactor. If that benefactor is not a god, it will be a leader (67).
The masses' desire for leadership, however, does not by itself bring oligarchy into existence; there must be leaders willing to rule permanently. Contrary to some contemporary interpretations of the "Iron Law", Michels does not believe that oligarchy is rooted in "self-serving behavior by the few at the expense of the many" (Fisher 1994, 130). In fact, he contends quite the opposite; in his view, there is no "personal motive whatever" in the leaders' actions (206). In a chapter entitled "Psychological Metamorphosis of the Leaders", Michels explains that their desire to rule originates in the fact that leaders are "pushed forward by a clearer vision, by a profounder sentiment, and by a more ardent desire for the general good" (206). Indeed, they "have adhered to the cause... on moral grounds, or from enthusiasm, or from scientific conviction", and "their only motives have been the spirit of sacrifice and the love of battle" (209-10). Thus it is the leaders' need to reshape an organization according to their understanding of the common good that gives birth to their passion to rule permanently.

Why then do such noble human beings become domineering leaders with "a natural greed for power" (205)? According to Michels, the "pernicious" and "universal desire to dominate" is awakened by the "permanent exercise of leadership"; in effect, the problem is not in the nature of the leaders but in the transformation of their nature once in office. When leaders acquire power, they become concerned with maintaining and increasing their power; in this respect, they acquire a love of power that becomes "second nature". They augment their own power because leadership, far from being pleasant, is hard, fatiguing, and entails sacrifices such as "persecution, imprisonment, exile", and even "premature death" (59-60). Once the leaders begin to sacrifice for those they rule, they believe that they deserve greater authority as a result of their sacrifice and do everything they can to acquire such authority. When they gain such increased authority, they also acquire increasingly difficult responsibility, which in turn augments their consciousness of merit, which leads to a feeling that they deserve more authority, which impels them to seek more power. Michels concludes in the last sentence of the book that "it is probable that this cruel game will continue without end" (408).

While the noble motivations of leaders compels them to desire more and more power, it is their vanity that makes permanently (and often violently) unwilling to share power. According to Michels, the masses' adoration awakens in the office-holder a consciousness of his power, which "always produces vanity, an undue belief in personal greatness" (206). With this powerful belief in their personal greatness, leaders come to regard the position as their own and are very unlikely to give it up; no one else can do the job or even deserves to try (206-07, n. 8; 372-73).  

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12 In this regard, it is fascinating to note Michels' prescient observation that the leaders' desire to maintain their...

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According to Michels, "even the purest of idealists who attains to power for a few years is unable to escape the corruption which the exercise of power carries in its train" (391). Indeed, "the abandonment of a public position at the cost of great efforts and many years of struggle is a luxury which only a 'grand seigneur' or a man exceptionally endowed with the spirit of self-sacrifice can afford" (206). Michels concludes that there are never enough people of such extraordinary nobility to prevent the "Iron Law" from taking effect, making oligarchy the fate of all political organizations, especially governments -- which are usually large, very hierarchic, and have top positions that seem most entrusted with the general good (206).

**c. Economic Oligarchies**

According to Michels, the "Iron Law" applies to all types of political organizations, including those whose basis of rule is economic (wealth in some form). These economic oligarchies are "plutocracies", of which there can be a number of different kinds -- rule by wealthy landowners, rule by mercantile-industrialists, rule by corporations (4, 6, 17). While such plutocracies have an "echeloned pyramidal structure" typical of all oligarchies, they are often not as extreme in their oligarchic character as "administrative" oligarchies (34-35, n. 27). These latter are oligarchies whose rulers hold office based on their moral, bureaucratic, or military qualifications (i.e. commitment to the common good, technical knowledge, victories or rank). From Michels' point of view, these "administrative' oligarchies are more important to study because they "terminate in a point, being dynastic, while in the other the apex is truncated, the hierarchy being plutocratic" (34-35, n. 27). Thus Michels studies Socialist political parties rather than traditional land-owning aristocracies.

According to Michels, plutocracies are less extreme types of oligarchy because they are formed from different motives than other types. Unlike the high-minded idealists who acquire and hold political power out of a passion to benefit the whole, the "bloated plutocrats" rule simply to protect or increase their wealth or family name (15). Thus plutocracy lacks any exclusive power holds true not only for Socialist political parties but also for Marxist states (383). In fact, Michels predicts that a Marxist state will be one of the most powerfully oligarchic political systems because it leaders will have struggled for a "noble" cause and will have no way to continue their "line" except by transmitting their offices through a small clique of cadres (384). In his study of the Soviet politics, Hammer confirms that the Soviet Union was marked by the "politics of oligarchy" (Hammer 1986, 1). He cites Lenin's statement that the Politburo of his time was "a full-fledged 'oligarchy'" in which "power was exercised on behalf of the people by a party controlled by a group of five men" (1). Unfortunately, Hammer misunderstands the meaning of oligarchy when he claims that the Politburo was an oligarchy which ruled "on behalf of the people". As we will see, true oligarchs argue that a regime should not be concerned with serving "the people". Hammer neglects this argument because he bases his analysis of the Soviet Union on a misinterpretation of the political classifications developed by "the political philosophers of the ancient world" (1). In his view, the ancients "classified governments" only "according to the number of people who shared political power" (1). Unfortunately, he ignores Aristotle's explicit distinction between regimes based not only on the number of people ruling but also on their notion of what constitutes justice and the common good.

13 Unfortunately, Michels does not say what gives some people an exceptional spirit of self-sacrifice.
creditable “values” claim, a problem it often tries to overcome by corrupting and co-opting values-giving institutions such as religion. While it might seem that the plutocrats’ lack of any serious claim to merit rule would make them more inclined to act selfishly once in power, the opposite is true; the idealists -- both bourgeois and socialist -- believe that they alone deserve to hold permanent power because of the splendor of their cause (e.g. “The Liberation of the Entire Human Race”) and their own personal high-mindedness (15). Paradoxically, then, the plutocrats have a less tenacious passion to hold exclusive power because they have no possible claim to wield power for the sake of the common good (35, n. 27). Thus, for example, some limited democratization of suffrage has been possible within plutocratic political systems that could not take place in administrative organizations such as a Socialist political party.

d. Making Value-Judgments on Oligarchy?

Even though Michels considers oligarchy in all its forms (especially its plutocratic one) as a phenomenon whose value-claims are beyond the purview of sociological science, he oddly does not abandon the idea of a rationally discernible justice that can guide judgments about the value of certain political systems. In the penultimate paragraph of Political Parties, he declares that “those alone, perhaps, are in a position to pass a fair judgment upon democracy who, without lapsing into dilettanist sentimentalism, recognize that all scientific and human ideals have relative values” (407). What then is this standard of political value judgments?

Surprisingly, Michels finds that standard not in democracy but in “pure aristocracy”. He says that “the ideal government would doubtless be that of an aristocracy of persons at once morally good and technically efficient” (407). He concludes, therefore, that “if we wish to estimate the value of democracy, we must do so in comparison with its converse, pure aristocracy” (407). Such an aristocracy is the ideal -- the true standard of goodness -- because it is fully moral (intending to secure the common good) and efficient (capable of securing the common good). In effect, aristocracy provides the ideal toward which democratic self-government aspires. Unfortunately, because such a pure aristocracy is impossible due to the “Iron Law” of oligarchic corruption, Michels concludes that “as a form of social life we must choose democracy as the least of evils” (407).

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14 In its division of facts and values, Michels’ sociology resembles that of his contemporary Max Weber, whom he quotes twice in footnotes in Political Parties -- both times as a scientific observer (see Michels 1959, 230, 305).

15 This conclusion is in some tension with Michels’ pronouncement in the “Preface” that “it is far from this author’s intention to pass moral judgment upon any political party or any system of government” (viii).

16 However, Michels does add the caveat that democracy must be preferred over aristocracy “where the hereditary principle remains in operation” (407). Hence he appears to suggest that elected aristocracy of ‘grand seigneurs’ could actually occur: “we may find it sometimes, though very rarely, as the outcome of deliberate selection” (407). Yet almost immediately after saying this, Michels talks about “the advantages which democracy, however imperfect, presents over aristocracy, even at its best” (407 -- emphasis added). It is unclear, then, whether he ultimately values
While Michels is willing to make these judgments on democracy and aristocracy, he refuses to do the same with oligarchy, especially in its plutocratic form, because it is beyond moral judgment. While aristocracy and democracy come into being through their appeals to the common good, oligarchy arises when organizational necessity and mass-leader psychology replaces moral argument. Oligarchy is the perverse effectual truth of both aristocracy and democracy. However, without an explicit concern for the common good, oligarchy lacks an animating moral principle, which removes it from the “eternal struggles... between aristocracy and democracy” over which system best secures justice (377). For Michels, then, the connection between oligarchy and aristocracy is merely the fact that both are the permanent rule of a few. Likewise, oligarchy and democracy have no moral connection or antagonism: oligarchy is not a competing moral or political system but the amoral negation of democracy that frustrates the realization of democratic hopes.17

E. Criticizing Michels’ Understanding: Could There be a Moral Foundation to Oligarchy?

Clearly, Michels shows that sociology, even in its “value-free” form, can make sound, interesting, and worthwhile observations about political organizations within the constraints of the fact-value distinction. Indeed, using such a sociological method he is able to distinguish among oligarchies, showing that “plutocracy” is an important kind of oligarchy (among many). Nevertheless, by calling plutocracy one kind of oligarchy, he implies that it shares with the others an origin in impersonal sociological forces of organization. Thus his analysis of plutocracy as a form of oligarchy pays no attention to whatever ethical arguments plutocrats might make. To the extent he differentiates the causes of plutocracy, he makes plutocracy seem less political by arguing that it is not animated by even the easily perverted moral passion that fuels bureaucracies or dictatorships of the proletariat. As a result, Michels does not explain whether some economic passions may have a distinctly political component that seeks satisfaction in holding political power.

In failing to address this issue, Michels ignores the possibility -- as his interpreter Alford seems to recognize -- that the acquisitive psychology contains within it the same kind of political passion for justice that leads the idealist to do whatever is necessary to maintain his power in an “administrative” oligarchy (cf. Alford 1985, 296). In short, Michels does not investigate whether aristocracy or democracy as the best form of government.

17 Despite oligarchy’s status as an amoral social force, Michels laments its “tragic necessity” and attempts to expose the “Bonapartist Ideology” that justifies oligarchic tendencies in an effort to curtail the influence of oligarchic leaders (400, 390). In short, Michels is emphatically a partisan of democracy (especially democratic socialism), albeit a deeply disappointed partisan (cf. 405-06). This partisanship leads him to say that oligarchy is a “disease” (cf. viii, 406). Like a disease, however, oligarchy is bad, not evil; it is not the product of intentional malice but of social-psychological forces “beyond good and evil”.

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an oligarchy of the rich is itself a value-laden political entity that arises from the political psychology of the wealthy and acquisitive. It is not surprising, then, that in following the trail blazed by Michels, today's dominant mode of analyzing oligarchies ignores whether some people really are "oligarchs" who believe that they merit political power based on principles of justice that in their view are superior to the alternatives, especially those of democracy. Thus while quite valuable in putting the problem of oligarchy squarely in front of those concerned about democracy, Michels' work -- and the contemporary sociological science that flows from it -- cannot guide an investigation of whether oligarchies in their plutocratic form may be a permanent political problem because they have a specific notion of justice that is a powerful alternative to aristocracy or democracy, one which strikes a moral chord in the political psychology of the rich and acquisitive.

In the chapters that follow, our task is to unearth the alternative view of oligarchy that has been buried in the 20th century by the success of Michels' work. Through that effort, we hope to revive a philosophic approach to oligarchy that understands it as a value-laden entity whose moral foundations are rooted in the political psychology of those who acquire oligarchic power. In so doing, we hope to broaden and deepen the way political science understands what oligarchy is and why it remains a serious concern for our liberal democratic world. We now begin our excavation by turning to Plato's Socrates, the first person who "called philosophy down from heaven and forced it to make inquiries about life and manners and good and bad things" (cf. Cicero, Tusculan Disputations ch. V. sec. 10). As the first philosopher of politics, Socrates was a partisan of neither democracy nor oligarchy, but rather sought to understand and evaluate the moral claims of the oligarchs so that he could find the truly best regime, the one that solves the problem of justice.
CHAPTER TWO
PLATO'S EXAMINATION OF THE OLIGARCHIC SOUL

I. Socrates' Treatment of Oligarchy
as an Example of Platonic Political Science

The purpose of this chapter is to understand Plato's treatment of oligarchy and to explore his teaching on the relationship between oligarchy and the best regime. Plato's most systematic analysis of oligarchic regimes is found in Book VIII of the Republic, in which Socrates is having a conversation with Glaucon and Adeimantus, two young Athenian gentlemen who also happen to be the brothers of Plato.1 In the beginning of Book VIII, the conversation returns to a discussion interrupted at the end of Book IV about the relative justice of five regimes: aristocracy (the rule of philosopher-kings), timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny.2 Glaucon states that the conversation resumes the interrupted discussion of cities and souls "so that, when we have seen them all and agreed which man is best and which is worst, we could consider whether the best man is happiest and the worst most wretched" (544a). The conversation's ultimate focus on the happiness of the just life means, as Socrates says, that the ensuing discussion in Book VIII is dedicated only to "outlining a regime's figure in speech and not working out its details precisely, since even the outline is sufficient for seeing the justest man and the unjustest one, and it is an impossibly long job to go through all the regimes and all the dispositions and leave nothing out" (548c-d). His account of oligarchy is therefore not adequate from the perspective of a comprehensive political science because it does not examine the multiplicity and variety of oligarchic regimes. Instead, it attempts to lay bare oligarchy's nature to the extent necessary for showing Glaucon and Adeimantus why oligarchy is an unjust and unhappy arrangement of the human soul.3

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all citations of the Republic are taken from the Bloom translation, 1991. Greek references from the Republic are taken from the Hermann edition as found in the Loeb/Shorey edition, 1987.

2 In the Platonic corpus, oligarchy also appears in the Statesman (301a, 302d), Laws (710c, 712c), Apology (32c), Menexenus (238e), Epist. V (321d), and Epist. VII (326, 348a).

3 This emphasis on educating Glaucon and Adeimantus to the poverty of the oligarchic life (and all other unjust lives) is in keeping with Socrates' professed desire to offer "a complete consideration of how pure justice is related to pure injustice with respect to the happiness and wretchedness of the men possessing them" (545a).
Yet Book VIII's focus on the soul does not make its discussion of oligarchy a poor example of Platonic political science. In fact, for Plato the examination of the oligarchic soul is absolutely necessary for a rigorous political science because the regime acquires its own character from the psyche of those who establish and hold the ruling offices. As Socrates asks Glaucon at the beginning of the Book, "do you suppose that the regimes arise 'from an oak or rocks' and not from the dispositions of the men in the cities, which, tipping the scale as it were, draw the rest along with them" (544d-e)? In this respect, Socrates claims that oligarchs create oligarchy, directly reversing Michels' contention. Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to understanding Plato's view of the oligarchic soul from which comes the oligarchic city. But we should follow Socrates' lead and "first investigate what justice is like in the cities. Then, we'll also go on to consider it in individuals" (368e-369a). So we turn first to the oligarchic city.

II. The Rise of Oligarchy: 550c-551b

a. From the Best Regime to Timocracy

In Socrates' account of the five regimes from the aristocracy of philosopher-kings to the tyranny of one person, oligarchy is the middle regime and comes after timocracy. Timocracy itself comes into existence because there is a "chaotic mixing of iron with silver and bronze with gold" in the ruling group of the best regime due to the failure of its eugenics program to ensure that only the best offspring of the citizens (gold and silver children) enter the ruling group (546d). As a result, the bronze and iron individuals among the new rulers (those with the souls of farmers and artisans) pull "the regime toward money-making and the possession of land, houses, gold, and silver" while the gold and silver-souled rulers attempt to lead "the souls toward virtue and the ancient establishment" (547b). After a struggle, the two sides come "to an agreement on a middle way" according to which the city allows "land and houses" to be held privately and those in the "new"

4 Commentators differ widely in their interpretation of Socrates' famous account of the problem of the best city's eugenics program and the "nuptial number". For example, Benardette calls the nuptial number "mumbo-jumbo" while Bloom attempts to show that it is part of Plato's response to Aristophanes' "characterization of the problems which beset" Socratic political inquiry (compare Benardette 1989, 185 & Bloom 1991, 467-68).

5 Although Socrates is speaking here to Glaucon, it is worth noting that he now calls the philosophic city-in-speech "the ancient establishment" (547b). This serves the valuable rhetorical purpose of connecting philosophy and the ancestral, thereby muting the potential danger to the established laws of the city that some listeners might feel is posed by philosophic discussion. Since Adeimantus has shown himself to be most interested in preserving the city's traditional nomoi, especially through education, this remark seems directed most to him (Bloom 1991, 415). Not surprisingly, his interest is piqued after Socrates' comments and he interrupts Glaucon to become Socrates' interlocutor quite shortly after this passage (cf. 548d). For Socrates' possible motive, at least with Glaucon, see Xenophon, Memorabilia, 3.6.
bronze and iron classes to be “enslaved and held as serfs and domestics” (547c). The new gold and silver classes are attached to private property but turn themselves to the things of “war”. However, they do this not for the sake of service to the city (as with the guardians) but in order to maintain their rule over “these men” who are now their slaves and enemies (547c). Thus while timocrats “desire money just as those in oligarchies do”, the rulers in the new timocratic regime are split between money-making and the war-like pursuits associated with the rulers of the best regime (548a).

b. From Timocracy to Oligarchy

According to Socrates, oligarchy emerges out of timocracy’s mixture of the open love of honor and the hidden love of money. After Socrates states that oligarchy follows timocracy, Adeimantus demands: “What kind of regime do you mean by oligarchy” (550c)? Adeimantus is uncertain because unlike the regimes discussed so far -- “aristocracy” (rule of the best) and “timocracy” (rule of honor-loving warriors) -- “oligarchy” only indicates how many people rule, not their claim to rule (cf. 544c). In response to the question of his young interlocutor, Socrates clarifies the nature of oligarchy by claiming that it is “the regime founded on a property assessment in which the rich rule and the poor man has no part” (550d). Oligarchy therefore is the rule of wealth and the wealthy. Strictly speaking, however, the rule of wealth should be called (as Michels does) “plutocracy”, not oligarchy. In conflating the rule of wealth and the rule of the few, Socrates replicates a tension at the heart of oligarchy between honor and wealth: if oligarchy were simply concerned with money, then the richest person would hold all of the highest offices in a simple one-to-one correspondence of wealth and political authority (other rich people with less wealth might be simply ministers or administrators). Instead, all who meet the minimum property assessment (timema) may have some share in rule and public honor.

The political consequence of this tension between wealth and honor is evident in Socrates’ discussion of “the transformation from timarchy to oligarchy” (550d). Under the agreement that

6 For this reason, Socrates calls timocracy “a certain middle between aristocracy and oligarchy” (547c). However, he omits the fact that the timocrats are experts only in war, whereas the rulers in the best regime also “have proved best in philosophy” (543a). As Socrates later stresses, there is no musical or philosophic education in timocracy, or in any of the other unjust regimes in Book VIII. The lack of philosophy in the city corresponds with injustice.

7 Oligarchy is the only regime whose nature or definition Adeimantus does not immediately think he knows (compare 547d & 548d, 557a-b, and 562d-e; but also see 562c).

8 Assessment (timema) indicates the oligarchy’s connection with honor (time) as well as money (Bloom 1991, 468 n. 9). Oligarchy’s combination makes it an especially attractive regime for Adeimantus, a young man who loves both honor and money (cf. 419a).

9 Socrates claims that “the way [timocracy] is transformed is obvious even to a blind man”, at which point Adeimantus asks: “How” (550d)? Given that Adeimantus is worse than blind (i.e. he cannot see but does not know it), is Socrates’ presentation of oligarchy not as rigorously clear-sighted as it would have been with a different interlocutor (see Strauss 1964, 53-55, 73-75)?
transformed the just city into a timocracy, the rulers in a timocracy own private property, although the regime has a law requiring a public show of austerity meant to reinforce a concern with military virtue and honor (550d). According to Socrates, the private ownership of wealth plants the seeds of timocracy's destruction because it gives timocrats the opportunity to "seek out expenditures for themselves and pervert the laws in that direction" (550d). They soon break the austerity law because their love of victory compels them to engage in an open spending "rivalry" using the money they had previously acquired in secret (550d). The timocrats still compete to acquire honor, but the field of battle has changed from war to money-making as wealth becomes more and more the source of honor. According to Socrates, this change undermines the regime because over time the timocrats "finally become lovers of money-making and money; and they praise and admire the wealthy man and bring him to the ruling offices, while they dishonor the poor man" (551a). At this point, those successful in economic competition replace great warriors as the archetypes of human excellence.

Timocracy is not overthrown, however, until wealth officially replaces military reputation as the requirement for holding political office. This happens when the rich who were chosen to run timocracy "then set down a law defining an oligarchic regime by fixing an assessment of a sum of money -- where it's more of an oligarchy, the sum is greater, where less of an oligarchy, less" (551b). According to Socrates, the property assessment is "put into effect by force of arms or, before it comes to that, they arouse fear and so establish this regime" (551b). The new rulers (and their timocratic allies) employ this force against the poor timocrats "whose substance is not up to the level of the fixed assessment" and who therefore lose their public offices and honor. Socrates does not yet say, though, why some spirited warriors embrace the change to money-making while others refuse to direct their competitive energy toward the acquisition of wealth. Yet he is satisfied with his account because it persuades Adeimantus that oligarchy can be reduced to the problem of

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10 The spirited timocrats' support for establishing an oligarchy is crucial for two reasons: first, money-makers concern themselves acquiring wealth and so might not have the time or inclination to establish a political regime; and second, money-makers would not likely be willing to use the threat of force against poor timocrats that is necessary for imposing oligarchy's property assessment.

11 Interestingly, Socrates says that oligarchies with higher property assessments are simply "more of" an oligarchy, not that they are fundamentally different in character from less restrictive regimes. As we will see, Aristotle contends that the relationship between the amount of the assessment and the nature of the regime is a much more complex question than presented here by Socrates.

12 Those who oppose the establishment of oligarchy are clearly not the poor of the bronze and iron group -- they are not said to be violent, and if they are concerned about politics they would welcome a change to a regime in which their money-making way of life is appreciated (cf. 565a). Nor do the poor referred to here include the people enslaved by the "agreement" that created timocracy (even though the timocrats' military vigilance against the slaves indicates that they judge them capable of violence) (cf. 547c). Indeed, slaves should welcome a change from timocracy to oligarchy because the rigidly harsh timocrats would be replaced by business people who analyze the question of slavery in terms of efficiency rather than honor. As a result, such people might be willing to lessen or abolish slavery if such a move were more conducive to money-making (cf. 549a).
understanding money-making (cf. 551b). A closer reading reveals, however, that while Socrates wants oligarchy to appear rooted in a departure from a concern with honor, he quietly shows that this regime is deeply linked to a new sense of honor connected with wealth rather than martial accomplishments. The problem for Socrates is how to articulate the relationship in oligarchy between honor and money so that Adeimantus does not become politically interested in this regime but does believe that it is better than the one that follows it in the movement of regimes away from philosopher-kings (i.e. democracy). In order to cement Adeimantus’ respect for the activity of philosophers, Socrates must get him to think that each regime farther away from the city-in-speech represents a degeneration from virtue. This is only possible if Adeimantus believes that oligarchy is better than democracy but worse than the previous two, and ultimately not worthy of his loyalty.

III. The Character of Oligarchy: 551c-553a

a. Oligarchy’s Mistakes

After Socrates declares that “this is, then, speaking generally, its establishment”, Adeimantus somewhat eagerly demands: “But what is the character of the regime? And what were the mistakes which we were saying it contains” (551c)? According to Socrates, oligarchy’s character can be understood not by what it does right but by its five characteristic “mistakes”: it chooses rulers based on wealth rather than political skill; it creates factional conflict between the rich and the poor; it is unconcerned with military virtue and unable to fight wars; it encourages its rulers to practice more than one art; and it liberates the acquisition of private property from all constraints. Taken together, these criticisms imply that unlike its predecessors, this regime confuses political and economic issues, ultimately subordinating politics to economics. In this sense, oligarchy’s mistakes are presented to Adeimantus as lowering the dignity of the political community.

According to Socrates, oligarchy’s first mistake is “the very thing that defines the regime”: it chooses rulers based on wealth, not political skill (551c). Actually, oligarchy does not ignore political virtue so much as equate financial success with political ability. If one is rich, one must be a good ruler. In this respect, oligarchy is simply following the pattern set by the timocrats who became so intoxicated by money that they believed that the people most successful in money-making must be the wisest and best human beings and therefore the best rulers.13 Oligarchy therefore does not abandon the idea that politics is based on the notion that the wisest or best should rule. Rather, it changes the city’s understanding of who is the wisest or best, from the

13. At the very least, the timocrats turn to the wealthy because they believe that the rich would know how best to
warrior to the rich person. Socrates holds wealth per se to have little or no connection with political merit.

Oligarchy's first mistake leads directly to its second problem: namely, that it "of necessity" divides the city into two hostile factions, creating "the city of the poor and the city of the rich, dwelling together in the same place, ever plotting against each other" (551d). Socrates contends that while factions do not first appear under oligarchy -- timocracy had such sharp divisions between free and slave that the rulers live under constant threat of slave revolt (cf. 547c) -- it is the first regime to combine economic and political divisions. By giving political authority and honor exclusively to the rich, it transforms the private economic division between rich and poor into a public distinction between those to whom the city accords dignity and those it does not. Since authoritative political office is the highest honor in the city, this new inequality elevates the rich to a qualifiedly higher honor than could be obtained by mere private wealth. At the same time, it radically debases the poor by adding the sting of dishonor to the privations of poverty. For poor people who do not care about honor and simply want to escape poverty, this new politicization of economic class may mean little. But for lovers of honor like the poor timocrats, there is no longer

arrange the city's laws for making money.

Socrates forces Adeimantus to agree that the rulers of a city should be the most skilled, not the wealthiest, but Adeimantus' reluctance is instructive. When Socrates tries to connect the sailor's art and the political art by asking: "isn't this also so for any other kind of rule whatever", Adeimantus only reluctantly agrees: "So I suppose, at least" (551c). To this, Socrates demands: "Except for a city. Or does it also apply to a city" (551c)? Socrates is obviously anxious to gain Adeimantus' agreement that politics is like sailing in so far as possession of wealth does not indicate possession of either the captain's or the ruler's virtue. Despite this pressure, Adeimantus can only bring himself to respond half-heartedly -- "It looks like it" -- when Socrates declares that "then oligarchy would contain the one mistake that is of such proportions" (551d). Adeimantus is reluctant to deny every connection between wealth and political merit in part because he may discern some real connection between wealth and political wisdom and in part because denying such a connection would mean that in a world almost exclusively made up of oligarchies and democracies. Athenian democracy (which he despises) would be the only regime in the real-world left for him to support (551c). It seems that oligarchy's hierarchical distinctions do have some appeal to those not enamored of democratic egalitarianism.

To oligarchy's division of the city, Adeimantus swears: "No, by Zeus, that's no less of a mistake" (551d). His oath is the first of his three invocations in Book VIII of the highest god -- in all three examples there is the presence or threat of civil strife. (The other two invocations of Zeus are in response to the need for the oligarchs to "cut out" the class of "idle extravagant men" and for the people to drive out the tyrant [564c; 569a].) Adeimantus' response is so strong because divisions between rich and poor destroy his cherished idea that there can be a unified city to which all parts can render service consistent with their happiness (cf. 419a-421b).

As Aristotle makes clear, true oligarchs regard the many not just as poor but as akin to "beasts" (Politics 1281b18-20). For an American example of such oligarchic contempt, see Nedelsky's discussion of Governeur Morris' attitude toward the prospect of democratic participation (Nedelsky 1990).
any hope for dignity except by the overthrow of oligarchy.\textsuperscript{17} Such poor men thus become the implacable enemies of the regime, whose overthrow becomes a “necessity” (551d).\textsuperscript{18}

The presence of a dangerous internal enemy causes oligarchy’s third (and central) mistake: it is unable “to fight any war” (551e). Socrates argues that the regime’s military incapacity comes from the rulers’ fear of arming “the multitude” (plethos), whom they are “more afraid of... than the enemy” because foreign enemies are not as immediate a threat to property as an army of the poor (551e). Because the wealthy would rather risk defeat by foreigners than achieve victory with the help of the poor, they usually fight with only a few troops, showing up “as true oligarchs on the field of battle” (551e). The city’s military prowess simultaneously suffers “on account of [the money-makers] not being willing to contribute money because they love it” (551e). Since the oligarchs believe that ruling is not an opportunity to serve the good of the city but a way to preserve their private goods, they will not risk their substance for the city’s preservation. Faced with these arguments, Adeimantus admits that it is “not a fine thing” for fear and greed to prevent rulers of a city from rousing the spiritedness necessary to defend their city against foreign enemies (551e).\textsuperscript{19}

According to Socrates, the fact that oligarchs are not single-minded servants of the city gives rise to the regime’s fourth mistake: its rulers have “that tendency to be busybodies we were condemning long ago -- the same men in such a regime engaged in farming, money-making and war-making at the same” (551e). Socrates is correct in saying that unlike the best regime (and even timocracy), oligarchy does not strictly adhere to the principle of “one man, one art” (a principle first articulated by Adeimantus [370b]). But do the rich actually farm or make war? As we have seen, they avoid war, and they seem to deriving their wealth from commerce, trade, and speculation, not gentleman-farming (cf. 551e, 555a, 555c). Why then would Socrates say that the rich are quite willing to carry out a number of activities at once? He wants to show Adeimantus that wealthy money-makers (i.e. those who become oligarchs) choose occupations not because they believe that some jobs are better on a hierarchical order of natural excellence, but because some activities produce more money than others. He wants to convince Adeimantus that while oligarchy appears to have dignity because it creates public distinctions between rich and poor, those distinctions are not based on natural merit. This argument serves to strengthen Adeimantus’ conviction that oligarchy is “in no way whatsoever” as noble as its proponents like to claim (552a).

\textsuperscript{17} Hence even though money-makers are “exactly the kind of men the multitude praises”, poor timocrats hate the rich (554a).

\textsuperscript{18} Because these poor honor-lovers come together as enemies of the regime, Socrates calls them a separate city within the city (551d).

\textsuperscript{19} Although the young man agrees that oligarchy’s incapacity is “not a fine thing”, his response is not too strong compared with his prior oath (“By Zeus”) (551e). It seems that the ignobility of the regime’s weakness does not affect him in a powerful way -- like the money-makers, the somewhat pedestrian Adeimantus is not outraged by a
Oligarchy’s neglect of “one man, one art” figures prominently in the last and “greatest of all these evils” besetting the regime: it allows “one man to sell everything that belongs to him and another to get hold of it; and when he has sold it, allowing him to live in the city without belonging to any of its parts” (552a). According to Socrates, oligarchy is the first regime to liberate acquisition of private property from limitation by law or custom. This liberation has the dangerous consequence that the outstanding money-makers become “super rich” while those without such skills become “out-and-out poor” and “without means” to earn back their property and their place in the city (552a-b). By not ensuring that all people can support themselves and their families by practicing a specific techne, oligarchy fosters greater and greater economic inequality and recklessly exacerbates the political tensions between rich and poor that it created by imposing a property assessment.21

b. The Effect of Oligarchy’s Mistakes

In discussing these five mistakes associated with the property assessment “that defines the regime”, Socrates has tried to thwart any possible attachment to oligarchic notions of honor by showing Adeimantus that the regime inherently debases political excellence, creates disunity in the city, saps the city’s martial strength, violates the basis for political justice, and neglects the city’s job of educating its citizens to care for the common good. The cumulative effect of these mistakes is to create a city in which a few very rich people use political office to exploit the rest of the city in order to line their pockets. The ruled hate the rulers, who have no concern for them or for the common good. Indeed, the rulers do not even have the good sense to mollify the ruled by spreading around some of their wealth. Because of these divisions, the city is susceptible to foreign attack and internal factional conflict, making it both ignoble and unstable.

All of these ignoble errors occur because oligarchy embraces the idea that the city exists to protect and foster the acquisition of property. Oligarchy accepts this understanding of the city because it believes that the money-maker’s life is the best way of life. While the regime’s litany of evils convinces Adeimantus that its view of the city is ultimately base, he is reluctant to turn his back entirely on oligarchy because he believes that in comparison to the drones the oligarchs are somehow noble or represent something noble that the city needs. As the discussion continues,

1 lack of military vigor (cf. Strauss 1964, 104).
20 Plato presents this more typical division of rich and poor (rather than of iron/bronze, silver, gold) as the crucial political division in the Laws, where the Athenian Stranger recommends a fairly rigid four-class system of voting in order to ensure a good distribution of property and a relatively mixed regime. Interestingly, the Stranger claims that regulating private property is the most important element in a city’s preservation (Laws, 736c).
21 While oligarchies do not necessarily enshrine unlimited acquisition in law, Socrates maintains that “this sort of thing is at least not prevented” in such a regime (552b).
Socrates draws out what in oligarchy appeals to a morally serious and civic-minded young man like Adeimantus and thus what may be responsible for the power of oligarchy's political appeal.

IV. The Transition from Oligarchy to Democracy: 555b-556a

a. The Growth of the Drones

Perhaps the most important long-term consequence of oligarchy's mistakes is the creation and growth of the drone class, which ultimately brings about oligarchy's destruction. At first, Socrates claims to Adeimantus that the drones are profligate former timocrats who lose their wealth (and hence their honor) to the oligarchs. He says that they are useless because they do not belong to any of the four "parts" of "profit to the city" -- "money-maker", "craftsman", "knight", or "hoplite" (552a).22 Those timocrats who resign themselves to oligarchy are "stingless drones" who "end up as beggars in old age" (552d). But those who remain angry at their loss of honor become drones with "terrible stings" who lash out at the propertied rulers by becoming "thieves, cutpurses, temple robbers, and craftsmen of all such evils" (552d).23 According to Socrates, "the ruling offices... diligently hold down [the wrongdoers] by force", showing that the rich have become willing to aggressively defend their property, at least in the case of immediate threats like crime (552e). Yet just after portraying oligarchs as bold defenders of the law and raising Adeimantus' indignation against the lawless drones, Socrates makes it clear that the drones are created by oligarchy's "want of education, bad rearing, and bad arrangement of the regime" (552e). Thus Adeimantus transfers his indignation to oligarchy on the grounds that if the regime were not so exclusively focused on making and honoring money, it could educate people to be moderate with their money or it could use the law to encourage them to be a contributing part of the city.24

According to Socrates, oligarchy falls to democracy "as a result of the insatiable character of the good that oligarchy proposes for itself -- the necessity of becoming as rich as possible" (555b). The rulers are so "insatiable" in their pursuit of money because they want to "become richer and more honored", which implies that as they become wealthier, some money-makers begin to value

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22 Socrates' four categories of profitable occupations now involve only financial or military matters -- those associated with music or philosophy have been dropped. By inference, Socrates now accords some dignity to the money-maker even though such a person had been made to seem contemptible compared with other human beings (cf. 551a).

23 Socrates attributes the creation of both two types of drones to "the god", thereby implicitly repudiating the earlier agreement he had reached with Adeimantus that the gods must not be said to be the authors or source of any evil (cf. 552d; 380c, 383c).
money as much as a means to honor as to material security (555c). But to convince Adeimantus that oligarchy's attachment to honor is fatally weakened by its attachment to wealth, Socrates must persuade him that satisfying the desire for money does not lead upward to timocratic love of honor but downward to democratic love of license. Only then can he successfully argue that while oligarchy has elements of nobility, it cannot be a noble political order worthy of Adeimantus' support.

Accordingly, Socrates begins his account of the collapse of oligarchy by stating that the drones now "sit idly in the city, fitted out with stings and fully armed, some owing debts, some dishonored, and some both, hating and plotting against those who acquired what belongs to them and all the rest too, gripped by a love of change" (555d). As economic inequality increases as a result of the rulers taking advantage of others in the city, the number of those disaffected with the regime grows and makes "the drone and the beggar great in the city" (555e).\textsuperscript{25} While the oligarchs violently suppress the growing number of property crimes, "they aren't willing to quench this kind of evil" by instituting reforms in the city's nomoi so that "the citizens would make money less shamelessly in the city and fewer evils of the kind we were just describing would grow in it" (555b).\textsuperscript{26} In addition, the oligarchs have "neglected everything except money-making and paid no more attention to virtue than the poor" (556c). As a result, their children become "luxurious and without taste for work of body or of soul, too soft to resist pleasures and pains, and too idle" (556b-c).\textsuperscript{27} The poor see this lack of vigor and courage "when the rulers and the ruled, each prepared in this fashion, come alongside each other" and observe "one another in dangers" (556c-d).\textsuperscript{28} There the "lean, tanned poor man" sees the rich "panting and full of perplexity" and "passes the word to the other: 'These men are ours. For they are nothing'" (556d). While the poor have grown in number and boldness, the families of the rich have become so absorbed in private

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\textsuperscript{24} As we will see, Aristotle suggests that portraying oligarchy as nothing but a money-making regime is, in critical respects, too simple; he notes, for example, that the oligarchy at Thebes deliberately excludes money-makers from holding office (Politics, 1278a24-26).

\textsuperscript{25} While the rulers are sensible enough not to arm the poor and employ them in the city's army, they foolishly ignore the drones' smoldering anger and "with heads bent down, not seeming to see these men, wound with injections of silver any man among the remainder who yields" (555e).

\textsuperscript{26} As examples of reform, Socrates claims that oligarchy could "prevent a man from doing what he wants with his property" or could require that "most voluntary contracts are to be made at the contractor's own risk" (556a-b). These recommendations are akin to those made by the Athenian Stranger for the regime in the Laws (cf. 736d-737a). They show that despite Socrates' fatalistic account of the rise and fall of regimes, he is aware of the important role a wise legislator or statesman can play in the preservation and reform of regimes.

\textsuperscript{27} Adeimantus' contemptuous retort ("what else could they be?") indicates how disgusted he is by oligarchy's failure to educate the young for service to the city (556c).

\textsuperscript{28} Socrates states that the rich and poor meet "either wayfaring or in some other community, on trips to religious festivals or in campaigns" (556c). The central element in this list ("religious festivals") is of special interest because it is the only time that Socrates mentions religion in connection with oligarchy. If the rich and poor attend the same religious festivals, either the oligarchic city has no special gods (except perhaps Plutus) or the poor worship the gods of the rich (especially Plutus).
luxurious pleasure that they have lost the thymotic spark that made the previous generation capable of ruling an oligarchic regime and suppressing its poor enemies.

b. The Democratic Revolution

At this point, the emboldened poor act on their festering hatred and attack the oligarchs. Democracy replaces oligarchy either when the rulers withdraw "due to fear" or "when the poor win, killing some of the others and casting out some, and share the regime and the ruling offices with those who are left on an equal basis" (557a). In Socrates' account of regimes, oligarchy is the only one to fall by means of a violent revolution rather than through conspiracy (how democracy falls to tyranny) or agreement (how the best regime becomes timocracy, and how timocracy changes into oligarchy). Oligarchy is more intransigent than other regimes because at least some of the rich will not abandon the notion that office-holders should meet a clear and measurable standard for office -- a property assessment. Part of their resistance to even the gradual elimination of the assessment is due to their fear of confiscations if the poor are allowed to hold office and rule the city (cf. 564e). But the oligarchs resist in part because they are angry that "for the most part, the offices in [democracy] are given by lot" and not based on a distinction between the rich and the poor (557a). They recognize that by accepting political distinction "only if [the office-holder] says he's well disposed toward the multitude", democracy repudiates the oligarchic idea that there are hierarchies between people that should be the basis of public honor (558d). From the oligarchs' perspective, then, democracy must be resisted to the death because it destroys the order on which oligarchy is based -- the rule of "better" over "worse" (cf. 554d-e, 558c).

However, not all of the rich violently resist the democratic revolution. The true moneymakers gather their belongings and flee when the poor begin to threaten (557a). In contrast, true oligarchs remain and fight because they are more attached to the dignity of their public distinction than to the wealth that gives them such distinction. They are so attached to their distinction because they believe passionately that they deserve it (cf. 565b-c). The difference between money-makers

29 The poor win because "just like a sickly body", the oligarchic city "needs only a slight push from outside to become ill" (556e). According to Socrates, this slight push is provided when "on a small pretext" people "are brought in as allies from outside, from a city under an oligarchy, by the members of one party, from a city under democracy by the members of the other" (556e). Unlike the other regimes discussed by Socrates, foreign affairs plays a key role in the downfall of oligarchy.

30 Despite their triumph, the poor do not exile or kill all of the rich. Some of the old rulers are allowed to remain in the city ostensibly because of the remarkable "gentleness" or easy-goingness of the victors (558a). As Socrates later makes clear, however, the rich are kept around so that the democratic leaders can more easily appropriate their property (564e).

31 Democrats embrace the "law of equality", which holds that all social and political hierarchies are rooted in convention, not nature, and therefore can be created or destroyed by agreement of the majority (cf. 563b-d).

32 Quite sarcastically, Adeimantus says that democracy's hatred of distinction makes it "a very noble regime" (558c).
and oligarchs, then, is the oligarchs' powerful attachment to the justice of their regime, an attachment that fosters the courage or spiritedness necessary to fight even a losing battle against the democrats. Thus it seems that oligarchs are only possible if there is an eruption of spiritedness in the money-maker's soul. Yet how can a money-maker become so spirited, especially if thymotic spiritedness tends to be the province of warriors and therefore of timocracy? Is oligarchy a mix of timocracy and democracy, just as timocracy was "a certain middle between aristocracy and oligarchy" (cf. 547c)? Socrates addresses these critical questions as he sketches for Adeimantus the rise and fall of the oligarchic human being, to which we now turn.

V. The Genesis of the Oligarchic Soul: 553a-d

a. Acquisitiveness and Fear

Socrates' sketch of the oligarchic "man" (anthropos) begins by offering "the principal way in which the transformation from that timocratic man to an oligarchic one takes place" (553a). The oligarch starts as the son of a timocratic father who was a general or "held some other great ruling office" (553b). In the beginning, the son too has a timocratic soul "and at first emulates his father and follows in his footsteps" (553b). But the father "then got entangled with the court -- suffering at the hands of sycophants -- and underwent death, exile, or dishonor and lost his whole substance" (553b). According to Socrates, "the son seeing and suffering this and having lost his substance is frightened and "thrusts love of honor and spiritedness headlong out of the throne of his soul; and humbled by poverty, he turns greedily to money-making; and bit by bit saving and working, he collects money" (553b-c). The trauma of experiencing the ruin of his father changes the son's soul so that "such a man now puts the desiring and money-loving part on the throne, and makes it the great king within himself, girding it with tiaras, collars, and Persian swords" (553c). Indeed, the young man goes so far as to make "the calculating and spirited parts sit by it on the ground on either side and be slaves" to his desire to acquire money (553d).

While Adeimantus readily accepts Socrates' account and confidently agrees that "there is no other transformation so quick and so sure from a young man who loves honor to one who loves

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33 The fact that such people could ruin a high official indicates that the human beings who correspond to the regimes are not in their respective regimes, but in a democratic city (see Bloom 1991, 419). Thus Socrates has in fact dropped the city/soul parallel even while maintaining it for rhetorical purposes.

34 According to Socrates' account, desire enslaves reason and will not let it "calculate about nor consider anything but where more money will come from less" (553d). Similarly, desire enslaves spiritedness and allows it to "admire and honor nothing but wealth and the wealthy, while loving the enjoyment of no other honor than that resulting from the possession of money and anything that happens to contribute to getting it" (553d).
money”, a careful reading shows us a curious fact about Socrates’ presentation: as a timocrat, the son should be angry rather than “frightened” at the unjust dishonoring of his own father (cf. 549e-550b). Why does the son capitulate and retreat into a life of money-making rather than fight back against the sycophants? The key is that he experiences a “fear” so powerful that it dissolves timocratic visions of military honor and shows him that the reputation gained from victory cannot prevent him from losing his “substance” or from suffering “death” at the hands of enemies (553b). In short, fear sobers him up to the reality that he cannot take self-preservation for granted; he must worry first and foremost about securing the means not of glory but simply of life. Fear of physical privation is a fundamental part of the money-maker’s psychology. Without this experience of pressing necessity, the desire to acquire money cannot be born.

b. Acquisitiveness and Honor

At the same time, however, Socrates suggests that fear by itself does not spark powerful acquisitiveness: there must also be a desire for honor or distinction. He claims that the son also turns to money-making because he is “humbled” by poverty, indicating that fear does not destroy the desire for honor he inherited from his timocratic father (cf. 553d). Rather, it changes what he believes will bring him respect, from military accomplishment to money. The son turns to money because it provides a more durable (if less spectacular) kind of honor, one that can resist the attacks of the sycophants and the short memories of the demos. Money gives the son a solid means to stay above privation and to recover the reputation lost by his father, whose military glory failed to restrain the sycophants. In short, no one can push him around if he has money. Thus Socrates portrays the money-maker’s soul as born from a combination of two desires that seem to be compatible: the desire to acquire security and the desire to acquire honor. For the money-maker, wealth satisfies both desires. But as we will now begin to see, Socrates makes it clear to Adeimantus that such a mixture of desires is highly volatile and gives rise to a human being who is disastrously at war within himself.
VI. The Character of the Oligarch: 553e-555a

a. The Oligarch as Money-maker

Socrates begins his discussion of the oligarch's character by asserting that in "giving the highest place to money", the son becomes "stingy and a toiler, satisfying only his necessary desires and not providing for other expenditures" such as "education", which he regards as "vanities" (554a). Upon hearing this indictment, Adeimantus condemns the money-maker for putting "a blind leader over the chorus" and honoring "it above all" (554b). In response, Socrates applauds Adeimantus for seeing that money is "blind" in the sense that it has no inherent direction; it is merely useful and is neither an end in itself nor by nature points toward any particular end. Adeimantus’ contemptuous response shows that for him the money-maker’s exclusive concern with understanding "where more money will come from less" makes him a base and unsympathetic character (553c, 554a).

Socrates adds to Adeimantus’ contempt by saying that the money-maker neglects "education in fair speeches and practices" because he evaluates everything in terms of financial benefit. For someone who believes so strongly in the need for education, this neglect is unforgivable. Moreover, Socrates says that it is disastrous for maintaining the order of his soul because only "argument mixed with music" (the kind of education received by the guardians) can prevent the rise of the "dronelike desires... of the beggar... and wrongdoing variety" (554b). Without such education to discipline his desires or attach them to higher pursuits, the money-maker begins to long for "pleasure... without labor" (554b). He manages "by his general diligence" to hold down this longing because he realizes that releasing it would subvert the self-control necessary to maintain his orderly soul (554c). But because he has neglected education, the money-maker suppresses his "bad desires... not by persuading them that they 'had better not' nor by taming

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35 Actually, Socrates opens the discussion a few lines earlier by asking Adeimantus to "consider if [the young man who loves money] would be like" oligarchy, suggesting that the money-maker and the oligarch do not have exactly the same soul (553e, emphasis added). Socrates’ question is preceded by two statements that call attention to the difference between money-makers and oligarchs (553e; cf. 548e-549b).

36 This is the only time in Book VIII that Socrates praises Adeimantus for speaking well. In addition to the reason given, Socrates also may consider Adeimantus' remark about Plutus (the blind god of money) praiseworthy because it shows that Adeimantus is capable to some extent of presenting philosophical truth in an artful or poetic way. On the ateleological character of money, see Aristotle, Politics 1257b24-35. Not surprisingly, there is a close etymological affinity between "money-maker" (chresimos) and useful (chresimav) (see Bloom 1991, 468 n. 18).

37 According to Socrates, these money-makers’ secret longing for pleasures can be seen in "their guardianship of orphans and any occasion... [which] gives them a considerable license... to spend what belongs to others" (554c). The spectacle of money-makers cheating little children to fulfill their drone desires does not raise Adeimantus’ ire, as indicated by his rather weak response ("true"). He is not disgusted by the lack of grandeur or vigor in the small-souled crimes of the money-makers (contrast this with his brother's earlier enthusiastic portrait of injustice on a grand scale [358b-361d]).
them with argument, but by necessity and fear, doing so because he trembles for his whole substance" (554d). In short, Socrates portrays the money-maker as "in a sense two-fold", torn between the low but seductive desire for immediate pleasure and the higher but more painful task of acquiring the wealth necessary for future security and honor (554d).

b. More Than a Mercenary?

