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The Statesman and His State: Cicero on the Commonwealth

AIVARAS STEPUKONIS

Lithuanian Culture Research Institute

astepukonis@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-3757-6620

The article explains Cicero's theory of state culminating in the conception of the commonwealth, the most stable form of political governance, grounded on a critically selective synthesis of the three simple forms of state: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Though Cicero discards the latter individually, he nevertheless thinks that by bringing them together and arranging their diverse political elements into a special structure of interdependence, a new form of state – the commonwealth – may emerge which would correct and overcome all the defects and shortcomings infecting the three simple forms of state, separately. The commonwealth, therefore, is a composite form of state that attempts to combine and mix various political aspects of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy in order to produce a more stable and permanent form of political governance.

Keywords: classical antiquity, Hellenistic period, Cicero, philosophy, politics, state, monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, commonwealth, statesmanship.

Thomas Merton once pronounced, “No man is an island.” Indeed, such was the title of a book by him¹. A brief utterance it is, and yet how profound and searching. It takes some intellectual effort, some inner brooding, yes, even some emotional plumbing of the heart to arrive at the comprehension that the idea of man², no matter how rich and fertile may its sense as an individual and singular creature be, if his essential portrait is but the skeletal

“man alone,” if his being draws no enlightenment from the idea of humanity, then the very import of what it means to be a man is bound to melt and evaporate in the fires of losing one's self in the perilous solitude of self-seeking. For what is man *qua* man, if not man *qua* mankind; and what is mankind, if not a fellowship of human beings of whom there is many? Even as they are numerous, so hold they together. They share, that is, a course of life gregarious in nature, they possess common experience as a community. And where there is a common share, there must also be a common care, a concern for the fate and fortune of other men. To iterate, no man is an island. Be it

1 See Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 1955.

2 Throughout the article, I shall adhere to the generic usage of the words ‘man’ and ‘men,’ including the masculine personal pronouns referring to them, to signify ‘human’ and ‘humans,’ respectively.

an ascetic hermit, wandering and rambling all by himself in the scorching sands of an abandoned wilderness, or some recluse of a literary genius steeped in a world of fantasy with no one round about, or else a nomadic shepherd whose only solace rests in the companionship of his sheep and the surrounding endless skies, bright and naked, full of countless gleaming luminaries, whoever it be and whatever the sense of their leaving and departing their fellow men, it is ever a leaving with the hope of a return, a departing with an expectation of arriving once again. Thus, no man is an island. And should he attempt to become one, he shall have to accomplish it at the risk of his very humanity, at the expense of his very self.

The Mere Philosopher *versus* the True Statesman

Centuries ago, even before the world had witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ, there lived a sage who shunned no civil enterprise, nay, he was deeply attracted to the community of men both in action and in decision, he was blessed with a profound understanding of matters humane, imbued with a passionate resolve to serve the cause of the people, amidst whom he lived, to make their shared life prosper and abound. He, the wiseman, followed his aged experience and, scrutinizing the comportment of the men, who too laid claim to wisdom and learning, took it to notice that among these there were two kinds: some, who were indulged in mere speculation and useless thought and others, who, fond of knowledge though they were,

felt themselves compelled and inspired by a sense of public duty to lead an active life of virtue. The first kind, called philosophers, outright disgusted any civic station; rather, they chose to enjoy the ease of retirement from social occupation, they spent time in leisure and contemplation, eschewing each and every political business as a trap and a snare. The second kind, however, statesmen by name, appeared almost the contrary of the first. Theirs was the course of brave, irrevocable action. With their voice resounded the courts, their arguments moved the decisions of magistrates. By their own hands, covered with sweat and blood, in a glorious victory or in an infamous retreat, they it was who shaped and molded the destiny of the state and its populace, avoiding no danger, frightened by no challenge, as if in the frenzy of public achievement they had elevated the life of others above their own. Whence comes such a disregard for one's well-being and such an adamant dedication for the welfare of fellow citizens? How is this possible? The sage said in reply:

I content myself with this one assertion: The need and love for noble actions, which nature has given to men that they may defend the common weal, are so compelling that they have overcome all the enticements of pleasure and of ease.³

Indeed many an art, be it the mastery of sculpture or the craft of ship-building, may on occasion become a topic for theoretical discourse. There is, to wit, a place for practice and a place for pure understanding of an art under consideration. But what one

³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, I.I, p.106.