Given this "factional conflict" in the money-maker's soul, it comes as some surprise that Socrates immediately proceeds to tell Adeimantus that "such a man would be more graceful than many" (554e). This remark is especially perplexing because Socrates also argues that "the stingy man is a poor contestant" in politics because he is "not willing to spend money for the sake of good reputation... or any other noble object of ambition in a city" (555a). But without any concern for nobler things, how is the money-maker at all "graceful"? According to Socrates, the money-maker has a certain grace because "for the most part his better desires would master his worse desires" (554e). But is he more than a mercenary? What "better desires" does he have if he is so "afraid to awaken the spendthrift desires and to summon them to an alliance and a love of victory" that he is unable to pursue any "noble object of ambition" (555a)? The noble element in the money-maker's soul, the element that eventually makes the oligarchic order worth fighting for, is brought out in Socrates' discussion of the transition to the democratic soul, to which we now turn.

VII. The Transition to the Democratic Human Being: 558d-561e

a. The Temptation of Pleasure

According to Socrates, the democratic human being starts out as "a son... born to that stingy, oligarchic man, a son reared by his father in his dispositions" (558d). Like his father, the son "forcibly" rules "all pleasures in himself that are spendthrift and do not conduce to money-making, those ones that are called unnecessary" (558d). However, "when a young man reared... without education and stingily, tastes the drones' honey, and has intercourse with fiery, clever beasts who are able to purvey manifold and subtle pleasures with every sort of variety, you presumably suppose that at this point he begins to change from an oligarchic regime within himself

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38 Punctuating his attack with an oath ("by Zeus"), Socrates continues by indicting the money-maker for trying to be "just... in other contractual relations" by "forcibly holding down bad desires" (554c-d). This is also one of the few times in Book VIII that Socrates calls Adeimantus "my friend", perhaps because he realizes that Adeimantus too is forcibly holding down the desire for "what is sweet and easy" because it comes into conflict with his austere notion of what constitutes a rightly-ordered soul (cf. 364a; 419a).
to a democratic one" (559d-e). Once the son grows up and begins to experience the lure of the drone's pleasure, he cannot carry on in his father's footsteps because he always had money and never had to acquire it through his own hard work. He has become "soft" because he never experienced the fear and dishonor of poverty that made his father so radically acquisitive. To the son, his father's way of life is unnecessary and unattractive when compared with the pleasure promised by indulgence of the drone desires.

As the sexual tone of Socrates' statement indicates -- tasting drones' "honey", having "intercourse" with "fiery" beasts, enjoying "manifold and subtle pleasures" -- the son is corrupted because he is erotically attracted to the pleasure that would come from fulfilling the unnecessarily drone desires. In his soul, the drones seem to represent eros, which was completely suppressed in the father's soul, held down by fear and shame. The transition from the "stingy, oligarchic" soul to the democratic thus involves the release of pent-up erotic desire, especially in the form of a longing for physical pleasure and gratification. Yet as we will see, a nobler kind of erotic longing is also responsible for transforming the mercenary money-maker into an oligarch.

b. The Restoration of Shame

Despite the temptation of pleasure, the son does not completely give into the desire for sensual gratification. Socrates contends that even after the drones' subversion of his self-control, "the democratic party can give way to the oligarchic... if a counteralliance comes to the aid of the oligarchic party in him, either from the advice or scolding of his father or from other relatives" (560a). When the oligarchic "party" is thus fortified, "faction and counterfaction arise in him and he does battle with himself... and with some of the desires destroyed and others exiled, a certain shame arises in the young man's soul and order is reestablished" (560a). Shame reestablishes the old order in the young man's soul not through fear but because he is still susceptible to feelings of nobility and baseness. Paradoxically, that limited openness to nobler sentiments is rooted in his

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39 During their discussion of the transition from the oligarchic to the democratic human being, Socrates and Adeimantus have an interlude on the nature of the "unnecessary" desires. In this discussion, prudence and moderation seem to constitute the "health and good condition" of the soul, which is to be guided by the necessary desires that are "useful for our works" (559c). Noticeably absent, however, are justice and courage, the two cardinal virtues more directly linked with erotic passion (cf. 357a; 361c-d). The prudent and moderate Adeimantus does not notice the absence of the erotic virtues; when Socrates asks him whether their division of the desire for food also applies to "sex and the other desires", Adeimantus agrees that it does (559c). While this may seem correct to him, Cephalus and Glauccon have testified that sexual desire or eros is a mad master because it cannot be circumscribed by considerations of usefulness (cf. 329c, 403a). By its nature, eros seeks to break out of all limits in search of what is truly noble and good (cf. 360a-b). This is why it is critical part of the desire for justice and courage; both of them are noble virtues whose perfection requires one to risk one's own benefit (cf. 357a, 361d, 474d). Such a passion is clearly absent from the calculating soul of the money-maker, whose epithymotic desire prevents eros from breaching the psychic wall between the necessary and unnecessary desires. A careful reading of this interlude thus shows that the oligarchic soul is not well-ordered because its prudence and moderation are based on a denial or suppression of eros. The best soul would be one that is prudent, moderate, just, and courageous because of its eros.
stinginess, which is really an ability to win victories over sensual pleasure (554d-e). In the son's mind, this power of the acquisitive soul gives it a certain dignity. He feels shame because his father's scolding reminds him of the dignity of that old order, especially when compared with the thoroughly easy-going character of the democratic soul. It restores to prominence in his mind the opinion that once sustained his desire to acquire: namely, that it is honorable to resist immediate gratification for the sake of acquiring future security and reputation.

c. The Final Collapse of the Oligarchic Soul

Despite the resurgent power of the orderly desires, shame is largely a negative passion; it prevents the son from giving into dishonorable desires but it does not give him anything new to which he can be devoted. Socrates tells Adeimantus that without such positive devotion, the "stingy, oligarchic" order must inevitably fall. After shame has restored the old order, "once again other desires, akin to the exiled ones, reared in secret due to the father's lack of knowledge about rearing, came to be, many and strong" (560a-b). Again using erotic language, Socrates contends that this return led to a "secret intercourse" that "bred a multitude" of unruly desires (560b). After this spawning, the newly-born desires "took the acropolis of the young man's soul, perceiving that it was empty of fair studies and practices and true speeches, and it's these that are the best watchmen and guardians in the thought of men whom the gods love" (560b).

Once inside, the drone desires fill his head with "false and boasting speeches and opinions" that transform him into a democrat (560e). Specifically, the drones re-label "shame" as "simplicity", spatter "moderation... with mud" by calling it "cowardliness", and drive away "measure and orderly expenditure" by persuading the son that they are really "rustic and illiberal" (560c-d). According to Socrates, the final destruction of the oligarchic order comes when these "boasting speeches" convince the young man that insolence is really "good education, anarchy, freedom, wastefulness, magnificence, and shamelessness, courage" (560e). With all these opinions transformed, the son no longer believes that it is noble or honorable to strive for anything beyond immediate gratification; there is no longer anything high-minded to prevent him from indulging whatever pleasures strike his fancy (554c-d). And since fear of privation no longer restrains him, the son suddenly loses all defense against the drones and experiences "the liberation and unleashing of unnecessary and useless pleasures" (561c). At this point, Socrates contends that

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40 While the oligarch gives up present pleasure for future security and honor, this is not sacrifice; it is enlightened self-interest (cf. 361a-d). But the oligarch views his actions as sacrificial (and therefore noble) because there is no guarantee -- especially given his belief in the unpredictable scarcity of good things -- that giving up pleasure now will redound to his benefit later.

41 Adeimantus responds that "fair studies... are by far the best", again showing his enthusiasm for an education that guards opinion rather than liberates the mind.
the oligarchic order collapses and is replaced by a democratic order in which all desires are of equal dignity (561c). Now a democrat, the son "lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him" and "there is neither order nor necessity in his life, but calling this life sweet, free, and blessed he follows it throughout" (561d).

\[d. \text{The Importance of Justice for the Oligarchic Soul}\]

Through this portrayal of the fall of the oligarchic soul, Socrates tries to persuade Adeimantus that neither money-makers nor oligarchs are governed by the kind of noble aspirations worthy of praise or emulation.\(^2\) Of course, he quietly shows that there is a real difference between the money-maker and the oligarch, as illustrated by the fact that oligarchs stand and fight the democrats while money-makers flee. The money-makers cannot summon the courageous spirit to fight because they lack moral passion. They are not noble enough to be outraged at the injustice of the democrats' attack or they are too afraid to risk combat. Either way, fear rather justice guides their political activity, limiting it to ensuring that the city allows unlimited acquisition and the laws "diligently hold down by force" crimes against property (552e).

According to Socrates, full-fledged oligarchs are born when "rich men... whose property" is threatened or "taken away" in the victorious democratic revolution "are compelled to defend themselves by speaking before the people and by doing whatever they can... For this they are charged... with plotting against the people and being oligarchs... And, therefore, when they see that the people are trying to do them an injustice... they at last end up, whether they want to or not, by becoming truly oligarchs" (565b-c; emphasis added). As Socrates makes clear, oligarchs are wealthy people who have become willing to risk "impeachments, judgments, and contests" in order to defend the dignity and justice of the political order built on the money-making way of life (565c). For the oligarch, the dignity of that life resides not so much in the simple accumulation of wealth (which is what the many praise about the money-maker) as in the higher fact that such a person rules himself through the dominance of the orderly (money-making) desires over the disorderly (spendthrift) desires.\(^3\) In their view, the justice of oligarchy is that it that recognizes the moral excellence of the acquisitive person's orderly soul and publicly distinguishes it from lower ones that lack these virtues. For such people, oligarchy must be fought for because it is the only regime that gives the city's highest authority and honor to the best human beings, the people who deserve them (especially when compared with democracy).

\(^2\) They are not ruled by what Socrates consider to be a truly noble or erotic passion because the core of the erotic experience is an act or feeling of self-forgetting (see Lutz 1998).

\(^3\) It is no surprise, then, that Socrates later tells Adeimantus that "the men most orderly by nature" are the best money-makers (564e).
The development of acquisitiveness, from a desire for wealth motivated by fear and shame to a bold demand for political honor, comes from moral outrage at the injustice of democratic leveling. This moral passion is fueled by a growing attachment to what the oligarchs see as the nobility or moral beauty of oligarchic distinction. Contrary to Michels’ sociological interpretation, Socrates does not see oligarchs as fallen angels made greedy for power by organizational forces outside their control. Rather, he suggests that what makes people “truly oligarchs” is their moral attachment to a specific notion of justice. Yet even though the oligarchic political psychology is distinguished by a moral passion, it is an imperfect passion because oligarchs never transcend their own needs or interests. Socrates emphasizes to Adeimantus that the soul ordered by oligarchic desire (epithymeia) may be capable of and even attracted to noble action, but such moments are fleeting and not powerful or constant enough to prevent the eventual collapse of the oligarchic order in the face of sensual pleasure (cf. 561b). He seems to argue that oligarchs inevitably become pleasure-lovers because oligarchy cannot sustain a passionate attachment to wealth. Unfortunately, Socrates dismisses the possibility that oligarchs can devote themselves to property for the sake of honorable distinction rather than for physical security.

However rhetorically effective this is in giving Adeimantus contempt for oligarchy, it is only a caricature of Socrates’ deeper presentation of the oligarchic city and soul. A careful reading shows that the dry soul of the money-maker cannot sustain itself; the acquisitive person will remain a money-maker only so long as he fears privation and is not satisfied that his reputation can keep him secure. But as soon as fear of privation or pressing necessity is overcome, eros will out. The only question is whether erotic desire will fuel an easygoing pleasure-seeking (democracy) or a thymotic defense of the dignity of property (oligarchy). Erotic desire will take a low sensual form if the money-maker’s original desire for reputation never develops into a demand for political authority and honor. But it will become such a political longing if he acquires enough wealth to overcome the shame of his poverty and if in the process he comes to believe that the rich deserve political authority and honor because they are the best human beings. In other words, if the money-maker has or develops a strong sense of merit or justice and has enough money to stop worrying about providing for himself and his family, he will naturally become an oligarch. In that case, acquisitiveness becomes an oligarchic political passion, making it possible for the regime to be self-perpetuating. Socrates ignores this possibility, however, because his purpose is to convince Adeimantus that oligarchy is a base and unattractive option for a young man who desires a noble political order (cf. 563d).

44 As we will see, Aristotle argues that the inherently political aspect of acquisitiveness emerges more and more as oligarchy advances toward its telos.
VIII. Oligarchy, Philosophy, and the Best Regime

a. The Common Good and Reason: Oligarchy’s Most Important Defects

Finally, it remains to address Plato’s understanding of the relationship between oligarchy and the best regime. As Book VIII makes clear, the heart of Socrates’ discussion of regimes is the implicit comparison between the best regime of philosopher-kings and the other regimes, all of which are unjust to some degree (543c-544b). Like the best regime, oligarchy accepts and promotes distinction based on a notion of virtue or excellence. Both regimes also open their ruling offices to anyone who possesses these virtues (or the sign of these virtues) at the requisite level. In terms of the soul, the rulers in each regime share an orderliness and moderation that is lacking in the timocrat, the democrat, and the tyrant. On the surface, then, oligarchy and the best regime share some important characteristics.

Despite such similarities, Socrates shows that the oligarchic order is radically deficient from the perspective of the city-in-speech. Without any education in “noble objects of ambition”, rulers in an oligarchy so completely ignore the common good (especially the needs of the demos) that their city is destroyed by factional conflict. In contrast, the guardians are educated to be concerned only with the common good. While the oligarch is similar to the guardian in that both have a spirited concern for justice, Socrates has reminded Adeimantus several times that oligarchs are only concerned with justice when their property or honor is threatened -- they devote the rest of their time to accumulating ever more money and honor. This makes them lower than the guardians, whose idea of justice is to serve the common good and has as little connection as possible with their own property and bodies (cf. 419a). In this respect, the guardians seem to transcend concern for their own good while the oligarchs merely identify their good as the good of the whole city. They therefore do not have the experience of truly giving up themselves or what they cherish for the sake of the city that they rule (cf. 551e, 555a). The oligarchs are less self-sacrificing and therefore less noble than the rulers of the best regime (cf. 419a-c).

These important moral differences between the oligarch and the guardian point to an even more fundamental division concerning reason. According to Socrates, the guardians are not only warriors -- they are also “best in philosophy” (543a).45 As philosophers, reason guides their souls

45 It may be, of course, that war-like thymos and philosophic eros cannot actually be combined in one soul and hence that guardians cannot really be both spirited warriors and philosophers (cf. 439e-440c). In this respect, it is worth noting that while the guardians are explicitly called “defenders of the city”, philosophers are not said to have thymos (see Strauss 1964, 110-11).
and establishes an order in which there is harmony between the parts (cf. 586e). Their austere attitude toward private property, for example, is the result of reason directing them to higher moral and philosophic concerns than money. In contrast, the oligarchic soul is moderate and orderly only because one desire (love of honor) suppresses another (love of pleasure). Desire acts in the place of reason, making it impossible for the oligarchic soul to pursue or appreciate anything "philosophic" (586e). The oligarchs' inability to live rationally accounts for Socrates' declaration that they cannot attain "the true virtue of the single-minded and harmonized soul" (554e). He wants Adeimantus to see that without the guidance of reason, the oligarch's soul (like those of all non-philosophers) is interminably "factious" and morally deficient (586e).

According to Socrates' account, the oligarchs' moral and intellectual deficiency prevents them from truly satisfying the moral passion that distinguishes them from money-makers. In his view, such passion is fueled by an erotic longing to participate in a good that transcends the self but that a person can "delight in for its own sake" (357b-c). Oligarchs may be nobler than pure money-makers, but they cannot separate honor from physical goods such as property (cf. 560b). In honoring corporeal goods that pass out of existence, they fail to pursue and participate in a good that is "connected with something always the same, immortal and true" (585c). They come closest in the honor they bestow upon wealth, for honor as such can last throughout time in the minds of subsequent generations. Unfortunately, however, even that honor is subject to the vicissitudes of financial conditions and to the rise and fall of economic fortunes; oligarchs (or their family line) can lose the honor once given to them because of their wealth. Thus while guardians -- in so far as they actually philosophize -- can find such participation in the eternal through the rational contemplation of the ideas, oligarchs cannot be sure of having any real connection to something beyond themselves that can satisfy their moral (erotic) passion.

46 The fact that Socrates considers "true virtue" to be "single-minded" implies that the guardian is only truly excellent (and therefore only truly happy) when acting as a philosopher, not as both a warrior and a philosopher. Indeed, it is a question whether there can be any such thing as a thymotic lover of wisdom (compare 375e-376c with 592a).
47 Even the greatest honor, of course, is immortal but not eternal; that is, it exists within time (e.g. "throughout the ages") and never transcends into the realm of pure ideas, as in the case of geometry or other sciences linked to immutable principles of the cosmos.
48 As Aristotle shows, some oligarchs try to get around the problem of immortal honor for themselves and their offspring by turning oligarchic regimes into dynasties in which the same families rule for generation after generation. In their search for immortality, oligarchs move the regime tend toward hereditary family rule in which authority and honor can be almost completely separated over time from actual family wealth. As Aristotle points out, however, such dynastic regimes elicit great opposition from many parts of the city and are therefore usually short-lived.
49 By implication, Socrates argues that the greatest good for a human being is to experience the eternal -- this promises to satisfy people's deepest need. As Socrates presents it, the longing comes from the desire of human beings to fill "the part of themselves that is, or can contain anything, with things that are" (I. e. the truth) (586b). In his view, human beings do not desire the truth because it is eternal; rather, they desire the eternal things because they are true. According to Socrates, reason is the faculty that grasps the truth and allows people to feel the pleasure found in having "the vision of what is" (585c, 582c). Yet Socrates may be presenting a somewhat simplified and perhaps...
In summary, oligarchy is defective from the point of view of the best regime in two fundamental ways. First, although oligarchy is born of a concern for seeing that the excellence of the acquisitive, orderly soul is justly honored by the city, it neglects the common good of the city. This is because it honors the wrong kind of orderly soul -- the selfish acquirer instead of the noble guardian. Second, although the oligarchs' devotion to honor raises the regime above merely private concerns, it rejects the philosophic life as the best life and therefore rejects the central organizing principle of the best regime and its laws (cf. 586b).

b. From the Soul to the City: The Enduring Problem of Oligarchy

While Socrates' conversation with Adeimantus appears to treat only one kind of oligarchic arrangement of the city and the soul, Plato allows the attentive reader to see the complexity of the oligarchic psychology. As Socrates makes clear, the money-maker's passion for wealth (which is the foundation of the oligarchic psychology) is actually a composite of the desire for physical well-being and the desire for honor, both of which can be found in the acquisition of property. True oligarchs, however, transcend their money-making origins; they are powerfully attached to wealth not so much for what it can buy but because it represents the hard-earned triumph of sacrifice and orderliness, virtues that they love and regard as the core of human excellence. Hence oligarchs give a spirited defense of their property against the democrats as part of a larger defense of the dignity and nobility of a way of life based on public distinctions between better and worse human beings (which, in their view, necessarily correspond with the distinction between rich and poor). The oligarchs' desire for their just honor requires them to have the highest dignities possible in a city, which are inherently political. Thus in their souls the desire to acquire necessarily becomes a desire to rule. As a result, oligarchs are a problem for the city everywhere acquisitiveness exists, and especially where it is encouraged by the regime. This Socratic argument is in direct contrast to Michels' notion that oligarchy is the product of amoral sociological and psychological forces, and it leads to the conclusion that oligarchy is the deliberate political creation of human beings motivated by the moral passion to defend the justice of public distinctions between rich and poor, distinctions ultimately meant to honor the excellence of orderly souls.

overly beautiful picture of philosophy because his account does not explain why the eternal truth is our deepest need (for one explanation, see Bloom 1991, 357). Perhaps part of Socrates' excessive grandiosity is explained by the fact that he is making the presentation of philosophy to Glaucon, who is an erotic human being who longs for an "overwhelming beauty" to complete him and give his life meaning (cf. 474d). If so, a deeper understanding of eros is required in order to understand fully how reason satisfies the longing for the greatest good.

50 We see some very indirect evidence for the oligarchs' neglect of philosophy in the mutual disdain of businesspeople and intellectuals.
Given the relative weights that an oligarchy could give to material security or political authority and honor, we can also recognize the possibility of a wide range of oligarchic regimes. As Socrates makes clear in the beginning of Book VIII, however, such a comprehensive outline is not the purpose of his discussion with Glaucon and Adeimantus (cf. 548c-d). Rather, he wants to dispel the charms of injustice, particularly those of anti-democratic political activity. As we now turn to Aristotle's treatment of oligarchy, we see how the complexity of the oligarchic soul is manifested in actual regimes and cities. In particular, we see how Aristotle develops Plato's suggestion that the oligarchic soul has the potential to give rise to a regime that is closer to the best regime than appears given oligarchy's foundation in the desire to acquire wealth. We should not forget, however, that Aristotle's presentation may also have a rhetorical component, one that is perhaps different from Plato's but which is equally important for his own argument.
CHAPTER THREE
ARISTOTLE'S CRITIQUE OF OLIGARCHIC REGIMES

I. The Dramatic Setting

a. An Audience of Gentlemen and (Potential) Legislators

The purpose of this chapter is to understand Aristotle's critique of oligarchy and to explore his understanding of the relationship between oligarchy and the best regime. Aristotle's treatment of oligarchy is presented in its most comprehensive form in the Politics. Unlike Plato's Republic -- whose dialogue form invites considerations of the influence of dramatic elements on the argument -- Aristotle's Politics has come down to us as a "course of lectures", giving it the appearance of a more straightforward technical treatise (Lord 1984, 9-10).

However, there is a dramatic element in the Politics that can be discerned by understanding its substantive theme, which is the science of regimes or of law-giving for regimes. That this theme is central to the Politics can be seen by examining its prequel, the Nicomachean Ethics, which declares the need to move on from ethical investigations to "the subject of legislation... in order to complete as best we can our understanding of the human things" (N.E. 1181b10-15). The Ethics helps to set the dramatic context of the Politics by identifying the audience to which Aristotle's ethical and political works are addressed. Specifically, they are directed toward gentlemen from the public forum who already have received a "proper upbringing in moral conduct" (N.E. 1095b6). According to Aristotle, these gentlemen likely have a passionate attachment to virtue that makes them interested in and even attracted to political activity (cf. 1094b2-3, 1102a8-12, 1180a10-11, 1180b23-25). The most high-minded of them may be drawn to the greatest political activity, legislation, because it tries to reform or establish institutions, laws, and customs that make citizens into good human beings (cf. N.E. 1160b35-1161a4; 1180a32-35, Politics 1333a12-15). The dramatic setting of the Politics is therefore found at least in part in Aristotle's engagement with

1 There is a vigorous scholarly debate over whether the Politics is a sequel to the Nicomachean Ethics (see Lord 1984, 19-20). Certainly, though, the theme of legislation and good laws is common to both works (compare N.E. I, 2-3 & 10, 9 with Politics II, I & IV, 1). All citations and Bekker numbers from the Nicomachean Ethics refer to the Ostwald translation, 1962.
talented, ambitious, and morally-serious gentlemen who have the desire and ability to study the art of law-giving.\(^2\)

The importance of this dramatic setting for Aristotle’s discussion of regimes is evidenced in his brief discussion of oligarchy in the *Ethics*. He states that oligarchy is depraved because it bases its rule on “wealth” (*plutos*) and “power” (*dynamis*) and not on “virtue” (*arete*) (*N.E.* 1161a3). As a consequence, the rulers in an oligarchy “fail to distribute according to merit what the city has to offer”, “take all or most of the good things for themselves”, “appoint always the same people to public office”, and “value wealth more highly than anything else” (*N.E.* 1160b11-15).\(^3\) In this respect, oligarchy’s character would appear to frustrate the natural human concern for justice and nobility that has been so well cultivated in gentlemen (*Politics* 1253a1-20).\(^4\) It appears from the *Ethics*, then, that oligarchy would not be an attractive regime to Aristotle’s audience of gentlemen nor to anyone else concerned with virtue and living nobly or with improving their fellow citizens through the study of politics and legislation (cf. *N.E.* 1160b35-1161a4).

b. The Importance of Oligarchy in Aristotle’s Political Science

In this chapter, however, we contend that oligarchy is important for Aristotle because it is the most common anti-democratic regime, one built on political principles with great moral appeal to certain kinds of human beings. In his view, oligarchy shows the anti-democratic dangers of acquisitiveness. Moreover, the problem of oligarchy shows potential legislators the extent to which the art of law-giving can transform a regime built on acquisitiveness into a nobler political order approaching the best possible regime.\(^5\) In this chapter, we focus on Aristotle’s examination of the

\(^2\) With its concern for gentlemen interested in legislation, the *Politics* is closer in context than it first appears to Socrates’ giving of laws for the city-in-speech with Glaucion and Adeimantus. The *Politics*’ discussion of regimes may -- like the *Republic* -- try to lead such interlocutors away from partisan political engagement toward a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the possibilities and problems of all political life. This does not mean that potential legislators are the only audience to which Aristotle’s remarks are addressed. He also wants to enlighten politically-active citizens and statesmen to the usefulness of philosophy as well as educate lovers of wisdom in the importance (both philosophic and prudential) of taking political claims seriously.

\(^3\) Aristotle also says that a household can be oligarchic. This occurs when the husband or wife rules on the basis of their wealth and not their virtue (cf. *N.E.* 1161a1-3).

\(^4\) According to Book I of the *Politics*, human beings are “by nature” political animals because they have a natural passion for the just and the noble, the concern for which is at the core of politics and is the special province of the political community (*Pol.* 1253a13-15, 1281a2-4 and *N.E.* 1094b14-15). Aristotle’s treatment of legislation and regimes in the *Politics* is directed at cultivating and clarifying his audience’s desire for the noble and the just.

\(^5\) Partly because oligarchy seems to debase the noble claims of the city, many commentators on the *Politics* argue that this regime has little significance for Aristotle’s political science. Some contend that democracy occupies much of Aristotle’s concern, especially since (in its Athenian form) it was the regime that most immediately confronted him (cf. B. Strauss 1994, 213-17, Lindsay 1994, 146). Some scholars even argue that Aristotle’s treatment of oligarchy is simply a subset of his analysis of democracy, and therefore offers little unique insight into his political science (see Mulgan 1990, 208-214). Unfortunately, those who claim that Aristotle’s treatment of oligarchy is important tend to argue that his analysis simply provides an apology for the rule of the wealthy and powerful (see Wood and Wood 1978 and B. Strauss 1994). No one has yet offered a sustained and sympathetic examination of the place of oligarchy in Aristotle’s political thought.
origins of oligarchy, the oligarchic view of justice, the types of oligarchy, and how the legislator can reform oligarchic cities so as to preserve them from destruction. We investigate how Aristotle embraces Socrates' fundamental analysis of the oligarchic soul but extends that analysis in order to show why there are a variety of oligarchic regimes that are more politically attractive and dangerous than Socrates admits. We then show why the knowledge of how to reform oligarchies offers important insight into the art of the legislator and thereby into Aristotle's political science. Finally, we conclude with a brief summary of Plato and Aristotle's understanding of the problem of oligarchy.

II. Aristotle's Definition of Oligarchy

a. Fewness or Wealth?

In order to understand Aristotle's treatment of oligarchy, we first need to know what constitutes an oligarchic regime. According to Aristotle, the city (polis) is a partnership of citizens in a regime or arrangement of political offices (politeia) (cf. 1252a6, 1275b16-20, 1276b9-10). He first uses the term "oligarchy" when discussing the city outlined by the Athenian Stranger in Plato's Laws (1265b28). He declares that the regime in the Laws "is intended to be neither democracy nor oligarchy but the one midway between them which is called a polity" (politeia) (1265b28). In his view, these three regimes -- including oligarchy -- are the "most attainable of all the regimes for cities" and hence the most important for those who wish to know what it takes to reform actual cities (1265b29).

Aristotle's formal definition of oligarchy shows why it is so common. In every city, there are the rich and the poor: in some cities, there is also a middle-class. According to Aristotle, oligarchy is the rule of a few "with a view to the advantage of the well-off" (euporos) (1279b4-8). He clarifies the principle upon which the few rule by saying that in a more precise sense oligarchy exists "when those with property have authority in the regime" (1279b18). Even if the majority rules, he argues that the regime "is necessarily an oligarchy" because "what makes democracy and oligarchy differ is poverty and wealth", not the number of rulers (1279b39; 1280a1). Because "it is

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6 According to Aristotle, the legislator's art is central to political science. As he understands it, political science is the philosopher's scientific (rational) examination of politics, especially the political problems of the noble and the just [cf. N.E. Book I, chapter three]. By examining the art that gives the city its laws, the philosopher can come to understand fully the most significant opinions associated with the city and its laws (i.e. those concerning justice and nobility). For Aristotle, this investigation of the just and the noble is the most important part of the philosophic study of politics, which forms the foundation of a political science that can offer guidance to citizens, statesmen, and (potential) legislators (cf. 1282b23).

7 Citations and parenthetical Bekker numbers refer to the Lord translation of the Politics, 1984. Greek references are taken from the Dreizehnter edition, 1970.
accidental that few or many have authority in oligarchies”, Aristotle concludes that the “defining principle” (horos) of the regime is the rule of wealth (1280b17).

b. Why Not “Plutocracy”?

But if this regime is defined by wealth rather than fewness, should it not be called “plutocracy”? According to Aristotle, “oligarchy” is the appropriate term for the rule of the wealthy because “it turns out that the well-off are everywhere few and the poor many” (1279b36). In short, the rule of the wealthy “turns out” to be the rule of the few, given the economic reality that most people are poor. This means, as Aristotle says in his most authoritative statement, that oligarchy is best defined as a regime “in which those who are well off and few in number have the offices” and rule with a view to their own advantage (1279b28-30). By calling such a regime “oligarchy”, it seems that Aristotle is naming it not by its essence but by an accident. Yet as we will see, there is good reason why Aristotle follows common practice and calls this regime “oligarchy”; there is an aspect of the oligarchic psychology that tends over time to give more emphasis to distinctions of soul between the few and the many that -- while linked with wealth -- transcend the simple division between rich and poor.

III. The Origin of Oligarchy

a. The Original Deviant Regime

To begin to lay out the nature of oligarchy, we turn to Aristotle’s discussion in Book III chapter 15 of the origins of regimes, including oligarchy. In the Republic, Socrates presents aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny as though they necessarily follow one another in a temporal sequence from most ancient to most recent. Here Aristotle lays out a contrasting order of regimes: first, kingship; next, polity; then, oligarchy; then, tyranny; and last, democracy. According to him, people were “originally” governed by kings “because it was rare

8 Thus while the essence of oligarchy is the rule of the wealthy, to understand this regime we must also understand how the rule of the rich is affected by the (accidental) fact that they are “everywhere” few in number.
9 Although Aristotle contends that the nature of a thing is best understood when that thing is in its full, healthy condition (its telos), his approach to the nature of the city suggests that we can gain an insight into a thing’s telos by examining how its parts originally come together (1252b30; 1252a26).
10 While Socrates’ presentation of regimes as governed by unavoidable necessity stems from his rhetorical purpose of moderating Glaucon and Adeimantus’ political activity, Aristotle suggests that the temporal order of regimes reflects the gradual development of natural human politicality as it is cultivated, distorted, or suppressed by the choices of citizens, statesmen, and legislators (cf. 1288b27). He seems more interested in engaging his audience's
to discover men who were very outstanding in virtue, especially since the cities they inhabited then were so small” (1286b8-10). After kingships had been ruling for a number of years, “it happened that many arose who were similar with respect to virtue” and who therefore “no longer tolerated [kingship] but sought something common and established a polity” (politeia) (1286b11-13). But as time went on and the rulers of polity “became worse and did business at the expense of the common [funds], it was reasonable that oligarchies should arise as a result, for they made wealth a thing of honor” (1286b13-16).

In this account, oligarchy is presented as the original deviant regime, yet “it was reasonable” for this regime to arise out of the first polities. The reason lies in the foundation of kingship and in the nature of the ambition of those who established polities. Originally, peoples were small and naturally wanted “good men” to rule them (1286b11). Because they believed that providing benefactions “is the work of good men”, they regarded as most virtuous the one person in each tribe or village who could provide the most “benefactions”. That person they selected king. Thus while the first kings may have benefited those they ruled, the early kingships were morally and politically ambiguous. They were not a noble partnership in the good life, but a form of collective selfishness in which people traded “honor” (time) to the kings in return for “benefactions”.

At first glance, polity seems like a nobler regime compared to kingship because it was moved by a desire for “something common” (i.e. a common sharing in rule). As Aristotle makes clear, however, those who established polities wanted to share in political rule not out of a new-found love of the common good but because they could no longer tolerate kingship, with its monopolization of honors (cf. 1286b16). This movement toward sharing political authority and honor occurred as cities became larger and wealth spread, making more and more people similar to the old kings in their capacity to provide “benefactions”. As many of them became equal in their “virtue” (i.e. their ability to benefit others through their wealth), they believed that they deserved an equal share in honors.

b. Ambition and the Rise of Oligarchy

According to Aristotle, oligarchies came into being out of the ambition to be recognized and honored for one’s excellence. As money became more and more recognized as the key to acquiring political authority and honor, the rulers of polity “made wealth a thing of honor” (1286b15-16). Those most ambitious for honor then began an increasingly desperate search for ways to acquire more wealth than their fellows. To serve their ambition, they “became worse” and either raided the passion for political activity, especially those who desire to be a “good legislator” or a “political ruler in the true sense” (1288b27).

11 Aristotle suggests that these early people were like children who are unable to admire what does not benefit them directly. In their primitive (uncultivated) condition, they mistook a part of virtue (benefiting others) for its whole.
"common funds" of the city, neglected the public business in favor of acquiring more private wealth, or both. Presumably, as a few of these ambitious people prospered through such unscrupulous methods, they became more and more in control of the ruling offices. Eventually, they set up oligarchies to entrench their rule so that they would no longer need to benefit the city in order to receive its honors. At this point, the old political agreement of "honors for benefit" that was the foundation of kingship and polity collapsed under the weight of almost unconstrained individual ambition; the common good was abandoned because the rulers no longer believed that they needed to serve the city in order to acquire its offices and honors. Aristotle claims that once this "base longing for profit" was liberated, a few with the greatest such longing seized the oligarchies and changed them into "tyrannies", making the cities into slaves for their desires (1286b17-18). Finally, as cities became larger and the multitude (plethos) grew stronger, the people would not tolerate such abuse; they "attacked" and overthrew the tyrants, changing "tyrannies into democracies" (1286b20).

While Aristotle's political genealogy does not portray any regime as simply noble in its origins, oligarchy seems particularly bad. It is portrayed as driven and indeed dominated by private ambition. It is the first regime to neglect the common advantage and to liberate the rulers from the constraints of having to benefit others in the city. This change is important because it laid the foundation for tyranny. Because of its greed and arrogant neglect of justice and the common good, Aristotle classifies oligarchy as a deviant regime (cf. 1279b8). Is Michels therefore right to say that oligarchy cannot have any moral justification? Or do the oligarchs believe that there is a moral basis for their regime, as Socrates seems to imply? To address these questions, we now turn to Aristotle's treatment of oligarchic justice.

IV. The Justice of Oligarchy

a. The Regime and Justice

According to Aristotle, a city comes into being when a number of villages come together under one shared set of customs, laws, and institutions (the city's nomoi) (cf. 1252b27-1253a20). While all cities share certain basic elements -- all have geography, topography, climate, population, language -- each one has a distinctive ethos and way of life that grows out of its nomoi (and in turn reinforces them). Despite acknowledging the influence of factors like geography, climate, and

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12 According to Aristotle, the mark of a potential tyrant is desiring "the enjoyment that comes with pleasures unaccompanied by pains", for which he recommends philosophy as a safe and satisfying alternative (1267a8; 1267a10-15; 1311a4).
language, Aristotle contends that a city’s institutions, laws, and customs ultimately come from its arrangement of the most authoritative political offices. That arrangement is based on the citizens’ shared understanding of who deserves to hold the highest offices (1275b18-20). Thus the foundation of the regime and the central organizing principle of the city’s way of life is its notion of justice, specifically the citizens’ common understanding of who should rule (1280a10). Against Michels’ analysis of political parties, Aristotle sides with Socrates in contending that people are ultimately partisans of a faction or regime not from organizational necessity but because they are devoted to its understanding of justice (1281a10).

b. Why the Rich Deserve to Rule (I):
Oligarchy’s Understanding of the Common Good

According to Aristotle, oligarchy is rooted in a notion of justice according to which the rich deserve all of the political offices and the non-rich deserve none (1281b23-32). The oligarchs believe that the monopoly of offices created by a property assessment is just in both senses of political justice: the common good of the city and the fair distribution of authority and honors (i.e. distributive justice). From the point of view of the common good, the oligarchs contend that the rich benefit the city more than do the poor and therefore deserve a greater share in ruling (1280a28-31). They believe that they contribute more to the city because in their view the city exists to protect and promote property interests; in Aristotle’s words, the oligarchs maintain that the city is above all a partnership “for the sake of possessions” or “for purposes of exchange and use of one another” (1280a25, 35). According to the oligarchs, the protection of property is only possible when the rich rule, because the poor are likely to abuse their power and confiscate the wealth of the few for

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13 According to Aristotle, justice -- rather than power or interest -- is the foundation of the regime because human beings are by nature political: that is, they have a natural passion for nobility and justice that animates all political discussion, debate, and activity (cf. 1253a1-18). In contrast to Hobbes or Locke, for example, Aristotle argues that truly political people do not use justice as a pretext for power but instead seek power as a means to implementing their notion of justice (compare Politics 1281a10; 1282b15-20; 1301b25-30 with Leviathan ch. 10 & First Treatise sec. 106).

14 This question of political merit (i.e. “Who should rule?”) is the most urgent and important question for the city because clashing notions of political merit are the deepest and most volatile sources of conflict among citizens and between regimes. According to Aristotle, the question arouses such deep passions because its answer implies that one type of person is wiser and better than another and therefore deserves to rule over the other. The regime’s shared notion of justice is so powerful in defining a city because it presumes to know who is the best person (and therefore the best ruler). It suggests such a presumption for the following reason: If we give to each person the penalty or reward that is due (which is what justice does), we presume to have a knowledge of what behavior should be rewarded and penalized, which assumes that we have a knowledge of what behavior is good and what is bad. In acting justly, we therefore presuppose a knowledge of what is good for human beings (cf. 1253a14-15). This means that each regime’s view of justice is at bottom an articulation of what it considers to be the life that we must live in order to be good (i.e. the good life). According to Aristotle, the question of the good life (the life that makes people truly happy) is the most important question for a human being (Book VII, chapters one and two). Thus, in Aristotle’s view, differences between regimes imply irreconcilable differences on the most fundamental human question: “Who is a good human being?”, or alternatively, “What is the best life for a human being?"
themselves (121281a17-20). In response to this position, Aristotle admits that if it is "for the sake of possessions that [human beings] participated and joined together... the argument of the oligarchs might be held a strong one" (1280a31-1280b5). But he insists that the oligarchs are wrong because "virtue must be the care for every city, or at least every one to which the term applies truly and not merely in a manner of speaking. For otherwise the partnership [koinonia] becomes an alliance which differs from others -- from alliances of remote allies -- only by location" (1280b5-10). Hence the oligarchs misunderstand the value of their contribution to the city because they misunderstand the purpose of the city. It is to promote virtue among the citizens, not to acquire and honor wealth. Aristotle therefore concludes that while transaction of business "must necessarily be present if there is to be a city" (and thus the rich do contribute something to the good of the city), the oligarchs' concern with property leads them to neglect the true common good of promoting virtue among all of the citizens (1280b31).15

\[c. \text{Why the Rich Deserve to Rule (II):}\]
\[\text{Oligarchy's Understanding of Distributive Justice}\]

According to Aristotle, the oligarchs' (mis)understanding of the purpose of the city is rooted in their (mis)understanding of who is the best human being and most deserves the city's distribution of political authority and honor. While all partisans of particular regimes agree that the city should aim at the most authoritative good, they all differ about what that good is (cf. Book III, chapter 12). Hence they disagree about who is living the good life and who is therefore a good human being. Unlike their great opponent the democrats, the oligarchs embrace the idea that not all free people are good or worthy human beings; in their view, inequalities entitle some free people to rule others (cf. 1280a23-25). In this respect, they accept the principle of distributive justice that unequal people deserve unequal honors (1282b27).16 For them, wealth is the politically relevant inequality; as Aristotle says, the oligarchs believe that if human beings "are unequal in a certain thing, such as goods... they are unequal generally" (1279b23). The oligarchs link wealth and moral superiority because they believe that the acquisition and possession of property is the greatest virtue or a sign of the greatest virtue. For the oligarchs, a regime built on property is just because the rich are morally superior to the rest of the city and deserve to rule. But what then,

15 While Aristotle acknowledges that the oligarchs do promote the basic life of the city because business and revenue are necessary for a community to exist. But in his view, common business activity is not sufficient to establish a true city in which "affection" and virtue elevate the political partnership to a place where citizens can live "happily and finely... for the sake of noble actions," and not simply "for the sake of living together" (1281a1-3; cf. 1252b28-30, 1257b41, 1280a31-32).

16 Despite the appearance that oligarchs turn the political partnership into merely a business enterprise, they do not deny that the city is a partnership among citizens in the highest or most authoritative good (1280b40-1281a1-5). Rather, they contend that the acquisition and possession of property is the highest activity in which citizens should be partners.
according to Aristotle, is the oligarchs' higher virtue on which their notion of distributive justice rests? And what is the connection between that virtue and wealth?

*d. The Oligarchs' Idea of Human Excellence: Money-Maker or Gentleman?*

To understand Aristotle discussion of the oligarchs' notion of human excellence, we need to contrast his presentation with that of Plato's Socrates. In the *Republic*, Socrates contends that the oligarchs defend their regime because they believe very powerfully that the money-maker's life is the best life; it signifies an orderly soul capable of lifting itself above pressing necessity by sacrificing present pleasures for uncertain future benefits. The oligarchs contend that the few must rule because the many lack such virtue; the noble excellence demonstrated in money-making is possible for only a small number of people (cf. 554d-e).

In the *Politics*, Aristotle extends and qualifies Socrates' presentation. He agrees that the oligarchs' view of virtue and justice originates in a defense of acquisitiveness. He also notes, however, that some oligarchies such as those at Thebes actually require wealthy money-makers to give up acquisition for a period of years before they can become rulers (cf. 1278a15-26). Hence some oligarchs believe that an acquisitive person is not completely fit for oligarchic office and must take time to develop the necessary virtue (cf. 1278a24-26). For such oligarchs, orderly acquisitiveness is the foundation but not the whole of virtue. They believe that acquisition is good largely because it leads to the possession of wealth, which then allows the flourishing of certain virtues (and correction of certain vices) implicit in "those who engage in business". In their view, rule should be limited to a few not because of the economic reality that only a few are rich but because of the moral reality that not many are distinguished by their virtue, only certain kinds of rich people. But since many oligarchies allow any rich person to share in political authority, do the oligarchs disagree over the virtue that deserves the city's honor?

According to Aristotle's presentation, all oligarchs agree that property allows a person to overcome the evils associated with poverty, but they seem to disagree over why the acquisitive life is worthy of honor. Unlike the oligarchy at Thebes, regimes devoted to the endless accumulation of wealth believe that the life of acquisition is the good life. For them, what makes human beings noble is the act of overcoming material privation and freeing oneself from necessity. In understanding the oligarch this way, they fundamentally agree with Socrates' initial presentation of the oligarch.¹⁷ Aristotle, however, seizes on Socrates' quiet distinction between oligarchs and

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¹⁷ We should recall that Socrates portrays all oligarchies and oligarchs as consumed with acquiring wealth in order to make Adeimantus view oligarchy as base and unworthy of his devotion. Socrates does not distinguish between lower and higher kinds of oligarchies for fear that Adeimantus might become interested in those like the Theban regime that reject money-makers as unfit for the dignity of public office. Such a regime's concern for order and distinction
money-makers in order to show that that the passion fueling oligarchs cannot be reduced to the desire to acquire money. For "Theban" oligarchs, wealth is honorable because it is the only means to a higher end; hence, these oligarchs "are held to occupy the place of gentlemen" by the many and "in most places" even mistake themselves for aristocrats (cf. 1293b40-41, 1294a18-19). These gentlemanly oligarchs believe that both wealthy money-makers and the poor should be excluded from office because both groups are "vulgar" (apeirokalia): that is, inexperienced in the nobler matters that are necessary to elevate the mind in preparation for political rule. There seem, then, to be several kinds of oligarchies rooted in different notions of what type of human being is truly good and deserves to rule. Yet these examples show that all oligarchies presume a link between wealth and virtue; so the different types are not unconnected, disparate regimes. This connection between oligarchies suggests that there may an oligarchic telos toward which all the different types incline by nature and in which the student of regimes can more clearly discern the oligarchs' full understanding of the proper connection between wealth, virtue, and justice. To address this possibility, we need to examine Aristotle's classifications of the different types of oligarchy.

V. The Types of Oligarchy

a. The First Classification: Heredity and the Rule of Law

Aristotle first classifies the kinds of oligarchy in Book IV, chapter five.\(^{18}\) He presents four types of oligarchic regimes. The first two are regimes in which eligibility for officeholding is open to any person who meets the property assessment (1292a40-45, 1293a13). In both, the poor are excluded altogether and all of the rich are eligible for office. In the first oligarchy, however, all of the rich select the officeholders, while in the second, those already in power choose their replacements from among those who meet the assessment (1293a20-25). Thus the second regime is actually an oligarchy within an oligarchy in which the poor are non-citizens, some of the wealthy are second-class citizens, and the wealthy rulers are full citizens.\(^{19}\) Yet while the first two oligarchies differ in this respect, Aristotle notes that they share an important similarity: both are under the rule of law (1292a40-45, 1293a12-15).

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\(^{18}\) According to Aristotle, this classification is part of an attempt to find the type of each regime "that is most fitting for all cities", which means that Aristotle's first classification of oligarchy is dictated by the needs common to every city (1288b34). Hence the first presentation of oligarchy in effect shows the extent to which oligarchy is consistent with the ordinary requirements of the political community.

\(^{19}\) Aristotle says that the character of this second type of oligarchy depends on whether the oligarchs select new members "out of all those [who meet the assessment]," which "is held to be more aristocratic," or "from certain ones," which is more "oligarchic" (1292b2).
The third and fourth types of oligarchy share a different fundamental premise: in them, there is an hereditary descent of offices originally secured by large assessments (cf. 1292b3-5). The third oligarchy, the more moderate kind of hereditary regime, arises when the rich “tighten [the eligibility for office] by being fewer and having larger properties... [so that] the offices are in their hands, in accordance with a law requiring that the deceased be succeeded by their sons” (1293a25-30). While the regime has been tightened up significantly by the provision for hereditary succession, law continues to mle and serve as the basis for the city’s way of life (1292b3-5). Still, hereditary succession seems to be a radical departure from the principle of the first two oligarchies because it eliminates the possibility that a person with newly acquired wealth could share in political office. Now son follows father in office, regardless of how much property others acquire; family name becomes the basis for a legitimate claim to rule. But Aristotle indicates that such a change is not a complete departure from the oligarchic principle of wealth because “good birth” imparts the wealth and money-making virtues of the ancestors to their contemporary family members (cf. 1301b4). Hence oligarchy remains tied to defending the goodness of property acquisition and the life of the money-maker, albeit not as the living embodiment of outstanding virtue but as the past foundation on which to build an honorable regime.

The significance of the rule of family is even more obvious in the second (and most extreme) form of hereditary oligarchy. Aristotle says that the regime is gradually placed in the hands of a very few families so that "human beings rule rather than law". He calls this dynastic oligarchy, or simply “a dynasty” (dynasteia) (1292b8, 1293a30-34). This fourth type of oligarchy is the most extreme form of oligarchy because it combines extraordinary exclusivity with the abandonment of the rule of law. The will of a few oligarchic families now governs the entire city. In placing this oligarchy fourth and last, Aristotle invites us to wonder if it is the culmination or telos of all oligarchies.

b. The Second Classification: Dynastic Telos

1. Why Oligarchy Becomes More Exclusive: The First and Second Oligarchies

Aristotle addresses this issue in the next chapter of Book IV (Book IV, chapter six). He offers an improvement on the first classification by arguing for the first time that there is a discernible oligarchic trajectory that illuminates the nature of oligarchy. As in the previous chapter, Aristotle claims that the first “kind” (eidos) of oligarchy exists “when a larger number of persons own property, but in lesser amounts and not overly much” (1293a12-13). The offices in this moderate regime are “open to whomever possesses” the amount of the assessment (1293a14-15). But now Aristotle explains why “the law necessarily has authority” in this first regime: the rulers
"have neither so much property that they can be at leisure without concerning themselves with it, nor so little that they must be sustained by the city" (1293a16-18). As long as the law recognizes their claim to rule, these officeholders "will necessarily claim to merit having the law rule for them rather than ruling themselves" (1293a18-19). Hence this regime is politically moderate and lawful not because the oligarchs have moderate acquisitive desires but because their acquisitiveness is focused on the accumulation and maintenance of property.

According to Aristotle, "the second kind of oligarchy" illustrates what happens politically when oligarchs become less tied to material concerns. This regime comes into being when the rulers "themselves elect from the others those who are to enter the governing body" (1293a23-24). Aristotle links the rulers' self-replacement with the fact that "those who own property are fewer than those mentioned earlier, and the properties greater" (1293a20-23). He explains the connection between greater wealth and a more restrictive assessment by saying that the larger properties of the very rich make them "more influential" in the city, on account of which "they claim to merit aggrandizement for themselves" and so raise the assessment in order to have more exclusive control of offices (1293a22-23). Hence oligarchy becomes more exclusive as the rulers' material insecurity fades and they gain the opportunity and ability to lift their gaze from economic to political concerns. With their political desires liberated from the constraints of material necessity, the richest come to believe that the just allocation of honors requires not only the old political distinction between the rich and the poor but also a new hierarchy among the rich themselves that relegates some of them to second-class status. By excluding so many people on the basis of wealth, this second regime raises the question whether there is any element within the oligarchs' political psychology that could open their regime to notions of virtue beyond those intimately connected with wealth.

2. Oligarchies of Good Birth and Friendship:
The Third and Fourth Regimes

Aristotle's treatment of the third kind of oligarchy addresses this question. According to him, this regime arises if the oligarchs "tighten" the regime "by being fewer and having larger properties... in accordance with a law requiring that the deceased be succeeded by their sons" (1293a26-29). In the first classification, Aristotle calls this regime another "form" (eidos) of oligarchy; here, he declares that it is "the third advance" in oligarchy (1293a27). Hence the various oligarchies are not so much different regimes or disparate forms of one regime (as they seemed in the first classification); rather, they are better understood as stages in the "advance" of oligarchy.

20 Still, the very wealthy have not jettisoned the law because "are not yet strong enough to rule without law" (1293a25).
toward a certain kind of rule or telos. Because the fact of an oligarchic trajectory is distinctly revealed only in this third regime, we must pay close attention to what distinguishes it from its predecessors. Most obviously, it is different because it restricts officeholding according to the principle of heredity. As we saw in the first classification, hereditary oligarchy substitutes “good birth” for wealth as the criterion of political merit. Earlier we said that such hereditary regimes retain a connection to wealth because they still base entitlement to office on ancestral property. Yet by excluding all “new money” from political office, this kind of oligarchy severs itself from adherence to the principle that the wealthy, by virtue of their wealth, deserve to rule. Hereditary succession consolidates political authority even further into the hands of a few because it excludes any new sharing of offices. It therefore provides, in terms of time, endless aggrandizement for the dynastoi. Yet Aristotle notes that even though family name becomes preeminent, law continues to rule because it governs hereditary succession. Thus while the oligarchs are “strong enough” to exclude those who do not belong to certain families, they do not rule simply according to their will (1293a25).

According to Aristotle, the abolition of a legal order occurs in the fourth and last form of oligarchy, the one in which “human beings rule rather than law” (nomos) (1293a32). Law is cast aside “when [the oligarchs] tighten [the regime] excessively with respect to their properties and in the extent of their friendships” so that only members of a very few families are entitled to hold office (1293a30-31). Aristotle’s reference to friendship implies that the tie between ruling families in a dynasty is not the formal legal attachment of citizens but the shared affection of friends who are much alike because they possess similarly large and long-standing family fortunes.21 In a dynasty, such friendship is possible because huge family fortunes allow the oligarchs to know each other intimately and share each other’s way of life to a very great degree. Only with this intimacy can informal understandings reliably replace legally binding rules.

The dynastoi want to replace law with friendship because friendship fulfills the purpose of law without its limitations. As Aristotle makes clear, the oligarchs view law as a means to extend their rule over the city (cf. 1282b8). However, the rule of law limits their authority because even though they make the law, it rules directly over the city, not them. Hence the law has a certain authority and dignity that as such detracts from the oligarchs’ private control over public honor. In an extreme dynastic oligarchy, however, the rulers are finally free from the necessity of obedience to anything higher than their own will; they no longer share the city’s honor with the law. The city becomes like a private possession shared by friends for their benefit and honor. At the same time, the intensified friendship among them also provides the basis for common political activity,

21 This mention of “friendship” (philia) is the only one in Book IV, which suggests that students of law-giving can learn much from dynastic oligarchy, if only in a negative way, about one of the great ends of the city: namely, friendly “affection” based on the mutual desire for self-sufficiency (1280b36-40).
without which one of the *dynastoi* might try to gain power over his fellow rulers. Thus dynastic rule promises the prospect of being honored commensurate with their virtue without a danger that such honor will be diminished or taken away by rivals. Since this exclusive political authority and honor is what the oligarchs seek and what they consider to be just, they believe that only with such a political arrangement is there full justice.

3. Still a Political Partnership

Aristotle's presentation suggests that oligarchy grows more hierarchical and restrictive as the oligarchs' desire for honor is liberated from economic and legal constraints. Their growing demand for honor intensifies the concentration of political authority that reaches its *telos* in extreme dynasty. The first two types or stages of oligarchy are more moderate because the rulers are so concerned with the maintenance and increase of their property that they prefer to have law govern rather than take the time to rule directly (cf. 1293a17-19). Indeed, the first oligarchy is dominated less by a desire for political honor and more by the spirit of material acquisition. In that sense, it is similar to the kind of regime described by Socrates as oligarchy (cf. *Republic* 554a-b). In the second kind of oligarchy, the oligarchs consolidate their rule by selecting their fellow rulers, which allows them more control over the city's honors. The full working out of the oligarchs' ambition occurs in the third and fourth oligarchies, in which the rulers consolidate offices even further through dynastic succession and the abolition of the rule of law. As we have seen, the *dynastoi* chafe at the limitation placed on their ambition by law because law competes with them for a place of honor (cf. 1287a25-35). Thus with the overthrow of law, they become the sole source of political authority and hence the only legitimate recipients of public honor. Yet even in the most extreme dynasty, one person or family alone does not hold power; while dynasty may be tyrannical in its oppression of the city, it is always a political "partnership" that retains some republican character (cf. 1252a15).

*c. The Third Classification: The Best Possible Oligarchy*

1. The Most Well-Blended Regime

In his last major classification of the kinds of oligarchies, which he offers in Book VI, chapter six, Aristotle speaks predominantly of "the first and most well-blended" oligarchy. This regime seems to be the best possible oligarchy, which means that it is the oligarchy closest in spirit
to the best possible regime. This oligarchy has "a distinction among assessments, some being lesser and others greater" (1320b24). Those who meet the smaller assessments are allowed to share in the "necessary offices" that administer activities needed for the city's material well-being, such as "the superintendence connected with the market" (1321b12). In contrast, the wealthy are entitled to participate "in the more authoritative offices"—those that are truly "political" in the sense that they "deliberate about common matters" (1320b23, 1322b37). This distinction between assessments enables the oligarchs to bring in "the better [part] of the people" so that the regime will include "as many of the people as will allow them to be superior to those not sharing" (1320b27-28).

2. The Benefits of Such a Regime

According to Aristotle's presentation, this division of offices is the key to establishing the best possible oligarchic regime. It satisfies the oligarchs' demand to base political offices on some notion of merit connected with wealth. In fact, this arrangement embodies the important principle of distributive justice that unequal people should not be given equal authority or honor by the city (cf. 1282b20-22). Moreover, these distinctions promote the common good because they reduce factional conflict. By co-opting the demos into the regime without angering the oligarchs by

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22 With this in mind, we can attempt to understand Aristotle's implicit hierarchy of the various oligarchic regimes. The best is the most "well-blended" oligarchy that includes the multitude but reserves higher offices for the rich. Next is a regime based on good birth and rule of law that honors virtue but only because virtue is associated by its rulers with old-money (cf. 1294a22). Third is a moderate oligarchy that is open to all who hold the requisite property and does not differentiate between necessary and authoritative offices (cf. 1293a20-25). Fourth is a dynastic oligarchy where the rule of law is still in effect (cf. 1292b4). Last is the kind of dynastic oligarchy that foregoes rule of law for the whim of a few wealthy individuals (cf. 1292b5).

23 Other necessary offices include supervising "the preservation and repair of decaying buildings and roads", registering "both private agreements and judgments from the courts", and "the guarding of prisoners" (1321b11-41).

24 In Book IV, Aristotle seemed to imply that the more moderate oligarchies simply had a single low assessment rather than the two-tiered system of offices characteristic of the most moderate oligarchy in Book VI. It could be that this change is attributable in part to the change in emphasis between Books IV and VI. In Book VI, Aristotle contends that "the greatest" task of the legislator is to understand how to reform regimes so that they are best preserved (1319b35). As a consequence, he speaks in Book VI "with a view to reforming [existing regimes]" rather than analyzing regimes that are the most "attainable for all" cities, as he does in Book IV (cf. (1317a34; 1288b39). In other words, Book VI classifies and evaluates oligarchies according to their potential for reform toward the best possible oligarchic regime, whereas Book IV studies oligarchies from the perspective of understanding "what sort of oligarchy is suitable for what sort of multitude" (1317a10-11). Since most cities are governed by law, Aristotle's main classification in Book IV evaluates oligarchies based on their relationship to the rule of law. In Book VI, he evaluates oligarchies according to their potential for reform toward the best oligarchy possible. The two approaches may produce different classifications not only because law may have a different place in each but also because the best possible oligarchic regime may not be the one most suitable for many cities. In addition to focusing on how good oligarchy could be if fully reformed, Aristotle also stresses in Book VI how bad oligarchy can become if left unreformed; he talks about "the worst" and most "extreme" kinds that are nothing short of "tyrannical" (1320b30-35). This emphasis on the moral height and depth of existing oligarchies makes sense when we recall that Book VII begins Aristotle's treatment of the best regime. By outlining in Book VI the best and worst that can be done in most existing cities, Aristotle whets our appetite for Book VII's discussion of the best that the legislator can accomplish with "equipment... one would pray for" (1325b36).
forcing them to share the highest offices, the well-blended regime avoids the dangerous political conflict that would likely occur if the assessment simply were lowered to take the non-rich into office. By reserving higher offices for them, this political arrangement simply directs oligarchs more efficiently and safely into the offices they might otherwise take by violence. As a result, the well-blended regime better effects the common advantage.

While Aristotle views this kind of oligarchy as a potentially good regime, he makes it clear to legislators that they must not forget oligarchy's troubling natural dynamic. Specifically, he shows that the oligarchs' overweening sense of dignity leads them over time not to establish a two-tiered system of offices but to tyrannically exclude from office all parts of the city they consider unworthy, especially the poor. Left to itself, oligarchy will destroy itself, or the city, or both. Thus the very passion for honor that makes oligarchy a potentially noble regime also makes it a dangerous one. But can the legislator save oligarchy from itself? Can the oligarchs' noble but flawed desire for honor be transformed so that the various kinds of oligarchies no longer tend toward dynasty but instead move toward the "first and most well-blended sort of oligarchy" presented in Book VI?

VI. The Destruction, Preservation, and Reform of Oligarchy

a. The Destruction of Oligarchy: Injustice and Factional Conflict

25 By saying that distinctions in office are emblematic of the best oligarchy, Aristotle implies that the city must be a partnership between rich and poor that nonetheless recognizes distinctive political hierarchies (cf. 1283a38, 1282b34).

26 But if the oligarchs act ignobly by forsaking moderation and the common good in favor of their own "aggrandizement", how can their ambition be rooted in a need for the noble? The answer lies in the fact that oligarchs do not consider it noble to sacrifice oneself for the city because they do not believe that sacrifice is the core of nobility. For them, nobility does not mean transcending self-concern but freeing oneself from limitation or necessity by becoming wealthy and holding political authority. It means ruling one's desires, material circumstances, and political opponents. Their longing for nobler things may be fueled by liberated eros, as Socrates contends, but it remains fundamentally thymotic (proud, self-regarding) rather than erotic (needy, self-transcendent). Why is the case? According to Socrates, the oligarch can never fully shake attachment to himself because he never loses sight of necessity, whether in the form of material privation (poverty) or political enemies (democrats). Thus despite an eros that naturally seeks transcendence of the self through nobility or moral beauty, the oligarchs' lingering concern for necessity keeps them attached to a self-regarding love of honor rather than a truly aristocratic and self-transcending concern for virtue for its own sake (cf. Politics, 1312a20-40; N.E. 1124b27).
1. Oligarchy’s Need for the Legislator

Before we examine Aristotle’s suggestions on how a legislator can establish the best possible oligarchy, we must understand what causes the destruction and preservation of oligarchic regimes, for without stability no regime can be improved, much less made be good or just. Aristotle discusses the destruction of oligarchy in Book V. He begins by suggesting that the legislator’s deliberate reform of oligarchy is especially important because while “democracies generally are preserved by their considerable populations”, oligarchies have a dangerous tendency toward political exclusion that they can only offset by their “being well arranged” (1321a1-3). Hence of the most common regimes of the city, oligarchy most needs the legislator’s attention in order to survive. Without it, oligarchy will be destroyed. But Aristotle makes it clear that before a legislator can understand how to preserve oligarchies through reform, he must know what destroys them: like a doctor, he can only work out the cure once he understands the disease.

2. Personal Conflict Within the Oligarchy

In chapter six of Book V, Aristotle devotes his attention to the two “most evident” ways “in which oligarchies undergo revolution” (1305a36-37). According to him, oligarchies are destroyed either when the rulers “treat the multitude unjustly” or when a conflict arises within the ranks of the rich (1305a37-1305b5). Aristotle says that conflict within an oligarchy becomes likely “when some draw the oligarchy into fewer hands... those who seek equality are compelled to bring in the people to assist them” (1305b35-40). Oligarchy then may breed a demagogue who, because he is bitter against his former colleagues (or because he is extremely ambitious), may try to overthrow the ruling group in a people’s revolution, which often leads to a shift in favor of a more popular regime (cf. 1305b1-31). Aristotle also notes that conflict may occur “when some of those in the oligarchy are treated by others in high-handed fashion” (cf. 1305b35-1305a9). In fact, he declares that the oligarchs have a tendency to “wanton living”, “resentment”, disputes over “judicial decisions”, and offenses against honor, all of which motivate them to carry on factional conflict against each other (cf. 1305b40-1306b5). Indeed, because oligarchs are particularly ambitious

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27 The discussion of the rise and fall of oligarchy occurs in between Book IV and Book VI for the following reason: Book IV lays out how bad oligarchies become as they naturally move toward dynasty; Book V then focuses on how that badness leads to revolutions in oligarchy, particularly without the rule of law. Finally, Book VI illustrates to the legislator what oligarchy could be if Book V has been understood. Hence a complete discussion of Book VI’s view of oligarchy is not possible without an examination of Book V.

28 Because oligarchy so urgently requires the assistance of the legislator’s art, its preservation offers an opportunity for the potential legislator to examine one of the most difficult tasks presented by an actual regime. It also reveals the extent to which the legislator can make actual cities into truly good cities.

29 Oligarchs can distrust each other so much that they are willing to give up control of their defenses to mercenaries.
and sensitive to questions of honor, ordinary personality conflicts exacerbate an already precarious political situation. This is why Aristotle says in Book V that "in oligarchies two sorts of factional conflict arise -- one against each other, the other against the people" while "in democracies there is only that against the oligarchy, there being none that arises among the people against itself that is worth mentioning" (1302a9-11). As a result, Aristotle continues, "democracy is more stable and freer from factional conflict than oligarchy" (1302a8).

3. Factional Conflict With the Multitude

While intra-oligarchic conflict weakens oligarchy, the gravest threat to this regime is popular revolution. According to Aristotle, "revolutions from oligarchy to democracy" occur because "men engage in factional conflict and effect revolution in regimes if they have no share in prerogatives or if they are treated unjustly or arrogantly" (1316b21-22). By excluding the many, oligarchy triggers dangerous factional conflict by the *demos* that must be violently suppressed or the regime will be destroyed. This problem is so severe that it makes oligarchy "the second-worst" regime and -- with tyranny -- "the most short-lived", particularly in comparison with democracy (1289b3, 1315b11).

The serious problems of stability that naturally beset oligarchic rule are worsened by the important fact that "the middling sort... are more numerous and have a greater share in the prerogatives in democracies than in oligarchies" (1296a12-15). The lack of a numerous middle-class element in oligarchy robs it of a vital component of stability. Lost is a moderate class of people to serve as a buffer between the oligarchs and the poor, a class of people who have enough

This too causes overthrow of oligarchies because the mercenary captain "sometimes gains authority" over the oligarchs and becomes the *de facto* ruler of the regime or overthrows the regime and establishes a mercenary tyranny (cf. 1306a20-32).

30 Interestingly, Aristotle extends his analysis of oligarchic injustice to aristocratic regimes as well. For example, he claims that "so-called aristocracies" -- which are mixed regimes that tend toward oligarchy -- exclude the many and are therefore "overturned through a deviation from justice in the regime itself" (1293b8; 1307a6). Even the best aristocracy deprives the many from any share in prerogatives: to that extent, "all aristocratic regimes have an oligarchic character" (1307a34). While the basis for denying office-holding to the many may be different, both aristocracy and oligarchy practice exclusionary politics that can threaten revolution, civil war, and the destruction of the city (cf. 1281b30). Because of this, neither regime can be fully just, because justice is a virtue and "it is certainly not virtue that destroys the element possessing it, nor is justice destructive of a city" (1281a20).

31 As causes of revolution, Aristotle separates "no share in prerogatives" and "treated unjustly" because he believes that it is not necessarily unjust to exclude the multitude from political authority if they do not deserve it (at least according to distributive justice). Moreover, he contends that they represent two distinct political desires: the desire to perform noble actions (characteristic of the "most ambitious" people who consider it unjust to be denied political prerogatives) and the desire to be treated by rulers with sufficient respect (characteristic of the many, who are generally satisfied with "a minimum of work and property" as long as they are not treated arrogantly by their rulers) (cf. 1308a8; 1281a3; 1305b20; 1267a2; 1267a9).

32 Part of oligarchy's instability is caused by the fact that it may have trouble vindicating itself by its own standard of justice since "the majority has a just claim in relation to a minority, for they are... wealthier... when the majority is taken together in relation to the minority" (1283a40-43).
of a stake in the regime to wish its continued existence, and who respond well to the oligarchs' claim to be the party of responsible administration (1286b40-1287a6). Oligarchy thus tends toward a zero-sum conflict pitting the few rich against the many poor, so that Aristotle is prompted to say "when the poor predominate numerically in the absence of [the middle class], [oligarchies] fare badly and are quickly ruined" (1296a16). This is especially true because the wealthy -- despite their quality of business-like prudence in some matters -- often "seek to act arrogantly and aggrandize themselves... if the regime gives them preeminence" (1307a17).

**b. The Preservation and Reform of Oligarchy**

**1. The Necessity of Reform**

In his discussion of the destruction of oligarchy, Aristotle reveals an apparently different approach from Socrates to the question of how regimes change. According to Socrates' account, all regimes inevitably collapse in a particular order, with oligarchy necessarily falling to democracy. Because of the necessity of oligarchy's demise, Socrates acts as though he and his interlocutors ought to have little interest in its reform or preservation, or in the reform and preservation of any actual regime. In contrast, Aristotle maintains to his audience that the wise choices of the "political expert and legislator" can greatly affect the survival of particular regimes, especially oligarchies (cf. *Politics*, 1317a33-35, 1319b33-35; 1321a1-3). Indeed, because oligarchy can only survive for any period of time by "being well arranged", its preservation

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33Yet even good administration -- one supposed strength of oligarchic rule -- may not save an oligarchy. Aristotle says, for example, that "at Erythrae during the oligarchy of the Basilids in ancient times, even though matters were well superintended by those in charge of the regime, the people chafed at being ruled by a few and effected a revolution in the regime" (1305b18-22). The fact that Aristotle selects an ancient example of an anti-oligarchic revolution seems to emphasize the instability of oligarchy because, as he points out, ancient multitudes tended to be even more docile than those of democratic times in which the multitude has become politically ambitious (cf. 1286b18; 1305a1-5). In such times, the simple fact that the many are excluded may cause them to attack an oligarchy or even an aristocracy that rules moderately and efficiently (cf. 1279b35, 1306b23).

34 This statement implies, of course, that oligarchies need to cultivate ties to the middle-class, which may be possible given its sensible and businesslike approach to many political problems.

35 Yet at the same time as the wealthy seek to concentrate political authority exclusively into their own hands, an oligarchy's original property assessment may no longer produce the same exclusivity it once did. Prosperity or inflation may increase accessibility to the requisite property level; as Aristotle says, "frequently the assessment is arranged at first with a view to the existing circumstances... and then it happens that the same properties come to merit an assessment many times as great, as a result of prosperity...so that all citizens come to share in all offices" (1306b6-13). Thus particular oligarchies can move in different directions (less or more inclusion in office) or the same regime can fluctuate at different times. The important thing to note is that oligarchy's natural tendency to tighten the qualification for office can be offset by more people becoming wealthier, although this is a possibility only in a regime that is not already hereditary or dynastic.

36 Socrates does offer two suggestions designed to compel citizens in an oligarchy "to care for virtue" (*Republic* 556a-b). Both of these aim to have money-makers conduct their business dealings "less shamelessly" by stigmatizing unlimited acquisition (556b). As we will see, Aristotle claims that the oligarchs' view of what is shameful can begin to be changed through the correct arrangement of offices.
depends on its reform. Unlike democracy (which can last for a long time despite its vices), oligarchy must draw closer to the best regime if it is to endure. Thus for Aristotle the question is not how to prevent oligarchies from changing, but how to change them.

2. The Standards for Reform

Before examining how to reform oligarchy, we must have some understanding of the characteristics of the regime by which oligarchy is to be judged and improved, for only then can we understand oligarchy’s potential to move toward the best regime. For Aristotle, there are four levels of best regimes: the best simply (the rule of one wise person), the best possible given circumstances “one would pray for” (an aristocracy of gentlemen that takes virtue seriously for its own sake), the “best practicable” under good conditions (a polity or truly mixed regime in which all parts of the city share some political authority), and the “best available to most cities” (a democracy or oligarchy that tends toward polity) (1288b25-34; 1325b36; 1279a35-36; 1329a15-20; 1327b10-15; 1328b35-40). As the best possible regime given “equipment... one would pray for”, an aristocracy of gentlemen is supposed to be the real-world home of political and moral excellence -- where “the best persons are ruling”, or where a few persons “are ruling with a view to what is best for the city and for those who participate in it” (1279a35-37). According to Aristotle’s famous six-fold classification of regimes based on the number of rulers and the purpose of their rule (their own good or the common good), oligarchy is defined as a deviation from virtuous aristocracy because the wealthy few neglect the common advantage in favor of rule for their own good (cf. 1279b8).

Oligarchy’s neglect of the common good can be traced to its lack of concern for virtue. Aristotle states that although “it is impossible to pursue the things of virtue when one lives the life of a vulgar person or a laborer... in oligarchies, it is possible for a vulgar person [to share in office], since many artisans become wealthy” (1278a20-23). Because the vulgar often rule in oligarchies (at least in non-hereditary regimes), Aristotle argues that such a regime is often too attached to money and fails to fund activities and institutions that would serve the common advantage of both citizens and non-citizens and make “the people... glad to see the regime endure” (1321a35-45). Because of its vulgar lack of attention to noble matters, unreformed oligarchy not only shortens its life but also neglects the highest action on behalf of the common good: namely,

37 Aristotle suggests that the theoretically best regime, a kingship of “one person... preeminent in virtue with respect to the rest”, is not possible in any actual city (1288b34-36). He maintains that cities have grown so large that it is no longer possible to have the personal rule of one supremely virtuous person. Moreover, the various parts of the city (rich, poor, etc.) have become politicized to the point that they would not accept the exclusive rule of such a person (nor would such a person would want to rule such a multitude). More importantly, such rule would contradict the political character of the city, which requires a partnership between equals in deliberation and action concerning “the most choiceworthy way of life” (1288b37).
the promotion of virtue among citizens.

3. The Building Block of Reform: Wealth

Yet Aristotle does not conclude that oligarchy lacks any possible foundation for including virtue into its concerns. He takes seriously the oligarchs' claim that there is a close relationship between wealth and virtue. As we have seen, he admits that is not uncommon that "those who are well off are held to possess already the things for the sake of which the unjust commit injustice; this is why they are referred to as gentlemen and notables" (1293b37-38). But a critical distinction must be made here; Aristotle does not say that the well-off are gentlemen, only that they are held to be gentlemen because they do not have to commit injustice in order to survive economically. Still, his remark implies that oligarchs are correct in maintaining that wealth provides a certain freedom from necessity. This freedom is important, according to Aristotle, because wealth often is a prerequisite for the leisure necessary to cultivate virtue and to become educated (cf. 1293b38). And since he argues that "education and virtue" have the highest claim to rule, the oligarchs seem to have some basis for their claim, if only because Aristotle admits that wealth is required to obtain the leisure and education necessary for a life dedicated to truly noble activity (1283a25).

But as Aristotle points out in his criticism of Phaleas in Book II chapter seven, leisure and education by themselves do not translate into virtue. The wealthy could receive an education that might have no positive influence on the way they would conduct themselves as citizens and rulers. Their education could teach them to love wealth (a distinct possibility in an oligarchic regime) and to neglect the virtuous life. Thus without being directed by the regime toward virtue, the potential leisure and education of the well-off in no way qualifies them as virtuous leaders. Indeed, Aristotle goes out of his way to argue that some oligarchs pursue wealth without limit and turn to base physical gratifications instead of pursuing noble activity and an education in virtue (1258a1-7).

Yet despite oligarchy's weak connection with virtue, Aristotle seems to admit that a certain tie does exist between wealth and political and moral excellence. For example, he states that when contrasted with the many, "the wealthy... for the most part... are more trustworthy regarding agreements" (1283a30-33). The trustworthiness of the rich seems to come from the greater sense of responsibility that transacting business and managing large amounts of money helps to foster. According to Aristotle, this sense of responsibility translates into the well-off generally being better administrators of the city and its public things (cf. 1283a20-23). Thus the strengths of oligarchic rule lie in the oligarchs' emphasis on caution, prudence, and a business-like approach to the problems of the political community. In this sense, the wealthy may have something like the prudence and moderation that are necessary for the kind of higher political offices requiring "much experience and trust" (cf. 1322a-31-32). Depending on how the legislator arranges an oligarchy,
wealth can be the foundation for improving the regime.

4. The Example of Carthage

Given the nature of the link between wealth and virtue, we would expect the best possible oligarchy to be one that uses wealth only as a gauge of moral and political capacity.\(^\text{38}\) Of all the actual regimes with some oligarchic character discussed in the Politics, the one that most fits this description is not explicitly mentioned in Aristotle's several classifications: the Carthaginian regime. According to Aristotle, Carthage has a mixed character that "deviates... toward oligarchy" because the Carthaginians always elect "the greatest offices" not "on the basis of desert alone but also on the basis of wealth" (1273a23-24). As a result, political authority tends to be concentrated in the rich. Despite this fact, Carthage allows some of the people to speak out on laws proposed by the "kings and the senators" and does not pay its officials, something that Aristotle says "must be regarded as aristocratic" (1273a17-18). Hence he argues that "the Carthaginians are held to govern themselves in a way that is fine and in many respects extraordinary compared to others", especially more unmixed oligarchic regimes (1272b25). Indeed, because Carthage has never had "factional conflict worth mentioning, or a tyrant", it would seem to be the kind of "well-blended" regime Aristotle recommends to the legislator (1273a20-28).

Unfortunately, Carthage cannot be the example to follow. According to Aristotle, it "escapes the consequences of [its oligarchic character]... by the fact that a part of the people is always becoming wealthy through being sent out to the cities; for by doing this they heal the disease of the regime and make it lasting. But this is really the work of chance" (1273b17-21). Aristotle thus implies that a legislator should not seek to reform oligarchy by strictly emulating Carthage. Instead, the legislator should try to understand the political arrangement of Carthage and reconcile it with the needs of his oligarchic city. This task is particularly difficult because in most oligarchies the rich confront the poor without the advantage of expanding economic opportunity or a large middle class. Hence if anything, the example of Carthage seems to offer a dim prognosis for the preservation and reform of oligarchy -- even a moderate oligarchic regime that includes a large element of virtue survives only by inimitable good luck.

5. Toward the Institutions of a Mixed Regime

If Carthage cannot be the model for oligarchic reform, what can the legislator look to for

\(^{38}\) But have we neglected the true standard for judging oligarchies: namely, the degree to which they pay attention to the common good? Not if we remember that Aristotle considers the highest part of the common good to be the promotion of virtue among all the citizens (cf. 1279a17-20, 1253a15, 40). Any regime that promotes a concern for virtue is promoting the common good.
improving oligarchies? The answer, according to Aristotle, is to understand the institutions of a polity or mixed regime and move oligarchies toward them. Specifically, oligarchies must begin institutionally to include the people in the sharing of political authority.\(^{39}\) Unfortunately, as we have seen, the inclusion of the many is enormously difficult for most oligarchies because the poor generally cannot become wealthy, and therefore they cannot qualify for participation in political office, as in Carthage (cf. 1279b35, 1280a1, 1273b20). But because oligarchy tends to have a very small middle class, it is a political necessity for the poor multitude to feel included in some tangible way, lest the city be “filled with enemies” (1281b30). Aristotle thus recommends several ways to make oligarchy’s exclusion of the multitude less harmful: public profits should be distributed to the indigent (cf. 1309a21); there should be short terms for the authoritative offices in order to reduce the dominance of particular oligarchs (cf. 1308a15); and any financial incentives for holding high office should be removed (cf. 1308b33, 1321a33). Most importantly, as we recall from Aristotle’s praise of the “well blended” oligarchy in Book VI, oligarchy should establish a distinction between necessary and authoritative offices, with the wealthy holding the highest offices and the demos controlling such lower positions as would allow them to veto measures, audit the conduct of high office-holders, and even maintain magisterial appointments such as superintendent of markets or forests (cf. 1320b23-25, 1298b26-40, 1309a26-31, 1321b10-1322a30). In Aristotle’s view, these reforms would push an oligarchy toward being a well-mixed regime because they would allow the best of the many to participate in the regime in new and constructive ways.

Despite the apparent goodness of such reform, however, Aristotle does not say that the best oligarchy of Book VI is a truly mixed regime; instead, he declares that it is “very close to so-called polity” (1320b24). A well-blended oligarchy is not a polity because the wealthy still rule on the basis of property assessments whose fundamental purpose is not to include as many of the people as possible but to distinguish the rich from the poor (cf. 1279b1-3, N.E., 1160a31-36). Yet while these assessments obviously are not aimed at identifying the most virtuous and giving them authority, neither do they exacerbate divisions within the city. Indeed, by including the middle-class elements of the multitude in the regime, they reduce such class divisions. In this respect, such inclusion of the many may offer a real opportunity to improve all kinds of oligarchic regimes.\(^{40}\)

\(^{39}\) Of course, an oligarchy must also be under the rule of law; indeed this is the first reform that must take place, at least in the most severe form of dynastic oligarchy (cf. 1279a15-20). Although Aristotle does not say specifically how including the poor will result in the adoption of the rule of law, his proposals for institutional arrangements such as audits by the people are likely to be an incentive for the wealthy to desire a regularized system of law, lest they become subject to the whims of the multitude (cf. 1281a15-21).

\(^{40}\) According to Aristotle, however, even oligarchs of “good birth” are uneasy about such reform because they believe that “old-money” has a connection to virtue that one of the multitude could not have (cf. 1293b35-40, 1294a20-25).
VII. Oligarchy and the Best Regime

a. Toward the Spirit of Aristocracy: The Moral Effect of Political Reform

Like Plato, Aristotle’s political science is built on a search for the best regime, for the regime that directs human beings toward their highest fulfillment in “the actualization of virtue and a certain complete practice of it” (1328a35-37). His criticism of existing regimes takes its bearing from this high standard; a regime is good to the extent it embodies the principles of the best regime. As the best possible regime, aristocracy is the legislator’s political standard in trying to reform oligarchic regimes, at least in the sense that the legislator must try to promote as much as possible the spirit or animating principle of aristocracy. To become more like true aristocrats, the oligarchs must not only be forced to rule more justly (which occurs in a “well-blended” oligarchy that resembles a polity), but must become concerned with pursuing and encouraging virtue for its own sake. But can this occur even in the “well-blended” oligarchy that Aristotle recommends as the best possible oligarchy?

Clearly, as an oligarchic regime becomes less exclusive through limited democratization, it is forced to become more concerned with justice identified as the common advantage, since it must, by institutional arrangement, give some hearing to the wishes and interests of the “better part of the people” because they are involved in the election and auditing of the rulers (cf. 1293a12, 1292b5, 1279a29-37, 1278b33-40). Not only will this change reduce the chance that oligarchy will be destroyed by factional conflict, it is also good for the oligarchs themselves. If they begin to consider the interests of the many because of the incorporation of popular elements, their rule will come to resemble political rule more than mastery, since the characteristic of political rule is that the rulers look to the good of the ruled in conditions of at least rough political equality (cf. 1278b33-40, 1279a10, 29). And while what the many consider to be their interest may not be particularly noble, the act of such consideration forces oligarchs to think of themselves more and more as rulers of free human beings (cf. 1253b4, 1259b1-10). According to Aristotle, this change is important because “rule over free persons is nobler and accompanied to a greater extent by virtue than ruling in the spirit of mastery” (1333b27). As oligarchs move more toward political rule, they necessarily begin to look away from themselves toward the demos, which they previously had considered no better than a multitude of “beasts” (1281b19). This looking away is a critical part of the most important of the moral virtues, justice (Nicomachean Ethics, 1129b15-35).41 By becoming more like polity in its institutions, oligarchy becomes more aristocratic in its spirit as the

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41 This is not to say that Aristotle considers political rule to be devoid of any oppressive element; indeed, he admits that law is obligation and that all rule involves command or coercion (cf. 1259b35-38). Still, one part of political rule is the consideration of others, and even the possible sacrifice of oneself for the larger good.
rulers become more habituated to the practice of a fuller, truer version of justice.

b. Reforming the Oligarchs' Attachment to Property

That moral transformation begins by changing the oligarchs' attachment to property. As it stands, they view the possession of wealth as honorable and a sign of noble character. But in a mixed oligarchy, they would be required to give heed to the democratic desire for a more equitable distribution of property, which would force them to change the way they use their own property (cf. 1281a16, 1304b30, 1321a44). For example, Aristotle states that in order to support popular inclusion in the lower offices, oligarchs would pay taxes (1320b3). In addition, he implies that the reforms would make the oligarchs fund "magnificent sacrifices and festivities" and have them pay for adorning the city "with votive statues and buildings" (1321a35-40). Indeed, he goes so far as to say that a reformed oligarchy should make it the duty of wealthy families to give poor families land or jobs, and even to follow the example of the Tarentines in requiring the rich to make their excess possessions "common in use" with the poor (1320b10).

Aristotle stresses this sort of reform because the virtuous use of property is the necessary beginning point for the oligarchs' education in nobility. Every regime must address the desire for private property because nearly all people believe that acquiring or having wealth is the good life or is at least central to the good life (1256b30-35). Aristotle argues, however, that attachment to property actually lowers the mind by directing it to "bodily gratifications" rather than to the nobler goods associated with the higher activities of the soul (1263b15; 1337b13). Thus in Aristotle's view, an education in noble virtue must begin for most people by freeing them from the lure of private wealth, with its ensnarement of the mind in merely necessary and self-regarding goods. This means that changing the attachment to private property is central to understanding how to reform actual cities, especially where such attachments dominate.

Such reform is particularly important in oligarchies because they are the only regimes that publicly honor wealth above all. To persuade the oligarchs to use their property moderately and to

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42 It is worth noting that the public support of piety becomes an important part of the reformation of oligarchies, implying that oligarchs with a more aristocratic spirit may take the demands of piety more seriously, perhaps because they would be more concerned with justice (the central issue for piety).

43 Since these property reforms may make the poor more satisfied with their position in the city (and therefore less likely to agitate for confiscatory policies), oligarchs might begin to believe that they can afford to be less concerned with aggressively protecting their wealth.

44 Indeed both oligarchs and democrats (i.e. nearly everyone in every city) greatly desire private property. As Aristotle shows, however, the oligarchs love wealth as a source of public honor while the democrats love it as the means to the freedom necessary to pursue their private physical delights (1321a43).

45 Of course, Aristotle argues that "the greatest of all the things" that can be done to preserve and improve regimes is not change property arrangements but to educate the citizens against the tendency of their regime (assuming they live in a deviant regime) (cf. 1310a13). In oligarchy, however, the two go together because the citizens can not be so educated without first reforming their love of wealth, since wealth is the pillar of the regime (cf. 1310a23-25).
some extent for the sake of the poor (their old enemy) is to begin to change their most deeply-held opinions as to what is most honorable or virtuous. This is especially significant because the rich -- especially money-makers -- tend to be stingy and unwilling to use their private wealth for political purposes that do not directly benefit them (cf. Nicomachean Ethics 1120b13). If their opinion of the honorable use of property can be changed, their souls will shed one of the greatest impediments to improvement. But if their minds are not changed about the honorable use of property, they will resist all further reform because they are so attached to honor. If the legislator simply concentrates on giving the many a "minimum of property and work" without changing the oligarchs' view, the demos may be content to possess a small amount of property and to be left alone, but the oligoi will continue to try to acquire ever more money or political authority because they are more spirited, have greater desires, and are more likely to think that they merit great things than most of the multitude (cf. 1267a9-15).46

While a well-mixed oligarchy would still maintain that the good life is associated with wealth and the things provided by wealth, its institutions and law would embody the notion that property is not the sole honorable end, and that the acquisition and use of wealth for self-aggrandizement is base.47 In this scenario, the wealthy would begin to see their riches as a means to larger political ends rather than simply viewing the city as a means to enriching or honoring themselves alone (1280a27).48 This change might help to foster a sense of common endeavor or even partnership not only among the rich but also between the rich and the poor.

c. A Political Education in Virtue

46 According to Aristotle, "the many do not chafe as much at being kept away from ruling -- they are even glad if someone leaves them the leisure for their private affairs -- as they do when they suppose that their rulers are stealing common funds; then it pains them both not to share in the prerogatives and not to share in the profits" (1308b35-38). Thus the people do not really want to share in officeholding in order to fulfill themselves as political animals or even to have their claim to rule recognized; they want to protect their own material self-interest (cf. 1253a1-5). In fact, Aristotle says that "the poor will not want to rule" if they cannot profit from offices; indeed, they will be content "if they are kept inferior but are done no injustice" (1267b8; 1309a5). Under normal conditions, the poor only become political when oligarchs arrogantly dominate them or when a demagogue whips them up by exaggerated injustice or the promise of great profit.

47 Indeed to the extent that rulers in a reformed oligarchy would spend large sums of money adorning the city and supporting its political arrangement, they would be learning the virtue of generosity or even magnificence, which Aristotle defines as spending one's own money for the common good, especially for noble or enduringly beautiful projects and activities (cf. N.E. 1123a4-29).

48 In Aristotle's view, this especially powerful moral reform is only possible in oligarchy. A similarly important change does not occur in the reform of democracy, because in a healthy democracy the citizens still consider their private pursuits and pleasures to be most important; indeed, this is why in the absence of the people's assembly the wealthy are left to administer a reformed democracy (cf. 1275b18; 1319a30-34). Thus the legislator who reforms democracy does not begin to transform the fundamental opinion of the ruling group as to what constitutes a good life, since the many still have better things than to do (e.g. looking after their private farms) than to concern themselves intently with any higher understanding of moral and political excellence (cf. 1318b14-17). Thus the reform of oligarchy is especially important for showing what the legislator's art can (and cannot) do to improve the character of citizens.
But does the reform of an oligarchy’s political arrangement make the oligarchs truly more concerned with virtue? One the one hand, they are forced to concern themselves with the needs of the many, but virtue is supposed to be the disposition to choose what is good (Nicomachean Ethics 1106a20-24; 1106b36; 1111b6). Would the oligarchs not simply resent their new political arrangement as a democratic imposition to be overthrown as quickly as possible? Can their minds really be changed so that they develop a more aristocratic spirit? As we have seen, Aristotle argues that such a change is possible, at least to the extent that political reform can prod the oligarchs to begin to develop a fuller understanding of virtue. He contends that those such as oligarchs who lack an education in virtue should be compelled to become habituated to more selfless or noble actions. For example, when discussing the aristocratic regime outlined in Books VII and VIII, he says that “it is noble for the free among the young to serve in many of the tasks that are held to be characteristic of servants” (1333a8-10).

Through reform, oligarchs would undergo an education in the virtues similar to that given the young in the best possible aristocracy. Specifically, they would begin to learn that free and noble human beings must be willing to subordinate part of their good to the common advantage (cf. 1333a1-7). Among themselves, this would mean accepting the justice of ruling and being ruled in turn. With respect to the multitude, it would mean allowing the many to hold lower offices for the sake of the city’s common good. Without such reform, even high-minded oligarchs would dismiss any concern for others (especially for the poor multitude) as a slavish concern unworthy of those who are so obviously superior because of their excellence or good birth (cf. 1280a23-24). Structural changes are therefore needed in order to make the oligoi begin to consider political questions as something different from (and larger than) issues of hierarchical privilege. Oligarchs must replace their desire to be honored for the virtues associated with wealth (i.e. orderliness, moderation, elevation above poverty) with a desire to be honored for their ability to serve the common good (i.e. their political and moral virtue).

If such reform takes place, Aristotle suggests that at least some of the oligarchs may begin to deliberate on political questions in a manner that gives greater consideration to examining the justice or nobility of matters under deliberation, particularly those dealing with the many’s claim to rule. For if the “better part” or the “respectable” among the demos hold minor offices and audit high officials, they would be more likely to call attention to the justice or goodness or nobility of their own position (cf. 1320b28, 1273b5). In such a confrontation, the oligarchs’ opinion that their view embodies the whole of justice may be eroded, just as it would be if a potential or actual oligarch were exposed to a critique of oligarchy of the kind presented in Book III of the Politics (e.g. 1280a11, 1281a9). By institutionalizing the factions’ clash of opinions on justice, the legislator can make some progress in addressing the oligarchs’ partial view of justice, which Aristotle sees as the fundamental political and moral problem of this regime. In so doing, political
reform begins to open their eyes to a fuller understanding of virtue.

d. Toward a Noble Leisure

Forcing the oligarchs into a broader understanding of virtue is especially important for moving this regime toward an aristocracy of gentlemen because such reform progressively opens future generations to the pursuit of nobler activities. This results from the fact that in unreformed oligarchies "the sons of the rulers" live in idle luxury (1310a25). Hence there are many young people who have the time and money to pursue activities other than money-making but who are deterred because of oligarchy's opinion that only the virtues rooted in property should be honored by those who have leisure and the opportunity to rule.49 But once political necessity shows the oligarchs the need for some concern with political and moral virtue, their souls may begin to change because they can no longer ignore the status of those virtues. They may recognize the need to practice the virtues, and thus may see the need for an inquiry into which virtues to practice and how to practice them.

This turn to the study of the virtues associated with politics and the rule of free persons not only requires leisure but also elevates the use of leisure in the city, since the rulers now require it (Nicomachean Ethics 1095a1-14). This change is critical. The legislator can only make oligarchy friendly to human flourishing if the oligarchs' minds have been awakened to the need to become more magnanimous, especially with regard to using their property and political authority to benefit the rest of the city (most notably the poor). If this happens, studied leisure could become more widespread as such a city becomes more prosperous and the virtue of nobler activities. This results from the opinion of oligarchs that "can no longer ignore the status of those virtues. They may recognize the need to practice the virtues, and thus may see the need for an inquiry into which virtues to practice and how to practice them.

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49 In this sense, oligarchy's emphasis on the goodness of wealth makes it less open than democracy to nobler pursuits such as moral or philosophic study because democracy offers the freedom to choose philosophy. The problem is that democracy may so equalize the goodness of all pursuits that it dampens the natural human passion for noble actions, effectively combating the lure of politics or philosophy for "those most ambitious with a view to virtue" (1324a31; 1317b15).

50 Not only is this good for the souls of young oligarchs, but Aristotle also implies that it is something of a political imperative for oligarchy because people are "most particularly in need of philosophy and moderation and

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recognizes something of the goodness of an education in the nobler things. Indeed, such activities may even be encouraged by this reformed oligarchic politics.\(^5\)

This openness to (and even promotion of) gentlemanly leisure is particularly important because it makes a reformed oligarchy closely related to the best possible regime outlined in Books VII and VIII of the Politics. As a careful examination of those books shows, Aristotle proposes moral virtue as the basis for the way of life embodied by his best regime, then quietly substitutes noble leisure as the best political equivalent to what he sees as the highest life, the life of philosophic contemplation (1328b33-41; 1334a10-40).\(^5\) A reformed oligarchy will not make fostering philosophy the end of the regime, but it will have the ability and the motive to make room for leisured study within its politics. This makes a reformed oligarchy an example within real-world politics of how a regime could approximate the highest principles of the best regime. In particular, it can embrace Aristotle's contention that politics must elevate human beings above honoring selfish goods (one of the most powerful of which is private property) and point them toward "just and moderate" activities that have a noble end. The noble action in question is more than mere orderliness or moderation: it is a combination of participating in the common deliberation connected to the highest offices and allowing investigation of the virtues associated with such activity. As Aristotle's discussion in Book VII shows, this combination of political action and reflection is the best way of life that the city and the individual can share (compare 1325b7-15 with 1325b16-31).\(^5\) In this sense, Aristotle's reformed oligarchy incorporates in a rough form both the virtue and leisure characteristic of the best possible regime.

**VII. The Peril and Promise of Oligarchy**

*a. What the Study of Oligarchy Shows About Legislation and Political Science*

\(^5\) Although their argument is quite different from this one, Wood and Wood use a helpful term to describe Aristotle's goal for oligarchic political life: they call it "an oligarchy of gentlemen" (cf. Wood and Wood 1978).

\(^5\) On the transformation in the end of the best regime, see Bartlett 1994, esp. 390-95.

\(^5\) And it is this concern with the noble that informs Aristotle's larger discussion of politics and the regime. As we know, Aristotle contends that the regime ought to elevate human beings in some way so that they learn to take nobility and human excellence seriously. By taking politics seriously, people are pointed to a certain fulfillment as political animals, which above all means engaging their passionate concern with justice and nobility in rational discourse (cf. 1253a15, 1281a3). In this way, politics and philosophy share a fundamental similarity, because for Aristotle experiencing and thinking through the attraction of the just (and, by implication, the noble) is essential to understanding the true ground of philosophy and the philosophic way of life (cf. Nicomachean Ethics 1177b15-25; Politics 1323b32, 1324a30, 1325b20; see also Republic 402a-c, 403c, 409b-c). It is therefore not surprising that Aristotle suggests the political and philosophic ways of life for those who are "most ambitious with a view to virtue", and recommends "philosophy" for the most erotic human beings (1324a30; 1267a7-12).
Aristotle's reform of oligarchy shows why it is such an important regime for understanding the legislator's art and his own political science. Unlike the aristocracy formed in conditions "one would pray for", the well-blended oligarchy deals directly with the real circumstances present in nearly every city, and especially with the conflict over property between rich and poor that is one of the greatest causes of political instability and injustice (1281a17). To that extent, its attention to the problems surrounding property make a well-arranged oligarchy a surer (though lower) goal for a legislator concerned with understanding how to preserve non-democratic regimes. Indeed, despite some scholars' claims to the contrary, oligarchy is of special interest to Aristotle because by gaining insight into this regime, those studying the legislator's art can understand how to moderate and ennoble acquisitiveness, which is the most common and powerful form of the desire for distinction, elevation, and nobility. As we have seen, Aristotle's analysis leads him to advocate loosening oligarchy's exclusive character by very carefully mixing in elements of democracy. Such a reform can make oligarchy more stable and more just, and in that sense it attains an important end, because a regime can only begin to promote virtue (in any sense) once it has overcome constant threats of conflict and revolution (cf. 1280a20).

More importantly, it can also force oligarchic rulers to rule more politically, and thereby to begin to learn to exercise more of the higher virtues. In Aristotle's view, this kind of rule can provide an apprenticeship in virtue for oligarchs that could not be found even in an old-money regime that is detached from the vigorous pursuit of money. For even there, considering the good of others in the city (particularly the demos) is not part of the rulers' understanding of political virtue. While this does not mean that a reformed oligarchy will ever provide the kind of education offered in the best possible regime of Books VII and VIII, it shows how the reforms can also make the souls of the money-honoring oligarchs gentler, more virtuous, and even concerned to some degree with the noble use of leisure. To that extent, Aristotle reveals how the legislator's art can elevate the otherwise inevitably dangerous ambition of wealthy.

It also illustrates, however, that the legislator can never raise oligarchy to the level of the truly virtuous or noble because such a regime cannot be expected to sever its deepest attachments to wealth. The oligoi will not be like the aristocrats of the best regime who consider the acquisition or

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54 The regime sketched in Books VII and VIII has a large slave or semi-free population, which allows for an abstraction from the needs and even the existence of the free multitude (cf. 1327b7-29). A reformed oligarchy, in contrast, explicitly recognizes and tries to deal with the fundamental political reality of the demos.