is to make of virtue, will it find the vigor of its meaning in the realm of mere words and definitions, or will it rather dwindle and fade away in the haze of capricious and ever insatiable surmises, unless it is animated through tangible deed and palpable action, unless it is vitalized through true moral performance? The sage had his say and spake thus: “[V]irtue entirely depends upon its use,”⁴ and its highest and loftiest application resides in the government of a state. To chatter about virtue without living it seems as vain and futile as an attempt to express what language is without using it. On the contrary, to pursue virtue and behave according to it is to dismiss every philosophical asylum, abandon each theoretical haven, however complacent and endearing it may appear to one’s gratification, and to enter the wavering stage of civil performance and act in good faith, face the turmoils of public life and overcome them, stand ready to suffer on behalf of other men when evils befall them, and be gladdened and cheered up when their undertakings are met with success. That is the first difference between a philosopher and a statesman, a difference between a person who talks about virtue and one who has it in his blood.

Still, another distinguishing mark must not escape the ears of the hearer, if the contrast between a philosopher and a statesman is to bear fruitfully upon the latter’s discernment. This, moreover, relates not to the private traits which frame one’s outlook and stature as a man of reflection or that of action, but to the nature of how

the two sorts of men conduct themselves in effecting the manner and thoughts of others bringing about a benevolent change in their lives, bettering their condition. Since a philosopher has no taste for, nay, is repulsed by the dreary toils and drudgeries of petty social involvement, his sole predilection lying in the retired undulations of unimpeded thought, his only means of association with fellow men is reason alone, underpinned by argument, perhaps, but ever confined to thought. Even so, what is the power of an argument empty of example, bereft of experience, void of demonstration, what is its might, furthermore, when the manifold failures and deficiencies of the people’s understanding are not glossed over, but taken into account? Will it, the argument, as it spins its intricate threads and weaves them into untraceable designs of intellectual wizardry, will it succeed to bear upon the mind of the commons? Unlikely. It is surer, however, that it will impart to the simple folk a pernicious state of perplexity and fill them with mistrust and suspicion for arguments in general, such as Socrates once described when he spoke of misology⁵. Yet, a statesman carries all the superiority of persuasiveness, for he needs not to seek beyond his own life; rather, he sets himself as a model of virtuous life and convinces his fellow men by being the kind of man he is, and not imposing a moral task on others which he has not carried out himself. He is destined to become a leader of the people whose happiness he will make his cardinal goal. And is their a higher and nobler vocation, and a graver

4 *Ibid.*, I,II, p. 106.

5 See Plato, *Phaedo*, 89d–91c, pp. 40–43; *Republic*, 411c4–e3, p. 101; *Laches*, 188c, pp. 27–28.

responsibility, than holding the mandate conferred by the people to be in charge of their affairs and care for their weal? Such a mandate is a true possession of a statesman, a treasure none of which is in the hands of a philosopher, so long he is but what he is.

A proof that a philosopher and a statesman is not one and the same vocation, nonetheless, is not yet a proof that a person ought to prefer one to the other, or that one is more advantageous and beneficial than the other. Perhaps it has been hinted that the life of a statesman should be emulated, whereas that of a philosopher reprimanded. But does not the opposite case emerge as soon as the actual manner in which men deal with their like is consulted?

First, there seems to accompany nearly every political activity, the higher it ascends the ladder of public importance, a multitude of dangers and misfortunes. Who, at least a trifling versed in the history of civil strife, is not aware of numerous instances when men of perspicuous social prominence were subjected to persecution, confiscation of property, ridicule, banishment, and even death. Who is so silly and inconsiderate as to expose himself to such trouble and harm? Who, that is to say, lacks foresight and circumspection to such a degree as to become a statesman? To embark upon such a course of life is no glorious feat but an atrocity committed both against oneself and against one's friends, a cruelty, moreover, wrought on rash impulse and barren expectation.

Yet, the sage had his say and spake thus:
All who talk like this

hold up the base fear of death before the eyes
of brave men, although brave men usually

find it more pitiable to be worn out by the natural infirmities of age than to have the opportunity of surrendering for their country, as they prefer, the life which in any case they must surrender to nature.⁶

None of us is to evade the macabre clutches of unsated death, die and vanish must all of us as soon as at the ominous signal of ruthless fate is trumpeted, still it is within the power of each and every man to decide whether his death will be noble or base, glorious or ignominious, courageous or cowardly, apt to edify or to corrupt those who witness it. Virtue is the signpost which adjudicates whether one's abode erected in hereafter is to sore among the triumphant family of luminous stars or to roam and prowl in the breathless darkness of the Hades murky and morose.