55 Of course, the reform of tyranny would seem to be an even more impressive example of the legislative art than the reform of oligarchy, since the tyrant is even more likely than the oligarchs to ruin the political life of a city. This is partly true, and perhaps explains why Aristotle devotes so much energy in the Politics to the reform of tyranny (e.g. Book V, ch. 10). But aside from the fact that he often considers oligarchy to be very similar to tyranny, in Aristotle's view the task of pointing a money-lover toward the noble virtues is even more difficult than reforming a person who desires to govern a city alone, since rule is a nobler (i.e. less merely useful, less intrinsically self-regarding) good than money, and therefore shares a certain kinship with moral virtue that wealth does not (cf. 1320b33; 1258a1-25, 1325b5-10).
management of private wealth to be unworthy of their time, attention, or honor (cf. 1320b33). The highest oligarchy can go is a moderated, gentlemanly concern with ruling prudently and with ensuring that the wealthy have as much of a high-minded appreciation for noble activities, including the finer aspects of leisure, as they do for political honor. By showing the height that most actual cities can attain, Aristotle's reform of oligarchy illustrates how close he thinks that a real city can come to, and how far it must remain from, embodying the highest principles of political life. Ultimately, his presentation raises the question whether the highest political activity (legislation) is limited in its power to reconcile the notion of justice embodied in oligarchy with the justice demanded by the city as a political partnership. Aristotle thus questions the justice of oligarchy and the greatness of the legislator's art, for if that art cannot reform oligarchy into the best regime, its powers to effect good are limited. In this respect, Aristotle's treatment of oligarchy reveals the almost paradoxical character of his political science, which seeks to provide guidance to political life even as it points to another way of life -- the philosophic life -- that can more fully satisfy the deepest desires of the potential legislator. Thus despite differences in presentation, Aristotle's treatment shares a fundamental similarity with Socrates' discussion of oligarchy: both contradict Michels' assertion that oligarchy has no inherent connection with justice, yet both question whether oligarchy or any regime can embody full justice.

b. The Political Psychology of Acquisitiveness: Plato and Aristotle on the Problem of Oligarchy

I. The Importance of Moral Passion

For Plato and Aristotle, oligarchy is the political expression of the psychology of the wealthy and acquisitive. As we recall, Michels argues that oligarchy is largely the result of amoral organizational forces combined with a distorted psychological relationship between leaders and masses. In contrast, Plato's Socrates contends that oligarchy arises from a passion that, while originating in the money-maker's desire for safety and honor, transcends the simple need for preservation and respect. According to Socrates, the oligarch is born when such a successful money-maker is forced to defend his property against an unjust attack by the democrats (565c). As an oligarch, he no longer acts like the money-maker who moves with his head "bent down, not seeming to see [the drones]"; instead, he stands up and makes a public defense of property and the justice of a regime based on property (555d). In short, the oligarch's political psychology is emphatically moral.

Such moral passion comes to the fore because the money-maker has replaced his insatiable desire for money with a devotion to wealth as the expression of the nobility of an orderly soul. He
comes to honor property not for what it gets him but for the virtues it requires and represents, which can only be acquired by a few. As Socrates portrays it, the oligarch's moral passion is fueled by an erotic desire for something beyond a purely selfish good like money. This higher longing is manifested in the oligarch's fierce attachment to his regime, even to the point of dying in its defense rather than surrendering to the democrats' egalitarian order. Socrates thus implies that a desire for self-transcendence, rather than self-preservation or aggrandizement, is at the moral core of oligarchy.

Aristotle expands Socrates' discussion by applying it to the legislator's study of actual regimes. According to Aristotle, oligarchy is the most common embodiment of the anti-democratic desire for political hierarchy. The oligarchs' ambition for exclusive political authority gets stronger as they move farther from physical necessity by becoming richer or by inheriting wealth. Aristotle suggests that the entrenched institutions, laws, and customs of an oligarchy often provide an oligarchic education that offsets the tendency (identified by Socrates) of rich young people to become libertine democrats. In this respect, Aristotle's discussion adds a crucial element to Socrates' presentation because it suggests that oligarchy tends over time toward rigid and exclusive hierarchies that are hostile to democratic change or even to the well-intentioned reforms of the legislator.

2. The Desire to Acquire and the Desire to Rule

According to the ancients' understanding, oligarchy is so politically dangerous because there is an inextricable link between the desire to acquire great wealth and the desire to rule. Acquisitiveness has a moral component that by nature finds its satisfaction in the highest political authority and honor. Hence so long as there are acquisitive people, there will be potential oligarchs; and so long as political office is seen as the place for the noblest or most honorable people, potential oligarchs will become real oligarchs. For the ancients, this is especially true in a democratic city that attacks the wealthy's property or is simply built on principles opposed to their notion of what constitutes human excellence. Because the oligarchs' political passion is a version of the erotic love of the noble at the core of true morality, oligarchy does have the potential to be a nobler regime. Unfortunately, it is distorted by their mistaken belief that nobility (and therefore honor) is linked to the capacity of a person to free himself from limitation by overcoming poverty and dominating his opponents instead of cultivating virtue by sharing in rule or participating in the life of philosophy. Hence despite its nobler potential, oligarchy tends to be a harsh and unjust regime, especially if left unformed.

In the end, Plato and Aristotle understand the problem of oligarchy from the comprehensive perspective of political philosophy, which investigates the possibility of a true justice on which to
found the best regime. As we will now see, the moderns accept the ancients' method but they deny that political philosophy must evaluate oligarchy from the perspective of the ancients' best regime. In particular, they attempt to show that the desire for the noble supposedly underlying the oligarchs' political passion is really a selfish desire that to a large extent can be satisfied by the protection and encouragement of private property and personal liberty. Hence they contend that with the right institutional arrangements, the "inextricable" link can be severed between the desire to acquire and the desire to rule. In their view, the political problem of oligarchy can be solved if only people can be turned away from Plato and Aristotle to a new understanding of the purpose and foundation of politics. To that innovative teaching we now turn.
CHAPTER FOUR

HOBBES AND LOCKE ON ACQUISITIVENESS
AND THE PROBLEM OF OLIGARCHY

I. Oligarchy and the Spirit of Modern Political Science

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the early modern view of oligarchy articulated by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and especially to uncover their understanding of the acquisitive psychology. We focus on the political psychology of acquisitiveness because the ancients view it as an ineradicable cause of oligarchy. As such, the acquisitive psychology is perhaps the deepest source of the disagreement between the ancients and moderns on the political problem of oligarchy. As we have seen, Plato and Aristotle's critique of oligarchy is guided by their search for the best regime, for a political order that directs human beings to their fulfillment in the highest good. Hence the ancients evaluate oligarchies based on the extent to which such regimes foster the way of life that is truly noble and good (as much as the political community can, given its nature). In contrast, the liberal democratic view of oligarchy is built on the modern conviction that political life should not be directed toward making citizens into excellent human beings but toward securing the here and now goods necessary for "the relief of man's estate". Hence the moderns' political science evaluates oligarchy based on the extent to which it is useful in securing the earthly goods that improve the human condition. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, the first great thinker to attack the ancient and medieval order was Niccolo Machiavelli.\(^1\) Hence our chapter on the moderns' teaching on oligarchy must begin with a brief (and necessarily superficial) outline of the change in understanding oligarchy begun by Machiavelli's revolution in political science.

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II. Machiavelli’s Understanding of Acquisitiveness

a. Acquisitiveness as the Foundation of Politics

While Machiavelli wrote a variety of poetic and historical works illuminating his political teaching, *The Prince* and *The Discourses* are generally considered to be the most comprehensive revelations of his political wisdom. While both books emphasize Machiavelli’s break with previous writers, *The Prince* is especially (in)famous for its overt contention that the old thinkers must be rejected because their search for the best regime led them to imagine “republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth” (61).² Machiavelli claims that by focusing on “how one should live” rather than “how one does live”, the ancients (and their medieval compatriots) “let go of what is done for what should be done” (61). As a result of ignoring reality for high-minded imaginings, traditional political science led people not to the good life but to “ruin” (61) In sum, Machiavelli charges that the political thought of Plato and Aristotle is part of an old “order” that cruelly deluded humanity into pursuing political utopias that could never deliver on the promise to fulfill people’s real desires.

Machiavelli’s attack on the ancients’ political science is evident in chapter one of *The Prince*, where he offers a political classification based on “How many are the kinds of principalities and in what modes they are acquired” (5). In the first sentence, he declares that “all states, all dominions that have held or do hold empire over men have been and are either republics or principalities” (5). In offering this scheme, Machiavelli indicates that oligarchy and democracy are not radically different regimes, as Aristotle maintains, but are both kinds of republics. In fact, Machiavelli here abandons Aristotle’s six-fold classification of regimes according to who rules (the number and type of people) and for what purpose (their own good or the common good).³ These distinctions based on justice and the common good are fundamental to politics, according to Aristotle, because all human beings are political animals: that is, to a lesser or greater extent all people have by nature a concern for justice and noble living that finds its outlet in speech and activity concerning political matters (cf. *Politics* 1253a1-20). Machiavelli denies this argument;

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² This section focuses on *The Prince* because it is the most famous and influential of Machiavelli’s works and the one in which he claims (in his “Dedication Letter”) that his wisdom has been “reduced... to one small volume” (3). All citations and parenthetical page numbers refer to the Mansfield translation of *The Prince*, 1985. All citations and page numbers from *The Discourses* are taken from the Mansfield and Tarcov translation, 1996.

³ In Book I, chapter two of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli explicitly refers to previous ancient and medieval political classifications. According to him, “some who have written on republics say that in them is one of three states - called by them principality, aristocrats, and popular... Some others, wiser according to the opinion of many, have the opinion that there are six types of government, of which three are the worst; that three others are good in themselves but so easily corrupted that they too come to be pernicious” (11). He makes it clear that while the ancient and medieval classifications seem “wise”, their distinction between correct and deviant regimes is founded on the false notion that some rulers choose to pursue the common good without being “constrained by necessity”, especially the necessity of keeping the city together in the face of external danger (13).
he claims instead that the acquisition and maintenance of empire must be the fundamental focus of political science because notions like justice or the common good cannot support or foster a political order, especially in “the midst of danger” (which every state is in fact always in) (cf. 24, 90, 42). Thus in order to ensure the existence and development of a political order, a prince must base his “modes and orders” on something that -- unlike the desire for justice or nobility -- can be counted on to exist in all people and to work in all situations.

Machiavelli finds such a foundation for politics in the desire to acquire, which he calls “a very natural and ordinary thing” (14). While the ancients admit the existence of human acquisitiveness, they contend that good politics is built on the principle that all people have a need to go beyond narrow self-concern and live according to what is right by nature (i.e. what is in accord with the naturally or divinely-ordained good). Machiavelli claims instead that while all people pay lip service to morality, nobility, and justice, they only live according to these high-minded notions of virtue when it is convenient for them (23-24). Plato and Aristotle are wrong in their contention that people by nature have a noble passion to do what is right or to seek a higher good. Except for a few individuals under the spell of intense hatred or love, human beings are universally “ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain” (73, 66). Because their first concern is always with themselves, people can be counted on to attempt to secure their own well-being in every situation (cf. 73, 66). According to Machiavelli’s argument, this self-concern is at the heart of the desire to acquire because people can only be sure that they will have what they want if they go out and get it. Some people -- like the ancient Romans -- “foresee... inconveniences from afar” and relentlessly acquire in order to overcome those future problems, while others fail to acquire much because they accept “that

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4 This change has great importance for modern political science because it effectively denies that the defining fact of any political community is its “regime” (politeia): that is, the city’s arrangement of political offices based on a notion of “who should rule” (Politics 1280a8-10; 1281a14-15). This ancient and medieval view regards the political arrangement of ruling offices as establishing a distinctive set of institutions, laws, and customs (nomoi) that give each city a particular way of life. For Machiavelli, “who rules” does not change what politics is about since all rule is established and maintained for the purpose of holding “empire” over men. The difference between states is the type and extent of their empire. On Machiavelli’s use of “state” (stato) rather than “regime”, see Mansfield 1983. Subsequent early modern writers also neglect “regime” and instead speak of “forms of commonwealth” (Hobbes and Locke) or “forms of government” (Montesquieu and The Federalist).

5 Machiavelli claims that he is the first to base politics on a true understanding of “nature” and “natural”. Ordinary (“vulgar”) people have wrongly equated the “natural” with the familiar while the ancients and medievalists incorrectly held “natural” to mean in accordance with the telos or purpose of a thing (The Prince, ch. 2; Politics. 1252b30-35). In contrast, Machiavelli insists that “natural” means in accord with necessities that transcend the familiar but that have no naturally or divinely-ordained purpose that human beings must follow (cf. The Prince, chs. 3, 26).

6 This is not to say that the ancients believe that all people are equally moved by a concern for justice and nobility. As shown by Socrates’ encounter with Adeimantus, Polemarchus, and Glaucon, some human beings are nobler or baser by nature and by education, which can cultivate, ignore, suppress, or distort their higher natural inclinations (cf. Republic, 357a-358e).

7 Machiavelli does not rule out that justice may some power in the soul; he simply but vigorously denies that it is more powerful than self-interest (61, 90). He sometimes seems to suggest that the power of justice (i.e. the fact some people do in fact risk themselves for their friends or their country) comes from a secret expectation of immortality or glory for themselves and/or their posterity (66-67; see also Leviathan, ch. 11, @6).
saying... which is everyday in the mouths of the wise men of our times -- to enjoy the benefit of time" (13). But regardless of whether people are successful acquirers, their natural self-concern fuels a desire to acquire that can only be understood as a “very natural and ordinary thing” (12).

b. Types of Acquisitiveness

Despite the fact that all people are naturally acquisitive, Machiavelli divides human beings into “diverse humors” based on what they want to acquire. He contends that most human beings are part of “the people”. This human type is marked by a desire to enjoy the safety and pleasure that comes with possessing “property and women” (72). For the people, acquisition means gaining and keeping comfort and security; as a result, their acquisitiveness is limited to ensuring secure possession of their lives and conveniences (91). Politically, this means that they “desire neither to be commanded or oppressed by the great”, who threaten to take their property and women (39). “The great” themselves are marked by a desire to “command and oppress the people” (39, 72, 74). These human types are more politically ambitious because dominating the people requires that they aggressively seek control of the state. Finally, a very few individuals are “princes”. These human types are marked above all by a desire to acquire the kind of great or everlasting “glory” that comes with founding “new orders and modes” (39, 23). Machiavelli acknowledges that the prince’s desire for “glory” resembles the desire of the great because acquiring and maintaining glory requires completely commanding one’s “state” and conquering rival states (35). He maintains, however, that the prince’s desire goes beyond the great’s ruthless ambition because it also demands that the prince acquire the veneration and love of the people, which is accomplished by liberating them from their oppression by the great who rule the old order (67, 23). Hence the true prince does not seek to acquire power as an end in itself nor as a means of oppression; rather, it is the means to acquiring glory (cf. 35). Because this glory is the most difficult prize and requires the prince to mold a new people out of the old form, it entails the broadest and deepest kind of acquisitive desire, the one with no limits on what or how much it will acquire in order to establish a continuously expanding order that constantly renews itself and conquers other orders (cf. 7, 23, 26).⁸

⁸ According to Machiavelli’s presentation, the object of acquisitiveness generally determines the extent of acquisitiveness: the greater the object desired, the larger the scope of acquisitiveness. Thus, for example, the desire to acquire glory (the greatest object) entails the deepest and most wide-ranging empire.
c. Oligarchy as a Republic of the Great

Where then does the regime described by the ancients as oligarchy fit in Machiavelli's new political science? According to his classification, there are only two kinds of states:principalities and republics. Obviously, rule by a few wealthy families is not a principality so it must be a kind of republic. Of republics, there is a "government of aristocrats", a popular state", a "licentious" popular state, and a "state of the few", which is oligarchy (Discourses Bk. I, ch. 2, p. 11). But who are these "few" -- are they of "the great" or "the people"? For Machiavelli, the answer depends on why the few are attached to their state. If, like money-makers, they defend it so that they can accumulate and protect wealth for their own security, then they are closer to "the people". But Machiavelli seems to suggest that most often oligarchies are run by the great. He makes this clear in recounting the origin of "the state of the few", which came into being when the "administration" of the aristocrats' state "came next to their sons, who, not knowing the variation of fortune, never having encountered evil, and unwilling to rest content with civic equality, but turning to avarice, to ambition, to usurpation of women, made a government of few, without respect for any civility" (Discourses II). Given the few's disdain for and oppression of the people, they would seem to belong to Machiavelli's "great". In short, most oligarchies are republics of the great, with all the difficulties that arise when political ambitious people share rule.9

d. Acquisitiveness, Oligarchy, and the New Political Science

With his new understanding of politics, Machiavelli initiates a fundamental reversal of the ancient view of oligarchy. He regards acquisitiveness -- rather than a concern for justice or nobility -- as the central passion of all people, including the politically ambitious wealthy. This change lowers the standard by which political science evaluates oligarchy; no longer is it to be judged by the extent to which it conforms to the noblest or most just regime but by how well it allows the rulers to satisfy their desire to acquire and maintain empire. Of course, Machiavelli's claim that "the end of the people is more decent than that of the great" indicates a certain preference for a republic of the people rather than a republic of the great (39). But at its deepest level this preference is not based on democratic justice but on what is good for the founder and his glory; republics with a mix of the people and the great are easier to "maintain" because the ambition of the great drives the people on to conquests they would otherwise not attempt while the neediness of the people makes them remember their founders as the givers of their "liberty"

Thus Machiavelli prefers a mixed republic over a republic of the great, in part because the mixture creates constant tension that spurs competition which finds an outlet in imperial conquest, and in part because mixed republics are more stable and enduring sources of glory for a new prince than those purely of the great, whose "insolence" makes them resent the glory of the founder and perhaps even conspire to seize control of his state (74).

Machiavelli’s political science rejects the traditional political judgment of oligarchy. For Machiavelli, however, disconnecting acquisitiveness from "imaginary" higher concerns allows "whoever understands" to see that the ancients exaggerated both the danger and the potential of oligarchy. In his view, "the state of the few" is simply the expression of one type of human acquisitiveness (for "command") that may be dangerous but is by no means the most radical threat to a political order (that honor belongs to the potential prince). Nor does oligarchy’s concern for order and dignity give it any special potential because of some nascent connection to an aristocratic "best regime". In Machiavelli’s view, these "higher" oligarchic desires are simply a form of the all too human need to acquire, which reaches its peak in the prince’s love of immortal glory.

Given the apparent demise of oligarchy in contemporary times, could it be that Machiavelli’s new understanding of acquisitiveness sever what the ancients thought to be an inseverable link between the desire to acquire wealth and the desire to rule? Did Machiavelli’s political psychology, far from entailing the establishment of tyrannical oligarchies, create the possibility of a politics that is both acquisitive and non-oligarchic, even democratic? These questions are at the heart of Hobbes’ and Locke’s analysis of the acquisitive psychology, to which we now turn.

10 In Book I, chapter two of the Discourses, Machiavelli indicates a preference for a mixed state that combines the popular state “with the power of the principality and with that of the aristocrats” (13).

11 Of course, Machiavelli rates the "true princes" desire for glorious self-aggrandizement as the "greatest" example of acquisitiveness (22). For him, this longing to acquire glory is above the desire of those who seek to command empire but not to gain glory (35).
II. Hobbes' Outline of the Acquisitive Psychology

a. Hobbes and the Modern Project

Thomas Hobbes has been called one of the founders of modern liberalism by a number of scholars. He clearly shares Machiavelli's modern enthusiasm for overturning ancient and medieval political science, which Hobbes derides as a collection of "dreams... repugnant to Government" (687). And as a number of scholars have noted, he is at least "proto-liberal" in his argument that political society must be based on individual security and consent. Thus while Hobbesian political thought originates in the new world created by Machiavelli's revolutionary teaching, he extends and qualifies that teaching in such a way as to lay the groundwork for the liberal constitutionalism of Locke. As we will see, Hobbes accepts many of the fundamentals of Machiavelli's evaluation of acquisitiveness, but transforms those insights into a new understanding of both the passion and the politics to which it was linked by the ancients. In these respects, his teaching on oligarchy and the political psychology of acquisitiveness serves as a bridge from Machiavelli to Locke. To begin to understand Hobbes' argument, we turn first to his discussion of oligarchic government as it is offered in his most famous work, *Leviathan*.

b. Oligarchic Commonweals

In his discussion of oligarchy, Hobbes refuses to employ ancient and medieval political classifications. He complains that "Aristotles Civi Philosophy" has wrongly led people "to call all manner of Common-wealths but the Popular... Tyranny... And when the same men shall be displeased with the administration of the Democracy, or Aristocracy, they... call readily the one Anarchy, and the other, Oligarchy, or the Tyranny of a Few " (698). According to Hobbes,

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12 C.B. Macpherson, for example, claims that "there ought not to be any question" that Hobbes was one of the great founders of the liberal tradition; in fact, Macpherson argues that "it should rather be acknowledged that he dug the channel in which the mainstream subsequently flowed" (Macpherson 1985, 24).

13 All parenthetical page numbers refer to the Macpherson edition of *Leviathan*, 1985.

14 On the liberal aspects of Hobbes' political thought, see, for example, Dagger 1999, 57.

15 Hobbes claims that no "other Philosopher hitherto" has laid out a true science of politics (407). He thus implies that he is the first political thinker to break with the old order and establish a new, scientific approach to politics, suggesting that he does not simply embrace Machiavelli's political thought. Hobbes' own pronouncement, however, does not eliminate the possibility that his new political science is set in the context of the revolution in thought sparked by Machiavelli (cf. Strauss 1984, "Preface").

16 While *Leviathan* is the most influential and "most mature presentation" of Hobbes' political philosophy, it does not necessarily reveal all of his thought (cf. Strauss 1984, 170). For that reason, we will supplement *Leviathan* with Hobbes' other writings.

17 While meant to cast scorn on Aristotle's classification of regimes, Hobbes' statement admits that oligarchy is considered a term of opprobrium. He denies, however, that this fact has any significance for the political scientist.
oligarchy is not an unjust deviation from aristocracy, as Aristotle contends. Rather, it is a form of government in which a few -- who are "nominated or otherwise distinguished from the rest" -- hold sovereignty over the civil society or commonwealth (241). In denying any difference between aristocracy and oligarchy based on an objective standard of justice or the common good, Hobbes sides with Machiavelli against the ancients. Yet he takes exception to Machiavelli's position that the proper purpose of an oligarchic state depends on the type of acquisitiveness of its rulers, whether they are of "the people" or "the great". In his view, all forms of commonwealth -- whether sovereignty is held by one, few, or many -- are established by individuals alienating their natural right of self-government to a sovereign and all have the same purpose: to ensure "the Peace, and Security of the people; for which end they were instituted" (241). Hobbes therefore evaluates oligarchies not from the glory of the prince or the power of the great but from the "Safety" and good order of the people (241).

Based on this standard, Hobbes contends that the rule of a few -- whether called aristocracy or oligarchy -- is generally superior to democracy but inferior to monarchy. In a monarchy, "the private interest is the same with the publique" because "the riches, power, and honour of a Monarch arise onely from the riches, strength and reputation of his subjects" (241-42). In a government of a few, however, those who hold sovereignty may try to enrich themselves or their family at the expense of the other rulers or of the public weal, causing dangerous resentment within the sovereign group or between the sovereign and its subjects (242). In addition, a few may not share the same convictions, causing disagreement "out of envy or interest" (243). Moreover, because wealth is the most common source of distinction in civil society, governments of a few tend to be led by those few who are "versed more in the acquisition of Wealth than of Knowledge" (242). As a result, they tend to be less informed than monarchies about the responsibilities of a sovereign, less serious in their decisions, and less able to "receive counsell with secrecy" (242). Also, monarchies are more resolute in their actions because they only need the will of one in order to act (242). Hence aristocracies and oligarchies are generally less capable of effective military defense and administration of public works. Finally, any assembly, no matter how small, requires persuasion in order to reach a decision and therefore

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18 According to Hobbes, the political judgments of Plato and Aristotle were not based on a sound understanding of justice but were colored by their Athenian bias in favor of "their own Common-wealths, which were popular" (267).

19 For Hobbes' earlier published discussion of "the few", see De Cive (DC), ch. VII, sec. 2 and De Corpore Politico (DCP), ch. XXI, secs. 6-8 (especially sec. 7).

20 For Hobbes' other evaluations of oligarchy versus monarchy and democracy, see DC, X, 19 and DCP, XXIV, 3-8.
invites demagoguery, which at best makes the execution of laws inconstant, and at worse enflames ambitions, creating dangerous factions that lead to persecutions and even civil war (242-43).

In sum, Hobbes argues that oligarchy is a flawed form of government because it is less capable than monarchy of ensuring public order and the security of its subjects. Oligarchy has difficulty preventing the rise of ambition and faction within the sovereign group, which destroys effective law-enforcement and ultimately threatens factional conflict and the collapse of public order. In this respect, Hobbes’ criticism of oligarchy’s factional conflict resembles the ancients’ argument that oligarchy is inherently unstable. But while the ancients locate oligarchy’s instability in its exclusivity (i.e. its attempt to have political participation among the wealthy while excluding all other parts of the city), Hobbes contends that oligarchy is not exclusive enough to create the kind of unified government that can suppress “Pride and the other Passions” which lead to “the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a Civill Warre; or that dissolve condition of masterless men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine and revenge” (238).\(^2\) Hence while the rule of a few wealthy people is generally superior to the rule of many poor ones, it does not offer the same conveniences for the commonwealth as monarchy.

c. Hobbes’ Understanding of the Acquisitive Passions

1. Acquisitiveness and the Desire for Power

While Hobbes’ criticism of oligarchic government rests on his claim that the purpose of government is to secure public order, that standard itself is drawn from a new understanding of the acquisitive psychology. Hobbes does not deny Machiavelli’s central claim that acquisitiveness is natural to all human beings, but he rejects Machiavelli’s contention that there are fundamentally distinct types of acquisitiveness underlying the governments of one, few, and many. He claims instead that all acquisitiveness is really a manifestation of the desire for power common to all human beings that originates in the universal desire to avoid death.

Hobbes’ own understanding of the psychology of acquisition can be seen in his doctrine of natural right. According to him, “the Right of Nature, which Writers commonly call Jus Naturale, is the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himselfe, for the preservation of his own Nature” (189). In De Cive, he justifies this understanding of natural right by contending that “every man is desirous of what is good for him, and shuns what is evil, but

\(^2\) Oligarchy cannot fully consolidate sovereignty into one set of hands without taking it from the other rulers by factional conflict or even civil war.
chiefly the chiepest of natural evils, which is death; and this he does by a certain impulsion of nature, no less than that whereby a stone moves downward” (DC, ch. I, sec. 7). In other words, Hobbes maintains that Nature gives all human beings an irresistible desire to avoid death and preserve themselves, which they never lose unless they become utterly “weary” of living (192). He concludes that “it is therefore neither absurd nor reprehensible, neither against the dictates of true reason, for a man to use all his endeavors to preserve and defend his body and the members thereof from death and sorrows. But that which is not contrary to right reason, that all men account to be done justly, and with right” (DC, ch. I, sec. 7). Hence the irresistible natural desire to avoid death, to preserve oneself, is transformed by right reason into the natural right to self-preservation, which Hobbes defines as “the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himselfe, for the preservation of his own Nature” (189).

According to Hobbes, this natural right or liberty is undirected by nature toward any good or purpose higher than self-preservation. No higher purpose exists because “there is no such Finis ultimus (utmost ayme) nor Sumnum Bonum (greatest Good) as is written of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers” (160). As a result, human beings discover “felicity” not in some mythical “perpetuall Tranquillity of mind”, but in “a continually progresse of the desire” from one perceived good to the next (129-30, 160). To understand Hobbes’ argument on happiness, we must realize that for him there are two kinds of human motion: "Vitall" and "Voluntary" (118). Vital motions are automatic physiological motions such as breathing and pulse; in contrast, voluntary motions such as walking occur only with “the help of Imagination” and thought (118). Voluntary motions are spurred by either desire ("endeavour" toward a perceived good) or aversion ("endeavour" away from a perceived evil) (119). These two combine with opinion to produce voluntary motion, either internal (emotion) or external (action) (119). Thus according to Hobbes’ presentation, uninterrupted desire is actually constant voluntary motion from one perceived good to the next. Since “life is but motion”, he concludes that uninterrupted

22 Citations of De Cive and De Homine are from the Gert edition, 1978. According to Hobbes, people fear violent death “worst of all” because experiencing or imagining violence at the hand of another raises the terrible prospect of facing death suddenly and inescapably; moreover, it adds the pain of humiliation to the pain of dying (186).

23 Hobbes regards the doctrine of a sumnum bonum as one of the critical principles of ancient and medieval political thought. According to him, this doctrine holds that politics should be ordered according to a greatest good in which a person can find “the repose of a mind satisfied” (119). He claims that if the mind’s desires were truly satisfied, however, it would motionless and hence without activity, since desire is a motion (119). Unfortunately, such a state of “repose” is impossible: "Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand” (160). Thus he suggests that attaining the ancients’ greatest good would be the same as dying, which every person shuns unless life is utterly miserable. Hence no person really seeks the so-called greatest good. Hobbes later argues in De Homine (DH) that even the enjoyment of such repose would be a motion, and therefore that such repose is impossible (cf. DH, ch. XI, sec. 15). Of course, it is a question whether Hobbes fairly characterizes “the old Morall Philosophers” teaching on the greatest good. In particular, it is not clear whether he is correct in saying that they claim that such a good provides a complete state of motionless repose; sometimes, they merely seem to argue that a life lived according to the greatest good correctly orders the soul and frees it from the deep pain that comes from being out of harmony with its natural or divine telos (cf. Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. I, ch. 2; Bk. X, chs. 6-9).
satisfaction of desire provides great pleasure and constitutes the only real “felicity” available to people (161, 188, 186).

According to Hobbes, the only way for a person to attain such felicity is to have power, which is the “present means to obtain some future apparent good” (150). Because reason compels people to look forward in time, “the object of mans desire, is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire” (161). Unfortunately, reason does not allow human beings to know with certainty the future obstacles to their desire; hence they know there will be a future but they do not know what it will bring. As a result, they anxiously imagine the future and cannot place a limit on the amount of power they will need (96, 169-70). According to Hobbes, they therefore desire constantly to acquire more and more power, leading him to conclude that “in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death” (161).

In Hobbes’ view, all forms of acquisitiveness spring from this natural desire for power after power. In discussing the ubiquity of war in the state of nature, he contends that “in the nature of man, we find three principall causes of quarrell: First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory” (185). He argues that “the first, maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for safety: and the third, for Reputation” (185). At first glance, the desires for safety, gain, and glory seem to resemble Machiavelli’s tri-partite division of the people, the great, and the prince. Hobbes maintains, however, that different people want to acquire different goods not because they have different natures or goals but because they have different opinions -- some more reasonable than others -- about which good (safety, gain, or glory) will best provide the power necessary to achieve the common human goal of avoiding death (188).25

24 According to Hobbes, reason is the ability to construct a “Trayn of regulated Thoughts” that allows a person to “seek all the possible effects, that can by [a thing] be produced” and to “imagine what we can do with [a thing], when wee have it” (96). Reason therefore compels people to imagine how they can continue to preserve themselves in “the future”. Thus rather than purging the mind of restless acquisitiveness, reason and imagination can fuel the desire to acquire more power.

25 Hobbes is aware that some people (like martyrs) seem to welcome death because of the prospect of a great reward, like “life Eternall” (which is really another way of avoiding death) (cf. Leviathan, ch. 38, @1). This is a political problem, according to him, because “the maintenance of Civill Society, depending on Justice; and Justice on the power of life and death... residing in them that have the Soveraignty of the Common-wealth; It is impossible a Common-wealth should stand, where any other than the sovereign, hath a power of giving greater rewards than Life; and of inflicting greater punishments than Death” (478). Thus Hobbes reinterprets Scripture to show that the sovereign is “Gods Supreme Lieutenant” on earth and that Christian doctrine only requires private confession that “Jesus is the Christ”, not a public stand against the sovereign if one is commanded to say or do what is against God (477-78).
2. Acquisitiveness and the Political Problem of Glory

From the perspective of good Hobbesian politics, there is a clear hierarchy of the passions linked to acquisitiveness. As political passions, the "Feare of Death", the "Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living", and the "Hope by their industry to obtain them" are the most rational expression of the desire for power because they are the most conducive to peace (which is the best way to preserve oneself) (188, 190). Moreover, these passions spur human beings to create the covenant that moves them out of the "brutish" state of nature into civil society (188). Conversely, a great desire for material gain is more dangerous because even though it can be satisfied through peaceful exchange, it tempts people to "use Violence, to make themselves Masters of other mens person, wives, children, and cattell", which threatens to spark widespread conflict and war (185). As a result, Hobbes suggests that the desire for gain must be carefully watched by the sovereign and even circumscribed so that no subject grows too wealthy and powerful (185). Indeed, he sides with monarchy over oligarchy in part because oligarchy tends to unite material acquisitiveness and political power, which is dangerous because those who honor wealth may tend to use sovereignty to loot the commonwealth and enrich themselves rather than preserve public order.

According to Hobbes, however, the most politically dangerous acquisitive passion is the desire for glory. The love of glory is an extreme version of the desire to acquire honor, which he defines as "the reputation of power" (156). In his view, the love of glory is the desire to have a reputation for great or even unlimited power and to feel "that exultation of the mind... arising from imagination of a mans own power and ability" -- especially from imagining others' opinion of one's great power (400-01, 124-25). The political problem is that establishing a glorious reputation requires "augmentation of dominion over men... through acts of conquest" (184-85). Because all human beings "will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves", they will not tolerate anyone ruling them without their consent, nor will they praise another person's power unless they believe they will receive a benefit from such praise (184, 152). Hence those who want to be glorified must use violence or the threat of violence to compel that praise, inevitably risking their preservation for any "signe of undervalue" (185).

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26 Of course, if a person in the state of nature seeks glory in order "to subsist", such action "ought to be allowed him" (185).

27 Glory can take the form of "confidence", which is an accurate assessment of a person's power based "upon the experience of his own former action", or the form of "vain-glory", which is a feeling of power inaccurately "grounded on the flattery of others; or onely supposed by himself" (125). For Hobbes' other thematic treatments of glory and vain-glory, compare On Human Nature (HN), IX, 1 with DC, ch. I, sec. 4 and DH, ch. XI, sec. 6.

28 According to Hobbes, this is only true for those who desire real glory; vain-glory does not produce aggressive acquisition because the vain person is content with "the supposing of power" in his mind (125). On the need for the new prince founding a new order to use force to compel belief, and on the danger of doing so, compare The Prince, ch. 6, @4 with Leviathan ch. 15, @7.
seeking entails risking death, Hobbes maintains that those who seek to acquire glory must be seduced or deluded into acting contrary to their deepest fear (185). He thus denies Machiavelli's argument that glory-seekers are the highest type of human being and worthy of study and "imitation"; in Hobbes' view, such people must be suppressed, not praised.

But if Hobbes is right in saying that glory-seeking requires people to act contrary to their deepest passion, why is the desire for glory so strong in some people that it must be suppressed by Leviathan? Why is glory so attractive to some human beings? According to Hobbes, the seductive power of glory is rooted in the fact that enjoying the contemplation of endless power can temporarily deliver unmixed pleasure. Human beings naturally seek pleasure, and some have such powerful desires for pleasure that they are drawn to the promise of unmixed pleasure (119). If some of these people have a desire for even greater pleasure and an imagination that allows them to contemplate unlimited power, they may believe that endless power is the good that truly promises the kind of pure pleasure or "felicity" they are seeking. Hence their desire for unmixed pleasure draws them to the glory that can be acquired by "acts of conquest", especially becoming the sovereign (184-85).

According to Hobbes, this desire for glory is understandable but irrational. While "after death, there be no sense of the praise given us on Earth", he admits that the "Desire of Fame" is not "vain; because men have a present delight therein, from the foresight of it, and of the benefit that may redound thereby to their posterity" (162). Yet he still criticizes the love of glory (the imagination of one's limitless power) on the grounds that it cannot deliver the promise of permanent unmixed pleasure contained in the *summum bonum* because the idea of such pleasure implies rest or lack of motion that he makes clear is impossible: "even the enjoyment of a desire, when we are enjoying it, is an appetite, namely, the motion of the mind to enjoy by parts the thing it is enjoying. For life is perpetual motion that, when it cannot progress in a straight line, is converted into circular motion" (*DH*, XI, sec. 15).29 Thus even enjoying the contemplation of endless power can deliver only temporary unmixed pleasure, not the "repose of a mind satisfied". The more reasonable path is to seek safety by political obedience and material comfort by economic activity.

Unfortunately, the inability of glory to truly satisfy glory-seekers does not stop some of them, especially among the rich. According to Hobbes, ordinary people who desire only enough power for security and comfort can become propelled by visions of glory only when their imaginations

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29 In *De Homine*, Hobbes argues that "love of fame or renown, if it be excessive, needs be placed among the perturbations" because "even though we think of fame after death as being neither unpleasing nor useless for others, we are nevertheless mistaken in looking at the future like the present, because we shall not experience it, nor can we mere mortals estimate its worth" (*DH*, XII, sec. 8).
are fired by religious zeal and its promise of overcoming death (cf. 206). Among the rich, however, there are some acquisitive people whose love of wealth is connected to the desire for the kind of glory that comes with holding sovereignty. These acquisitive types are not satisfied with riches because they realize that even though there is "inconvenience arising from government in general to him that governs... the sovereignty, together with the necessity of this care and danger, comprehends so much honour, riches, and means whereby to delight the mind, as no private man's wealth can attain unto" (De Corpore Politico (DCP), ch. XXIV, section two). Because "the Greatest of Humane Powers is... the Power of a Commonwealth". sovereignty seems to satisfy the urge for glory that is particularly strong in those acquisitive people who long for the seductive pleasure of imagining and feeling their limitless power (150). Hence political authority and its concomitant glory becomes irresistible for those whose need for power is too strong to be satisfied by material goods, no matter how great.

In making this argument, Hobbes shows how he radicalizes Machiavelli's detachment of the acquisitive psychology from any higher good than power. While he agrees with Machiavelli that glory replaces the ancients' sumnum bonum as the most seductive object of human striving, he contends that the acquisition and maintenance of such glory is "against reason" because such glory is, in the end, fleeting (205). Indeed, he maintains that even the glory afforded to the greatest Machiavellian princes cannot satiate the open-ended (i.e. "restless and perpetuall") desire for "power after power" because although sovereignty promises enormous power and reputation, acquiring and maintaining political authority requires conquest and violence that will ultimately lead to one's destruction (205). Those thinking clearly see that there is no need to acquire sovereignty because one only needs enough power to live comfortably. Thus in place of

30 Hence a critical part of Hobbes' Enlightenment project is to rationalize or undermine religious zeal and to make religion serve politics by uniting church and state under one sovereign.


32 Hobbes recognizes that since a sovereign's power and reputation tend to be limited to his commonwealth, real glory-seekers may try to increase their power and reputation by imperial conquest of other commonwealths. To counter this tendency, Hobbes counsels sovereigns to find their true glory not in war and conquest (after all, they could lose and be destroyed), but in the vigilant defense and efficient administration of their own commonwealth (238-39).

33 For Hobbes, the wealthy's turn to acquiring political authority cannot come from a thymotic attachment to the justice of an oligarchic political order because such a moralistic attachment is impossible, given the nature of thymos. He argues that "the emotion that is called thymos by the Greeks" is not the arousal of righteous indignation but is really "the desire for vengeance" that seeks "the conversion to our will" of the person who has harmed us (DH, XII, 4, 57). Thymos is simply the motion of "a fiery spirit" seeking to making offenders conform to its will (cf. DC, I, 4). Whereas anger (which is sudden "Appetite with an opinion of attaining" one's desire) aims only to remove the object in the way of desire, thymos seeks to inflict harm on that which thwarts desire in order to make "the mind of him with whom we are angry" realize that he is incapable of harming us (cf. HN, IX, 5-6; DH, XII, 4). Thus thymos is directed toward re-establishing one's power in relation to others, not restoring justice to the world. According to Hobbes, thymos is a tempting passion (despite the risks entailed in punishing an offender) because through the act of imagining and carrying out punishment, human beings feel as though they have limitless power to conform others to their will. In a thymotic rage people feel gloriously invincible. As a result, thymos adds a dangerously uncalculating element to the love of glory that helps to explain why some people pursue "conquest... farther than their security requires" (185).
seeking political power or glory, Hobbes argues that the most rational action is either the pursuit of peace (in the state of nature) or obedience to the sovereign (in a commonwealth).

d. Leviathan: Ameliorating the Problem of Oligarchy

Despite Hobbes' denial of a distinctly oligarchic acquisitive passion, his discussion suggests that acquisitiveness is politically dangerous because in its most powerful form it tends to regard the glories of sovereignty as the next good to be acquired in the unending search for power after power. Because human beings are necessarily acquisitive of power and because some of the wealthy will inevitably turn to politics to satisfy their greater desire, there will always be some politically ambitious rich people who will either hold sovereignty or be a potential threat to those who do. In this respect, Hobbes maintains that the problem of oligarchy is coeval with political society and that a vigilant sovereign can check or suppress the danger of an oligarchic challenge, but never fully diffuse or eliminate the problem. The best a sovereign can do is protect public order, channel acquisitiveness into the market, and teach all subjects (including the wealthy) their rational duties of obedience (cf. Leviathan, ch. 30).

By giving this warning to the very acquisitive and to their sovereigns, Hobbes hopes to enlighten the commonwealth and to channel the political ambition of the wealthy into taking up the kind of public service (e.g. holding administrative posts under the sovereign) or private acquisition (e.g. money-making) that does not threaten the peace and security that all people truly desire. While this new rational commonwealth may not completely remove the lure of political power for the wealthy (and hence oligarchy always remains a potential form of government), it promises a more peaceful solution than that offered by a new prince or a republic of the great. As we will see, Locke embraces the Enlightenment spirit in which Hobbes approaches the political analysis of oligarchy, but he further extends Hobbes' de-politicization of acquisitiveness so that the problem of oligarchy -- as the ancients understood it -- is eliminated, even while the end of government becomes the protection of property. This paradox of eliminating oligarchy by protecting property is grounded on Locke's revised understanding of the desire to acquire, which concludes with the argument that private acquisition rather than political authority is not only the most rational response to the human condition but also quite possible to foster in a truly liberal commonwealth.
IV. From "Quarrelsome and Contentious" to "Industrious and Rational": Locke on Property and the Taming of Acquisitiveness

a. Locke, Liberal Democracy, and Capitalism

John Locke is generally regarded as one of the great early theorists and advocates of a liberal constitutional order that over time has evolved into contemporary liberal democracy. As C.B. Macpherson notes, for example, Locke's work "stood nearly at the beginning of the liberal tradition" and "seems to have almost everything that could be desired by the modern liberal democrat" (Macpherson 1962, 194). It is true that Locke's political thought originated or developed many of the most important principles associated with modern liberal republicanism, particularly the ideas that government exists to protect individual rights, receives its political power in trust by the consent of the governed, and must exercise its power through the rule of law. Macpherson concludes that in these respects, Locke has been held responsible for the birth or development of many of today's dominant political notions such as "government by consent, majority rule, moral supremacy of the individual, and the sanctity of private property" (Macpherson 1962, 194).

At the same time, Locke is also known as one of the first great explicators of some of the fundamental principles of capitalism. Despite certain scholarly controversy, Locke is generally understood to have offered some of the most significant early modern arguments in favor of the unlimited acquisition of private property through market activity, which has come to be an important part of the moral justification for modern capitalist economics. For Locke, acquisition of private property is not antithetical to liberalism but is in fact a necessary part of a liberal constitutional order. Both must exist together if each is to flourish. Locke's synthesis of liberal politics (protection of individual rights) and liberal economics (capitalist acquisition of private property) is well captured in his familiar claim that "the great and chief end therefore, of

34 On Locke's political advocacy, see Ashcraft 1986. For Locke's subsequent political influence, especially in colonial, revolutionary, and republican America, see generally Dworetz 1990. Despite the efforts of historians like Wood (1972), Pocock (1975), and Shain (1994) to downplay or deny the importance of Lockean principles in the American Founding, a number of scholars have shown the connection between Locke and the founders of the American regime (cf. Pangle 1988, Dworetz 1990, Zuckert 1996, Thompson 1998). Zuckert has shown convincingly, for example, that traditional Whig and even Calvinist thought in America was heavily Lockeanized by the 1780s (cf. Zuckert 1996).

35 Macpherson is one of the most prominent theorists who sees Locke as an important early advocate of capitalist principles, especially as defended according to the "natural individual right to property" (cf. Macpherson 1962, 196). While Tully (1980) and others have attacked Macpherson's interpretation, a number of scholars have shown that this interpretation is in fact correct (cf. Pangle 1988, Zuckert 1994). For some of Locke's other writings in political economy, see his essay "On Lessening Interest to Four Percent", his "Essay on the Poor Law", and his "Fragment on Trade" in Goldie 1997.

36 Economic historians generally agree that Locke's understanding of the natural right to property is of central importance in the intellectual history of capitalism (cf. Vaughn 1980).
Mens uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, is... the mutual Preservation of their Lives, Liberties and Estates, which I call by the general Name, Property" (Second Treatise [2T], sec. 123).

Yet how is this synthesis possible? How can a political order committed to defending property avoid becoming an oligarchic order explicitly opposed to what Locke calls the fundamental maxim of good politics: "Salus Populi Suprema Lex" (2T, sec. 158)? According to Locke, political science can solve the problem of oligarchy as understood by the ancients if it grasps the fact that human acquisitiveness is not intrinsically oligarchic and therefore can exist in tandem with a liberal political order built on the consent of the governed. As we will see, he bases his conclusion on the argument that acquisitiveness can largely be detached from proud political ambition and made part of a new love of liberty. Thus he concludes that while the rich can be politically dangerous to the rights of everyone, acquisitiveness can be unleashed without raising the specter of oppressive oligarchy. To begin to lay out Locke’s argument, we start with his understanding of oligarchic government.

b. The Oligarchic Form of Commonwealth

Locke offers his most systematic comments on oligarchic governments in chapter ten of the Second Treatise: “Of the Forms of a Common-Wealth”. In this brief chapter, he states that the form of a commonwealth is determined “according as the Power of making Laws is placed” (2T, sec. 132). This legislative power comes into being when individuals originally join together in the state of nature and compact with each other to alienate their right to execute the law of nature to the political society formed by their compact; at that point, “the Majority having... the whole power of the Community, naturally in them, may implo[y] all that power in making Laws for the Community from time to time, and Executing those Laws by Officers of their own appointing” (2T, sec. 132). According to Locke, when the whole political community directly creates the laws by majority vote, “then the Form of the Government is a perfect Democracy” (2T, sec. 132). But when the majority decides to “put the power of making Laws into the hands of a few select Men, and their Heirs or Successors... then it is an Oligarchy” (2T, sec. 132). For Locke, oligarchy is a type of government in which a few people (and “their Heirs”) are selected by the

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37 Chapter ten is brief because Locke leaves to others much of the practical political science (e.g. “the great art of government”) that can be derived from the principles articulated in the Two Treatises (cf. 2T, secs. 42, 152). For one example of Locke’s practical application of his principles to constitution-making, see “The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina” in Goldie 1997.

38 By contending that oligarchy is a form of commonwealth in which “Heirs” follow predecessors in holding legislative power, Locke subsumes aristocracy -- with its traditional hereditary connotation -- under the category of “oligarchy”. This inverts the ancient classification, which defines oligarchy as a “deviation” from aristocracy (Politics 1279b8).
majority of the “Community” to make laws for the whole political society. Locke’s definition suggests that any form of government between democracy (law-making by all) and monarchy (law-making by one) has an oligarchic aspect, including various kinds of representative republics. At the same time, however, he seems to indicate that a republic with the regular and frequent election of law-makers would be less oligarchic because the people would choose the “Successors” of the rulers rather than the few handing over legislative powers to their hand-picked “Heirs”.

With his definition of oligarchy, Locke explicitly moves even further than Hobbes away from the ancients’ understanding. Like Hobbes, he uses “oligarchy” to describe a type of commonwealth in which a few hold power, implying that “aristocracy” and “oligarchy” are simply different names for the same kind of government. In this respect, Locke joins Hobbes in breaking with the ancient distinction between aristocracy and oligarchy based on justice and the common good. But he departs even further than Hobbes by omitting any acknowledgment that “oligarchy” is commonly a term of opprobrium, thus severing all links between oligarchy and

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39 Of course, it is a question who counts as part of the “Community”. Macpherson argues that Locke’s liberal commonwealth has an inherently oligarchic “moral foundation” because it is built on the seventeenth century English social assumption -- which Locke takes “for granted” -- that “human beings of the laboring classes were a raw material to be worked up and disposed of by the political authority” (Macpherson 1962, 229). As a result, Macpherson concludes. Locke believes that “the laboring class was rightly subject to but without full membership in the state”, which was limited to men of property (land, businesses, etc.) who had the leisure and capacity to “live a rational life” (Macpherson 1962, 229). Unfortunately, there are two problems with this analysis. First, Locke admits that even the “day Laborer” has a property in his labor that he sells to employers for a wage which, while often just subsistence level, makes him better off materially than the king of “a large and Fruitful Territory” in America (Second Treatise, sec. 41). Hence laborers are rational enough to improve their lives by selling their labor (even just for food, etc.) rather than having to have it extracted from them by force (like animals or slaves). Yet as Macpherson rightly points out, this does not mean that laborers are rational enough to actively participate in government either by voting or holding office. However, it does suggest that the “day Laborer” is rational enough to be a free person and therefore part of the community whose original consent is required for legitimate government. Second, Macpherson assumes that Locke believes that -- unlike laborers -- the upper classes are rational or at least capable of living a fully rational life. Yet Macpherson admits that Locke recommends a “simplified Christianity for all classes”, which is a tacit admission that no class of people -- except perhaps philosophers -- can live according to the dictates of reason without the revealed “Christian doctrine of rewards and punishments” (Macpherson 1962, 225). Even the upper classes, then, are not capable of fully living a “rational life”. At best, their wealth sets them “free from a constant drudgery to their backs and their bellies” and allows them -- with the right education -- to be more open to the claims of reason (TCU, sec. 7). Such limited rationality seems adequate for voting and holding political office, at least in a liberal commonwealth whose outlines have already been handed down by a “Reformer of Politicks” like Locke and implemented by prudent founders and statesmen (First Treatise, sec. 106). On the problem of having statesmen reasonable enough to establish an actual form of government on liberal principles, see Rosen’s discussion of the American Founding (Rosen 1999, chs. 3-4).

40 Locke seems to deny that an oligarchy exists when the people give the legislative power to a “few select Men” but not to their heirs or successors. That form of commonwealth is not directly discussed by Locke but would seem to be a popular republic. As we will see, Montesquieu regards the hereditary succession of “Heirs” as the defining characteristic of an oligarchic republic.

41 Locke’s emphasis on the electoral reform of rotten boroughs indicates his sympathy for a more proportional, less oligarchic, and probably more popular system of representation (2T, secs. 157-58).

42 For Locke, however, the oligarchs hold “legislative power”, not “sovereignty” (as Hobbes claims). The difference is that legislative power is only one part (albeit the “Supream” part) of the people’s absolute political power (2T, sec. 134).
injustice. In addition, unlike Hobbes' statement that oligarchies are usually run by people distinguished by their wealth, Locke omits any mention of the necessary or usual characteristics that cause "a few select Men" to receive legislative power from the majority. In his view, such mention is unnecessary because those trying to understand the distinctiveness of oligarchies need only know that an oligarchy exists when a "few select Men" have the power to make laws for the political community.

For Locke, oligarchy is clearly a legitimate form of commonwealth, perhaps even the most common form of legitimate government. But he does not understand "oligarchy" as the ancients do: that is, as exclusive rule by the rich who claim that their superior virtue is the only just source of legitimacy. In contrast, Locke regards the number of legislators as the true defining principle of oligarchy because he does not believe that any peculiar excellence or deficiency in the rulers can confer legitimacy or opprobrium on a form of commonwealth. According to him, no one has a natural title to rule anyone else with their consent because everyone is by nature in a state of "Equality" and "perfect Freedom" (2T, sec. 4). The moral foundation and purpose of the commonwealth remains the same whether legislative power is held by one, few, or many. Legitimate authority is only bestowed by the consent of the majority in conferring legislative power on a few. This means that the few who hold the legislative power are "oligarchs" only because the majority makes them so by conferring such power. Thus oligarchs are the creation of the majority and do not have any independent claim to rule outside the will of the majority.43

In this respect, Locke agrees with Hobbes that there is no distinctive political animal called an "oligarch" with a claim to rule based on a unique notion of human excellence. Because oligarchs have no natural title to rule, Locke holds that the majority of the community can limit the length of time that they hold the legislative power. Moreover, the majority always retains ultimate authority to withdraw power from the oligarchy if it becomes destructive of the legitimate end of all forms of government: namely, the people's "enjoyment of their Properties in Peace and Safety" (2T, sec. 134). Within these bounds, however, Locke seems to favor a constitutional government in which a "few Select Men" -- probably men of leisure -- hold the legislative power, especially if they are selected by periodic election from at least some of the people (free-holders, for example) (2T, secs. 157-58). In this respect, Macpherson is right that "Locke is not a democrat" (Macpherson 1962, 196).44 Locke believes that oligarchy -- properly understood -- is perfectly compatible with a liberal commonwealth, so long as it protects the

43 With this argument, Locke lays some of the groundwork for Michels' contention that oligarchs do not create oligarchies; rather, oligarchy creates "oligarchs". Unlike Michels, however, Locke attributes the rise of oligarchy not to impersonal sociological and psychological forces that thwart the desire of the people but to the deliberate choice of a political society.
44 Despite the accuracy of Macpherson's characterization of Locke, he may underestimate the extent to which Locke's liberalism (with its fundamental principles of natural equality) planted the seeds for the later growth of egalitarian sentiment in 19th and 20th century liberalism (cf. Pangle 1988, 313 n. 2).
“Lives, Liberties, and Estates” of the people and recognizes that the consent of the majority of the whole people is the source of its legitimate authority.

c. Acquisitiveness and the Problem of Pride

1. The Origin of Acquisitiveness

According to Locke, the solution to the problem of the rich becoming ambitious and usurping all political authority lies in understanding the political psychology of acquisitiveness. More particularly, he argues that political science must have a correct understanding of the link between acquisitiveness and the kind of pride that fuels political ambition in the wealthy. For Locke, understanding this link requires returning to the basic constitution of the human being. He maintains that despite obvious varieties in human temper produced by physiological or educational differences, by nature “all men steadily pursue” the same fundamental objects: their “preservation” (the “first and strongest desire God Planted in Men. and wrought into the very Principles of their Nature”) and their “happiness” (cf. IT, secs. 86, 88; An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (ECHU), II, XXI, secs. 41, 43, 56, 59, 68; Some Thoughts Concerning Education (STCE), sec. 143). For all people, “the Greatest Happiness” consists in the “utmost pleasure of which men are capable” (ECHU, II, XXI, Sec. 55; STCE, sec. 143). Like Hobbes, however, he derides “the Philosophers of old” for believing that there is a “Summum bonum” that can provide soul-satisfying contentment alike to all human beings (ECHU, II, XXI, sec. 55). Instead, the objects which bring happiness are “to different Men... very different things”, suggesting that happiness is a private, subjective good without any uniform moral content (ECHU, II, XXI, sec. 55). In sum, all individuals by nature have two basic and irresistible desires -- to continue living and to feel as much pleasure as possible -- that they often fulfill in very different ways.

Locke argues that from this basic understanding of human nature and its pursuit of comfortable self-preservation, it follows that acquisitiveness originates as a reaction to the need

45 The only time a person may cease to desire to continue living, according to Locke, is when he is trapped in conditions of such hopeless “hardship” -- like slavery -- that the pursuit of happiness is simply impossible (284). In that condition, a person may “draw on himself the Death he desires” so long as he does so by attempting to break free of the force that keeps him in misery (284). In the case of the slave, this means that he must resist “the Will of his Master”, whose absolute and arbitrary power over him forecloses the possibility of pursuing happiness (284). Even though the person reasonably believes that trying to break free will bring on death, he is acting on his right to pursue happiness and therefore the resulting death is not contrary to natural law (2T, sec. 6).

46 While Locke is clear that happiness has no uniform moral content, he is equally insistent that the individual pursuit of happiness has universal moral and political pre-conditions. Morally, a person needs the Lockean qualities of “virtue, wisdom, breeding, and learning”; politically, a person needs liberty: that is, “freedom from absolute, arbitrary power” and “the constant pain... it leaves” in the mind (STCE, sec. 134; 2T, sec. 23; ECHU, II, XX, sec. 14).
to satisfy the natural desires for pleasure and preservation. According to him, human beings acquire by laboring with their mind or body to gain control over external objects that accident, experience, or "foresight" leads them to believe will satisfy their desires (2T. sec. 26; STCE, sec. 126). The purpose of acquisition is "to appropriate" to oneself the mental objects (clear, distinct, and non-contradictory ideas) or physical goods (private property) necessary to ensure one's comfortable preservation (ECHU, II, XXIX, sec. 1; 2T, secs. 25-26). In Locke's view, acquisitiveness is necessary and reasonable because "God and Nature" have not given human beings the resources within themselves to satisfy the very desires implanted in them by Nature (1T, sec. 90; 2T, secs. 28, 43). Hence when human beings are acting rationally in accord with the "Law of Nature", they are acquisitive. At the same time, they should do -- it is reasonable to do -- the least harm possible to others (2T, sec. 6).

2. Acquisitiveness and Natural Pride

Locke acknowledges, however, that natural acquisitiveness can slip the bounds of reason and go horribly awry, becoming a destructive force that produces conflict and chaos. Hobbes describes this chaotic condition as the "state of nature", but Locke call it the "state of war" and differentiates it from humanity's original condition. He says that "however some men have confounded" the two conditions, the pure state of nature exists where human beings live "together according to reason, without a common Superior on Earth, with Authority to judge between them" in "a State of Peace, Good Will, Mutual Assistance, and Preservation" (2T, sec. 19). While Locke admits that the state of nature can "easily" become a state of war "full of fears and continual dangers", he refuses to equate the two because he does not believe that people's original desire to acquire (i.e. the acquisitiveness of people in the pure state of nature) necessarily entails the destructive acquisitiveness that fuels the state of war (2T, secs. 6, 13, 19, 21, 123). But how then does acquisitiveness become destructive, helping to turn the state of nature into a state of war?

According to Locke, acquisitiveness can become irrational and destructive because it is linked a potentially dangerous love of power found in all human beings. He argues that individuals have a "love of dominion" over the external objects that they believe can preserve them or give them pleasure (STCE, sec. 35, 105). This love of dominion is not innate but is acquired almost immediately after birth, when people begin to feel the painful unease

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47 When Locke employs the term "natural", he does not necessarily mean original or innate; often he uses "natural" in the sense of some idea or habit becoming part of a person to the point of being acted upon without reflection. Indeed, Locke is very clear that no ideas or habits (and only certain desires) are innate; all ideas and habits (and most desires) are made "natural" to a person through sensory experience, reflection, and especially education (cf. ECHU, Bk. I, ch. II, sec. 1; STCE, sec. 139).
accompanying need (*ECHU*, II, XX, sec. 36). From the experience of need people gain the desire to have control over objects that can satisfy their "Wants" (*2T*, sec. 35). That desire for control over objects is the original love of dominion, which is natural and reasonable because it is necessary to satisfy innate desires.

Locke contends, however, that this natural love of dominion is "the first origin of most vicious habits that are ordinary and natural" because it gives rise to the desire to have power over others (*STCE*, sec. 103). According to him, individuals perceive -- beginning in infancy -- that they can protect or acquire desired objects by having power over others, especially those who give or take away these objects (like parents) (cf. *ECHU*, II, XX, sec. 14). At the moment of that perception, the desire for such dominion is born and children cry not out of physical pain but out of willfulness (*STCE*, sec. 105). Locke maintains, however, that because dominion over others is sought for the sake of dominion over objects (which is the original goal of acquisitive desire), the desire for mastery over others can be checked if individuals believe that they can acquire and securely possess their desired goods without holding such mastery. In that condition, "insolent domineering" over others can be reduced and with the right education in virtue, civility, breeding, and learning even be "weeded out"(*STCE*, sec. 109-110). Thus while people will necessarily try to dominate external objects in order to live comfortably, the same necessity does not compel them to subject others to their will if they can get what they need without dominating them (*STCE*, sec. 109). Hence Locke concludes that while the "love of dominion" is a natural and reasonable desire, the desire to dominate others is against the law of nature, if such dominion is not necessary for one's comfortable preservation (as it is not in a rationally constructed family and commonwealth) (cf. *2T*, sec. 6).

3. The Fact of Self-love

While Locke suggests that acquisitiveness in principle can be kept within the bounds of reason, he acknowledges that such limitation is practically very difficult because of another aspect of human nature: self-love. It is a fact that people often want to acquire or possess the same scarce object, leading them into conflict (*2T*, sec. 123). Unfortunately, such conflict is

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48 According to Locke, there is an original distinction between needs and wants -- unlike wants, needs are the body's "natural wants", the "pain" created "from hunger, thirst, cold, or any other necessity of nature" (*STCE*, sec. 106). Unfortunately, "the wants of fancy and those of nature" become indistinguishable because innate impulses are filtered through a person's mind, which soon begins to form opinions and imaginations ("fancy") about he needs and does not need (*STCE*, sec. 107; *ECHU*, II, XX, sec. 36). These opinion-based needs are what Locke calls "desires" or "wants" (*ECHU*, II, XXI, sec. 43). Thus through the inevitable awakening of the mind, want ("fancy") supplants need ("necessity of nature") as the springboard of human action.

49 According to Locke, the desire to dominate and harm others when it is unnecessary for comfortable preservation constitutes "cruelty", which is not part of original "humanity" (*STCE*, sec. 116). Where it exists, it has been "planted" in people "by fashion and opinion" (*STCE*, sec. 116).
rarely settled rationally (that is, according to what best preserves all involved) because “Self-love will make Men partial to themselves and their Friends” and give rise to “Ill Nature, Passion, and Revenge” (275). Locke claims that self-love clouds reason by making acquisition into a competition of “whose wills shall carry it over the rest” rather than a matter of preservation or comfort (STCE, sec. 109). Yet self-love need not become dangerous if it is properly channeled, which can only occur if one understands the passion and opinion in which it originates.

In Locke’s view, the passion fueling self-love is the innate desire for self-preservation (cf. IT, secs. 86, 88). Stated more fully, Locke argues that every person feels strongly attached to his “self” (i.e. the totality of the conscious faculties, labor, and products of his mind and body) because he feels its power to ensure the continuation of his vital motion (STCE, sec. 115). As the center of motion and therefore of life, the self must be protected to ensure the continuation of life. Hence the irresistible passion for preservation gives people the impulse to defend their “self” against all threats.

But what transforms this simple impulse into the passion of self-love? According to Locke, self-love requires the “Idea” of love, which stands for the feeling of “Delight” a person has “upon the thought... of the Delight, which any present, or absent thing is apt to produce” (ECHU, II, XX, sec. 4). With respect to the “self”, love is the pleasure a person feels “reflecting upon the thought” that he is powerful enough to acquire some object that will reduce his pain, increase his pleasure, or assure his preservation (ECHU, II, XX, sec. 2). The more a person is convinced of his power, the more he tends to admire himself. Properly understood, then, self-love is created by the coming together of a person’s passion for preservation and happiness and his opinion of his power (i.e. the power of his “self”) to secure those goods.

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50 According to Locke, dangerous reactions are worsened because “imagination” is always tempted to “extravagant” conjectures that magnify the harm to oneself and enlarge acquisitiveness beyond what reason authorizes (STCE, sec. 138). To combat extravagant imagination, Locke goes out of his way to debunk the glory of conquerors (whom he derides as nothing more than “Great Robbers”) and to foster reasonable religion, which he does by arguing for religious toleration and by promoting reason as humanity’s “only Star and Compass” in matters of religion (2T, sec. 176; cf. Reasonableness of Christianity) (In discussing the religious education of children, Locke also suggests that parents limit Bible reading to short histories, promote rational explanations of miracles, and suppress children’s imaginative fear of “goblins, specters, and apparitions” [STCE, sec. 191].) At best, imagination should be used to conceive of the limitless possibilities to acquire and vigilantly guard the property of oneself and one’s fellows (cf. 2T, sec. sec. 36-37; STCE, sec. 110).

51 On Locke’s understanding of the “self” as the conscious totality of the faculties and labor of mind and body, see Zuckert 1996, 278-86; Macpherson 1962, 220). Like Hobbes, Locke links the dignity of the “self” not to its conformity with or participation in a higher good but to its power to ensure the preservation and pleasure of the mind and body (see Leviathan, ch. 10, @16-18; ECHU, I, I, sec. 1).

52 According to Locke, “passion” exists when “any simple Idea is changed or produced... in the subject” by new ideas coming from sensation or reflection (ECHU, II, XXIII, sec. 11). The change in ideas “produces” a new motion within the mind and body, which “is called Passion” (ECHU, II, XXIII, sec. 11).
4. The Link Between Self-love and Dangerous Pride

In Locke's view, self-love sparks "Ill Nature, Passion, and Revenge" when it becomes a form of pride detached from its original connection to self-preservation. According to him, "pride" is the feeling of pleasure or delight produced by a person's opinion of his power (STCE, sec. 81). In short, pride is a sense of self-power -- the stronger the opinion of one's power, the stronger the pride. Locke claims that since even infants discern that they have some power to attain the objects of their desire, there is a "natural pride" in human beings "even from our cradles" (STCE, sec. 117). This "natural pride" is part of self-love and is not unreasonable because individuals will not act on a desire unless they believe that they have the power to satisfy it (ECHU, II, XX, sec. 36). Without such belief or opinion, people may not try to acquire what is necessary for their preservation and comfort because they will regard action as hopelessly beyond their power (ECHU, II, XX, secs. 7, 9). Hence some pride is necessary for human life and is a reasonable part of natural acquisitiveness.

Natural pride has the potential to become dangerous, however, because it can turn from dominating objects to dominating other people. According to Locke, individuals realize almost from birth that "there are in the world" other "men than they" who could try to prevent them from getting what they want or even try to gain dominion over them in order to take what they possess (STCE, secs. 40, 57, 110). Thus to ensure a sense of power over one's desired objects, a person must have a firm opinion of his power not only in relation to external objects but also in relation to other people (STCE, sec. 119). In short, a person needs to believe that others regard him as powerful. Human beings are therefore necessarily sensitive to how others perceive them, especially if they are not sure that those others will abstain from dominating them and using them at their pleasure. This concern is heightened if those others seem to evince a disregard or disrespect that implies they may try to harm them (STCE, sec. 110; 2T, sec. 17). Because of these uncertainties, "natural pride" contains the seeds of an outward-looking concern or even anxiety over one's reputation among others, especially those one believes are powerful enough to harm one (STCE, sec. 110).

Locke argues that this natural concern for one's reputation can take rational and irrational forms. It can be a defensive pride limited to assuring a person that he has enough power vis-à-vis others to preserve himself comfortably. This rational pride leads a person to love liberty understood as freedom from the absolute, arbitrary power of another who can thwart his desires at will (STCE, sec. 109; 2T, secs. 17, 23, 222). Because it is limited to resisting encroachment on

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53 According to Locke, "power... is two-fold: viz. as able to make, or able to receive change" (ECHU, II, XXI, sec. 2).
54 Locke describes this natural love of power as "Man's Natural Ambition", implying that he views ambition as primarily a love of power, not a love of honor (philotimēia), as the ancients contend (IT, sec. 106).
But natural pride also can be transformed into an dangerous love of power that demands others openly recognize one's power by submitting themselves to one's will (e.g. "Ill Nature, Passion, and Revenge") (2T, sec. 13). This self-aggrandizing pride comes into being when a person strongly hopes to acquire a certain object and believes that he has the power to acquire that object, but at the same time also strongly fears that another will interfere with his acquisition and possession of that object (STCE, secs. 117, 119). In such situations of insecure neediness (like those in the "very unsafe, very insecure... Condition" of the state of nature), augmenting one's power may be the only way by which a person can be sure that he has a reputation for power strong enough to serve as a "fence" to deter others from thwarting his desire (350; 2T, secs. 17, 125). This is why Locke suggests that during conflicts in which people perceive or imagine that their preservation or pleasure may be at stake if they back down, their pride "silences" the "advice" of their reasonable fear and "is very apt to carry them too far, and with too much heat" (STCE, sec. 115; 2T, sec. 125). In those conditions, self-love naturally turns into a self-aggrandizing love of power.

According to Locke, political ambition is fueled by this proud, self-aggrandizing demand for power and reputation (1T, sec. 106). But if this is true, why should the rich in a settled civil society ever feel political ambition? How are they insecure and needy, or closer to the state of nature than the poor? According to Locke, some people are needy for power even in comfortable circumstances because they have a much stronger self-love than other people. Their extraordinary self-love arises out of the fact that they have an impulse for happiness (i.e. pleasure) that cannot be satisfied by the prospect of an absence of pain and the "few degrees of Pleasure in a succession of ordinary Enjoyments" that "make up a happiness" for most people (ECHU, II, XXI, sec. 44). If this strong impulse for pleasure is combined with a great opinion of their own capacities and power, an unusually powerful self-love is born. According to Locke, this kind of self-aggrandizing desire is more prevalent in the class of those with "the advantage of fortune", whose wealth makes them tend to treat "their inferiors... with domineering words, names of contempt, and an imperious carriage as if they were of another race and species beneath them" (STCE, sec. 117).

But why should these rich and passionate self-lovers turn to politics to satisfy their love of power? According to Locke, this occurs because riches, no matter how great, are still not the equivalent of political power, with its "Right to make laws with penalty of death" (2T, sec. 3). Politics is the only source of undisputed "absolute power" within a commonwealth and dresses
"up Power with all the Splendor and Temptation Absoluteness can add to it" (17, sec. 106). Indeed, even if the power of a person's wealth spans across countries, such power is still rooted in the limited dominion of "a Master over his Servant", not the absolute power of sovereignty over a commonwealth (27, sec. 2). Thus like Hobbes, Locke argues that the very ambitious among of the rich turn away from economics to politics because they have a uniquely powerful self-love that is unfulfilled by the acquisition of wealth and can only be fulfilled by holding political power.

d. The New Lockean Commonwealth: Rationalizing Acquisitive Pride

Given this outline of the psychological and political relationship between acquisitiveness, self-love, and political ambition, it is clear that Locke believes that the problem of oligarchy can be overcome to a greater degree than argued by either the ancients or by Machiavelli and Hobbes. While he acknowledges that self-love necessarily entails a "natural pride" that looks outward and often demands respect from others even if that demand entails confrontation and conquest, he does not accept Hobbes' argument that outward-looking pride is an ineluctable part of human nature that can only be kept in check by fear of Leviathan's overwhelming power (cf. Leviathan, ch. 28, last paragraph). As we have seen, Hobbes contends that pride is an ineluctable part of human beings because their "restlesse pursuit of power after power" compels them to compare their power with others and exalt their worth at the expense of others, whether they are in the state of nature or in civil society (Leviathan, ch. 13, para. 2). Locke admits that under insecure conditions, self-love will give way to self-aggrandizement, making most people uncivil and some people dangerously ambitious. Yet Locke argues that Hobbes is wrong to believe that "Man's Natural Ambition" and pride can never be turned into a politically beneficial passion. Pride comes from self-love, and self-love is rooted in self-preservation (17, sec. 88). Thus such pride actually contains a defensive aspect that can be attached to goods -- like liberty -- that ensure preservation without requiring a person to dominate others (17, sec. 106; 27, sec. 17).

To keep people's pride from threatening others, Locke argues that the first step is for human beings to enter civil society and leave behind the state of nature (with its "Great... inconveniences" created by the partisan, overzealous or "uncertain" enforcement of the law of nature) (27, sec. 123). Once a secure commonwealth is formed, a number of political conditions still must be met because some of the most acquisitive (especially among the rich) may try to augment their power by claiming to be the source of their own political authority and using it to violate the rights of the people. First, citizens -- especially the wealthy who will likely hold political office and have great influence on manners and customs -- must be educated in self-denying virtue and public civility so that their natural "love of dominion" is turned from
"insolent domineering" and "covetousness" into a liberal spirit of liberty that does not offend others citizens’ pride or provoke their fear (STCE, “Epistle Dedicatory”; secs. 109-110). Second, all members of the political society must believe that their property (their dominion over objects) is so secure that they need not fear the intrusions of others. Absent such fear, people will be much less likely to develop the kind of aggressive pride that seems to be their only hope when their person or property is chronically insecure (STCE, sec. 110). Politically, this means that the commonwealth must be devoted to protecting each person’s property from “Quarrelsome and Contentious” people -- whether outside or inside the commonwealth -- who would take the property of other citizens (2T, secs. 34, 123). Third, people not only need to possess property but also must be assured that they can acquire enough to meet any future needs. Hence natural acquisitiveness must be allowed and encouraged so that it does not become frustrated and turn to seizing others’ person or property in order to satisfy itself. In short, Locke argues that a commonwealth must reject the traditional moral stigma or legal limitations on the accumulation of property and instead embrace its unlimited acquisition through market activity (cf. 2T, secs. 50, 139). Finally, citizens must not fear that government will use its absolute power in an arbitrary way to confiscate property; rather, government must regulate and protect property by creating, enforcing, and adjudicating according to “established, settled, and known” laws to which the people or their representatives have consented (2T, secs. 124, 138-39).

To ensure that government uses its absolute power in appropriate ways, Locke suggests two safeguards. First, there must be an enlightened citizenry that is vigilant in defense of its rights and is accustomed to making independent judgments about the claims of those in authority (cf. 2T, secs. 210; STCE, sec. 216; Of the Conduct of the Understanding (TCU), sec. 3). Second, every commonwealth must have a constitutional system of government that separates legislative and executive powers, subordinates the executive (“the prince”) to the legislature (except in extraordinary moments of prerogative), and requires that the legislative power itself be exercised through rules of law that prevent those who hold it from handing down arbitrary decrees from which they are exempt (cf. 2T, sec. 143). In such a system, office-holding in the legislature and even voting might be restricted to those with some property, even significant holdings, on account of their more reasonable solicitude for the right to property. Yet Locke concludes that if a liberal commonwealth could be formed, the ambitious, dominating, and politically dangerous part of acquisitiveness could be reduced and the remaining political passion of the rich could be made to serve rational liberalism, whose fundamental political principle is the “preservation of mankind” in peace and comfort (2T, secs. 25-26, 135).

Clearly, Locke believes that a new liberal politics can succeed where others failed. A political society that combines education in civility, enlightenment on the rational duties of citizens and governments (including religious toleration), constitutional rule of law, and
capitalist acquisition of private wealth can liberate acquisitiveness while preventing the rich and acquisitive from forming a faction dedicated to the enslavement of the people. This commonwealth cannot be democratic, at least until the rich are sure that the poor are rational enough to protect everyone’s rights and not despoil them. It must accept a political larger role for the wealthy in order to prevent the rise of factional conflict by the rich or an attempt by them to establish an old-fashioned oligarchy that rejects protection of rights as its purpose and denies the need for even the tacit consent of the rest of political society, including the poor. In a rational commonwealth, however, Locke suggests that successful acquirers would likely become supporters of the regime rather than its oligarchic enemies. Indeed, in such a political society property becomes a banner of universal liberty, not factional domination.

In this respect, there is an optimism in Locke’s treatment of acquisitiveness not present in earlier thinkers, either ancient or modern. But can Lockean principles ground a political science capable of guiding legislators and statesmen as they seek to create -- out of so many contingent circumstances -- a real liberal order that does not fall prey to the problem of oligarchy? To address this difficult question, we now turn to perhaps the most famous early modern student of what Locke calls the “great art of government” -- Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron De La Brede and de Montesquieu.

55 A liberal commonwealth must establish religious toleration to prevent destructive factional conflict over control of the state church and to stop anyone from using religious pretenses to gain “Empire” over others’ lives, liberties, or estates (LCT, pp. 22-30). Religious toleration also promotes the free-thinking necessary to preserve the spirit of liberty and to allow philosophers to pursue the truth without fear of legal prosecution, even in delicate matters of theology (TCU, sec. 12).
CHAPTER FIVE
MONTESQUIEU ON OLIGARCHY, LIBERALISM, AND THE ACQUISITIVE SOUL

I. Montesquieu's Modernity

a. Montesquieu and His Predecessors

We now turn to Montesquieu’s understanding of oligarchy as articulated in his monumental work, The Spirit of the Laws.1 The work purports to uncover “the spirit of laws” through an examination of a wide variety of political societies; its purpose in that endeavor is to enlighten the public and, even more importantly, to educate present and future legislators on how to give the best possible laws to their countries (cf. “Preface”, paragraph [@]15: Book 29, chapter one, paragraph one -- hereafter 29, 1, 1).2 Some commentators have contended that the book’s empirical method makes it more akin to ancient works like Aristotle's Politics than to early modern works such as Hobbes' Leviathan or Locke's Two Treatises.3 Despite its premodern appearance, however, Montesquieu explicitly states that his book is an innovating work for

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1 First published in 1748 and translated into English in 1750, The Spirit of the Laws was important enough to be placed on the Index in 1751. As a number of scholars have noted, the work had a great effect on 18th century political thought, especially on the American Founders (see, for example, Schaub 1995, ix; Federalist #9, #47, #78). Because of the enormous size and complexity of the book, we can only concentrate on the aspects that are essential for understanding oligarchy itself and for discerning the relationship between oligarchy and Montesquieu’s liberal republicanism. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of The Spirit of the Laws are taken from the Cohler translation, 1989.

2 Montesquieu argues that “it is not a matter of indifference that the people be enlightened” (“Preface”, @10). But given his covert manner of writing, it seems that the public enlightenment he envisions would come less from direct public access to his teaching and more from legislators who grasp his teaching and reform politics and the public mind based on that teaching. On Montesquieu’s covert manner of writing, see Pangle 1989, 11-19. For a criticism of that approach to reading Montesquieu, see Cohler 1988, 6-9.

3 Sabato and O'Connor, for example, go so far as to say that Montesquieu “actually drew many of his ideas about government from the works of Greek political philosopher Aristotle” (Sabato and O'Connor 1999, 56). Although both Montesquieu and Aristotle emphasize the importance of a “spirit of moderation” in addressing their works to citizens, statesmen, and (potential) legislators, the two books are fundamentally different as works of political philosophy. Aristotle leads up to a consideration of the alternative to political life found in “some sort of study” while Montesquieu suggests that philosophy is simply part of the highest form of political activity (cf. 1324a29; Spirit, Bk. 29, ch. 19). Aristotle subtly presents philosophy as a radical challenge to political life while Montesquieu encourages the most politically ambitious to consider the philosophic study of politics as the height of their political ambition. In this respect, Montesquieu is more politically radical than Aristotle.
which “new words have had to be found or new meanings given to old ones” (“Foreword”, @1). Thus *The Spirit of the Laws* seems to partake of the new spirit of its modern predecessors, especially their break with the tradition of political thought originating with Plato and Aristotle. In addition, however, Montesquieu suggests that he is improving on “what so many great men in France, England, and Germany have written before”, indicating that his work not only continues the early modern tradition but may also be meant as an improvement on that intellectual tradition (“Preface”, @16).

**b. Forms of Government and Montesquieu’s New Political Science**

For the political scientist or legislator, one fact stands out in surveying the form, organization, and content of *The Spirit of the Laws*: Montesquieu differs from his early modern predecessors on the idea of a best form of government. Unlike Hobbes’ marked preference for absolute monarchy or Locke’s strong adherence to constitutionalism rooted in popular consent, Montesquieu seems to lack devotion to one general way of ordering political societies. In the “Preface”, Montesquieu protests his “love” for the monarchic government of his French homeland yet argues that in “the nature of things” the “principles” of good politics are as universal as human nature and therefore not limited to monarchies (“Preface”, @3, 6). Indeed, he contends that well-ordered politics can exist in societies of a variety of shapes and sizes if the laws are correctly related “to the physical aspect of the country; to the climate... to the properties of the terrain, its location and extent; to the ways of life of the peoples, be they plowmen, hunters, or herdsmen... to the degree of liberty that the constitution can sustain, to the religion of the inhabitants, their inclinations, their wealth, their number, their commerce, their mores and their manners... to one another, to their origin, to the purpose of the legislator, and to the order of

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5 One hint of Montesquieu’s modernity and openness to innovation: he calls Machiavelli a “great man” (6, 5, 1).
6 On the problem of seeing Montesquieu as merely a “Frenchified Locke”, see Schaub 1995, x. Despite his differences with Hobbes and Locke, he refuses to use the ancients’ term “regime”. Sometimes he refers to a “state”, which is a more comprehensive term that means something like the contemporary word “country” (cf. “Preface”, @9). Still, his use of “forms of government” -- akin to Hobbes’ or Locke’s “forms of commonwealth” -- seems to imply that he more narrowly construes the extent to which the arrangement of political power alone gives a distinct way of life to a political society. Indeed, while Montesquieu’s work remains within the framework of political science (especially the legislator’s activity), he talks a great deal more than Hobbes or Locke about the influences on “the spirit of the laws” of non-political factors such as geography and climate (cf. Book 14). On the “sociological” aspects of Montesquieu’s thought, see Aron 1965, Durkheim 1965, Hirschman 1977.
7 Schaub notes that Montesquieu’s “political science is much less doctrinaire, legalistic, and universalistic than that of Hobbes or Locke” (Schaub 1995, xi).
8 Like Aristotle, Montesquieu appears to stand above the various forms of government, arbitrating between them according to a higher notion of good politics than can be captured in one pure form of monarchy or republic (cf. Schaub 1995, 21-24). But Montesquieu conspicuously ignores Aristotle’s six-regime classification, except to criticize Aristotle for classifying governments not “by the form of the constitution but by accidental things, like the virtues or the vices of the prince” (19, 9, 1).
things on which they are established" (1, 3, 14). To understand the “spirit of the laws”, “they must be considered from all these points of view” (1, 3, 14). Only then can one “fathom the whole of a state’s constitution” (“Preface”, @9).

Despite the “infinite diversity of laws” and forms of government, Montesquieu contends that there are three fundamental political alternatives available to the legislator: “republican government”, “monarchical government”, and “despotic government” (2, 1, 1). In a republic, “the people as a body, or only part of the people, have sovereign power”; in a monarchy, “one alone governs, but by fixed and established laws”; and in a despotism, “one alone, without law and without rule, draws everything along by his will and his caprices” (2, 1, 1). Like Hobbes and Locke, Montesquieu rejects the Aristotelian division of regimes according to how many rule and whether they do so for their own good or the common good. Instead, his classification first separates forms of government based on how many people hold “sovereign power” (one or more than one), and then divides the government of one person according to whether sovereignty is exercised according to law or the unbounded will of the ruler. Law replaces the common good in Montesquieu’s thought because he embraces the modern position that the first purpose of politics is to ensure the citizens’ “liberty and their security”, not to foster a polis that cultivates virtue according to the citizens’ shared notions of justice and nobility (29, 1, 3). As we will see, he regards republics, monarchies, and despotisms as the fundamental alternatives not because each has a peculiar claim to merit political authority but because each corresponds to the most powerful passions of the human heart, which are not necessarily political in the Aristotelian or even Machiavellian sense. As we will also see, acquisitiveness is one of those passions.

In this chapter, we hope to show that Montesquieu shares many of the modern principles articulated by Hobbes and reworked by Locke, but makes significant modifications to them that can be seen in his analysis of governments, including oligarchic republicanism. For although Montesquieu wrote no treatise on oligarchy per se, his views on this form of government draw into stark relief his understanding of the problem of reconciling acquisitiveness and a good political order. In particular, the study of oligarchy can show how the legislator should

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9 As he goes on, Montesquieu implicitly adds a fourth form of government: the liberal commercial republic that partakes of some of the popular character of republicanism but has a different purpose (liberty) from that of the ancient republics (glory). He regards England as the model of this new form.

10 According to Montesquieu, the “sovereign power” of the “political state” is formed by the “union of all individual strengths”, which is made possible by the union of individuals “wills” in “the civil state” (1, 3, 7-10). Unlike Hobbes or Locke, Montesquieu does not explicitly say that civil and political society are formed at the same time by a covenant or compact between isolated individuals (cf. Locke, 27, secs. 99, 103 & Hobbes, Leviathan, chs. 17, 20.) Indeed, he indicates that “the civil state” can exist prior to political society because human wills can be joined through natural desires such as sexual attraction and sociability. However, conflict within civil society quickly forces it to break apart or become a “political state” that has the strength to stop internal and external aggression (1, 3, 7). As Montesquieu says, “a society could not continue to exist without a government” (1, 3, 7).

11 Montesquieu’s relative silence on oligarchy stands in stark contrast to Aristotle’s classification of regimes, which prominently features oligarchy as one of the six basic orders of the city. Indeed, Aristotle goes so far as to suggest that oligarchy and democracy are the two most common political orders (Politics, 1280a1-10). Since oligarchy does
manipulate the arrogance and vanity underlying acquisitiveness into supporting rather than threatening liberty. Thus Montesquieu’s treatment merits attention for two reasons: first, it illustrates the potential political tension between acquisitiveness and liberty; and second, it illuminates the place of oligarchic elements in Montesquieu’s liberalism, a liberalism that has played an important part in the formation of the American regime. In this chapter, we hope to show that Montesquieu does not believe that there is an inherent connection between liberalism and oligarchy, but he does caution that a liberal order can drift toward oligarchy if its institutional and moral foundations are weakened. To begin establishing these conclusions, we turn first to the fundamental principles of human nature Montesquieu applies in his discussion of oligarchic politics.

II. The Laws of Human Nature

a. Laws and the Law-giver

To give good laws, legislators must understand what laws are best for their particular people. According to Montesquieu, this understanding requires knowledge of two kinds. First, the legislator must know how a particular form of government “relates to the disposition of the people for whom it is established” (1, 3, 9). It is not enough, however, that laws merely fit the language, habits, manners, customs, and morals -- what Montesquieu calls moeurs -- that develop with a people’s historical adaptation to their geographic, climatic, or other physical circumstances (1, 1, 14).12 Rather, good laws also must be based (as much as the moeurs will allow) on the universal principles of politics as understood by human intelligence (1, 1, 3; 11, 8; 15, 5, 3). Legislators must take into account what is good for a people as human beings and what is good for them as a people with particular moeurs (19, 2, 1; 19, 5, 3). Legislators therefore have the enormous task of understanding the fundamental constitution of human nature, the variety of human moeurs, and the proper relationship between them (19, 4, 1-2).13

not figure prominently in Montesquieu’s list, it is not surprising that there has been almost no sustained scholarly discussion of his views on oligarchy.

12 According to Montesquieu, accommodating a people’s historically-evolved customs, manners, and institutions places an increased burden on the legislator to understand historical circumstances and increases the importance of history as a standard for judging the goodness of laws (on the importance of history in Montesquieu’s political thought, see Pangle 1989, 6-9).

13 The enormous complexity of giving good laws requires the legislator to stop and consider all possible factors. Thus the legislator should be guided by a “spirit of moderation” (29, 9, 1). To attain this spirit, the legislator must be purged of those prejudicial opinions that make “one unaware of oneself” (“Preface”, @ 13). For Montesquieu, philosophic self-knowledge is thus valuable as a necessary prelude to law-giving, but not as the ground or beginning point of a rival life of philosophy.
Montesquieu argues that to attain such knowledge, legislators must begin by understanding human nature in its purity, without changes wrought in it by the adaptation of societies to their particular circumstances. To understand human nature in its purity, the legislator must consider "a man before the establishment of societies" -- a person in the state of nature (1, 2, 1). Montesquieu grounds his teaching on the state of nature in his discussion of "the laws of nature" that govern all things. According to him, "laws... are the necessary relations deriving from the nature of things" (1, 1, 1). He contends that "all beings have their laws", including "man" (1, 1, 1). The "invariable laws" that govern "man as a physical being" come from the "motion" of humanity's material constitution, which is "particular to themselves" and distinguishes humans from other beings (1, 1, 5-11). Beyond physiological impulses, human beings have "feelings" and "intelligence", which differentiates them from animals (which lack intelligence) and plants ("in which we observe neither knowledge nor feeling") (1, 1, 12). Because of their "faculty of knowing", human beings form ideas and opinions that guide their actions and shape their responses to their instincts and feelings (1, 2, 1). As an amalgam of instinct, feeling, and intelligence, a person can deviate from the "invariable laws" of his physical constitution either because "as a feeling creature, he falls subject to a thousand passions", or because "as an intelligent being" he may have "imperfect knowledge" or even be "subject to ignorance and error" (1, 1, 10-14). There is then a unique malleability in "the constitution of our being" that can be molded by physical circumstances, moeurs, and laws to produce a great variety of individuals and peoples, depending on the particular mix of opinions, feelings, and instinct (14, 1, 1). Still, there is a common human nature shared by all people "before the establishment of societies": it is humanity's distinct combination of physical necessity, feeling, and intelligence (1, 2, 1).

14 Montesquieu argues that the state of nature, while pre-political, is not necessarily pre-social. The earliest stage of the state of nature is that of isolated individuals but latter stages include the rise of pre-political societies. According to Schaub, it "should be obvious" that in this respect Montesquieu lays much of the groundwork for Rousseau's political thought, especially Rousseau's famous "account of humanity's pre-history" in the Second Discourse (Schaub 1995, 27-8).

15 Montesquieu's modernity shows itself in his definition of law and natural law. According to the classic premodern definition offered by Aquinas: "law is an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care for the community, and promulgated" (Aquinas 1988, 17). In Aquinas' thought, natural laws are divine commands known by human reason and given for the sake of directing people to the objective goods that fulfill their nature. According to Aquinas, the violation of such laws carries penalties beyond their natural consequences. In Montesquieu's version, natural laws seem to entail no such divine obligation and punishment; the penalties for breaking them are simply the natural bad consequences. For a fuller discussion of Montesquieu's modern understanding of natural law, see Lowenthal 1987.

16 Within the general pattern of human nature, each person's (or people's) motion varies to the extent that their material constitution is different (14, 5, 1-2). Hence each person or people, while human, has a distinct "character of the spirit" and "passions of the heart" based on their physiological constitution and its alteration by geography, climate, education, and laws (14, 1, 1).
b. The Law of Peace

For Montesquieu, the first law of human nature is “peace” (1, 2, 3). According to him, human beings in the pre-social state of nature “flee” at the approach of another person because “everything unknown makes them tremble” (1, 2, 2). They are afraid of anything unknown because they do not know that it will not harm them (1, 2, 2). In this condition of fearful concern for their safety, “each feels himself inferior; he scarcely feels himself an equal” (1, 2, 3). In explicit contrast to Hobbes, Montesquieu argues that people’s fear of others pushes them to move away from each other, not to “seek to attack one another” in preemptive strikes (1, 2, 5).17 In this respect, Montesquieu agrees with Locke against Hobbes - the state of nature is not per se a state of war in which human beings are led by their original passions to seek “empire and domination” (1, 2, 8; Second Treatise, sec. 19).

Montesquieu disagrees with Locke, however, on why the original state of nature is not a state of war. According to Locke, the state of nature exists wherever people live “together according to reason, without a common Superior on Earth, with Authority to judge between them” (Second Treatise, sec. 19). The state of war erupts in the state of nature when fear or pride make people abandon reason and use “force without right” against others (Second Treatise, secs. 13, 16). Thus for Locke, the active guidance of reason distinguishes the peaceful state of nature from the state of war. In Montesquieu’s view, however, it is sentiment rather than reason that originally defines the state of nature. According to him, the person’s original and most basic internal motion is the feeling of “life” -- “the spirits in motion” (1, 1, 12; 1, 2, 8; 14, 2, 11-12).18 He argues that these feelings “belong to men from the outset”, prior to the awakening or exercise

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17 According to Montesquieu, pre-emptive strikes based on fear arise in society, where people have acquired such a general suspicion of each other that they believe in "the necessity to attack" (10, 2, 3).
18 By "spirits in motion", Montesquieu means both physical and psychological spirits: blood flow and nerve reception and motions of the soul (feelings, passions). This notion of "spirits in motion" is critical for Montesquieu's understanding of human nature, as seen in his discussion of the physiological and psychological effects of climate. He argues that in cold climates "men are more vigorous" because cold air "shortens... the body's surface fibers", which "increases their spring and favors the return of blood from the extremities of the heart" (14, 2, 1). As a result, their "blood is pushed harder toward the heart and, reciprocally, the heart has more power" (14, 2, 2). This "greater" physical strength produces many psychological effects: "more confidence in oneself, that is, more courage; better knowledge of one's superiority... higher opinion of one's security" (14, 2, 2). Thus the peoples "in cold countries are courageous like young men", whose bodily spirits are capable of robust motion (14, 2, 2). From this, Montesquieu concludes that "in northern countries, a healthy and well-constituted but heavy machine finds its pleasures in all that can start the spirits in motion again: hunting, travels, war, and wine" (14, 2, 12). In hot countries, a person's physiological and psychological spirits are put in motion by "sensitivity to pleasures" and "pain", which is more common in hotter climates because "the tufts of nerves are more open" (14, 2, 7-9). This sensitivity to pleasure makes the souls of people "in hot countries... sovereignly moved by all that is related to the union of the two sexes... one lives for love itself" (14, 2, 10-11). However, "the heat of climate can be so excessive that the body there will be absolutely without strength. So, prostration will pass even to the spirit, making hot countries inclined to despotism (14, 2, 13). Thus while the psychological spirits can be affected by the ideas received from experience and education (political, religious, etc.), they have difficulty overcoming the limits of soul imposed by physical climate. In other words, certain countries just cannot have a liberal commercial republic until they get air-conditioning (cf. Schaub 1995, 7).
of intelligence or reason (1, 2, 8). If nothing impedes this sense of being alive, the person experiences "happiness" (14, 2, 11). Unfortunately, natural "needs" like hunger or thirst inevitably interrupt the body's pattern of motion and the psychological feeling of life accompanying that pattern (1, 2, 6). The pain of these needs forces people to "seek nourishment", which restores their feeling of life (1, 2, 6).\(^9\)

According to Montesquieu's argument, this feeling of life is not the passion responsible for the natural law of peace; that distinction belongs to the desire for self-preservation. In his view, the feeling of life is not the same as the desire for self-preservation; it is prior to that desire because it is prior to all reflection or ideas, on which the desire to preserve oneself rests. Yet even though the desire for self-preservation comes after the feeling of life, it is the most powerful human passion. It is born from the knowledge of death, which comes through the gradual development of the rational "faculty of knowing". Because people have the mental ability to grasp patterns in sense data, abstract generalities from those patterns, and form ideas out of those generalities, "by degrees" they form the idea that painful disruption of their internal motion implies the possibility that such motion could cease altogether; in other words, unlike other plants or animals that do not have "intelligence", human beings come to realize that they can "suffer death" (23, 2, 3; 1, 2, 2; 1, 1, 13).

Comprehending the idea of one's own death is terrible for a person; the nothingness and lifelessness of death unsettles the mind and gives rise to what Montesquieu calls "our hopes" and "our fears" -- the fear of death (and its warning signal, pain) and the hope of avoiding such evil, especially by recapturing the feeling of life (1, 1, 13). This combination of fear and hope constitutes the uniquely human desire for self-preservation.\(^{20}\) According to Montesquieu, people are originally timid (and therefore peaceful) because the desire to avoid death is more powerful than the longing to feel alive. It is so powerful because "fear always enlarges [its] objects" and usually overpowers hope, making fearful "weakness" the natural condition of people once reason has begun to awaken (19, 27, 11; 1, 2, 2).\(^{21}\) Thus even though human beings in the state of nature may deeply miss the feeling of their "spirits in motion", fear of any possible harm makes them

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\(^9\) Seeking "nourishment" is the "second law of human nature" (1, 2, 6). Compared to Locke, Montesquieu says very little about this natural impulse. In Locke's presentation, reason dictates that "Men, being once born, have a right to their Preservation, and consequently to Meat and Drink, and such other things, as Nature affords for their subsistence" (2nd Treatise, sec. 25). Indeed, Locke grounds his critically important discussion of the origin of private property in how an individual may rightfully "appropriate... the Fruit, or Venison" necessary "for the support of his Life" (2nd Treatise, sec. 26). Montesquieu offers no similar thematic discussion of the moral foundation of private property, because in his view acquisition of property is not as decisive as Locke believes in relieving the fearful burden of the human condition.

\(^{20}\) Members of other species may have an instinct for self-preservation, but only humans have a desire for such preservation based on knowledge of death.

\(^{21}\) Once people feel their life threatened, fear of death becomes a permanent part of their soul because "one is afraid of seeing the escape of a good that one feels" (19, 27, 11). Hence after the first experience of danger to life or limb, security becomes a constant concern.
“flee” from danger rather than try to conquer the object causing their fear and impeding their feeling of life (1, 2, 2-8).

c. The Law of Sociability

According to Montesquieu, human beings overcome their fear of each other because they are led by another “law of nature” to make a “natural entreaty” that draws them together (1, 2, 7). Montesquieu discusses this natural entreaty in his outline of the evolution of social bonds within the state of nature. He argues that although individuals are originally isolated in the state of nature, they are not radically asocial. Rather, while “fear would lead men to flee one another”, “the marks of mutual fear would soon persuade them to approach one another” (1, 2, 7). But approaching each another is not enough to form a social bond between two individuals; such approach is only the opportunity to form a bond. A reason for connection is required, which Montesquieu finds in the fact that human beings “would also be so inclined [to approach each other] by the pleasure one animal feels at the approach of an animal of its own kind” (1, 2, 7). Hence human sociability originates in a kind of species self-love that seems akin to that of gregarious animals. Montesquieu quickly adds, however, that “in addition, the charm that the two sexes inspire in each other by their differences would increase this pleasure” (1, 2, 7). Apparently, fellow feeling is not strong enough by itself to bring people together in more than fleeting social bonds -- sexual attraction is required to establish the first society, the sexual coupling (1, 2, 7).