But perhaps the opponent of political path is careless about matters of death having fixed his sight exclusively on life with its countless and unforetold incidents, its successes and mishaps, to wit, having set his eyes but on life here and now. And what does he find in this restless world of tumult and oppression? He observes that very often those who extol the possession of virtue, who unreservedly toil in the alleviation of fellow men's misery and indigence, who fight for public order laying equitable laws, establishing honorable tradition, maintaining precious customs, it is these men who so often are brought to naught precisely by those whom they saved and restored to a state of well-being and decency, it is these pitiable people, called statesmen, who in

6 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, I.III, p. 107.

the end receive no recognition of their merits, no distinction for their notorious deed, who in the end are destined to suffer anguish and disillusion. How gross must the dissipation of their hopes be, when their public accomplishment instead of reverence and acknowledgment is accorded the spite and hatred of the mass, who, given the right occasion, are ready to seize on their political leaders and with wickedness and ingratitude stultify and degrade them. If this is the lot of a statesman, asserts the opponent, then no person of understanding will wish to be one.

Calm and peaceful, the sage had his say and spake thus: "Truly [...] virtue enjoys many consolations and, in particular, it is sustained by its own peculiar glory."⁷ The true recognition of virtue, whereby alone the incandescent splendor of its greatness may appear, comes properly not from men, but from God, whose verdict is as immutable as it is eternal, notwithstanding whether humans consent or disagree with the divine law, for God's promise stays, but the opinion of mortals passes way just as they themselves. As a result, honor, fame, and distinction stick to virtue even if none is attributed to it by people blind and negligent. A statesman, thus, is ever a man of honor, fame, and distinction. For God sees the goodness of his deeds and fails not to reward him.

Indeed scarce have become the objections of a mere philosopher inimical and adverse to the incumbency of public duty. In reply, therefore, he endeavors to mount one

more argument in order to discredit those who opine that pursuit of virtue enjoins on man taking part in managing the affairs and enterprises of the human community whose member he is, participating, that is, in fulfilling the obligation towards one's mother country. Behold the demeanor of politicians, watch their moral predilections, heralds the mere philosopher, and you will see that these are corrupt and worthless men. They crave for power, covet riches and possession, desire vain-glory, indulge in endless pleasures. Their single target is self-gratification, their principal means is political deception and beguilement. They look on the world through the eyes of their belly. How empty and conceited is the goodness of their reign, how evil and cunning their care for the countrymen, for they seek the order of the state, because it is under such circumstances that they have learned to profit at best; they strive to relieve the lot of the commons by loaning them money and property, why, if not because they are masters of usury ravished by the greed for the gain of their investments. Such is the real portrayal of politicians, exclaims the mere philosopher caught by now in a rhapsodic frenzy. And woe to everybody, who approves of their lives, fraught with savagery and mischief though they are.

Neither the heat of words, nor their hypnotic contagion, could breach the unperturbed conviction of the sage, who had his say and spake thus: Verily, there are such politicians as described who are nothing but spurious leaders and pseudo-statesmen. And this is the loftiest task of a genuine statesman, that such brutes and rogues be eradicated from any public occupation.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III.XXVIII, p. 221 (a passage borrowed from Lactantius (*inst.* 5.18. 4–8) to fill the lacuna).

As if a good and brave and high-minded man could find a more honorable reason for entering public life than the desire to avoid the rule of scoundrels or to prevent them from rending the common wealth, while he himself, though eager to aid, looks impotently on.⁸

Is it not obvious, that our need for good statesmen arises exactly from our need to dispense with all the bad ones? It is of crucial importance, therefore, that good, earnest, and virtuous statesmen be reared and nurtured for the sake of the country's weal.

As for the mere philosopher, his social passivity should be regarded as sloth and indolence. Nor is his excuse to be accepted, when he condescends to proffer his assistance in cases of civil emergency, in times of the state's tribulation and decline. For such an assistance will be deemed sterile and fruitless. The mere philosopher has failed to note, that statesmanship is an art, which is imparted by long hours of special education and is inculcated by arduous training and exercise in the management of public matters. As a consequence, in order to aid the state in times of trouble and emergency one needs to possess two things: a proper knowledge and a relevant political station, the latter being the requisite if that knowledge is not to remain in practical potency but to come to fruition by effecting a change in the maintenance of the commonwealth.