Montesquieu contends, however, that sexual attraction and species self-love by themselves cannot be responsible for the social bonds characteristic of more enduring human associations. He argues that “other animals” also have these passions that lead them to live in families or herd-like extended families (1, 2, 8). What enlarges human sociability beyond some kind of original family unit (about whose form Montesquieu says nothing) is people’s continued success “in gaining knowledge” (1, 2, 8). This growing rationality gives them the ability to share ideas, which provides “a second bond, which the animals do not have” (1, 2, 8). From this rational

22 Unlike Hobbes, Montesquieu does not believe that individuals naturally overcome their fear by turning to conquest and subjugation; in his view, the idea of conquest, triumph, and glory is “so complex and depends on so many other ideas that it would not have been the one [people in the original state of nature] would first have” (1, 2, 4; cf. Leviathan, ch. 13, @4, 7). This is especially true because the ideas of conquest and glory rest on comparisons that occur only in society.

23 According to Montesquieu, in the state of nature mutual fear leads people to approach -- not attack -- each other because prior to social contact that leads to feelings of superiority or inferiority, a person would have no reason to strike another person preemptively out of gain, fear, or glory, as Hobbes maintains (cf. Leviathan, ch. 13, @7).

24 In linking self-love and sociability, Montesquieu denies Hobbes’ argument that individuals naturally feel “a great deale of griefe in keeping company” with each other (cf. Leviathan, ch. 13, @5).

25 According to Hobbes, the “concord” of “small families” existing outside of civil society “dependeth on natural lust” (Leviathan, ch. 13, @11).
capacity to acquire and communicate ideas is born “a fourth natural law”: “the desire to live in society” (1, 2, 8).

Since reason is responsible for the desire to live in a larger and more enduring society than the sexual coupling, it might seem that people are attracted to such a society simply because it offers greater opportunity to acquire and communicate ideas. But since the most compelling idea acquired by human beings in the state of nature is the idea of their own death, it would seem that any society growing out of humanity’s rational capacity would be geared toward allaying the fear of death. And in fact, “gaining knowledge” allows people to see that despite the fear that makes initial contact between individuals so painfully tentative, they can better avoid their fears by uniting with others in a society (12, 2, 1; 1, 3, 7). But because this union of individual wills goes beyond immediate family connections, it cannot rely on the “natural feelings” of sexual attraction or parental tenderness to check the potentially dangerous willfulness of its members (23, 11, 3). Thus it needs known and enforced rules of behavior, which are supplied at first by custom and later by “positive laws” with penalties attached for their violation (11, 3, 2; 1, 3).26

Human nature may give rise to society, but the need to enforce rules requires the “union of all individual strengths” possible only in “the political state”, with its monopoly on coercive power; in short, “society could not continue to exist without a government” (1, 3, 7). Thus Montesquieu concludes that the desire of people in the state of nature to live securely leads beyond individuals, beyond family, and beyond society to the “political state” (1, 3, 8).

In sum, Montesquieu’s presentation of the laws of human nature suggests that the original “constitution of our being” is made up of several fundamental “motions” created by the complex interaction of instinct, feeling, and intelligence: the feeling of life, the desire for “preservation”, the desire for “nourishment”, the desire for contact with others of the same species (especially the kind of intimate contact possible in sexual coupling), and “the desire to live in society”. While many of these pre-social passions are linked to the primitive feeling of life or to the desire for self-preservation, none of them is acquisitive or entails acquisition beyond what is necessary to meet the immediate needs of oneself or one’s family. It seems, then, that the acquisitive passion is not natural to human beings, at least in the sense that it is not originally present in them prior to society. If so, acquisitiveness must arise with the formation of human society beyond the family. As we will now see, Montesquieu does indeed link the rise of various types of acquisitiveness to passions born of conflict first arising in society, particularly to the arrogance and vanity that arise from social comparisons.

26 Unlike Aristotle, Montesquieu does not believe that people’s rational capacity leads them to form a political society in which they can satisfy their political nature by deliberating about the good, the just, and the noble (cf. Politics 1253 a1-16). Human beings do not “desire to live in society” because they are political animals but because they want the security and pleasure that comes from living with a large company of their own kind (1, 2, 8).
III. Arrogance, Vanity, and Acquisitiveness

a. Self-love

Montesquieu grounds his treatment of acquisitive desire in an understanding of the relationship between arrogance, vanity, and acquisitiveness. He contends that these passions arise in society but are linked back to the pre-social passion of self-love. Yet when he claims that people in the pre-social state of nature love themselves, he does not quite mean the same thing as Hobbes or Locke. They argue that self-love is a devotion to the self that naturally tends toward self-aggrandizement (ineluctably for Hobbes, generally for Locke). Montesquieu argues instead that people in the pre-social state of nature love themselves in the sense that they delight in their "primitive" feeling of possessing "life". In this simple state, self-love is the warm pleasure -- the "constant happiness and a sweet tranquillity" -- felt when one is unimpaired in the motions of one's body or mind; a kind of unconscious self-possession in which one's desires extend no further than preserving one's feeling of life (6, 13, 7). This means that in its original form, self-love does not entail grasping to acquire more than others; it is only seeks to preserve one's feeling of unobstructed motion.

Montesquieu admits, however, that self-love becomes dangerous once people begin to move into society. In society, the "equality that was among them ceases" because people begin to compare themselves with others (1, 3, 1). These comparisons yield an opinion of one's superiority or inferiority compared to others (cf. 16, 2, 4). These opinions in turn make a person feel comparatively strong or weak ("Preface", @14). A sense of comparative strength makes a person feel free from danger and thereby increases his feeling of life while a sense of comparative weakness causes fear that constricts internal motion and thereby diminishes the feeling of life (cf. 15, 1, 1).

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27 This notion of original amour de soi is developed powerfully by Rousseau (cf. Melzer 1990, 33-34, 40-41).
28 In the family, self-love is less likely to fuel desire for "empire and domination" because each member tends to regard the family as part of himself and himself as part of the family, especially in the case of parents with children.
29 According to Montesquieu, people feel superior or inferior in terms of "their spirit or their talents" (Pensees no. 615 in Schaub 1995, 31).
b. Arrogance and Acquisition

According to Montesquieu, a sense of comparative superiority tends to become arrogance, the belief that one is completely superior to others (19, 9, 1). Because of this perceived superiority, the truly arrogant person feels self-sufficient and has no concern for others’ opinion nor any feeling of weakness or dependence on others. Montesquieu argues that as a result, the arrogant person has an “inhuman” lack of emotions such as fear or empathy, which originally derive from the sense of “weakness” that all people share in the pre-social state of nature (19, 9, 1).

According to Montesquieu, arrogance can give rise to a powerful acquisitiveness. At first glance, this seems unlikely given the fact that a truly arrogant person lacks a sense of vulnerability and therefore feels no need to be active in either work or war, making him lazy and without a desire to acquire anything (19, 9, 1). But acquisitiveness can arise out of arrogance when a person’s sense of superiority is insecure, as when people first “begin to feel their strength” or when their established superiority is challenged (19, 9, 1). In such cases, arrogant people set out to overcome the obstacle that stands in the way of establishing or re-establishing their sense of superiority. They acquire out of a desire to destroy the challenge to their superiority, either by acquiring the obstacle itself (and thus removing it) or by acquiring the resources necessary to overcome the obstacle. In either case, a desire to acquire is sparked within them.

Montesquieu argues that this acquisitive desire is not limited to overcoming the initial threat to one’s superiority; it also entails a desire for honor (for the recognition of one’s superiority). Once the arrogant person’s superiority has been challenged, he needs challengers to acknowledge his superiority so that he can be sure of it. The arrogant person cannot go back to an isolated sense of superiority because he must be vigilant in ensuring that others acknowledge his superiority (i.e. honor him). After a long time of no challenges, it is possible that the arrogant person may become complacent again. But in the meantime, the most effective way to ensure that others recognize one’s superiority is to dominate them; as a result, arrogant people seek honor through the kind of fame (widespread honor) or glory (lasting fame) acquired by conquest (cf. 19, 9, 6). Hence their acquisitiveness expands into a desire for empire. According to Montesquieu, then, a challenge to arrogance sparks two acquisitive desires, both of which must

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30 Of course, arrogance does not preclude some fellow feeling, otherwise it would be impossible for arrogant nations to exist (cf. 19, 9). But while individuals in arrogant nations feel an attraction to their own kind, they do not consider anyone outside of their nation to be their own kind. According to Montesquieu, this arrogance distorts “the love of all” that is part of the “general virtue” of humanity (“Preface”, @14).

31 According to Montesquieu, the self-sufficiently arrogant do not go about seeking whom they might devour; they only destroy that which “chance has let fall into their hands” (19, 9, 1).
be satisfied in order to re-establish one’s sense of superiority: the desire to acquire a dominant position and the desire to be honored or glorified for one’s dominace. Acquiring such position and honor makes the arrogant person feel alive, restoring the feeling lost by the initial challenge to their superiority.

In Montesquieu’s view, the greatest examples of acquisitiveness rooted in arrogance were the Romans, who sought to acquire glory through conquest. As he makes clear, the Romans believed themselves superior to their neighboring war-like tribes, but they were forced to prove their superiority over and over again in contests of arms, which created enough uncertainty and insecurity that they could not feel self-sufficient in their strength (cf. *Spirit*, 11, 17, 2; 8, 5, 7: *Considerations* ch. 1). This insecurity turned their arrogance into a desire to dominate others and be glorified by them (11, 17, 2; 1, 3, 5). Unlike other arrogant peoples, however, the Romans were imbued with a “vast ambition” for universal domination because their leaders had a “greatness of ideas” that enabled them to see that only a constantly expanding empire could keep threats to the superiority of Rome from reappearing in the future (19, 9, 6). They became strongly attached to glory in the beginning of the process of expansion because in glory they felt the strength they sought but could never feel was securely theirs (7, 2, 3). The more Rome acquired, the more glorious it became, and the stronger it felt (7, 2, 4). But once it felt secure in its conquest of all serious threats in the known world, not even continued shrewd management of internal pressure by the Senate could keep Rome from beginning to lose its expansionist drive (cf. 7, 2, 4, n.5).

Montesquieu argues that the rise of the Empire signaled the end of the republican expansionist spirit and the beginning of consolidation. This point was the beginning of the end for Rome because its institutions were designed around conquest and could not adjust to a less expansionist life. Without a habituated sense of pressing necessity, the Romans turned from the lofty but hard pursuit of glory to “a more pleasant way of living” centered on the enticements of luxury (7, 4, 6). During the Augustan age, the commerce of luxury proliferated as the Romans sought to exhibit their superiority without the painful exertions required by the pursuit of glorious conquest (cf. 21, 16, 1&6). In sum, the Romans illustrate Montesquieu’s contention that acquisitiveness comes from arrogance only when the sense of superiority is not securely felt. Once such security returns -- as it did to the Romans with the peace and prosperity of the Augustan age -- arrogance once again breeds complacency and self-absorption (cf. 15, 16, 4).

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32 In addition, the recurring clash between glory-seeking members of the patrician and plebeian classes created internal turbulence, thereby causing further insecurity and augmenting Roman’s need to produce an expansionist outlet for this “noble rivalry” (cf. *Spirit*, 11, 13, 2; 11, 15, 1).

33 As Montesquieu makes clear, the Roman lack of personal luxury was both the cause and effect of Roman citizens' continuing concern with “only the glory of the homeland and one's own glory” (7, 2, 3).

34 The decline of the expansionist and glory-loving spirit in the imperial period led to the military corruption and downfall of Rome at the hands of the barbarians (21, 16, 1).
c. Vanity and Acquisition

While the military acquisitiveness of the Romans came out of arrogance, Montesquieu also links the desire to acquire with vanity, a passion built on a sense of inferiority. According to him, the seed of vanity is sown when people compare themselves with others and judge themselves inferior ("Preface", @14). Vanity arises when, to remedy their feeling of comparative weakness, people seek to "call attention to themselves" and impress others (7. 1, 7). According to Montesquieu, the vain "desire to distinguish oneself" is directed at acquiring the difficult, rare, or subtle objects of "luxury, industry, the arts, fashions, politeness, and taste" whose possession adorns oneself and makes one "be looked at" by others (19, 9, 1). Being noticed and gaining distinction suppresses the sense of inferiority and makes the vain person feel alive. Despite producing the same end, vanity differs from arrogance in that the vain person does not use force to compel others to recognize his distinction or superiority (7, 1, 7; 19, 9, 1). While arrogance tries to destroy others' low opinion by dominating them, vanity tries to change such opinion by presenting the appearance of distinction or superiority.

Of all of the expressions of vanity discussed by Montesquieu, "industry" is perhaps the most important because of its strong connection to acquisition. Here his discussion bears fruitful comparison with Locke. According to Locke, industry is the "fit application" of one's mental or physical labor to "seek the removal of uneasiness... though not with impatience or great haste

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35 Montesquieu compares his discussion of the origin of vanity with Mandeville's contention in *Fable of the Bees* that vanity is the pleasure of a "weak spirit" (7, 1. n. 2.).
36 According to Montesquieu, vanity rises to the level of "a general distress" in large cities because it is much harder to distinguish oneself from others: "if their number is so great that most are unknown to one another, the desire to distinguish oneself redoubles because there is more expectation of succeeding.... But by dint of wanting to distinguish themselves, all become equal, and one is no longer distinct; as everyone wants to be looked at, no one is noticed" (7, 1. 7-8).
37 While acquisitiveness is born of a desire to restore a person or nation's feeling of "life", such restoration is problematic, according to Montesquieu. Once in society, comparisons are constant and thus the feeling of life is always being disturbed. vanity or arrogance is almost inevitable. Moreover, even in the original state of nature the feeling of "life" is disturbed by the fears and hopes created by knowledge of death; hence there is no uncorrupted original unity in the soul that can be permanently restored. In this respect, Montesquieu differs importantly from Rousseau, who seems to offer hope that there can be a fully happy life that recaptures humanity's original good condition (either in the life of the solitary dreamer or the self-governing citizen) (cf. Melzer 1990, "Introduction"). It is Montesquieu's fundamental argument that humanity cannot go back to its very original condition that makes his thought seem so much less revolutionary than Rousseau's inflammatory writings about the need to wipe away "corruption" and restore the original human condition. (Cohler is wrong to attribute Montesquieu's moderate tone simply to the fact that *The Spirit of the Laws* belongs "to the first half of the 18th century -- a period of relative quiet when one could think of reform, muddling through, or making time" [cf. Cohler 1989, xi-xii].) Paradoxically, Rousseau ultimately seems pessimistic about the power of politics to solve the human problem; in this respect, he is in fact less politically radical than Montesquieu, who actually proposes a liberal order that legislators should try to establish.
38 According to Montesquieu, vanity is a more natural passion than arrogance because "weakness" is the feeling common to all people in the pre-social state of nature (1, 2, 2). On Montesquieu's political preference for vanity -- which he associates with femininity -- over arrogance, see 19, 9, 1 and Schaub 1995, 41-43.
upon the first approaches” (*Second Treatise*; secs. 31, 34, 37; *STCE*, secs. 106-07). Often painful, industrious labor is not the product of vanity but of habituation and, more deeply, of rational understanding of what is necessary to solve a problem, especially the problem of comfortable self-preservation (cf. *Second Treatise*, sec. 34). In Locke’s view, vanity is more often associated with the “Quarrelsome and Contentious” who threaten the hard-won property of the “Industrious and Rational” (*Second Treatise*, sec. 34).

In contrast, Montesquieu argues for a fundamental psychological link between industry, commerce, and vanity.39 In his famous analysis of commerce, Montesquieu discusses three ancient and three modern examples of trading republics that “drew their livelihood from the entire universe”: Tyre, Carthage, Marseilles, Florence, Venice, and Holland (20.4, 1). Marseilles became a trading center because “the barrenness of its territory made its citizens decide on economic commerce” in order to support themselves (20.5, 1). “Tyre, Venice, and the Dutch towns” were founded by “fugitives” who fled “violence and harassment” and were “constrained to hide in marshes, on islands, on the shoals, and even among dangerous reefs” (20.5, 2). According to Montesquieu, these people “found security” in such locations and decided to stay (20.5, 2). Once there, they “had to live” but did not have the resources or strength for the more common pursuits of farming, banditry, or piracy (20.2, 4). They therefore turned to commerce to provide that living (20.5, 2). In each case, commerce was created by the natural or man-made necessity of preserving themselves, not by a passion for riches or by a vain desire to impress their neighbors with wealth.

While these examples suggest that commerce originates in the need for self-preservation, commercial acquisitiveness takes on a life of its own because of the operation of the passion for distinction. For example, Venice became a trading town out of necessity but it grew into “the center of the commercial world” because its leading citizens wanted to distinguish themselves and their town from rival Italian cities who were politically or militarily stronger (21.21, 3).40 Because the challenge from those cities could not be overcome until commerce was firmly established, the Venetians secured future trade by the formation of a commercial empire (21.21, 3). And since trading empires are not fully secure until they have military protection, the Venetians expanded their state territorially and evolved an imperial political apparatus designed to administer the necessary military protection for its commerce. Contrary to the Roman Republic, Venice built its empire less by military force and more by providing goods and services to others. For the Romans, political empire was a way of continuing their military conquest and domination of any threat to their superiority. For Venice, political empire was a

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39 Vanity has a direct relation to industrious acquisitiveness through the “commerce of luxury” -- trade in items sought not for their utility but for their ability to satisfy the “delights” or “fancies” of the buyer (20.4, 1).

40 Unlike military acquisitiveness, commercial acquisitiveness seems to come from vanity.
necessary means to increase their commerce, which in turn was their means of distinguishing themselves in the eyes of their neighbors and the rest of Europe. Thus for Montesquieu, it seems that political ambition does not have a single source; it can be born of an aggressive arrogance and love of the conqueror's glory or come from a vain desire to impress others and win distinction.

Despite differences between the types of acquisitiveness, Montesquieu contends that both forms begin to die for the same reason: successful acquisition removes the feeling of insecurity that sparks the desire to acquire. Vanity is satisfied when the vain have acquired enough to ensure that they will be noticed (which depends on the depth of the sense of inferiority). At that moment, they may even begin to feel superior and become arrogant (19, 10, 3). In the case of commercial acquisitiveness, the "spirit of commerce" - hand work, exact justice, moderation, frugality - breaks down because successful traders grow so wealthy that they no longer feel insecure (20, 1, 2). Montesquieu contends that at that point, they turn to the indulgence offered by luxury (21, 6, 2). As we recall, conquerors like the Romans also end up turning to luxury. According to Montesquieu, this is not a coincidence; for as we will now see, he argues that luxury is the endpoint of all acquisitiveness once security has been achieved.

_d._ Luxury, Beauty, and the Satisfaction of Acquisitive Desire

Montesquieu's discussion of the link between acquisitiveness and luxury rests on his contention that people often find satisfaction of their longing to escape death in an activity largely neglected by Hobbes and Locke: the appreciation or contemplation of beauty. To flesh out this argument, we must understand Montesquieu's notion of luxury and beauty. According to him, the enjoyment of beauty requires natural or acquired taste. In "the most general meaning", "taste" is "nothing more than the faculty of discovering, with quickness and delicacy, the degree of pleasure which we should receive from each object that comes within the sphere of our perceptions" (Essay on Taste, 845-46). Natural taste is humanity's original attunement to pleasure in the pre-social state of nature, which is largely covered over as a person acquires social manners, customs, and moeurs. Acquired taste is largely the product of social customs and education, and is therefore highly conventional. Nevertheless, the cultivation of taste through custom and education can quicken the mind's sensitivity and ability to receive pleasure from beautiful things (Essay, 845; Spirit 19, 5, 1).

41 Montesquieu wrote the Essay on Taste in 1754 at the request of D'Alembert, who wanted to include it in the Encyclopedia. Although Montesquieu died before revising the Essay for publication, it appeared in the Encyclopedia in 1757 (two years after Montesquieu's death). All citations and page numbers of the Essay are taken from the Oster edition of Montesquieu's Oeuvres Completes, 1964. All translations are my own.
To enjoy beauty through acquired taste, a person needs luxury: that is, a person must possess and enjoy beautiful objects that are not necessary for self-preservation (cf. 21, 6, 2). According to Montesquieu, luxury requires a level of wealth above subsistence and "is founded only on the comforts that one can give oneself from the work of others"; as a result, luxury "exists in a compound ratio of the wealth of the state, the inequality of the fortunes of individuals, and the number of men gathered together in certain places" (7, 1, 1-7). Where these conditions of wealth, population, and inequality prevail, there will be the luxurious enjoyment of beautiful objects.

But what makes an object beautiful in the first place? Montesquieu contends that a beautiful object is known as such by the fact that it is "merely agreeable without being advantageous"; its "contemplation" gives pleasure to the mind or soul (âme) without any consideration of the thing's consequential utility (Essay, 845). More specifically, an object is beautiful when "the same quality" exists in each different part and in the sum of all the parts (Essay, 847). Thus while each part may be different, there is a shared excellence of parts and whole, which combines all the qualities that give the mind "pleasures": "order", "variety", "symmetry", "contrast", and "surprise" (Essay, 845-47). The combination of these qualities in one object makes it beautifully perfect and gives it an inexpressible "majesty" (Essay, 847).

The appreciation of such beauty gives a person unmixed mental pleasure, according to Montesquieu, because it satisfies the mind's restless "impulse... to enlarge the sphere of its contemplation... [and] to extend our views and to wonder from place to place" (Essay, 845-47). In contemplating such perfectly ordered complexity, the mind can continue its naturally endless motion without painful confusion imposed by laboring to understand wholly disparate and unconnected parts or without falling into the "lifeless inactivity and languor" that comes from contemplating the same objects over and over again (Essay, 847). In addition, because a beautiful object gives pleasure apart from its utility, the mind can enjoy it without considering how such a thing must be usefully employed, which temporarily removes the anxieties, worries, and fears that otherwise accompany the mind's natural impulse to consider the future (compare Essay on Taste, 845 with Leviathan, ch. 3). As a result, Montesquieu suggests that contemplating beauty allows a person to forget need and anxiety and to feel alive as long as the appreciation or contemplation lasts. This feeling of life satisfies the acquisitive desire because it allows the arrogant and vain to feel alive without the labor of trying to dominate or impress others. In both

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42 It is possible to enjoy the beauty of unimproved nature through acquired taste, although such beauty is more accessible to unrefined "natural" taste (Essay, 847).
43 In contrast to the beautiful, the "good" is that which pleases because it is useful (Essay, 845).
44 While Montesquieu states that the mind "is naturally framed for contemplation and knowledge", he argues that people do not seek knowledge in order to attain the summum bonum or participate in the highest forms. Instead, they love knowledge (rather than find it merely useful) because its beauty offers temporary escape from pain and death (Essay, 846).
cases, appreciation of beauty provides relief from the insecurity and painfully unnatural striving that underlies acquisitiveness.

Montesquieu's argument on the importance of beauty illustrates his development and correction of Hobbes' and Locke's views of human nature. Like both men, Montesquieu argues that there is not a greatest good or highest moral beauty in which all people in common can share lasting contentment (cf. Essay on Taste, 845; cf. Leviathan, ch. 11; Essay Concerning Human Understanding, II. XXI, sec. 55). Yet he contends that the appreciation of beauty -- whether in "poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, different sorts of games, and finally the works of nature and of art" -- is the most rational response to the painful fear of death because beauty offers the best escape from the feeling of "nothingness" associated with pain and death (Essay, 845). In effect, Montesquieu's teaching on beauty tries to extend the logic of the early modern denial of a sumnum bonum by arguing that there is no better way to avoid the fear of the greatest evil (death) than by forgetting it temporarily in the appreciation or contemplation of beauty. But as we will now see, Montesquieu follows Locke in accepting the political primacy of security or liberty over beauty. For him, it is against this standard of liberty and beauty that the goodness of oligarchy must judged.

III. Oligarchic Republicanism

a. Oligarchy and Aristocracy

At first glance, oligarchy seems to play a minor role in Montesquieu's analysis of political orders. For example, the word "oligarchy" (or some derivative thereof) occurs only twice in the entire Spirit of the Laws (cf. 8, 2, 9; 8, 5, 4, n. 16). These passages show that Montesquieu believes it to be an "extreme corruption" of "aristocracy" (8, 5, 4). According to him, aristocracy is a republican form of government in which "sovereign power is in the hands of a certain number of persons" who "make the laws and see to their execution" (2, 3, 1). This "part of the people" is usually a few families distinguished by wealth or honorable birth (2, 2, 1; 2, 3, 1; 3, 2,

45 According to Montesquieu, the lack of a sumnum bonum means that the mind is forever restless; hence, the tranquillity of happiness can only be attained while the mind is absorbed in the contemplation of beautiful objects or systems, which is necessarily a temporary activity subject to many inconveniences, interruptions, and difficult obstacles (Essay on Taste, 847).

46 Because of the prominence of beauty and related matters of "sexual passion" in Montesquieu's thought, Schaub speaks about the "erotic foundation of Montesquieu's brand of liberalism" and contrasts it to "the unerotic liberalism of Hobbes and Locke" -- thinkers who, as Pangle points out in the case of Locke, say almost nothing of the moral and political importance of beauty because they have "no doctrine of eros" (Schaub 1995, 9; Pangle 1988, 213, 227, 230, 269, 292-93 n. 8).
Oligarchy comes into being when the governing body of an aristocracy "becomes hereditary" (8, 5, 4). For Montesquieu, then, oligarchy is rule by an hereditary aristocracy.

Since Montesquieu claims that each form of government has a nature ("that which makes it what it is") and a principle ("that which makes it act"), the question arises as to the nature and principle of oligarchy (3, 1, 2). As a derivation from aristocracy, oligarchy shares aspects of aristocracy's republican nature, which is characterized by "the spirit of equality" among citizens (11, 6, 30). Unfortunately, this spirit runs counter to aristocracy's political distinctions based on social, economic, or familial inequalities. Because of this tension, aristocracy is a partial, imperfect form of republicanism. Indeed, Montesquieu goes so far as to say that "the more an aristocracy approaches democracy, the more perfect it will be, and to the degree it approaches monarchy the less perfect it will become" (2, 3, 10).

Aristocracy's cure for the tension in its nature between republican and monarchic elements is found in its animating principle, "virtue" (3, 4, 3). In a democratic republic, virtue consists in wholehearted devotion to the homeland, even to the point of "self-renunciation, sacrifice of one's dearest interests, and all those heroic virtues we find in the ancients and know only by hearsay" (5, 2). Such a spirit is possible because citizens are equally poor and the laws and moeurs forbid luxury. This maintains "equality" of small fortunes and "love of frugality", which "limits the desire to possess" and "limits ambition to the single desire, the single happiness, of rendering greater services to one's homeland than other citizens" (5, 3, 3-5). Thus for democratic peoples

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47 Montesquieu concludes that "love of equality" is the animating passion of republican virtue and that democratic "rule by the people as a body" is true republicanism (2, 2; 1; 5, 3, 1). Hence his first discussion of republicanism is a chapter entitled: "On republican government and on laws relative to democracy" (2, 2). 48 Given this tension between aristocracy and perfect (democratic) republicanism, it is not surprising that Montesquieu fails to discuss the nature of republican government; instead, he speaks about the "nature" of democracy and the "nature" of aristocracy, implying that they are two different forms of government (2, 2-3). Still, he holds that democracy and aristocracy share the fundamental characteristic of all republican government: "obeying and commanding one's equals... through the laws" (8, 3, 1-2). Where they differ is who counts as an equal: in democracy, every free adult (male) is to be regarded as equal; in aristocracy, "only a part of the people" are understood as equal (2, 1, 1). At least in democracy, this kind of legal equality goes some way to re-establishing the natural equality lost with the advent of society, when comparisons begin to put each person either under or over the will of another (8, 3, 2). Democratic republican government thus has a link to original human passions that in part explains its attractiveness to human beings, especially the modern liberal educated in the equality of natural rights. 49 Montesquieu's understanding of the noble self-sacrifice seen in ancient republics shows a critical difference between his thought and that of the ancients. For Montesquieu, sacrifice is "heroic" because it runs directly counter to the most powerful natural passion -- the desire for self-preservation. Heroic self-denial is attractive from a distance because "we love in theory all that has the character of severity" (10, 2, 2; 25, 4, 7). Such severity is moving to behold because all people admire the almost superhuman strength necessary for a person to risk his preservation; it testifies to a unity of a soul that makes people feel alive. Unfortunately, according to Montesquieu, such unity is so unnatural in society that people could only have it when habituated by the kind of harsh institutions and education that prevailed in the most closed and illiberal ancient republics (3, 5, 2). In contrast, the ancients maintain that noble action is attractive because all human beings (especially erotic ones) have some natural desire for the noble or morally beautiful. In their view, noble sacrifice is not simply self-denial; rather, it involves giving oneself over to this higher passion, which can be cultivated (but not created) by the regime. Thus while certainly painful (at least in civic or moral activities), noble action entails a great feeling of release or freedom, at least for the erotic person.
“who have nothing but the necessities, there is left to desire only the glory of the homeland and one’s own glory” (7, 2, 3).

In aristocracy, however, virtue is not wholehearted devotion to the glory of the city but “the spirit of moderation”, which is necessary to offset the pernicious effects of the aristocrats’ arrogance (5, 8, 2). According to Montesquieu, there are two kinds of aristocratic moderation: “a great virtue that makes the nobles in some way equal to their people... or a lesser virtue, a certain moderation, that renders the nobles at least equal among themselves” (3, 4, 5). With respect to the relationship between the people and the nobles, moderation “takes the place of the spirit of equality in the popular state” by reestablishing “the equality necessarily taken away by the constitution of the state” (5, 8, 1-2). While such moderation requires a kind of strength of soul, nobles act moderately not from heroic motives but out of an enlightened concern for “their preservation” (5, 4, 5).\(^5\) Aristocracy must be very careful in letting loose the desire for glory, because without a commitment to giving themselves over to their homeland and all its inhabitants, a love of glory will feed the aristocrats’ arrogance and tend either to breed dangerous competing factions among them or to make them as a class extremely harsh toward the people. As a consequence, aristocracy cannot gain great vigor from the passion for glory, which must be prudently checked and controlled in order for aristocracy to survive as a republican form of government (3, 4, 5). According to Montesquieu, whatever aristocratic vitality does exist comes from the attitude of severity and austerity necessary for great moderation on the part of the nobles: as he says, “modesty and simplicity of manners are the strength of nobles in an aristocracy” (5, 8, 3).

b. Aristocratic Arrogance and the Rule of Law

Yet even aristocratic moderation, no matter how strong, cannot endure nor preserve aristocratic government without the rule of law. Montesquieu contends that if the law applies to aristocrats as well as their subjects, their arrogance will be moderated because the rule of law places their wills, like the people’s, under an external burden. This legal restraint on their will reminds them that they are not so superior that they can afford to antagonize each other or the people. With such restraint, aristocracy can be “a monarchy that has many monarchs and... quite good by its nature” (8, 5, 2; 5, 8, 16; 5, 8, 3, n. 20). To ensure the stable rule of law, the legislator must understand that “there are two principal sources of disorders in aristocratic states: extreme inequality between those who govern and those who are governed, and a similar inequality between the different members of the governing body. Hatreds and jealousies that the laws

\(^5\) While Montesquieu admits that “great” moderation "may form a great republic", this effect is merely incidental to the nobility's intent, which is to govern "for its particular interest" (3, 4, 3-5).
should prevent or check result from these two inequalities" (5, 8, 5). Montesquieu maintains that "the first inequality is found chiefly when the privileges of the principal men are considered honorable only because they bring shame to the people" (5, 8, 6). To reduce this aristocratic arrogance, the law must allow the nobles and the people to mix freely, especially to inter-marry (5, 8, 6).

But such changes in aristocratic moeurs are insufficient if the law does not also attack the material inequality that is the foundation of aristocratic arrogance. According to Montesquieu, this attack must take place on several fronts: the rulers should "never draw stipends from their magistracies" and must never "make the people their tributaries" (5, 8, 7-8); the rulers must not divide "the revenues of the state" among themselves but must distribute "all that can be drawn from the public treasury, all the wealth that fortune sent them, to the people, to be pardoned for their honors" (5, 8, 8); "the laws must also prohibit nobles from engaging in commerce" so that they do not monopolize the trade of the people and leave them without a way to earn a living (5, 8, 13); and finally, "it is essential above all that the nobles not levy taxes" on the people because such power would make them "like princes of despotic states, who confisicate the goods of whomever they please" (5, 8, 11). The purpose of the law in aristocracy is thus to mitigate any expression of arrogance or acquisitiveness on the part of the nobles. To do so, the law should not try to cultivate any nobler aspects of their passion for superiority and direct it toward a higher end than wealth or power, as Aristotle suggests; instead, it must "always humble the arrogance of domination" by creating fear in the aristocrats that oppressive rule will lead to their loss of political superiority (5, 8, 17).

Among the aristocrats themselves, the law must control those nobles who desire honor from other nobles. This is an inevitable problem, according to Montesquieu, because aristocrats naturally tend to demand honor from everyone, including their peers. Among nobles, the desire for honor can spring from either arrogance or vanity. While the nobles among themselves have a kind of equality (especially in the eyes of the outside world), some nobles families are regarded by themselves and other families as superior in wealth, lineage, or honor. Hence while the

51 According to Montesquieu, the conflict within aristocracy's principle between the spirit of honor (inequality) and the spirit of moderation (equality) is a fatal flaw because a state's corruption "almost always begins with that of its principles" (8, 1, 1).

52 According to Montesquieu, when the nobles tax the people and divide among themselves "the impost they levy", aristocracy becomes "the harshest of all governments" because it is the most degrading to the people (5, 8, 7). It is easier for the people to accept the idea (implicit in despotism) that one person is vastly superior to the rest than to accept that a few are so superior, since fewness admits the principle of equality. Despotism does not provoke such thoughts because it makes everyone equally the slave of the despot.

53 If the nobles do not distribute the state's wealth to the people, the nobles must at least show the people that the revenues "are well administered"; they can do this by publicly "displaying them to the people" through public works, thereby "letting the people enjoy" their reflective glory (5, 8, 10).

54 Hence, as we will see from the discussion of Venice, Montesquieu holds that the most important institution in an aristocracy is that of "a magistrate to make the nobles tremble" (5, 8, 17).
pretense of equality among aristocratic rulers prevents full-blown arrogance, the real inequalities require that "the laws must not favor the distinctions that vanity puts between families on the pretext that some are nobler or older" (5, 8, 22). In addition to finding ways to reduce "the greatness of families", the law must prop up weak aristocrats by obliging all nobles "to pay their debts promptly" so that no family falls into "extreme poverty" (5, 8, 19-21). Montesquieu also advocates the more radical step of abolishing primogeniture "so that fortunes are always restored to equality by the continual division of inheritances" (5, 8, 20). Finally, "when the laws have equalized families, it remains for them to maintain the union between families" by using "arbiters" to resolve "disagreements among nobles... promptly" before "disputes between persons become disputes between families" (5, 8, 21). If these laws are in place, nobles will be treated equally despite the inequalities of wealth or power that may exist between them. The law thus provides a putative equality that mutes arrogance, salves bruised vanity, and prevents conflict between aristocrats.

c. Oligarchic Arrogance and Arbitrary Rule

In the case of oligarchy, however, the republican/monarchic tension inherent in aristocracy is exacerbated by the fact that oligarchy is ruled by hereditary scions. Hereditary rule weakens the principle of aristocratic moderation by placing the oligarchs beyond the restraints imposed by an outside selection process. They need not pay attention to the concerns of the multitude or the opinion of any nobles outside the hereditary ruling families. Montesquieu claims that without such restraint, many of "the ruling families" quickly "fail to observe the laws", introducing the "extreme corruption" associated with oligarchy -- "arbitrary" rule (8, 5, 1). Once the "ruling families" become accustomed to ruling arbitrarily, some may even attempt to seize power for themselves, creating the possibility that "many little oligarchies" could "become tyrannies" (8, 5, 2). Indeed, Montesquieu goes so far as to describe the typical oligarchy as "a despotic state that has many despots" whose competing wills tend to de-generate the government into a lawless despotism of the one strongest (8, 2, 9). This does not happen immediately in part because of competition between jealous nobles, which is a feature of oligarchy's republicanism. More importantly, however, most oligarchs have little incentive to seize power singularly -- the abolition of law gives their will free rein, imparting a feeling of self-sufficiency that makes many of them "fall into a spirit of nonchalance, laziness, and abandon, which will make a state with neither force nor spring" (8, 5, 5).

According to Montesquieu, the legislator can prevent aristocracy from de-generating into oligarchy only "if the laws are such that they make the nobles feel more strongly the perils and fatigues of command than its delights, and if the state is in such a situation that it has something
to dread, and if security comes from within and uncertainty from without" (8, 5, 6). But where the nobles profit from office or there is no external threat to keep them in line, they will grow arrogant and be tempted to overthrow the laws that restrain their ambition unless a wise legislator ensures that "sovereign power" is exercised according to established and regularly enforced law. For only by preventing the nobles from using their power arbitrarily can the legislator create the possibility of freeing subjects from "violence" by the rulers, especially in the form of arbitrary seizures of their life, honor, or goods (12, 4, 1). Thus Montesquieu makes it clear that aristocracy can only be a decent form of republican government if it has laws that suppress the arrogant acquisitiveness of its rulers. Without such laws, aristocracy quickly becomes corrupt and tends toward hereditary oligarchic rule, the worst form of government that can still be called republican.

\[d. \text{The Oligarchy of Venice}\]

\[1. \text{Venice as the Clearest Example of a Non-Democratic Republic}\]

However helpful Montesquieu’s general analysis of aristocracy is for our understanding of oligarchy, he unfortunately offers very little direct discussion of the principles of oligarchy. To further uncover such principles, it is necessary to examine what he says about particular historical examples of non-democratic republicanism. In his discussion of aristocratic republics (or republics with strong aristocratic elements), Montesquieu mentions at least eight specific examples: Genoa (2, 3, 4); Rome (2, 3, 5; 3, 8, 5-7; 7, 5, 7); Ragusa (2, 3, 8); Lucca (2, 3, 9, n. 20); Athens (2, 3, 9; 7, 5, 7, n. 8); Lacedaemonia (3, 8, 16&23); Carthage (7, 5, 7; 20, 11; 11, 6, 12), and Venice (2, 3, 7; 3, 8, 3, n. 20; 3, 8, 9&16; 7, 3, 2; 7, 5, 5, n. 7; 11, 6, 8, n. 6; 11, 6, 12&21&65; 19, 2, 20). Of these, he discusses Venice most often and in greatest detail, implying that Venice is the form of aristocracy most worth examining if the legislator wants to understand non-democratic republicanism. The choice of Venice is especially noteworthy because it is the only one of these aristocracies that Montesquieu explicitly calls a "pure hereditary aristocracy" (11, 6, 12; cf. also 8, 5, 5, n. 7). In other words, Venice is the only oligarchy specifically mentioned as such in The Spirit of the Laws. This would seem to imply

55 While Montesquieu acknowledges that laws can be oppressive, they are a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for checking the arrogant willfulness of rulers (cf. 12, 4, 4 n. 8).
56 As examples of aristocracies, Montesquieu also mentions unnamed "Greek" and "Italian" republics (7, 3, 3; 7, 5, 7).
57 Montesquieu visited Venice and the Venetian states in 1728 and recorded his observations in his Voyages in Europe (see Oeuvres Complètes 1964, 215-232).
that the clearest way for the legislator to understand non-democratic republicanism is to examine its most extreme historical form, Venetian oligarchy.

According to Montesquieu, the Venetian oligarchy must go to extraordinary lengths to combat the political dangers of aristocratic arrogance. Alone among many oligarchies, Venice does not fall prey to the "corruption" of purely arbitrary rule because it is also "one of the republics which has best corrected, by its laws, the drawbacks" of its form of government (5, 8, 17; 8, 5, 5, n. 7). In particular, the Venetians behave "very wisely" by having the laws "prohibit nobles from engaging in any commerce, for it could give them, even innocently, exorbitant wealth" (5, 8, 14). Moreover, Venetian sumptuary laws "force the nobles to be modest in their tastes" (7, 3, 2). Acquisitiveness and immodesty are thus directly suppressed by the laws and prevented from becoming a source of greater economic inequality and arrogance.

To try to ensure that this spirit of moderation endures, Venice also has several important political institutions. It divides legislative, executive, and judicial power such that "the Great Council has legislation; the Pregadi, execution; Quarantia, the power of judging" (11, 6, 12). While these "various tribunals... temper one another" enough to prevent complete concentration of power, this separation of powers unfortunately falls short of what is necessary for a good political order because "these different tribunals are formed of magistrates taken from the same body; this makes them nearly a single power" (11, 6, 12). Because of this dangerous concentration of power in one body of nobles, Montesquieu contends that the Venetian republic could not last without its most important institution: the state inquisitors. This office works secretly "with no formalities" and "avenges the crimes it suspects" based on a "note of accusation" thrown into "the lion's maw" by an "informer" (2, 3, 7; 11, 6, 8). The threat of prosecution by these magistrates -- who are drawn from the body of nobles -- "makes the nobles tremble" and checks their arrogant ambition, thereby "violently return[ing] the state to liberty" (2, 3, 7). Despite this good outcome, the necessity of such "violent springs" -- which are nearly as bad as the instruments of terror employed "in the government of the Turks" (11, 6, 8) -- shows that oligarchy, while "not precisely" like Asian despotism, is by nature partly "despotic" and even close to "tyranny" (11, 6, 21; 5, 8, 17). Thus even though Venice is better than "the despotism of Asia", the best laws cannot make Venetian oligarchy a good form of republican government (11, 6, 12).

2. Commerce and the Character of Venetian Oligarchy

According to Montesquieu, the legislator cannot understand the ferocity of Venice’s oligarchic institutions simply by grasping their extreme concentration of power in such a small body of hereditary nobles; he also must understand the link between Venice’s political
organization and its character as a great commercial center. At first glance, the very fact that Venice is commercial seems puzzling. After all, Montesquieu argues that the “spirit of commerce” can endure only if the “principal citizens ... engage in commerce themselves”, yet he also notes that the rulers of Venice are forbidden to engage in commerce (5, 6, 4). How then does commerce survive in Venice? According to him, Venice maintains its commercial character for three reasons. First, by preventing oligarchs from engaging in commerce, Venice keeps open commercial opportunities for artisans and the middle-class, thereby suffusing much of the rest of the city with the “spirit of commerce” (cf. 7, 3, 2; 20, 2, 2-4). Second, those in Venice who become rich and live profligate lifestyles are “the most despised” by the nobles and become “the most obscure” in the city (7, 3, 2). Thus there is a certain public stigma attached to immoderation and a public honor attached to frugality, which makes it more likely that lovers of honor will be frugal. Finally, severe sumptuary laws force the nobles to “be moderate in their tastes” and to spurn the kind of unrestrained luxury that helps to transform aristocratic arrogance into despotic willfulness (7, 3, 2). Hence even though nobles do not engage in commerce themselves, these austere political arrangements force them to have a frugal and temperate moderation that approximates “the spirit of commerce”. Moreover, this forcefully imposed and maintained spirit keeps them away from the oligarchic vice of brutal arrogance.

While the example of Venice shows that aristocratic moeurs can indirectly strengthen a commercial way of life, it also raises the question whether commerce may have been itself responsible for Venice’s oligarchic form of government. Does commerce breed oligarchy? Montesquieu responds by making it clear that not all commercial republics are or necessarily become oligarchic. Athens, for example, started as an aristocracy and then after the reforms of Solon became over time simultaneously more commercial and more democratic (5, 6, 6). Yet the fact that Venice developed its oligarchic institutions as it became more commercial suggests that there may be a dynamic in commerce that creates the necessary conditions for oligarchy to arise unless checked by the legislator. In particular, while everyone may become wealthier in a democratic commercial republic, successful families acquire much more wealth than others, creating significant material inequality between citizens (cf. 5, 6, 3). This is not a problem “as long as the spirit [of commerce] continues to exist” and family fortunes fluctuate enough so that there is not a concentrated “excess of wealth” (5, 6, 3).

Montesquieu claims, however, that “one sees the sudden rise of the disorders of inequality which had not made themselves felt before” when the successful acquirers consolidate their holdings and turn away from “frugality, economy, moderation, [and] work” toward the more natural enjoyment of luxury (5, 6, 4).\footnote{Commercial people will also turn away from acquisition if a despot makes their acquisitions so uncertain and insecure that they no longer consider commerce worth the effort (20, 4, 7). In short, security of property (a}
contrary to the spirit of moderation” (7, 3, 1). Luxury undermines moderation in two ways: first, achieving the level of wealth necessary for luxury can create a sense of superiority in the successful merchant that -- if unchecked -- can turn into aristocratic arrogance; and second, enjoying luxury habituates the wealthy to indulging their passions, which can include a passion for political superiority (19, 9, 1; 8, 4, 1). Thus even in a democratic republic, commerce can create oligarchic tendencies. But is every commercial republic therefore in danger of becoming an oligarchy? Is there no other way besides the ferocious Venetian institutions to prevent the pursuit of wealth from spawning a faction of the wealthy that seeks to destroy the security and liberty of other citizens?

IV. Oligarchy and Liberty in England

a. English Liberty and Its Ties to Commerce

According to Montesquieu, England shows how commercial activity can be harnessed to protect liberty rather than promote oligarchy. In his view, England is the model of the kind of political order in which a person can have liberty. He contends that liberty has two aspects: philosophical and political. “Philosophical liberty consists in the exercise of one’s will or, at least (if all systems must be mentioned), in one’s opinion that one exerts one’s will” (12, 2, 1). Political liberty “consists in security or, at least, in the opinion one has of one’s security” (12, 2, 1). Putting the two together, liberty in its broadest sense means feeling secure from arbitrary coercion by fellow citizens or the government while exercising “one’s will” (cf. 12, 2, 1).

According to Montesquieu, there are two kinds of political liberty -- liberty of the constitution and liberty of the citizen. In its relation to the “constitution”, political liberty means preventing despotism -- no one can have the whole “sovereign power” so that such a person “alone governs according to his wills and caprices” (3, 2, 1). To preclude such concentration of political power, Montesquieu famously recommends a “distribution of the three powers” -- legislative, executive, and judicial -- into separate hands (11, 9, 3). At the same time, the “citizen” must have political liberty in the sense that he is not subject to “arbitrary” actions, especially in criminal matters (12, 2, 2; 12, 4, 1). Ensuring “the citizen’s liberty” not only

significant part of freedom) encourages acquisition simply by making it possible (20, 4, 9).

59 Although Montesquieu admits that his portrayal of 18th century England is idealized, he is serious in claiming that England is the “one nation whose constitution has political liberty for its direct purpose” (11, 6, 68; 11, 5, 2). While he admits that “it can happen that the constitution is free and the citizen is not”, he suggests that England comes closer than any political order to achieving political liberty both in terms of the constitution and the citizen (12, 1, 3).
requires that law, rather than the ruler's whim, should be the standard to guide and punish behavior but also that law itself must be rational (12, 4, 1). To be rational, law must set the penalty for its violation not "from the legislator's capriciousness but from the nature" of the crime (12, 4, 1). Only when the punishment rationally fits the crime can the legislator be sure that the citizen is as free as possible and that "man does not do violence to man" (12, 4, 1).60

While the separation of powers and rational laws are necessary for liberty, Montesquieu emphasizes that a critical part of England's liberalism comes from its commercial character. In particular, England uses commercial acquisitiveness to maintain liberty without resorting to the harshly illiberal institutions employed in Venice to suppress aristocratic arrogance. Montesquieu contends that England tames the political dangers of such passions by two means. First, historical evolution has produced the separation of the "three sorts of power" such that each has gradually come to check the other; as a result, barriers have arisen that prevent political power from concentrating in the hands of one person or class, as in Venice (11, 6, 1; 11, 6, 66). Thus in England it is beyond the power of any person, economic group, or social order to use the sovereign power arbitrarily to violate or harass the physical or material security of other people.

These protections of persons and property have the effect of allowing the common people to fearlessly "expose" their property in economic activity "in order to acquire more" (20, 4, 7). As a result, the people become more economically independent, thereby reducing the need for interaction and "dependence" on other social orders, especially the nobility (19, 27, 27).61 The relative economic and social independence of the commoners in England reduces popular servility and gives far less room for aristocratic arrogance, thereby sapping the psychological foundation of oligarchic government. Moreover, such independence means that no one, however humble, is restrained from allowing their acquisitive desires to come forth: hence, "all the passions are free there... and the ardor for enriching... oneself would appear to their full extent" (19, 27, 9&6). Given this liberation of acquisitiveness in England, Montesquieu concludes that "this nation, made comfortable by peace and liberty, freed from destructive prejudices, would be inclined to become commercial" rather than turn its acquisitive energies to political ambition, whether in the form of factional conflict or imperial conquest (19, 27, 29).

From this account, it is clear that the English commercial character is unlike the Venetian in that England's commerce is originally neither an accident nor a product of the need to survive. England became commercial after it could provide for itself and after its separation of powers

60 As Schaub notes, "Beccaria, the Italian jurist responsible for introducing Montesquieuian penal reform throughout Europe, made plain his intellectual debt" to Montesquieu on the issue of rational punishment (Schaub 1995, 158 n.7).
61 According to Montesquieu, the relative lack of socio-economic dependence produces a nation of "confederates more than fellow citizens" who live "mostly alone with themselves" and are largely "withdrawn" from social attachments such as friendship (19, 27, 62-70). England's laws contribute to moeurs that preserve liberty, but at the cost of conviviality.
had begun to develop. Thus while great new families arose from commercial enterprise to become nobility, they could not consolidate into an overwhelming faction of hereditary nobles that could draw all political power into its hands, as in Venice. At the same time, their aristocratic sense of superiority made them oppose domination by either commons or crown. Thus Montesquieu argues that like Englishmen of other classes, these nobles became fiercely attached to the political independence of their social order. This attachment makes them constantly concerned about upholding the balance of power between the social orders, which preserves political liberty and the rule of law. Thus institutions in England have channeled the aristocrats' arrogance into a proud independence that -- while based on self-concern and a contempt for the commons -- makes them vigilantly guard their own liberty and by consequence the liberty of everyone.

b. Oligarchy in England

Montesquieu argues, however, that the English liberal order still faces potential oligarchic challenge because the nobles' self-interested attachment to their position does not eliminate the fact that some of those “distinguished by wealth, birth, or honor” will “have no interest in defending... the common liberty” because they believe it is “their enslavement” (11, 6, 30). These few driven by such a powerful desire for superiority will seek to dominate the government unless they have a part “in legislation... which will happen if they form a body that has the right to check the enterprises of the people” (11, 6, 30). Thus there must be a legislative chamber for the hereditary nobility (19, 27, 33). The aristocrats' legislative power cannot replace the “pleasure of command” felt by those who long for political superiority, but it can give them enough power to feel superior to the people without actually being able violently to oppress them. Their feeling of superiority can be preserved (which keeps them from lashing out) and domesticated by the existence of an upper house like the House of Lords that can be checked by other political institutions. Some families may chafe at this domestication, but in the English system (with powers separated) they will not have the means or opportunity to use the law to

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62 In particular, the "natural aristocracy" will not be content with England's protection of "the common liberty" (19, 27, 56). They will seek in politics something higher, greater, and more difficult than liberty, which for them is only worthwhile if it leads the nation to undertake a great endeavor that may require the "sacrifice" of "its goods, its ease, and its interests" (19, 27, 23). But because the separation of powers prevents political domination and the independence of each citizen leads him to follow "his own enlightenment or his own fantasies", those attracted by the love of glory would be incapable of leading the nation to any kind of glorious political order like the ancient republics. In their frustration, they would leave the country or completely withdraw from society and -- if they were writers -- would produce "scathing... satirical writings" about the "vices" and small souls of their contemporaries (19, 27, 71). In this respect, Jonathan Swift's satire of the modern (English) human being comes to mind.

63 The legislative power of this chamber must be its faculty of vetoing because if it could enact legislation, the nobility "could be induced to follow its particular interests and forget those of the people, in the things about which one has a sovereign interest in corrupting, for instance, in the laws about levying silver coin" (11, 6, 34).
oppress others, as they do in Venice. England's liberal commercial order thus makes room for oligarchs without allowing them to dominate society.\textsuperscript{64} It ameliorates the problem of oligarchy by using what Aristotle identifies as an old oligarchic trick: co-opting its opponents through a prudent arrangement of political offices.\textsuperscript{65}

V. Montesquieu's Liberal Solution to the Problem of Oligarchy

\textit{a. Liberty and Beauty: The Standards of Political Judgment}

As we have seen, Montesquieu's critique of oligarchy cannot be separated from the fundamental principles of his political science. Like Hobbes and Locke, he rejects the ancients' attempt to order politics according to a \textit{sumnum bonum} or highest way of life. Instead, he argues that individual self-preservation and liberty are the foundation for good forms of government. In alliance with Locke against Hobbes, Montesquieu maintains that modern politics must reject monarchical absolutism in favor of political liberty (both of the constitution and the citizen) because without such liberty human beings will be in the fearful and miserable condition of being under the despotic (absolute, arbitrary) power of another person or group. To check the constant threat of despotism, citizens must have a watchful spirit, which is fostered by separation of powers and the kind of industrious commercial acquisitiveness that keeps people looking into the future. Unlike Locke, however, he argues that there is a great human cost to limiting politics to the protection of individual liberty and the encouragement of commercial acquisitiveness. For one thing, the restless anxiety required to preserve liberty can taint the pursuit of happiness and make life a "tormented" existence (19, 27, 66). Hence he maintains that political liberty by itself is insufficient to create a political order that secures the conditions for the "constant happiness and a sweet tranquillity" found in the feeling of life (6, 13, 7).\textsuperscript{66} Moreover, despite the salutary

\textsuperscript{64} This does not mean that the actual English system is perfect. According to Montesquieu, England mistakenly allows its nobility to engage in commerce, which weakens their attachment to hereditary "prerogatives, odious in themselves, and which, in a free state, must always be endangered" (11, 6, 33). Without such attachment to non-commercial distinctions, the nobility will turn their energy to acquisition, which will either remove all non-mercenary notions of beauty or goodness from society (as in Holland), or lead them to try to recover their old vitality by political domination (as in Venice) (20, 2, 2). In the first case, the cause of humanity is threatened by a loss of concern for beauty; in the second, humanity could lose the security brought about by England's liberal order.

\textsuperscript{65} Interestingly, Montesquieu emphasizes (in a book designed largely for legislators) that England's prudent arrangement of political offices is not the product of a single legislator's mind, but is the happy concatenation of a number of historical forces (11, 6, 66). Perhaps he means to illustrate the limit of the legislator's art or perhaps he wants to show a potential legislator the possibility of achieving the greatest possible glory by intentionally establishing a liberal order that previously has only existed in one place and taken hundreds of years to evolve.

\textsuperscript{66} In his disagreement with Locke over whether liberty is sufficient for the full pursuit of happiness, Montesquieu foreshadows Rousseau, who criticizes early modern thinkers for neglecting happiness for the sake of preservation and comfort (Melzer 1990, ix).
effects of turning vanity from politics to economics, commerce tends to weaken the distinct *moeurs* that embody a people’s “natural genius” and “vivacity” (20, 2; 19, 5, 3; 16, 6, 1). Specifically, commerce can undermine a shared sense of taste and conviviality by reducing “all human activities” to “one’s interests alone” (20, 2, 2-3).

Thus as part of his argument for a liberal commercial order, Montesquieu stresses the need for the legislator to accommodate prevailing customs and arts that cultivate taste and diffuse a shared national sense of what is beautiful (cf. 19, 5, 1-3). He must work with these so long as they do not completely inhibit commerce nor contravene the political liberty necessary to protect the individual’s security (6, 13, 3). Indeed, because beauty cannot be appreciated when a person fears for his life or well-being, Montesquieu accepts the political primacy of security or liberty. In this decisive respect, he is an early modern liberal. From his point of view, however, Hobbes and Locke concentrate so much on freeing the individual from the fear of death that they forget about allowing him to feel alive. Hence his stress on the need for the legislator to respect the variety of particular customs, traditions, and *moeurs* is part of an attempt to correct what he sees as a defective lack of concern for beauty in early modern liberal politics. In this revival, he is not acting on the ancients’ premise that such *nomoi* are crucial to cultivating noble souls by inculcating in citizens a common idea of the *sumnum bonum*, but on the contention that beauty is also needed to satisfy what Hobbes and Locke identify as all people’s deepest need: to suppress the fear of death. In short, Montesquieu resuscitates the appreciation of beauty not to revive antiquity but to further the modern project.

Given the tension between securing liberty and cultivating beauty, it seems that the best form of government for Montesquieu would be the one that reconciles individual security with a particular people’s ideas of beauty. Specifically, the best political order would prevent the rise of despotism by separating political power and securing individual liberty from willful, arbitrary violence by government or other citizens while still leaving room for the cultivation of taste among citizens.

*b. The Deficiency of Oligarchic Republicanism*

For Montesquieu, oligarchy is a deeply problematic political order. The problem for the legislator is how to reform an hereditary political order like Venice, which is driven by arrogance and acquisitiveness. Such governments are not directed toward the general liberty but instead

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67 Some climates or national customs are so hostile to liberty that free government is nearly impossible among certain peoples (12, 1. 4). One of the great tasks of the legislator is to understand the extent to which liberty can be introduced by the reformation of institutions and *moeurs* (1, 5, 13).

68 Against Locke, Montesquieu argues that human beings cannot pursue happiness without the appreciation of beauty; against the ancients, he argues that liberty is more important than beauty for living well.
tend toward arbitrary lawlessness and even despotism, especially if left unreformed. At the very least, they use the resources of the political state for the maintenance and aggrandizement of the nobles' hereditary power. Moreover, the illiberal institutions and severe spirit necessary for their survival tend to repress the passions rather than channel them into politically or economically beneficial activity.

At the same time, the hereditary rulers of oligarchic republics do not have the unified souls or civic glory that compensated the ancient republicans for the repression of their passions. Oligarchs are an odd combination of citizen and despot. They are part citizen because oligarchy is a republican form of government ruled by a few equally powerful hereditary scions. But they are part despot because they hold sovereign power over others based solely on distinctions of wealth and birth and use that power for their "particular interest", often unbounded by law (3, 4, 3). There is thus a massive political contradiction in oligarchic republicanism that can never be eliminated, only violently suppressed. Because oligarchy inherently tends toward violent willfulness, it resists all reforms that would make it concerned with protecting liberty or with promoting taste among anyone outside the extremely small group of hereditary families. For these reasons, Montesquieu judges it to be a bad form of government.

c. The Place of Oligarchy in Montesquieu's Liberal Commercial Order

Despite the deeply problematic character of oligarchy, Montesquieu contends that the rich can have a salutary political role in a liberal commercial order. If such an order can separate hereditary aristocrats into one chamber of the legislature, their composite soul can be used to the advantage of other citizens. In such an arrangement, wealthy nobles can feel superior to the people and willfully defend their hereditary prerogatives against the people, unchecked by the kind of painful moderation required in Venice. Yet this arrogant expression of will does not lead to the consolidation of power and oppression of the people because the institutionalized balance of powers according to socio-economic orders prevents such a consolidation. In this new form of government, the oligarchs as a group of citizens have the means, motive, and opportunity to be defenders rather than trampers of political liberty.69

At first glance, Montesquieu’s balanced constitution resembles Aristotle’s mixed regime. Like Aristotle, Montesquieu seems to hope that the political mixing of oligarchs and democrats, of rich and poor, will lead to a new spirit of restraint and moderation on the part of the oligoi.

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69 During the Constitutional ratification debate in Virginia, Patrick Henry lauded this Montesquieuan system of checks and balances based on the "self-love" of different social orders, and contrasted it favorably with the functionalist separation of powers in the proposed Constitution (Henry 1985, 319). For another powerful argument during the Founding period in favor of a mixed constitution with a separate political place for the wealthy, see John Adams’ Defense of the Constitution of Governments of the United States (cf. Thompson 1998, 263).
Unlike Aristotle, however, he wants this moderation primarily to produce a hatred of concentrated power, not a heightened concern with “some sort of study” of the noble things. He agrees with Aristotle that nobles should be prohibited from commerce, which will have the effect of giving them as a class a more luxurious leisure that can infuse the polity with some appreciation for beautiful things, or at least foster a non-utilitarian element in the polity that can appreciate beauty and perhaps even patronize it. But in the commercial order envisioned by Montesquieu, this will not constitute a society-wide civic education in the beautiful or noble -- it will only provide room within the liberal order for the appreciation of such things.

But if oligarchy is considered as one part of a more general liberal order in which it shares power with executive and commons, there is a qualified hopefulness in Montesquieu's treatment. Such an order may not be able to eliminate the problem of oligarchy altogether, but the legislator can use oligarchy to preserve liberty. For without hereditary nobles with some political power to check the will of the executive or the commons, such an order can turn into a despotic absolute monarchy or a tyrannical “extreme democracy”. In either case, the delicate separation of powers critical to preserving political liberty may be lost to the capricious will of one person or a majority. According to Montesquieu, such despotism must be prevented above all and no amount of higher concerns can justify including oligarchy if such inclusion threatens liberty. This more limited role for politics in cultivating the souls of citizens is perfectly in line with the new spirit of modern political science, which emphasizes security or liberty as the most important human need and the most fundamental purpose of government. As we will see now in turning to the problem of oligarchy in The Federalist, the American Founders incorporated many of Montesquieu's fundamental insights on the constitutional means for securing political liberty, but applied them to an unmixed republican order without an hereditary aristocracy. In the process, they both accepted and modified important aspects of Montesquieu's teaching on the relationship between oligarchy and a liberal commercial republic.
CHAPTER SIX
THE PROBLEM OF OLIGARCHY
IN THE FEDERALIST

I. The Federalist and the Modern Project

We now come to The Federalist, the final work in our consideration of the problem of oligarchy in modern political thought.\(^1\) We turn to The Federalist because it offers theoretical insight into the problem of oligarchy in the American regime, which is often regarded as the clearest practical instantiation of the political thought of Locke and Montesquieu.\(^2\) From its first publication in 1787-88 by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison (under the name "Publius"), The Federalist has been considered one of the most authoritative expositions of the principles of American constitutionalism.\(^3\) Of course, it was certainly a polemical attempt to win support for the proposed Constitution among "the people of the States of New York". But it has had lasting significance as a work of political thought because it purports to articulate timeless truths of politics, including the "improvements" achieved through early modern political thought and practice (cf. Federalist #1, paragraph [@]1; Fed. 9, @3). If this is true -- if The Federalist is the best articulation of American constitutionalism, and if that constitutionalism is the practical instantiation of early modern political thought -- then the problem of oligarchy in The Federalist is a window into the larger question whether the political thought that gave rise to American liberal democracy is fundamentally, theoretically oligarchic. This question is especially important given the apparent movement in some parts of the world toward American-style liberal democracy. By addressing the problem of oligarchy in the American political order, we may help

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2 According to Bloom, for example, "Locke and Montesquieu were the presiding geniuses of Adams, Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson in their moderate founding" (Bloom 1990, 228). This does not mean that the American Founders had no other philosophical influences nor that Locke and Montesquieu themselves embrace exactly the same political principles. It simply suggests that the Founders owed an enormous intellectual debt to Locke and Montesquieu, a debt of which they were often well aware (cf. Madison 1983, 233-34). For some of the recent scholarly work on the intellectual influence of Locke and Montesquieu on American political discourse and action in the Founding era, see Epstein 1984, Cohler 1988, Pangle 1988, Dworetz 1990, Zuckert 1994, Banning 1995, and Zuckert 1996.
3 Thomas Jefferson claimed, for example, that The Federalist was the "greatest work yet written on the principles of government". Despite its overall unity of thought, however, The Federalist was a collaborative effort between thinkers who did not always agree on a number of issues (especially federalism) -- a division that became more apparent in the politics of the 1790s and early 1800s. On the problem of differences in thought between contributors to The Federalist, especially Madison and Hamilton, see Epstein 1984, 2.
to shed some light on this problem in other, newly-established liberal democracies. Specifically, we may understand whether the arrival of liberal democracy will help to break down or strengthen inherited oligarchic social and political institutions. But to begin to address these larger issues, we first must turn to the analysis of oligarchy and republicanism offered by Madison, Hamilton, and Jay.

II. Oligarchies and Republics

a. What is Oligarchy?

The word “oligarchy” appears in *The Federalist* two times. The first and most important use occurs in *Federalist* #57, which is titled: “The supposed tendency of the plan of the convention to elevate the few above the many”. According to Publius, the opponents of the Constitution argue that representatives “will be taken from that class of citizen which will have the least sympathy with the mass of people, and be most likely to aim at an ambitious sacrifice of the many to the aggrandizement of the few” (*Fed. 57, @1*). He contends that “of all the objections which have been framed against the federal Constitution, this is perhaps the most extraordinary” because by arguing that voting districts will be too large to elect anyone except “the rich”, “the learned”, and “the haughty heirs of distinguished names”, the Anti-Federalist opponents of the Constitution are actually denying the ability of the people to select the best possible representatives to govern themselves (*Fed. 57, @5*). Hence Publius claims that “whilst the objection itself is leveled against a pretended oligarchy, the principle of it strikes at the very root of republican government” (*Fed. 57, @2*). Against the argument that the Constitution establishes an elective oligarchy, he argues that popular election ensures good representation by those “who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society” (*Fed. 57, @3*).¹

Publius’ use of “oligarchy” suggests that he understands it to be more than simply rule by a few. In his refutation of the Anti-Federalist charges, he contends that it is a system of government based on “the elevation of the few on the ruins of the many” (*Fed. 57 @3*). According to him, the few gain exclusive political power in one of two ways: either “some unreasonable qualification of property” is “annexed to the right of suffrage”; or “the right of eligibility” is “limited to persons of particular families or fortunes” (*Fed. 57, @3, 15*). If we put

¹ To ensure good republican government, such popular elections must take place within an extended commercial republic with institutionalized checks and balances, so that there are “the most effectual precautions for keeping [representatives] virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust” (*Fed. 57, @3*).
these statements together, it is clear that Publius defines oligarchy as a form of government that either reserves voting rights to the rich through an extreme property qualification or allows everyone to vote but reserves office-holding to the rich. In either case, the purpose of such an arrangement of offices is to ensure the political domination of the rich few over the rest of the political society.

**b. Oligarchy and the Republican Form**

But is such a form of government republican? Is oligarchy one option for those citizens, statesmen, and legislators who seek to establish a republican order? As we have seen, Locke accepts oligarchic government (that is, a few rich people holding the legislative power) as legitimate so long as it is republican in the sense that it protects the people's rights and recognizes that its ultimate political authority comes from the consent of the whole political community, including the poor. Montesquieu also holds that oligarchy is republican. While it is an hereditary aristocracy that often substitutes the will of the few oligarchs for the rule of law (and therefore is an "extreme corruption" of aristocratic government), as a type of aristocracy it is nevertheless a republican form of government. Publius disagrees with both Locke and Montesquieu -- according to him, oligarchies are not republics, at least if republicanism is properly understood. In "a genuine republic", "the great body of the society" rules through elected representatives (Fed. 39, @3). According to Publius, this "great body of the society" explicitly includes "the poor" as well as "the rich", "the ignorant" as well as "the learned", "the humble sons of obscure and propitious fortune" as well as "the haughty heirs of distinguished names" (Fed. 57, @5). Republics are therefore correctly understood as representative democracies in which "the people" vote and place their political power in trust with a few elected law-makers who hold office for a "short duration of their appointments" (Fed. 37, @5). Hence while laws are indeed made by a few in a republic, republics should not be confused with oligarchies, which are based on the fundamental principle that only "the wealthy and well-born" should hold the sovereign authority to make the rules that govern society (Fed. 60, @11).

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5 According to Publius, republics are the indirect rule of the people through their elected officials while democracy is direct participation of all citizens in the creation and execution of laws (cf. Fed. 14, @2). A republic also differs from a constitutional republic of the kind advocated by Publius. In the former, the people give their political authority directly to representatives; in the latter, they place their political power in a constitution, which then parcels out each power to their elected representatives (cf. Fed. 53, @2). In a constitutional republic like America, both the people and their representatives are under the authority of the Constitution.

6 The other explicit mention of "oligarchy" occurs in Federalist #77, written by Hamilton. In this paper, Hamilton criticizes the method of executive appointment practiced by the numerous executive council of New York. He contends that extending New York's practice to the national government would create a system in which "the private attachments of a dozen, or of twenty men, would occasion a monopoly of all the principal employments of the government in a few families and would lead more directly to an aristocracy or an oligarchy than any measure that could be contrived" (Fed. 77, @7). For Hamilton, oligarchy seems to be a political system in which a few families
To illustrate Publius' more democratic understanding of republics and oligarchies, it is worth comparing his judgment of particular governments with that of Montesquieu. According to Montesquieu, the oligarchic governments of Venice and Holland are republican, although not forms of democratic "popular government" (cf. Spirit of the Laws, Bk. 5, ch. 8, @1; Bk. 8, ch. 5, @3 & n. 6). In Montesquieu's view, "oligarchy" and "republic" are not mutually exclusive terms because a republic is any form of government in which more than one person rules; thus oligarchies are by definition republics because the few -- even the very few -- are still more than one person (cf. Bk. 5, ch. 7, @16). While the difference in nature between one ruler and a very few ruling families may seem small, Montesquieu contends that it is significant because "fewness" implies an equality among those few who share rule, which introduces the notion of equality of citizens that underlies the republican spirit -- a spirit that finds its fruition in the most perfect political equality: the democratic sharing of rule by all (Bk. 5, ch. 8, @1). Hence for Montesquieu oligarchy does have a different and more republican spirit from that which exists in either monarchy or despotism.

In contrast, Publius denounces so-called oligarchic "republics", saying that they are outside the republican form. In opposition to Montesquieu, he holds that "the United Netherlands are a confederacy of republics, or rather of aristocracies of a very remarkable texture" (Fed. 20, @1 -- italics added). With this careful distinction between republics and aristocracies, he suggests that Dutch aristocracy, indeed any aristocracy, is not a republic. In his view, a government must be "popular" in order to be republican; that is, "the great body of the people" must actively consent to their government through voting and even office-holding. According to Publius, this rules out "Holland, in which no particle of the supreme authority is derived from the people", even if it "has passed almost universally under the denomination of a republic" (Fed. 39, @3).

But why must a republic must be popular or democratic government? He offers an explanation through his verdict on Venice, Montesquieu's prime example of a non-democratic republic. While castigating "the extreme inaccuracy with which the term [republic] has been used in political disquisitions", Publius laments that "the same title [republic] has been bestowed on Venice, where absolute power over the great body of the people is exercised in the most control the operations of government either by open prerogative or de facto control.

The comparison with Montesquieu is especially important because The Federalist praises him as a "great man" (Fed. 9, @4), an "enlightened civilian" (Fed. 9, @7), an "oracle" (Fed. 47, @4), and a "celebrated" authority on matters of constitutionalism (Fed. 78, n. 64). But while praising Montesquieu and drawing on his great authority, Publius moves away from a close adherence to Montesquieu's classification of governments, even arguing at one point that "republic" has been used with "extreme inaccuracy" by all "political writers" up to his time, presumably including Montesquieu (Fed. 39, @3).

Montesquieu acknowledges the monarchic aspect of oligarchy, saying that where "the ruling families observe the law" oligarchy "is a monarchy that has many monarchs. But when these families fail to observe the law... the body that governs is a republic and the body that is governed is a despotic state; they are the two most ill-matched bodies in the world" (Bk. 8, ch. 5, @2-3).
absolute manner by a small body of hereditary nobles” (Fed. 39, @3). Because it denies the need for popular consent, the Venetian oligarchy fails to understand the fact that such consent is necessary because it is the political acknowledgment that no one has a natural title to rule anyone else; all people are by nature equal and no one can rule another except by their consent. By rejecting the need for popular consent or participation in government, oligarchies like Venice violate what Publius considers to be the fundamental maxim of the republican form that animates “every votary of freedom”: “the capacity of mankind for self-government” (Fed. 39, @1).

**c. Oligarchy and the Liberal Spirit**

According to Publius, Venice and the other oligarchies not only violate the popular form of republican government; they are also hostile to the true republican spirit. In his view, Venice transgresses the spirit of republican government by rejecting the proper end of republicanism: namely, the protection of the individual’s natural rights. He notes that Venice has been frequently involved in ruinous “wars of ambition” because the machinery of government exists to serve the self-aggrandizement of the noble families (Fed. 6, @12-13). In contrast, American republicanism is marked by a “noble enthusiasm of liberty” and a hostility to the accumulation of

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9 In making this remark, Madison is not only chastising Montesquieu but also Hamilton and Jefferson, both of whom call Venice a republic (cf. Fed. 6, @12; Fed. 48, @8). To be fair, however, Hamilton qualifies the republican appellation by calling Venice a “haughty republic” while Jefferson says, in a passage quoted from his Notes on the State of Virginia, that Venice is run by “one hundred and seventy three despot[s]” (cf. Fed. 6, @12; Fed. 48, @8). On Madison’s direct criticism of Montesquieu’s classification of the forms of government, see his essay entitled: “The Spirit of Governments” (Madison, 1983, 233-34).

10 According to Publius, true republicanism is democratic in form -- that is, the “great body of the society” decides in frequent elections who will hold legislative and executive power -- because it is liberal in spirit (i.e. its purpose is to secure natural rights). While the people may not be prudent enough to found a liberal republic (which requires “enlightened statesmen”), their pride demands that they be given a republican form of government in which they have some direct share in determining who will make the laws that govern them (Fed. 10, @9; Rosen 1999, ch. 2-3). Fortunately, this proud demand comports with the people’s capacity for self-government in an enlightened liberal country. As Publius suggests, the purpose of liberal government -- protection of individual rights -- presumes that government need not direct individuals to a certain way of life or even tell them how best to live. In short, liberal government presumes that individuals are capable of governing themselves, with some restrictions (laws, courts, police, etc.). Given that “honorable determination”, Publius argues that if individuals are capable of self-government, then “the people” (i.e. the collection of individuals) is also capable of participating in governing if they do it indirectly through a constitutional system of federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances with frequent election of office-holders, which allows “the public views” to be “refine[d] and enlarge[d]” into policy “more consonant to the public good” (Fed. 10, @16). Hence true republicanism is liberal and democratic (“popular”) because both rest on the fundamental principle that characterizes “all our political experiments”: belief in “the capacity of mankind for self-government” (Fed. 39, @1). On the question of whether Publius endorses popular government solely out of a commitment to protecting rights or whether he also see popular government as an end-in-itself, compare Diamond 1996, 21-23, Epstein 1984, 4-6, Pangle 1988, 44-47, and Rosen 1999, ch. 2.

11 According to Publius, Venice’s aggressive wars made it such “an object of terror to the other Italian states” that Pope Julius II successfully founded the League of Cambray -- which included “the Emperor, the King of France, the King of Aragon, and most of the Italian princes and states” -- in order to give a “deadly blow to the power and pride of this haughty republic” (Fed. 6, @12). In 1797, the League finally accomplished its goal: the Venetian government collapsed, although as much from internal disorder as from external pressure. All told, Venice existed as a more or less independent city-state for over 1300 years.
power in the hands of a few (cf. Fed. 1, @5). America's republican spirit flows from the fact that Americans believe government exists to secure the "the happiness of the people" through the "protection to their liberty and property" (Fed. 57, @11; Fed. 1, @9). Properly understood, then, the republican spirit is liberal; it is based on an "enlightened" attachment to protecting the natural "rights of humanity" to life, liberty, and property (Fed. 9, @3; Fed. 43, @31). According to Publius, republicans must reject oligarchies like Venice because they crush the liberal spirit. Not only are the people denied any share of political authority, but "a handful of tyrannical nobles" use their political power to violate individual rights whenever they want or believe necessary for their own self-aggrandizing ends.

From Publius' point of view, Montesquieu inaccurately calls oligarchy a type of republic because he does not fully draw out the link between the legitimate purpose of politics (the liberty or security of the person) and the popular republican institutions necessitated by that purpose. Montesquieu holds that oligarchy is a form of republic because it admits the republican principle of political equality, even if very imperfectly, by recognizing equality between the few who rule. In Publius' judgment, this is too limited a notion of equality because it denies that every individual is by nature equal and therefore must consent to (although not necessarily participate in) the government. In his view, the happiness of the people requires more than laws moderating the conduct of oligarchs (as Montesquieu suggests); it entails the wholesale rejection of Venetian "republicanism" in favor of a constitutional order that establishes a representative democracy in which the spirit of self-government flourishes. To understand more fully why Publius believes that oligarchy is intrinsically hostile to the kind of human happiness promoted by true republicanism, we must seek a basic understanding of The Federalist's notion of human happiness. This in turn requires a synoptic presentation of Publius' understanding of human nature, for we cannot understand what makes people happy without some understanding of their nature. We now turn to the task of limning just such an understanding, with the caveat that the discussion of this huge topic will be limited to only what is necessary to address Publius' understanding of the problem of oligarchy.

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12 Of course, The Federalist never claims that popular governments, even commercial republics, necessarily protect the people's rights; they must be established with such protection as their purpose. In fact, Hamilton argues that "popular assemblies" are "frequently subject to the impulses of rage, resentment, jealousy, avarice, and of other irregular and violent propensities" and that commercial republics "were... as often engaged in wars, offensive and defensive, as the neighboring monarchies of the same times" (Fed. 6, @10).
III. An Outline of Human Nature

a. Reason

In Federalist #37, Publius offers a brief but highly suggestive treatment of the basic epistemological problems confronting any rational attempt to investigate human nature and ground a political science capable of establishing a purely republican constitutional order. He claims that "every man will be sensible of this difficulty in proportion as he has been accustomed to contemplate and discriminate objects extensive and complicated in their nature. The faculties of the mind itself have never yet been distinguished and defined with satisfactory precision by all the efforts of the most acute and metaphysical philosophers" (Fed. 37, @8). Notwithstanding the philosophers' apparent failure to articulate a comprehensive understanding of human nature, Publius often talks about "human nature" (cf. Fed. 5, @3; Fed. 17, @4; Fed. 24, @8; Fed. 51, @4; Fed. 71, @1; Fed. 76, @10), the "nature of man" (cf. Fed. 10, @7), the "constitution of man" (cf. Fed. 15, @13), the "propensities of the human heart" (cf. Fed. 17, @5; Fed. 27, @4), and the "true springs" of human conduct (cf. Fed. 15, @12). He claims that even without precise philosophical definitions, "experience" can light the way to the truth about certain fundamental elements of human nature that can be relied upon by those establishing a political order (cf. Fed. 20, @24).

According to Publius, the first and most important element of human nature is the faculty of reason. In the opening paragraph of Federalist #1, the American Founding itself is characterized as an experiment in reason -- in whether "reflection and choice" can replace "accident and force" as the foundation of "political constitutions" (Fed. 1, @1). He maintains that the greatest power of human reason is its ability to lead to "the discovery of truth" (Fed. 1, @2). Reason leads to political truths in two ways: first, it can establish axioms of logical necessity that govern all discourse, including political arguments; second, it can reflect upon experience and sift out general truths about human nature and the legitimate ends of government.

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13 According to Madison, Locke is the only "philosopher" to have "established immortal systems... in mind" (Madison 1983, 233-34). However, Madison also states that none of "the greatest adepts in political science" -- presumably including Locke -- has "been able to discriminate and define, with sufficient certainty, its three great provinces -- the legislative, executive, and judiciary" (Fed. 37, @6). While Madison sounds guarded about theoretical progress in political science, Hamilton states that the "various principles" of good government are "now well understood" because of "great improvement" in "the science of politics", including a better knowledge of how to ensure "the regular distribution of power into distinct departments" (Fed. 9, @3). Assuming that Hamilton and Madison are of one mind on this issue, Publius seems to be arguing that the Americans' improved understanding of liberal political institutions is less the product of theoretical insight than of British and American constitutional experience.

14 For an assessment of the extent to which Publius answers the questions he raises, see Pangle 1988, 290 n.3.
In short, Publius suggests that reason can ground a political science adequate to the task of establishing a sound constitutional order.

With regard to establishing useful axioms of logic, Publius claims that reason has unrivaled power. According to him, "in disquisitions of every kind there are certain primary truths, or first principles, upon which all subsequent reasonings must depend" (Fed. 31, @1). These principles, which are "antecedent to all reflection or combination", contain "an internal evidence which... commands the assent of the mind" because they are entailed by the principles of reason itself (Fed. 31, @1). According to Publius, some fundamental "maxims in geometry" have this status as well as certain "maxims in ethics and politics" (Fed. 31, @1). These principles are: "that there cannot be an effect without a cause"; "that the means ought to be proportioned to the end"; "that every power ought to be commensurate with its object"; and "that there ought to be no limitation of a power destined to effect a purpose which is itself incapable of limitation" (Fed. 31, @1). These are self-evident truths "in the class of axioms", which the mind will fail to accept only under "the influence of some strong interest, or passion, or prejudice" (Fed. 31, @1).

The second task of reason is to show that self-evident axioms in geometry, ethics, and politics are actually discoveries of reality, not merely reflections of one's own passions. According to Publius, it is possible for "the dictates of reason" to illuminate a true standard of "justice" because by nature reason searches for "enlarged and permanent" truths above the individual's own mind (Fed. 15, @12; Fed. 42, @11). Hence the mind has the inclination or impulse to transcend the self and try to find all kinds of truth (including moral truth) untainted by "prejudice, passion, or interest". Thus while Publius concedes that "it cannot be pretended that the principles of moral and political knowledge have, in general, the same degree of certainty with those of the mathematics", he also claims that "they have much better claims in this respect than to judge from the conduct of men in particular situations we should be disposed to allow them. The obscurity is much oftener in the passions and prejudices of the reasoner than in the subject. Men, upon too many occasions, do not give their own understanding fair play" (Fed. 31, @3). Of course, this desire of human "understanding" to grasp "moral and political knowledge" may not indicate that reason always in fact understands moral and political reality -- sometimes it may draw incorrect inferences from true observations or it may mistake passions for principles of reality. Yet reason does have an inclination toward ascertaining moral and political reality and articulating a way of life ordered according to those natural principles of justice.16

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15 On other variations of these axioms established by reason, see Fed. 40, @16 and Fed. 80, @4.
16 In searching for the truth about moral and political questions, reason comes to see that "justice is the center of politics and morality; it is "the end of government", "the end of civil society", and the "foundation" of morality (Fed. 51, @10; Fed. 22, @13, Fed. 55, @9, Fed. 75, @3). According to Publius, justice requires impartiality, which is impossible without some attachment to abstract, general, or universal principles of "the public good", and reason always seeks to discover such "impersonal" universal principles in whatever question it investigates (Fed. 10, @7). Thus Publius implies that the human search for justice flows from reason's theoretic desire for ascertaining the...
b. The Fundamental Right to Self-Preservation

According to Publius, the foundational political insight given by reason is the recognition of “that original right of self-defense which is paramount to all positive forms of government” (Fed. 28, @6). This “original right” of self-defense comes from the primary right to self-preservation, which is the most fundamental right given by the “transcendent law of nature and of nature’s God” (Fed. 43, @30). Publius maintains that the right to self-preservation comes from the very nature of the self, which is compelled by nature to seek its preservation. The self’s desire for preservation is the strongest and most ubiquitous desire from which human beings cannot escape as long as they are alive (cf. Fed. 14, @8). Like Locke, Publius reasons that the desire for self-preservation becomes a right to self-preservation because if nature gives human beings this irresistible impulse, then “the rules of just reasoning and theoretic propriety” require that nature sanction all means necessary for achieving that end, since “whenever the end is required, the means are authorized; whenever a general power to do a thing is given, every particular power necessary for doing it is included” (Fed. 73, @5; Fed. 44, @16). In short, Publius replicates Locke’s argument that if nature gives individuals the irresistible impulse to preserve themselves, it must give them the right to do so as long as they do not attempt to go beyond what is necessary for self-preservation. This first principle of rational justice both sanctions and limits human actions to the reasonable purpose of self-preservation.

c. The Passions: Self-love and the Forms of Acquisitiveness

But if reason has the desire and ability to discover natural principles of justice such as the right to self-preservation, why do people not live according to the dictates of reason? For Publius, the answer lies in the fact that “human selfishness” is too strong for reason; selfishness...
forces people to act contrary to how reason tells them to live (Fed. 16, @15). According to Publius, this selfishness is driven by the passions rooted in self-love. He observes that there is in each person a "connection which subsists between his reason and his self-love" such that a person becomes attached to his opinions not only because he believes them to be right but also because they are his own (Fed. 10, @6). From this observation, he concludes that "there is nothing so apt to agitate the passions of mankind as personal considerations" (Fed. 76, @5). Thus while the mind by nature may be able to transcend the self, Publius suggests that the passions are by nature attached to the self.

This passionate attachment to the self is at the heart of the most powerful types of political and economic acquisitiveness. According to Publius, the desire to acquire can take three forms: industry, avarice, or ambition. For most people, "those passions which have the strongest influence upon the human heart" are connected to "the hopes and fears... immediately" linked to their "lives, liberties, and properties" (Fed. 16, @7; Fed. 45, @9). Hence much ordinary acquisitiveness is industry: namely, the desire to acquire the material goods necessary for economic security and comfort (Fed. 12, @2). At the same time, there are those -- like "the assiduous merchant, the laborious husbandsman, the active merchant" -- whose acquisitiveness takes the form of "avarice", which is the love of wealth beyond simple comfort and preservation (Fed. 12, @2). This passion "serves to vivify and invigorate all the channels of industry and to make them flow with greater activity and copiousness" (Fed. 12, @2). Avarice can be simply a more powerful form of the desire for security and comfort; on the other hand, it can be "as domineering and enterprising a passion as that of power or glory" (Fed. 6, @9). In its latter form, this desire for wealth transforms the acquisition of property into part of building an economic

\[20\) While even "religious and moral motives" may be too weak to combat selfish passions, there are some people of "superior virtue" who can resist passion in order to follow the dictates of reason (Fed. 22, @13, Fed. 55, @9, Fed. 75, @3). The foundation of this "superior virtue" is a little unclear, however. When speaking of the Constitution's need for "that veneration which time bestows on everything", Publius says that "in a nation of philosophers, this consideration ought to be disregarded. A reverence for the laws would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason" (Fed. 49, @6). Apparently, philosophers governed wholly by reason can live according to natural justice. Publius immediately adds, however, that "a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato" (Fed. 49, @6). More importantly, he later says that the ability to live according to reason is limited to the individual's private life: "in all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob" (Fed. 55, @3).

\[21\) Publius supports his argument for the ubiquity of self-love by observing that "men often oppose a thing merely because they have had no agency in gaining it, or because it may have been planned by those whom they dislike. But if they have been consulted, and have happened to disapprove, opposition then becomes, in their estimation, an indispensable duty of self-love" (Fed. 70, @12).

\[22\) "The people" are known as such because they are attracted neither by the "lust for power" that dominates the "high-handed" nor by "the love of fame" that rules "the noblest minds" (cf. Fed. 70, @1; Fed. 72, @4).

\[23\) While ambitious lovers of power seem to enjoy the very action of acquiring power and reputation, rational acquirers do not find pleasure in acquisition itself: they acquire wealth only because they "look forward with eager anticipation and growing alacrity to this pleasing reward of their toils" (Fed. 12, @2). These people are pushed to
empire that gives one significant power or pre-eminence (cf. *Fed. 1*, @5; *Fed. 6*, @3; *Fed. 9*, @2). In this respect, avarice contains ambition, which is the "love of power" (*Fed. 12*, @2). But such avarice is not intrinsically a political desire: that is, it does not inherently long for the "dignity", "importance", and "splendor" attached to the great concerns of government such as "commerce, finance, negotiation, and war" (*Fed. 17*, @1).

Finally, the desire to acquire can be a specifically political form of ambition that finds its satisfaction in acquiring political power (*Fed. 12*, @2). When Publius talks of ambition, it is most often in this political form. He says that ambitious people want to acquire political power because they believe it will allow them to aggrandize themselves over others, giving them "pre-eminence" and even "exalted eminence" in society (cf. *Fed. 16*, @3; *Fed. 77*, @6). In short, the most ambitious people love political power for the sake of "personal aggrandizement" (*Fed. 16*, @3). In "the noblest" of these people, self-aggrandizement takes the form of a longing to be "exalted" at "the summit of [their] country's highest honors" (*Fed. 72*, @7). This desire for "fame" spurs them to seek the highest political offices so that they can "plan and undertake arduous enterprises for the public benefit" and in turn receive enduring glory from the whole community (*Fed. 72*, @4; *Fed. 77*, @6). Only with such glorious exultation of themselves is their ambitious "passion" satisfied (*Fed. 72*, @4).

At the same time, however, Publius maintains that there is a different type of political passion linked to self-love. While self-love causes some people to desire aggrandizement and pre-eminence, it gives others a "jealousy of power". This jealousy makes people demand that no one be exalted for fear that such exaltation will destroy the "equality and security" they regard as necessary to protect themselves (*Fed. 6*, @3). Because of its emphasis on equality rather than pre-eminence, Publius calls this desire "republican jealousy", indicating the connection between true republican spirit and the rejection of oligarchic political orders that exalt the rich few over the rest of society (*Fed. 70*, @21). However, neither republican jealousy nor ambition are the product of a noble love of the common good; rather, both flow from a love of oneself either as the equal of others (in its republican form) or as their superior (in its ambitious form).

Even though both ambition and republican jealousy are forms of selfish desire, Publius judges between them according to the rational standard of justice. While he sometimes associates overly zealous hatred of political distinction with small-mindedness, he frequently lauds republican jealousy and warns against the potential dangers of ambition, suggesting that the desire for power rooted in "equality and security" is in accord with justice while the desire for

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24 Publius does not always use "glory" in the pejorative sense of that which is pursued by "a dangerous ambition"; sometimes "glory" is more closely associated with being or doing something of a very honorable character (cf. *Fed. 14*, @12).
power for the sake of pre-eminence is not (compare Fed. 29, @4; Fed. 44, @12; Fed. 64, @12 with Fed. 1, @5; Fed. 69, 10).26 Accordingly, he declares that "mere wantonness and lust of domination" is in conflict with "the love of power" possessed by "any reasonable man" because it goes beyond what is necessary for the preservation of oneself and one's rights (Fed. 17, @1).27 Hence even though republican jealousy is the product of self-love, it is in accord with natural justice. At the same time, any desire for power or self-aggrandizement that threatens the equality and security necessary for preservation is irrational and illegitimate.28

By elaborating a distinction between rational love of power and irrational ambition, Publius tries to show that political forms of acquisitiveness can have generally good consequences for liberty (republican jealousy) or potentially threaten the form and spirit of republicanism (ambitious "lust for power"). The task for the legislator (or convention of legislators) is to establish -- by "reflection and choice" -- a republican political order that harnesses all kinds of acquisitiveness to secure the liberty and "happiness of the people" (Fed. 1, @1, 9). As we have seen, such a government must be free from the tainted principles that made the "republics" of Venice and Holland into oligarchic governments of the "wealthy and well-born" that were fundamentally inimical to human happiness. But does Publius' embrace of republican equality mean that the wealthy have no place in a truly republican regime? Must they be excluded from office, exiled, or even killed? If not, what place do the rich and the acquirers of property have in Publius' new liberal democratic order? More particularly, what happens in this new regime to the oligarchic desires associated by the ancients with acquisitiveness? Are they transformed? Is the

25 According to Publius, power "is the ability or faculty of doing a thing" (Fed. 33, @3).
26 As an example of the injustice of wanting more power than is necessary for "security and equality", Publius discusses why the larger states would not accept the New Jersey Plan put forth by the smaller states (giving each state an equal vote in the legislature). For the larger states "to acquiesce in such a privation of their due importance in the political scale would be not merely to be insensible to the love of power, but even to sacrifice the desire of equality. It is neither rational to expect the first, nor just to require the last" (Fed. 32, @7).
27 Publius explicitly says that people's "zeal for their opinions" caused by self-love can lead them into dangerous partisan clashes in which they temporarily forget "the more powerful sentiment of self-preservation" (cf. Fed. 38, @5; Fed. 10, @6; Fed. 25, @3). Yet he distinguishes this temporarily dangerous ambition from an "extreme" love of power that he calls "irregular ambition" (Fed. 72, @13). This ambition is "irregular" because it will cling to power even at the expense of the people's "good-will" and praise (Fed. 72, @13). But how can Publius explain such dangerous ambition if both reason and desire orient human actions to self-preservation? He follows Locke in suggesting that radical political ambition originates in a powerful self-love that goes beyond the ordinary impulse of most people (cf. Fed. 10, @6; Fed. 14, @8). For such a person, the "charms" of power detach self-love from its original tie with self-preservation; at that point, self-love begins to fuel the ambitious desire for self-aggrandizement and even self-glorification (Fed. 17, @1). This desire to aggrandize oneself beyond all others draws the extreme lover of power to the "allurements" unique to the regulation of "commerce, finance, negociation, war" and all the other most important political matters (Fed. 17, @1). However, if we accept that glorious pre-eminence seems to offer the promise of permanent security for the self, then such pre-eminence would appear to an ambitious person not to be in conflict with his preservation but would be the satisfaction of that longing at the core of his powerful self-love (on the possible relationship between glory and security, see The Prince, ch. 6, @4; ch. 7, @1; ch. 15, @2).
28 Interestingly, The Federalist's treatment of vanity (a form of self-love) perfectly captures the ambiguity of the moral status of self-love in the thought of Hobbes and Locke. At one point, Publius calls vanity "this despicable frailty, or rather detestable vice" (Fed. 70, @12). He thus indicates that vanity may be a natural weakness (and thus not truly morally blameworthy) or a moral shortcoming within the capacity of a person to overcome.
problem of oligarchy thereby overcome? Or does it linger in a new or disguised form? It is to these questions that we now turn.

IV. Liberal Democratic Government and the Problem of Oligarchy

a. The Importance of Property in Publius' New Order

In *The Federalist*, Publius maintains that the nature and limits of government's powers are determined by its purpose (cf. *Fed. 10*, @11). This purpose is found by reasoned reflection on human nature and experience (cf. *Fed. 1*, @1; *Fed. 20*, @24). Taken together, these practical and theoretical insights provide principles of justice upon which law-givers, like physicians, can provide a remedy for disease -- in the case of America, by establishing a sound constitutional order to replace the sickly Articles of Confederation (cf. *Fed. 38*, @3-4; *Fed. 1*, @9). As we have seen, such reflection shows that justice requires a republican order founded on protecting the individual’s fundamental right to self-preservation and the other “natural rights” flowing from it, especially the rights “to liberty, and to property” (*Fed. 2*, @2; *Fed. 1*, @7).29

Of these rights, Publius gives special emphasis to the right to property.30 In a well-known passage, he argues that “the first object of government” is to protect “the faculties of men from which the rights of property originate” (*Fed. 10*, @6).31 According to Publius, this duty explicitly includes “the protection of different and unequal faculties of acquiring property” (*Fed. 10*, @6). The acquisitive faculties must be protected because their exercise allows people to secure the goods necessary for continuing their life and for pursuing their happiness by maintaining in society their rightful independence from the arbitrary coercive will of others (*Fed. 37*, @6; *Second Treatise*, secs. 4, 17). With protection for the present possession and future acquisition of

29 Publius contends that "the end of government is justice", that "the safety and happiness of society are the objects at which all political institutions aim", and that "to secure the public good and private rights against such a [majority] faction... is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed" (*Fed. 51*, @10; *Fed. 43*, @30; *Fed. 10*, @11). Taken as a whole, these remarks suggest that "justice" consists in the protection of individual rights, which leads to the "safety and happiness of society" as well as to the "public good". As shown in the subsequent controversy over the national bank, however, there was significant disagreement among Madison and Hamilton on the extent to which the national government could promote the “general welfare” beyond the protection of individual rights.

30 Much has been made by commentators such as Charles Beard of the Founders' emphasis on protecting the right to property. Such observers usually contend that this emphasis betrays the Founders' preoccupation with capitalist economic interests (cf. Beard 1913, 156-57). In response, a number of scholars have shown that Beard's interpretation of the Constitutional debates inverts the Founders' view of the relationship between politics and economics (cf. Epstein 1984, 107). For the Founders, capitalism as an economic system flows from the political principle of the right to property (cf. Zuckert 1996, 446).

31 For Madison's enlarged view of property as any product of the labor of an individual's faculties of conscience (e.g. religious beliefs), mind (e.g. scientific or political ideas), or body (e.g. physical labor), see his "Essay on
property, citizens can enjoy "that repose and confidence which are among the chief blessings of civil society" (Fed. 37, @6). Publius embraces Locke's argument that property, both as currently owned and as capable of being acquired by the future exertion of human faculties, is the fence against violations of the liberty necessary for self-preservation and the independent pursuit of happiness (2T, sec. 27). The rational principles of justice therefore make protecting the human faculties, especially those of acquiring property, the "chief object" of government.

b. Does a Defense of Property Raise the Danger of Oligarchy?