Hence, the mere philosopher is doomed to appear useless, and truly be so, when his comrades suffer at the hands of injustice, be it inside or outside of their homeland. For

he proudly omitted the instruction in civil procedures, nor has he got a position in the state which would render him in capacity to transform the evils besieging his country into goods that nourish it and sustain. He is no lover of wisdom but of stupidity, and let him wonder not if he harkens to lie judgments from others, too. In retort the sage had his say and spoke thus:

It has always seemed especially strange to men in the discourses of the learned, that men who admit that they cannot pilot the ship when the sea is calm, because they have never learned how nor troubled about such knowledge, nevertheless declare that they will take the helm when the waves are highest.⁹

Let him, the mere philosopher, be not offended when he is charged with folly and blunder. On the contrary, let him, before it is too late, submit to study in politics, take public obligation to heart, and follow the bidding of civil duty.

Even so, who is this sage and what is his name? It is Marcus Tullius Cicero. The work in which he has laid down his vision of a good statesman as well as of the nature of a good state is entitled *De republica* or, as English has it, *On the Commonwealth*. The purpose of the preceding paragraphs was, however, not so much the theme of a good statesman as an intellectual portrait of Cicero himself who gives the following account of his political schooling:

[I]t has been my good fortune not only to have performed some memorable service in

8 *Ibid.*, I.V, p. 110.

9 *Ibid.*, I.VI, p. 111.

the course of my public career, but also to have attained a degree of skill in the exposition of political theory. Both as a result of experience, therefore, and also because of my zeal for learning and teaching, I became an authority on matters touching the state. The scholars of the past, on the other hand, had been either acute in argument but without any record of achievement, or they had been commendable for their conduct of public office but without skill in presenting their arguments.¹⁰

Knowledge and experience for Cicero are an inseparable pair, and he excelled in both. His academic credit includes legal studies in Rome as well as subsequent education in Greece and Asia Minor. Not to mention the abundance of his political, social, and philosophical writings, translations, commentaries. The scope of Cicero's political experience is even more spectacular: At one or another moment of his life Cicero became an advocate, a quaestor¹¹, a curule aedile¹², a praetor¹³, and finally a consul. Throughout he managed his office with honesty and efficiency. In the person of Cicero, especially in his aspiration to unite intelligence, virtue, and experience and make it his basis for public action, we find thus the model and epitome of what a true statesman is supposed to be. Cicero

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I.VIII, p. 112.

¹¹ "One of numerous ancient Roman officials concerned chiefly with financial administration" (Frederick C. Mish, (ed.), *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 962).

¹² "An official in Rome in charge of public works and games, police, and the grain supply" (*ibid.*, p. 60).

¹³ "An ancient Roman magistrate ranking below a consul and having chiefly judicial functions" (*ibid.*, p. 923).

was a man of common sense, rooted in and attuned to the factual condition of the world: he spoke of morality, but ever with reference to concrete human beings and their actual comportment; in a similar fashion, he talked about the theory of the state, but ever with respect to one particular state, the Roman commonwealth, the history of its origins and political evolution. It is the latter term, "commonwealth," that is employed by Cicero, when he attempts in *De republica* to circumscribe the optimal constitution and arrangement of a state. Let us make, then, as the primary aim of the upcoming discussion the inquiry into the meaning of "commonwealth" which Cicero assigns to it. We shall, however, be greatly aided in the realization of our task, if we first view over Cicero's treatment of the three simple forms of state, i.e., monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

The three simple forms of state

A state whose power and government is delegated to one person, called a king, is a monarchy. To the latter's competence it pertains to establish and enact laws, perform judicial functions, decide over questions of war and peace, regulate foreign policy. Even as the whole of the grand universe is guided and directed by the reason of *one single* Divinity, as the *one* rational soul subdues and orders the multitude of turbulent passions and unruly appetites, as a ship sails best when at its rudder stands a *single* pilot, most of all experienced in voyaging and seafaring, as the excellent and efficacious supervision of the works and chores of an estate is due to a *single* shrewd and indus-

trious steward, as the good health of an infirmity-stricken human being is quickest restored by *one individual* physician, in as much as he is an outstanding expert in the medical art, so too are the interests and concerns of a state met and satisfied at best, if they are subject to the wisdom and care of a *single* king.¹⁴ In a monarchy, “[T]he king,” explains Cicero, “is described as if he were a father, planning for his subjects as if they were his children, and zealously protecting them [but never reducing them to subjection].”¹⁵ This, in fact, becomes the principal reason, why the simple form of state which is most favored and endorsed by Cicero is that of monarchy, namely, it is on behalf of the “love which the king bears to his subjects”¹⁶ that monarchy is so greatly praised and admired.