Publius' sympathy to the possession and acquisition of property appears to make him susceptible to the Anti-Federalist charge of advocating a constitutional order that elevates the acquisitive few at the expense of "the people".32 As we have seen, some forms of acquisitiveness -- especially the most powerful kinds -- is a self-aggrandizing political ambition that can pose political dangers to a republic. It seems to follow, then, that if government protects and encourages the acquisitive faculties as part of its protection of natural rights there would be rise of ambitious passions and the danger those with unequal faculties of acquisition would dominate politically. Can the legislator ensure that the desire to acquire does not turn into an oligarchic ambition that eventually leads the wealthy to overthrow a liberal republican order?

Publius certainly admits that there may be some oligarchic danger in an acquisitive republic. He concedes that the acquisitive faculties are "unequal" and therefore that the protection of them will lead to inequalities of wealth (Fed. 10, @6). He also acknowledges that such economic inequalities were a feature of the oligarchies of Venice and Holland (cf. Fed. 39, @3-4). Even with a ban on "titles of nobility", a proper constitutional order "must naturally tend to make it a fixed point of policy in the national administration to go as far as may be practicable in making the luxury of the rich tributary to the public treasury in order to diminish the necessity of those impositions which might create dissatisfaction in the poorer and more numerous classes of the society. Happy it is when the interest which the government has in the preservation of its own power coincides with a proper distribution of the public burdens and tends to guard the least wealthy part of the community from oppression" (Fed. 36, @15). This statement implies, of course, that the rich tend to use political control of taxation to advance their interests at the

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32 Publius himself notes that "the adversaries to the Constitution" claim that it will "court the elevation of the 'wealthy and the well-born' to the exclusion and debasement of all the rest of the society" (Fed. 60, @5). Despite his hostility to a politically entrenched class of the rich, Publius openly denounces the "rage for paper money" and the "wicked project" of using government to force "an equal distribution of property", which he suggests is characteristic of some Anti-Federalist sympathizers (Fed. 10, @22).

148
expense of the “least wealthy”. Thus they seem to have an economic motive to establish a political oligarchy, or at least to gain control of the most important offices in a popular republic. This is especially possible because, as Publius admits, most national office-holders will be drawn from “land-holders, merchants, and men of the learned professions” (Fed. 35, @9). Moreover, some of the wealthy love property for ambitious reasons and thus may acquire it so that they can use their wealth to fund political subversion. Indeed, for them a defense of property could be part of preserving their social pre-eminence, which may require political domination of the rest of society. Again, the desire to acquire property can provide a motive for oligarchy. Since some forms of acquisitiveness may contain ambitions that could turn the rich into oligarchs, it is not enough to simply unleash acquisitiveness in all its forms and hope that concern with economic interests will diffuse political dangers. The legislator must take steps to ensure that the dangerous aspects of acquisitiveness are neutralized or at least prevented from destroying an acquisitive republic.

V. Making Acquisitiveness Safe for Republicanism

a. Frustrating Ambition: Checks and Balances in an Extended Federal Republic

To prevent oligarchic ambitions from overthrowing the republican order, Publius contends that the first step is to frustrate political ambition generally by enlarging the size of the republic, by dividing political power between states and the national government, and by designing the constitutional system to separate power and to check all branches of government. According to him, the legislator establishing republican political institutions must remember that the ambitious act “with a view to getting rid of all external control upon their designs of personal aggrandizement” because “power controlled or abridged” is not able to fulfill the promise of “exalted eminence” (Fed. 15, @13; Fed. 16, @3). To avoid such abridgment, power always seeks more power and has “an impatience of control that disposes those who are invested with the exercise of it to look with an evil eye upon all external attempts to restrain or direct its

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33 It is noteworthy that Publius does not use the word “poor” but rather “least wealthy”. This is in part because America had no strict legal distinction between rich and poor as in many European countries (“aristocrats” and “peasants”), in part because during the Founding era America had less of the kind of static economic inequalities between rich and poor prevalent in Europe, and most importantly because Publius does not believe that anyone really is “poor” (i.e. without wealth). According to him, all people have property in the product of the exercise of their faculties (Fed. 10, @6). Hence in a government that protects the exercise of these faculties, all people have the opportunity to acquire and accumulate various kinds of property. Thus there are not “rich” and “poor” in the old European or aristocratic sense, but rather individuals who are successful and less successful in the exercise of their acquisitive faculties. 

149
operation" (Fed. 15, @13). Those who have power will want more, and the ambitious love of power, once awakened, grows stronger and stronger if left unchecked.

Publius maintains that the effects of ambition can be minimized if the legislator establishes the right kind of republic. If the size of the republic is enlarged beyond the old city-states of Greece or Italy (e.g. Venice), there will be such a "great variety of interests, parties, and sects" that no one ambitious faction of the wealthy could capture the legislative and executive power of the whole country (Fed. 51, @10). Indeed, while "land-holders, merchants, and men of the learned professions" will have significant political influence as representatives in such a large republic, the very possibility of a coherent political faction of the rich is greatly reduced in a country where the economic interests of the wealthy vary so much from region to region (Fed. 35, @9). And, Publius holds, if the interests of the rich do coalesce across states and regions, it will likely occur because the "principles" of "justice and the general good" are being threatened, as when there is a widespread assault on property rights (Fed. 51, @10).

Even in an extended republic, however, Publius contends that power must be institutionally separated and checked. The first separation comes from the federal "composite" nature of the republic, in which powers and duties are divided between states and the central government. Even if the Anti-Federalist fears were correct and a faction of the rich captured one level of government (especially the national level), the powers exercised by other levels would remain free from their grasp. At the national level, Publius follows Montesquieu -- "the oracle who is always consulted and cited on this issue" -- and advocates separating the legislative, executive, and judicial powers and assigning the bulk of each of them, with some mixture among the other branches for checks and balances, to a different "department" of the central government (Fed. 47, @4; Fed. 51, @4). This institutional separation of powers, combined with checks between branches, can prevent the "the intrigues of the ambitious or the bribes of the rich" from allowing "the wealthy and well-born" to capture one or more branches of government and gradually concentrate all political power in their hands (Fed. 58, @16).

It is important for understanding Publius' approach to oligarchy to realize that his support for separation of powers is not an endorsement of either the ancients' mixed regime or Montesquieu's constitutional balance of power based on social orders. Unlike Montesquieu, he argues for assigning the bulk of each power to an institutionalized "department", not to one social order or economic faction. Thus in Publius' constitutional order, the rich or well-born as a distinct group do not receive any specific type or quantity of the national government's power. He also rejects the ancients' mixed regime, which is based on the idea that the legislator must

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34 In a true republican system, of course, checks and balances is meant to restrain all factions, not just or even primarily the rich. Indeed, Publius often seems most concerned with a demagogue stirring up a majority faction of the people to attack property and thereby violate the right to property (cf. Fed. 1, @5; Fed. 9, @1).
create a mixed regime in which factions of the rich and poor hold specific offices that are tailored to their respective capacities and that force them to share political authority in such a way as to institutionalize their clashing notions of justice.\textsuperscript{35} Publius rejects this tenuous solution not only because it overlooks the equalizing spirit of America's "commercial character" but also because it gives the rich a permanent institutional position, implying that political merit is in some respect tied to wealth rather than based solely on equality of natural rights and the consent of the governed -- both of which are foundational principles of a liberal republican order. Thus Publius rejects both Aristotle's mixed regime and Montesquieu's balance of power as inconsistent with the "republican genius" (Fed. 39, @1).

In contrast to the stasis of a mixed regime, Publius' separation of powers mixes political power among three branches with distinct functions and gives each branch the opportunity, means, and motive to check the others based on institutional function -- not social, economic, or political faction. In such an arrangement, "ambition" is "made to counteract ambition" by attaching the personal desire for pre-eminence to one's constitutional office (Fed. 51, @4). This checks and balances system not only de-personalizes political conflict at the national level, it also prevents the wealthy from acquiring all political power even if they become filled with oligarchic ambitions (Fed. 51, @3). Still, while Publius refuses to institutionalize oligarchy by assigning specific political functions to the wealthy, his republican order seems built on the premise that some of the wealthy will be politically ambitious and perhaps even harbor oligarchic passions (just as some, if not many, of the poor may harbor democratic leveling passions against property). This new order arranges offices in such a way as to frustrate political ambitions by channeling them into institutionalized conflict with each other that ultimately helps to preserve the established constitutional order.

\textit{b. Transforming Ambition (I): The Importance of Commerce}

Despite Publius' faith in the "great improvement" in political science brought by knowledge of "the regular distribution of power into distinct departments", he admits that a republican order cannot rely for its preservation simply on frustrating ambition by institutional checks and balances; it must to some extent transform the ambitious love of power into publicly beneficial passions and activities (Fed. 9, @3). While arranging offices can be done by constitutional fiat, transforming the acquisitive passion is a continuous battle because protecting the acquisitive faculties will constantly unleash all forms of acquisitiveness, including ambition.

\textsuperscript{35} According to Publius, "the noblest minds" desire the highest offices not to impart to the city a right way of life but to achieve "fame" by carrying out great exertions on behalf of the public (Fed. 72, @4).
The political danger can be removed, according to Publius, if the founders of a republic understand that acquisitiveness can be "liberalized" under the right political conditions.

While the first step in transforming ambition is to frustrate it politically, the next is to turn frustrated ambition into less dangerous forms of acquisitiveness. According to Publius, the first step in taming acquisitiveness is to realize that the desire to acquire property is often more attached to interest than to passion and therefore can be made to serve the interest every person has in his own preservation and rights. As evidence for this position, Publius notes that "the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society" (Fed. 10, @7). Unlike political or religious factions, property divisions are generally factions of interest, not passion. At its deepest level, the desire to acquire property is rooted in people's rational concern with self-preservation rather than in a passionately held opinion about the right or honorable way to live (cf. Fed. 10, @7; Fed. 12, @2; Fed. 51, @10). Since property factions are not based on principles of right and wrong to which people are passionately attached as a matter of honor, such divisions may be common and long-lasting but they are less explosive than political and religious factions (cf. Fed. 10, @7-8).36

But if becoming wealthy requires some kind of passion beyond ordinary industry, is there not a serious danger that more politically dangerous forms of acquisitiveness will be unleashed?37 Will those with property not become contemptuous of a republican order in which they are regarded as the equals of the "least wealthy"?38 According to the ancients, sober industriousness cannot be maintained without some constant coercive intervention by the

36 The larger question, of course, is why Publius believes that differences in religious and political opinions -- opinions about the right way to live -- spark such passion factional conflict. One possibility is the ancient view that human beings (especially erotic ones) naturally have a noble love of justice and thus urgently need to believe that they are living in accordance with what is right. In this case, when one faction -- by publicly advancing opposing opinions about what is right -- denies that another faction holds true opinions about justice, it implies that the other is living wrongly and ignobly. This charge unleashes passionate anger and the opposing parties set out to destroy each other, either with words or swords. But this explanation of factional conflict fails to account for Publius' explicit contention that the passions are rooted in self-love, not a desire for the noble. Given self-love, why would disputes about right and wrong provoke such strong passion? One possibility is that a self is more lovable if it holds true opinions about right and wrong. Thus self-love becomes passionately attached to the rightness of one's opinions and is aroused when those opinions are challenged. But this explanation presumes that the person naturally finds a just self more lovable because justice is morally beautiful (i.e. noble). Yet as we have seen, that presumption is contradicted by Publius' contention that passion is rooted in self-love, not love of the noble. The other possibility is that possession of true opinion about right and wrong means that one understands the world, which gives one wisdom -- the power to govern oneself without having to be ruled by others (cf. Leviathan, chs. 3, @5; ch. 11, @1-2; ch. 13, @2). In this case, the anger felt at having one's opinion challenged comes from the fear of not having the wisdom one presumes. Losing one's wisdom is so disastrous because it would mean that one has lost an essential power for ensuring "the continual progress of the desire, from one object to another" (Leviathan, ch. 11, @1). In a word, one has lost the power to attain "felicity" without being under the power of others.

37 In this regard, see Publius' occasional linking of avarice and ambition (Fed. 6, @9, 15; Fed. 7, @5; Fed. 11, @2).
38 As Tocqueville notes, ordinary people pose a political danger to liberty only in their willingness to accept a "soft despotism" in which they exchange their liberty for material security and comfort provided by the national government (cf. Tocqueville 1986, 692-93).
legislator. In the *Republic*, for example, Socrates suggests that *nomoi* must be established that in effect reproduce the original fearful insecurity that keeps acquisitiveness from giving way to honor-seeking (oligarchy) (cf. 559e-560a). Without such a check, the ambitious aspect of acquisitiveness may emerge and slowly turn many industrious acquirers (and especially their sons) into honor-loving oligarchs. In Aristotle’s view, the intrinsic connection between acquisitiveness and political ambition is evident from the fact that the materially acquisitive become more politically ambitious as they become richer, and especially as more and more of their wealth is inherited, removing them farther and farther from the fear of poverty’s pressing necessity. In sum, the ancients argue that acquisitiveness cannot be “de-politicized” because all acquisitiveness is to some extent a form of ambition.

Following Locke, Publius inverts the ancient argument: in his view, political ambition is only one form of acquisitiveness, not vice-versa. While some of the acquisitive will always be ambitious lovers of political power or glory, the rest are moved by acquisitive desires that are largely economic or, if they have a political component, can be made to protect republicanism. Those moved by simple economic acquisitiveness are the industrious, who are not a direct threat to republican liberty. The real issue turns on those whose acquisitive desire is a mix of economic and political passions. These people are the avaricious, and there will be many of them in a political order that protects property rights and promotes acquisition.

For Publius, the question is whether the most “enterprising” people can be made loyal to a republican order or whether they must eventually become enemies of popular government, as the ancients contend. According to him, these people are fueled by a desire for “power and dominion” that can be directed toward either political power or economic empire, depending on what “charms” them (cf. *Fed. 6*, @3; *Fed. 17*, @1). Hence if property promises such pre-eminence, they will pursue it. In ancient republics like Rome that devoted themselves to political or military glory and despised money-making as unworthy of a free person, conquest rather than property was the source of pre-eminence. Hence enterprising people inevitably went into politics, not business (cf. *Fed. 8*, @8; *Fed. 9*, @1). In such non-commercial republics, political ambition flourished because politics replaced property as the source of the “power” and “pre-eminence”.

Publius’ analysis of the ancient city suggests that much acquisitive desire could be re-channeled if those with a desire for pre-eminence had a different object for their passion. In America, this re-configuration is quite possible because it is largely free of the unnatural political stimulation of the ancient republics or the European monarchies (*Fed. 11*, @2). Here “the industrious habits of the people of the present day” are not directed toward becoming “a nation of soldiers”, conquerors, or politicians but are “absorbed in the pursuits of gain, and devoted to the improvement of agriculture and commerce” (*Fed. 8*, @8). According to Publius, the pervasively “commercial character” of republican America shows that acquisitiveness gives rise
to an oligarchic class when people of an “adventurous spirit” are denied the opportunity of obtaining pre-eminence in society by economic means (Fed. 11, @2). In effect, ancient regimes artificially politicized acquisitiveness to the point of making the most vigorous citizens look with contempt on security, comfort, and money-making. But since most acquisitiveness is naturally “economic”, all that is required to make it politically benign is not to artificially distort its true character.

Even the desire to acquire fueled by a longing for pre-eminence can be satisfied if the legislator ensures that acquisition of property, not political power, is the best way for individuals to gain “pre-eminence”. In a country like America that already has a “commercial character”, Publius suggests that the only task to be done in this regard is to ensure that the new constitutional order prevents disruptions of commerce and creates a unified market in which large commercial empires can be established. Not surprisingly, he devotes much time and energy to proving that the new Constitution will bring “an unrestrained intercourse between the states themselves” that “will advance the trade of each, by an interchange of their respective productions, not only for the supply of reciprocal wants at home, but for exportation to foreign markets” (Fed. 11, @12). In the new republic, “the veins of commerce in every part will be replenished, and will acquire additional motion and vigor from a free circulation of the commodities of every part. Commercial enterprise will have much greater scope...” (Fed. 11, @12). Thus sober industriousness will be excited into economic avarice while many of the more ambitious forms of acquisitiveness will be channeled away from politics into building economic empires. In both cases, republicanism will be strengthened because the right to property will be exercised with greater vigor and the love of power will be turned into a more economically beneficial passion.

c. Transforming Ambition (II): An Enlightened Love of Liberty

Despite the political advantages of commerce, there is a danger for republican government in turning ambition into commercial enterprise. According to Publius, an “avaricious man might be tempted to betray the interests of the state to the acquisition of wealth” (Fed. 75, @3). If the acquisitive sell out liberty or are so absorbed in the private pursuit of their own wealth that they forget the public sphere, the right to property and indeed all rights could be threatened by the unnoticed, gradual accumulation of power into the hands of one person or faction. To survive, Publius’ new order therefore needs citizens who are more than bourgeois money-makers; they

39 This means that for The Federalist ambition is not intrinsically attracted to any particular object, only to whatever object seems to promise the greatest pre-eminence. Some acquisitiveness almost always has a political form because every society has political offices with final authority for making binding social rules, and in most regimes political
must be public-spirited citizens vigilant against the political intrigues of the rich and well-born, which over time have led to oligarchic governments such as those in Venice dominated by “a handful of tyrannical nobles” (Fed. 39, @4). Montesquieu tries to solve this problem by putting wealthy hereditary nobles into a separate chamber of the legislature, thus simultaneously isolating and politicizing them in defense of their property, prerogatives, and hopefully by extension the general liberty. Publius rejects this solution because he sees it as a potentially dangerous foothold for the rich, as unsuited to the republican “genius” of America, and as offensive to the equality of citizens that is the political reflection of natural human equality (Fed. 39, @1). But can the dangerous aspect of ambition be to a large extent removed while some attachment to the public and political is retained? More specifically, can the energetic pursuit of property be attached to liberty rather than to either political ambition (which may sacrifice liberty for power) or a largely private love of lucre (which may forsake liberty for gain)?

Publius believes that acquisitiveness can be part of a republican love of liberty, if acquisitiveness is properly linked to natural rights. Because the desire to acquire is naturally less political and more economic, acquisitive people ordinarily tend to become spirited only when frustrated by a direct threat to their property. In an “intelligent and well informed” population (“like the Americans”), however, the people know that they have natural rights and that government exists to protect those rights (Fed. 3, @1). In such a case, the people understand that a threat to property is really a threat to the right to property and they become indignant because they believe that individuals deserve to be able to acquire property (Fed. 3, @1; Fed. 9, @3; Fed. 1, @9). As “friends... of public and personal liberty”, they realize that a violation of this right implicitly threatens every other right (Fed. 10, @1). Thus when the rights to acquire, possess, or enjoy property are threatened (e.g. by irresponsible printing of paper money, legislative abolition of debt, or confiscation of land by executive decree), the “enlightened friends to liberty” will offer a spirited defense of property rights (Fed. 10, @1). They will do this, however, not because

office has the greatest responsibility for ordering society and is therefore the most prominent and glorious position.

40 The danger of oligarchic intrigue is not mitigated by America’s “absolute prohibition of titles of nobility” (Fed. 39, @6). While nothing short of a constitutional revolution could transform America into an hereditary aristocracy, Tocqueville points out that a prohibition on titles does not eliminate the possibility that successful commercial families over time could become an informal “aristocracy” (see Tocqueville 1986, 399, 556-57).

41 This does not mean that industrious and rational acquirers are attached to their property simply out of a fearful desire for self-preservation. According to Publius, even ordinary people can have a laudable “zeal for liberty” and a spirited attachment to their rights -- including the right to property. Such people not only fear tyranny, they hate it. This “noble enthusiasm of liberty”, however, is not the product of ambition or ancient republican love of the common good for its own sake. It comes from the belief that protection of one’s right to self-preservation is impossible without public and private liberty because anyone who has the power to deny another’s liberty (and hence his life) eventually will be able to usurp one’s liberty and life. In other words, the industrious and rational acquirer defends the rights of others because he knows that they are necessary in order to securely enjoy his own (cf. Fed. 17, @4). The rational person gets indignant at tyranny because it strikes in him a fear of painful enslavement from which he believes he has the right to be free. Hence fear causes righteous anger in him, and it is this combination of fear and spiritedness that produces hatred of tyranny.
wealth implies a higher excellence or virtuous way of life, but because threatening property by implication calls into question the sanctity of natural rights, which they know is the foundation of the happiness they enjoy under a republican government (Fed. 9, @3; Fed. 43, @30). In a liberal republic, this is the non-oligarchic defense of property that goes beyond a reductionist concern with self-preservation, but does not become the kind of self-aggrandizing and dangerous ambition characteristic, for example, of the Venetian oligarchs (Fed. 6, @10, 12). Thus while divisions between rich (successful acquirers) and poor (less successful acquirers) will produce "different sentiments and views", the poor can pursue property by exercising their rights (rather than by mob confiscations) and the rich can defend their property by protecting liberty (rather than by overthrowing republicanism) (Fed. 10, @7). By rooting acquisitiveness in rights, not ambition, a political order can defend the property of everyone (including the rich) without succumbing to oligarchy.

VI. Oligarchy and The American Political Order

a. Publius' Rejection of the Ancients' Political Psychology

According to Publius, the problem of oligarchy can be solved, at least to the extent of eliminating the political danger of an oligarchic faction forming that will overthrow representative democracy. In his view, the rationally discernible principles of justice dictate that government must protect property and especially the acquisitive faculties, for such protection insures that all people can respond to the acquisitive impulse created by their desire for self-preservation (cf. Fed. 10, @6; Fed. 43, @30). Moreover, Publius denies oligarchic elements any constitutional place in his new republic. He rejects the ancients' idea that the wealthy's claim to

42 "Considerate and virtuous citizens" are concerned about defending the right to property as part of a general defense of "public and personal liberty" (Fed. 10, @1).
43 According to Publius, to be attached to justice beyond one's interest is the "stern stuff of few soils" and requires "superlative virtue" of which very few are capable (Fed. 75, @3). This does not mean that virtue is unimportant in a republican government; in fact, he declares that "as there is a degree of depravity in mankind... so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form" (Fed. 55, @9). But this virtue is not the "monster-taming spirit, which is attributed to the fabulous heroes and demi-gods of antiquity"; it is the disposition to obey the law, to respect the rights of other individuals, and to offer a spirited defense of others' rights (Fed. 16, @5). This new republican virtue calls the citizen outside of his immediate interest only by promising the protection of his own rights in return. But if this is true, how can we then explain a patriot like Patrick Henry, whose famous "give me liberty or give me death" speech seems to indicate an attachment to liberty dearer than life itself? In response, it is worth noting that even Henry defends the "manly fortitude that ought to characterize republicans" because it is necessary to "preserve your liberty and mine" (Henry 1985, 298-99). In short, he suggests that he would choose to risk death in defense of other's liberty because he believes that the loss of one citizen's liberties will inevitably lead to the loss of his own, without which life would be "groaned under intolerable despotism"
rule contains a nobler view of justice that republican politics should accommodate in order to foster a healthy civic life, especially since such an accommodation as the ancients recommend requires a mixed regime that provides a special place in political office for the rich.44

Yet he does not deny that acquisitiveness has an element of nobility. Properly understood, acquisitiveness is the desire to exercise one's natural right to property vigorously. This rational exercise of rights is dignified and fosters republican pride because it lends credence to "that honorable determination, which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government" (Fed. 39, @1). In contrast to a liberal and republican respect for the acquisition of property, Publius sees oligarchic ambition (the desire to rule based on wealth) as a perversion of acquisitiveness because it separates acquisitiveness from its true dignity in natural rights and the idea of self-government that flows from those rights. Thus for him, the passion that must be frustrated, channeled, and transformed is political ambition, not the desire to acquire property (cf. Fed. 1, @5; Fed. 51, @10). Hence instead of following the ancients in restraining and educating acquisitiveness to draw out some of its nobler aspects, Publius sanctions the liberation of acquisitiveness while simultaneously creating a large federal republic in which "ambition" is "made to counteract ambition" through multiple competing factions and constitutional arrangements that separate, check, and balance political power between branches and levels of government (Fed. 51, @4).

b. Reducing the Allure of Politics

The constitutional arrangement of offices will not simply reduce the possibility of accumulating enormous political power (especially at the national level); it also will make politics less attractive to all but the most politically ambitious. Because these checks are institutional and therefore de-personalized, the ambitious are not thwarted by other office-holders as members of opposing social or economic factions but by them as bearers of institutional functions and ambitions.45 According to Publius, this de-personalization of the struggle of ambitions tends to mute the anger and desire for revenge that permeated the "turbulent" ancient

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44 In this respect, compare John Adams' treatment of the rich in his Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States. There he argues in favor of an upper legislative house peopled by the wealthy in order to "defang their ambition and influence" (cf. Thompson 1998, 263).

45 The fact that such arrangements are built on the institutionalized separation of powers by functions and not factions (as in Aristotle's reformation of oligarchy) indicates the impersonal nature of the system. Despite the fact that Publius accepts and embraces factions of interest and passion as fundamental to republican life, he refuses to give any credence to the notion that oligarchs have a distinctive claim to rule because he believes that attributes such as wealth or acquisitive ability do not change the foundation of politics in the natural right to self-preservation equally possessed by all individuals. Hence the legislator can properly treat rich and poor as members of "the people" with the same fundamental claim to the protection of their natural rights, not as members of factions advocating fundamentally different arguments about the purpose of government.

(Henry 1985, 300.)
republics, which pitted the many against the rich in angry and highly personal factional conflict (cf. Fed. 9, @1-2; Aristotle, Politics, 1281a16 & 1281b19). The cumulative effect of this institutional separation of power is to force the ambitious over and over again to confront the limits of what politics can achieve and thus what limited glory politics can deliver, especially when compared with acquiring great wealth by building an economic empire (cf. Fed. 72, @5-6; Fed. 11, @2, 8). When they see this limit, political ambition among the wealthy may begin to wane and even among some to die, at least where it is not all-consuming (cf. Fed. 16, @7; Fed. 17, @7). Where it is so powerful, the politically ambitious will be unable to acquire glory except by working with the many factions and branches to forge compromises that will likely benefit the public. Since the enterprising rich will probably not tolerate this slow and frustrating process, many of them will avoid direct political involvement. If that occurs, the ambitious will turn to business rather than to politics and the rich will become defenders of property against government intrusion rather than oligarchs who seek to establish a political order based on property.

c. Publius' Modern Republican Solution

In effect, Publius re-creates Locke's project to change the reason why people are attached to property, from a dangerous love of dominion to a salutary love of liberty (cf. Some Thoughts concerning Education:, sec. 119). He does so, however, on a large political basis by incorporating Montesquieu's basic principles of separation of powers and encouragement of commerce. But unlike Montesquieu, he believes that acquisitiveness can be unleashed without requiring a separate legislative chamber for the wealthy or aristocratic that compromises the wholly popular character of true republicanism. Such a chamber is unnecessary because acquisitiveness can flow from an enlightened understanding of property as the product of exercising one's rights, which all human beings and citizens have equally. It need not be grounded in vanity or arrogance, which would tend to make property part of an entrenched

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46 We can see powerful empirical evidence for the liberal republicanism's "de-politicizing" of the acquisitive desire in the fact that liberal democracies have never fought a serious war against each other. According to Publius, this is not simply because liberal democracies are commercial. In fact, he suggests -- in opposition to Montesquieu's claim that "the natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace" -- that commerce without political liberalism does not necessarily tend to pacify international relations (Spirit, Bk. 20, ch. 2, @1). As evidence, he calls attention to the fact that previous republics dominated by the commercial spirit frequently engaged in "wars of ambition" often precipitated by commercial disputes (Fed. 6, @8-12).

47 According to the famous observation of Lord Bryce, the most ambitious people in America tend to shun politics in favor of "the business of developing the material resources of the country" (Bryce 1996, 101-02).

48 Locke's project to transfer the passions away from dominion toward liberty has both educational and constitutional components. The constitutionalism of the Second Treatise is the "civil' presentation" and application of Locke's general philosophy (as is the Letter concerning Toleration); the domestic presentation occurs especially in Some Thoughts concerning Education (see Laslett 1988, 86 n. 2).
political conflict between aristocrats and commons. If the wealthy have a disproportionate influence in Publius’ republic, it will not be as a faction united around a passionate hostility to sharing rule with the less wealthy but as representatives of a multiplicity of factions advocating policies that advance the particular interests of “land-holders, merchants, and men of the learned professions” (Fed. 35, @9). It seems, then, that Publius holds out hope that the American experiment can finally sever the link between the desire to acquire and the passion to rule, which made oligarchy an inevitable political problem. But do he and his modern predecessors actually succeed? To that final question, we now turn.

Contrary to the opinions of many contemporary political scientists, Publius’ experiment is not one simply in democracy. He rejects pure democracy as a solution to the problem of oligarchy because “the history of the petty Republics of Greece and Italy” shows that democratic rule tends to disintegrate into domination by a majority faction that threatens “the rights of the minor party”, especially the right to property (Fed. 9, @1; Fed. 10, @1). Just as unfortunate, democracy’s unjust threat to property may antagonize successful acquirers and turn “our most considerate and virtuous citizens” into enemies of republican government, perhaps even oligarchic enemies (Fed. 10, @1). In neither case is the cause of true republicanism served. Nor does Publius advocate a mixed regime on the ancient (or even Montesquieuian) model; in his view, such constitutional orders enshrine the principle that the rich deserve a special position in the political order and thereby threaten the spirit of republican equality necessary to preserve the rights of every person. He argues instead for a new order of the ages -- an extended commercial republic built on constitutional principles of separation of powers and federalism. In his judgment, this American experiment is humanity’s best hope yet for securing by “reflection and choice” its most precious but fragile possession: the natural rights to life, liberty, and property.

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CONCLUSION
RECOVERING LOST INSIGHT

I. What To Do About Oligarchy?

a. The Ancient View

Today democracy dominates the human mind because no one seems to doubt its justice. In liberal democracies, no one publicly agitates for a return to oligarchy. Even in countries routinely described as oligarchies, no public figure argues that the rich deserve exclusive political authority. Of course, modern political science did not set out to fulfill the ancient democrats' dream of destroying oligarchy; it was animated by a passion to overthrow the ancient and medieval political tradition. But it was that tradition which imparted to statesmen and legislators the idea that oligarchies of the rich were an incurable problem: that there was an unbreakable link between the desire to acquire and the desire to rule: that the rich and acquisitive would always want to rule and might even deserve some specific share in political authority. Indeed, the old political science argued that the "solution" to the problem of oligarchy was not to try to get rid of oligarchy but to politicize it, in the high sense of making it more and more like the best political regime. This task was to be done by suppressing the material element of the desire to acquire and directing it toward its more natural concern with nobler ends.

b. The Modern Response

To the moderns, this was a ridiculous and inhuman endeavor. As we have seen, they believed that the legislator should simply allow it to take its most ordinary or natural course: economic activity. By freeing material acquisitiveness from legal limitation and moral stigma, modern political science sought to free human beings from their oppression by the old order. This was how to win humanity's faith away from Plato, Aristotle, and the medieval tradition they influenced.

In liberating acquisitiveness, the moderns laid the foundation for the almost unimaginable wealth and freedom of contemporary liberal democracies, but they also acquired a new version of the old problem: How can the rich be prevented from
oppressing political society? This problem could not be ignored; the moderns had to
solve it if they were to maintain the allegiance of "the people", on whom they built their
new politics. In general, their solution was to try to transform the political ambition of the
rich: first, by directing it as much as possible away from politics toward economics; and
second, by making it serve the new (liberal) purposes of political society.

II. But Who Is Right?

a. The Egalitarian Consequences of the Modern Argument

But were the moderns right? Did they in fact find the solution to the problem of
oligarchy? Some scholars argue that the moderns overcame the problem only by
capitulating to an impoverished view of democracy (cf. Nedelsky 1990, 1). According to
this argument, liberal democracies like America may not be oligarchies in the old-
fashioned sense, but they are nevertheless oligarchic systems set up to ensure that the rich
hold a disproportionate share of power. Liberal democracy may be committed to
protecting property as a natural right held by all people rather than as a claim to rule
advanced by a few, but the result is the same. America thus shows with great clarity the
undemocratic consequences of modern political thought.

On its face, this argument clearly has some power; America was not meant to be a
participatory democracy but a regime in which the deliberate sense of the people ruled
only indirectly and only over the long term. Yet the critics too quickly discount the
importance of the fact that the moderns, including the American Founders, rejected the
idea that the rich had a higher moral claim than other parts of the regime. The
fundamental starting point of modern thought is not a natural hierarchy of merit based on
a highest life, but -- beginning with Hobbes at least -- human equality (or at least humans’ belief in their equality).¹ That rejection of a natural hierarchy is critical because
it changes the notion of justice that gives shape to social and political life, from the rule
of superior virtue to the consent of equals. This change in the regime’s principle of the
just foundation of political authority inevitably results in a change in the regime’s

¹ The modern movement toward equality actually starts with Machiavelli, notwithstanding his insistence on
different “humors” of people, with the “greatest” princes at the top (cf. The Prince, ch. 6 @1, ch. 9, @2-3). He rejects the contemplative life as the best life for every person, instead favoring an active life of unending acquisition of different goods for different human types (the people/security, the great/power, the
prince/glory) (cf. The Prince, ch. 3, @12; ch. 25, @4). With this rejection of a common highest end, Machiavelli lays the groundwork for the equality of Hobbes, which is explicitly based on a rejection of the sumnum bonum (cf. Leviathan, ch. 11).

161
politics. Political practice lags behind political principle, but it eventually follows (even if it never fully catches up). From this perspective, the gradual, hard-fought attempt to democratize American life and thought -- as illustrated by the suffragette, civil rights, and feminist movements (as well as the New Deal) -- testifies to the political importance of the Founders' initial rejection of oligarchic principles of justice.

b. The Moderns' Mistake

Yet as we see in every election-cycle, parties of the rich and poor remain a salient feature of liberal democracies, including those with a substantial middle class. This is especially important given the American Founders' apparent failure to consider the development of a two party division between rich and poor when making their constitutional order. As we know, two separate political parties representing the interests of the rich and poor (usually incorporating other geographic, social, or religious factions) sprang up in the new constitutional order almost immediately and have persisted down to our times. Even though in each election Republicans and Democrats today try to reach out from their economic bases toward the middle class and other groups, charges of "fomenting class warfare" or "favoring the rich" continue to fly.

Is the persistence of rich and poor political identities -- no matter how weak -- evidence that the moderns failed to obliterate the fundamental political rivalry between "oligarchs" and "democrats"? The answer is a qualified "yes"; such rivalry may in fact continue because the moderns never fully address what the ancients claim makes the oligarchs principled opponents of democracy, even liberal democracy. They do not satisfactorily refute the ancients' analysis of why the oligarchs are a coherent political faction moved by their own spirited demand for exclusive political authority and honor.

As we have seen, the ancients teach that oligarchy is fueled by a moral passion for justice originating in an eros for the noble. According to them, the oligarchs have a strong erotic passion whose pleasure-seeking aspect they keep stifled out of the need to

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2 As both Aristotle and Montesquieu make clear in their comparative politics, there are a variety of religious, economic, geographic, and even climatic factors that affect a regime's political practice and prevent it from being fully in line with its underlying political principles (cf. Politics Bk. 7, chs. 4-12; Spirit of the Laws, Bks. 14-19, 24-26).

3 It is not adequate to say that the gradual extension of civil rights to women and racial minorities is merely an attempt by the oligarchic elite to co-opt social movements and thereby preserve their own position. No doubt that is part of the story, but democratic movements within liberal democracies were able to succeed in part because they appealed to the principle of equality of rights, a principle that the entrenched elite could evade or obfuscate but not deny. For a classic appeal to principles of equality from the American Founding in the service of extending civil rights (and thereby some measure of political power), see Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, "I Have a Dream" (Washington 1966, 217-21).
acquire. Yet because of their eros, the oligarchs still long for a self-transcending beauty, which they find in the austere but captivating majesty of nobility, with its call to self-sacrifice and self-transcendence. Because of its beauty, they admire the noble and, admiring, believe that it is good and that its presence is necessarily accompanied by the good. The oligarchs therefore hold that it is fitting for the nobler person to have the better things in life, especially the best -- gratification of the soul (i.e. happiness). In other words, they believe that the noble person deserves the best. Thus the oligarchs' eros gives birth to an opinion of justice based on hierarchical merit, from least to most noble. They pursue this hierarchical justice because only it, with its noble demands and respect for nobility, seems to lift the oligarch out of himself to a moral beauty that can satisfy his desire for self-transcendence. It is this justice for which the oligarchs will fight and die.

According to the ancients, this notion of justice is inextricably political and forms the oligarchs into a distinct political faction. Their longing to be noble can only be satisfied by monopolizing the authoritative political offices, which they believe they deserve by virtue of their moral excellence. Open political control gives them the opportunity to put the mark of their excellence on the whole city and receive honor for it. For the ancients, this nobler aspect of acquisitiveness is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes the oligarchs use their exclusive political authority to benefit themselves at expense of the rest of city (which in their view does not deserve any benefit). This warps the true meaning of virtue and sets off disastrous factional conflict between the oligarchs and their opponents (especially the democrats). On the other hand, however, the demand for honor has the potential to be ennobled into a more aristocratic, gentlemanly concern for virtue.

The moderns deride this moral interpretation of the oligarchs' political passion. If the oligarchs demand honor, they ask, how can the ancients say that their acquisitive desire is strongly erotic? Do the ancients not teach that eros strives for the beautiful or noble without looking for any honor for its efforts; that the beautiful itself is reward enough (cf. Republic 357b, 509a)? The moderns suggest that since the oligarchs demand recognition of their being noble, their political passion cannot really be fueled by any kind of so-called eros.

But this attack misconstrues the ancients' position on the relationship between the oligarchs' eros and thymos. The oligarchs' passion is thymotic not because it lacks eros but because its erotic component is inextricably linked to and distorted by a fear born of insecurity (originally from poverty and later from political attacks). This sense of insecurity accounts for the fact that the oligarchs, while fueled by eros, are both acquisitive and honor-loving. Because of the deep impression left by insecurity, the
oligarchs believe that they can be noble only if they have complete power over the noble things they deserve, like political office. To accomplish this, they must make political office rightfully their own. They must acquire it. Hence they are driven to be acquisitive by a desire for nobility.

They are lovers of honor, however, because of a tension between their *eros* and their acquisitiveness. The oligarchs view the process of acquisition as noble because it requires difficult exertion and sacrifice in overcoming obstacles. But for this very reason it is also painful. This is a problem because erotic lovers of the noble, like the oligarchs, believe that nobility is purely good; thus, as we have seen, they necessarily believe that being noble should bring with it gratification of the soul. For the erotic person, gratification means a pure psychic pleasure “unaccompanied by pains” (*Politics* 1267a7-8). There is thus a deep tension in the oligarchs’ soul; their *eros* to be noble fuels their acquisitiveness, but acquisition itself -- because it is painful -- cannot satisfy their erotic longing for pure pleasure of the soul. They therefore demand honor, which reduces the tension by being both a compensation for their painful acquisitive striving and a confirmation of its nobility. Hence, while fueled by *eros*, their oligarchic passion has a distinctly thymotic cast -- entailing a spirited demand for recognition of their excellence, without which their acquisitive passion could not be satisfied.

The moderns respond to this moral analysis of the oligarchs’ *eros* and *thymos* by saying that such passions are really confused longings for power. They do admit that some of the rich have unusually strong political ambitions. Indeed, even Publius -- who seems to have the most optimistic view about re-directing acquisitiveness away from politics toward economics -- admits that some of the most acquisitive among the rich are moved by a desire for political pre-eminence that will not go away. But unlike the ancients, none of the moderns believes that the political ambition of the rich is fueled by a moral passion for justice that advances the political rights of the rich as a class. Rather, such ambition is limited to wealthy individuals and families whose desire for self-aggrandizement is unsatisfied by the kind of power acquired in commercial empires, no matter how large. The wealthy demand exclusive political authority because of an insatiable appetite for power, not justice.

For all the moderns, the oligarchs’ supposed passion for self-transcendence is really a passion for self-preservation that becomes radically acquisitive and self-aggrandizing because it gets confused and carried away by pride. In the moderns’ view, the rich merely use justice as a rationalization for their proud self-aggrandizement. The moderns therefore believe that oligarchic political passion can be reduced to self-love or self-interest.
But while they call into question and try to debunk the oligarchs' moral passion, they do not disprove it. In particular, the moderns do not explain on its own terms the oligarchs' experience of being moved to sacrifice themselves and their property for the justice of the regime that honors their excellence. Self-aggrandizement, self-love, and ultimately self-interest do not clearly explain why the oligarchs say (as the ancients show they do): "We will sacrifice ourselves for this regime and its justice because to live under another regime is to live ignobly, and we cannot tolerate that." An impulse for self-preservation does not explain the self-transcendent character of being moved to sacrifice for a higher good, which is central to the oligarchs' passion for justice and crucial to their moral experience of nobility. Because the moderns do not refute this idea of nobility on its own terms, they cannot disprove the linchpin of the ancients' argument that the oligarchic political psychology has an ineluctably moral character. In not directly confronting the nature of eros for the noble, the moderns seem to have gotten oligarchy only partly right; they see its dangerous desire for power and honor, but may not fully comprehend the moral attachment that drive those desires. By taking the oligarchs' apparently superficial claim to justice more seriously, in contrast, the ancients offer what appears to be a deeper insight into the very heart of oligarchy.

III. Recovering What Was Lost: The Challenge for Liberal Democracy and Political Science

a. The Continuing Danger of Oligarchy

In the moderns' defense, however, we must ask: Why then has oligarchy disappeared? Surely it cannot be a coincidence wholly unrelated to their re-interpretation of the political psychology of acquisitiveness? Certainly, the moderns persuaded statesmen and legislators that there is no unbreakable link between the desire to acquire and the desire to rule that makes oligarchy natural and inevitable. Since oligarchy is not inevitable, liberal and democratic politics built on liberating acquisitiveness could go forward without fear that oligarchy would thwart their project.

Now in America at least, liberal democracy does appear to have liberated the acquisitive passion without creating a faction of oligarchs openly opposed to republican government. The large commercial republic devoted to protecting the right to property diverts most acquisitiveness into money-making while giving the wealthy enough political control to advance their interests or at least to prevent the domination of those
opposed to their interests. Whatever political ambition remains among the wealthy few can be frustrated and diluted using separation of powers and checks and balances, the very institutions that prevent other factions from oppressing them. Moreover, liberal democratic institutions and principles appear to inspire a strong egalitarian strain in political argument and discourse that can be used to combat any oligarchic forces. Indeed, the democratization of mind characteristic of contemporary liberal democracies would not be possible without the apparent de-oligarchization of the acquisitive passions accomplished by the early moderns. As evidence, it is worth noting that even the parties advancing the interests of the rich do not publicly argue for the justice of oligarchy, as the ancients oligarchs once did.

Despite all this evidence, however, the threat of a coherent oligarchic party continues because the moderns do not decisively refute the ancients' fundamental argument. Such a threat is especially likely in countries -- in the developing world, for example -- that are not large commercial republics, do not have a deeply-rooted liberal tradition, and do not possess what Tocqueville saw as America's relative "equality of conditions". But even in America these pro-democratic factors may not be enough. They simply prevent the rich from establishing themselves openly as oligarchs; they do not emasculate their moral impulse to form a political faction based on anti-democratic principles of justice. Paradoxically, then, even as democracy destroys particular oligarchies, it may not do away with oligarchy itself. If America has not yet seen the development of a coherent oligarchic faction, that does not mean it will not.

Given these possibilities, confidence in the inevitable defeat of oligarchy by the historical tide of liberal democracy is quite misplaced. We have yet to see liberal democracy arrive in many countries. We do not know, in places like South America, that liberal democracy will overcome the deeply-entrenched oligarchic institutions. It is quite possible that remaining oligarchic factions will co-opt liberal democratic arguments while regrouping their political forces. We can see this just below the surface in many countries like Russia, where there do seem to be parties of oligarchs. In the face of the current intellectual and political dominance of democratic ideas and rhetoric, these oligarchs may have been driven underground, not yet strong enough to openly assert their claims to political authority. Thus while they may not agitate in public, they are not reconciled to democratic justice. Nor are these oligarchs like liberals who defend property as a right held by all people that government should protect. They bridle at the idea of sharing political control, or even at acknowledging the need for the consent of the governed (which would imply equality). How long might it be before they make public their anti-democratic, anti-liberal argument?
The persistence of oligarchic political passion explains why, at a deeper level than they realize, some of the critics of liberal democracy may be right in arguing that the spread of liberal democratic ideas and institutions around the world will strengthen inherited oligarchic structures, not weaken them. The unleashing of acquisitiveness (especially through the global economy) could indeed be disastrous for the spread of democratic ideals and practices. Those made even wealthier (including multi-national corporations) may set up oligarchies once again. Disillusioned democrats may revert to oligarchy or, like Michels himself, become even harsher than the oligarchs of old. While we cannot say with absolute assurance that the ancients are right and that oligarchy will definitely rise again, we can conclude that the moderns have failed to refute them decisively. Thus oligarchy has not in principle been defeated. The problem endures, not because of Michels’ “Iron Law” but because of Plato’s and Aristotle’s insights.

b. Recovering Political Philosophy as the Means of Understanding the Oligarchic Threat: A New (Old) Direction

With their bold solutions, the moderns seemed for a while to restore faith in the power of political philosophy to improve “man’s estate”. Today that faith is lost. Political science is no longer seen even by many of its practitioners as capable of understanding the problem of oligarchy, much less solving it. The best contemporary political science can do is to ask how a few people come to have de facto control over political organizations and to try to explain how citizens and statesmen can attempt to mitigate the effects of oligarchic structures.

At first glance, our contemporary failure to come to grips with the importance of oligarchy’s moral and political dimension seems to be indirectly connected to the moderns’ approach to the problem. By rejecting the argument that acquisition embodied or gave rise to a uniquely oligarchic political longing, they effectively denied that there was a distinct political animal called the oligarch. Hence it no longer really mattered in modern political classifications whether rule of the few was called aristocracy or oligarchy. The fact that a few ruled was more significant than whatever justification they might try to give for holding political power. This change made oligarchy resistant to analysis as a distinct political regime. Still, political scientists considered oligarchy part of their domain until the late nineteenth century, when the split began in the social sciences between social facts (which can be studied rationally) and political values (which are beyond the realm of science). Whatever remained of the philosophic approach to the political problem of oligarchy was swept away by Michels’ study, which was a founding document of the new discipline of political sociology.
In our times, the value-free sociological approach has gathered useful data on oligarchy, but it has led political science into a theoretical dead end. Because contemporary sociology eschews any attempt at grappling scientifically with the central “values” question of oligarchy, it cannot address the underlying moral argument that has breathed life into oligarchy during its long history. Nor can it even begin to answer whether the oligarchs are right and the democrats wrong, or whether oligarchy persists because it speaks to something powerful in the souls of a certain kind of human being. Yet it is these very issues that have animated the study of oligarchy since Socrates called philosophy down from the heavens into the city. And as the debate between the ancients and moderns testifies, it is possible to use reason to inquire into political claims of justice and injustice, right and wrong, good and bad. There may not be an immediate definitive resolution, but progress can be made in isolating the central moral arguments that must be investigated further, as this work has tried to do in showing how the debate over oligarchy turns on understanding the oligarchs’ eros for the noble.

Unfortunately, today such arguments are considered unimportant or unanswerable scientifically. As a result of our theoretical impoverishment, political scientists too easily assume that oligarchy has been eliminated as a political problem or that it cannot be thought of politically, except in the sense that oligarchic structures still seem to thwart full democracy. Unfortunately, without considering oligarchy as a moral and political phenomenon, we forget that oligarchic “values” give rise to oligarchic organizations; that oligarchy is an organizational problem because it is first a political problem. As a result, we misunderstand what animates those structures, and hence how they can be attacked at their deepest levels. Without this ancient insight, we have lost a genuine understanding of how oligarchy’s challenge can and must be addressed.

To develop our understanding of oligarchy’s moral passions and arguments, political scientists must recover what has been lost in our own discipline. Empirical studies of wealth concentration, political participation, or policy outcomes will not suffice. We must restore political philosophy to its rightful place as the fundamental approach to the problem of oligarchy, especially through the debate between the ancients and the moderns. For further study, we most urgently need a closer analysis of the oligarchs’ political passions, especially their eros for the noble. To carry on this present work at a deeper level, we propose to dig further into the moderns’ understanding of eros to see if they do in fact provide a decisive critique of the ancients’ doctrine. Perhaps then can we find the resources to continue to restore life to our impoverished study of what has been, and may again be, the most serious political challenge to democracy.
Given the danger, we cannot let uncritical faith in democracy's justice blind us to the challenge of oligarchy. Nor can we allow uncritical support for (or hostility toward) liberal democracy keep us from investigating its moral relationship to oligarchy. Most importantly, we must renew the study of oligarchy so that we can understand a powerful critique of democratic justice. Only by engaging our great opponent can we gain the self-critical distance necessary for the existence of a truly healthy democratic politics.
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170


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