When the course of a state is steered by the mind and will of those whom the populace has agreed to select as men of utmost ability and excellence, such a state is termed an aristocracy. “[N]ature,” it is claimed by the upholders of the aristocratic type of government, “has contrived to make the men who are superior in courage and ability to rule over the weak, and the weak willing to submit themselves to the best.”¹⁷ Does not a free people wish to be secure? Does not the stability of the country hold the highest importance in the eyes of its faithful citizens? And if so, should not this task be entrusted to the prudence and discernment of the ablest and most virtuous

of its members? But this is an exact presentation of the ideal of an aristocracy, in accordance with which the best of the state is accomplished in the state of the best. For Cicero the prime excellence of aristocracy consists in its “wisdom and counsel.”¹⁸

At last, a democratic state is one in which all authority lies “in the hands of the people themselves.”¹⁹ Thus, it is the people that control legislation, they it is that administer justice, contrive military exploits and guard peace, conclude treaties, and decide over the civil status of their own property.²⁰ Is not this the true sense of freedom and the appropriate meaning of citizenry? As Aristotle, that eminent and venerable teacher of Western tradition, pinpointed it: he is a citizen who participates in the state by possessing the right and freedom to govern and to be governed.²¹ The democratic state, it is thought, contains the most auspicious conditions wherein such a capacity to govern and to be governed is brought to an exceptional height of fulfillment and consummation. The renown and greatness of democracy, according to Cicero, emanates from its earnest devotion to the liberty of men.²²

At this point, the first meaning of commonwealth comes into view. Cicero describes it as follows:

The commonwealth [...] is the people’s affair; and the people is not every group of men,

14 See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, I.LXXXVI–IX, pp. 141–5.

15 *Ibid.*, I.LXXXV, p. 140.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, I.LXXXIV, p. 138.

18 *Ibid.*, I.LXXXV, p. 140.

19 *Ibid.*, I.LXXXVI, p. 131.

20 See *Ibid.*, I.LXXXII, p. 135–6.

21 See Aristotle, *Politics*, III, 1274 b, p. 173 ff.

22 See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, I.LXXXV, p. 140.

associated in any manner, but is the coming together of a considerable number of men who are united by common agreement about law and rights and by the desire to participate in mutual advantages.²³

The reason, moreover, why people are prone to associate one with another, why they share the means of sustenance and concert their interests for the sake of communal unity, is not some kind of deficiency, nor is its basis a mere striving for self-centered utility, but rather it has its source in a “kind of social instinct natural to man,” who, as Cicero aptly remarks, “is not solitary.”²⁴ It is worthwhile noting, then, that monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy all in turn represent a sort of commonwealth, since each of them has sprung from such a social instinct embodied in a more or less common agreement about law and rights. Whichever simple form of state is under consideration, the social order by which its members are bound and united Cicero terms the “commonwealth.”²⁵ It is in the latter sense of commonwealth that after having scrutinized and appraised the three aforementioned forms of commonwealth Cicero declares that,

There is, accordingly, a *fourth kind of commonwealth* which, in my opinion, should receive the highest approval, since it is formed by the combination, in due measure, of the three forms of state which I described as original.²⁶

23 *Ibid.*, I.XXV, p. 129.

24 *Ibid.*, I.XXV, p. 129. This is also the view held by Aristotle.

25 *Ibid.*, I.XXVI, p. 131.

26 *Ibid.*, I.XXIX, p. 134.

We shall return to this passage shortly to examine its entire message. At present, however, it is enough to grasp the first meaning of commonwealth defined as a social bond among human beings rooted in the observance of common laws which bring forth and secure mutually desired benefits. According to this meaning of commonwealth, as a result, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy each is a commonwealth.

Although the eminent cause precipitating the rise of commonwealth in the above sense is, as has been shown, a kind of social instinct, the fact which at least in part explicates why there exist in the world such a thing as a state, and this mostly in the form of a monarchy, an aristocracy, or a democracy, the latter cause, nevertheless, ought not to be confounded with still another cause which accounts for why an actual type of commonwealth lasts and perseveres and not collapses and disappears in time and under variant and diverse historical circumstances. The difference in question here is between the cause of a state's origin and that of its duration. In Cicero's opinion, the three simple forms of commonwealth, though they came into being due to men's proclivity for gregarious life, which is the cause of their origin, nevertheless, they lack a principle of organization that would ensure their stability and endurance. Hence, what faults and weaknesses does Cicero detect in monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic states and their governments, respectively? Let us examine them in turn.

The weakness of a monarchy originates from its unyielding tendency to deprive the people of an active role in shaping the life of the state. The regal hegemony of the kind

arrogates the reign of the state exclusively to itself and prevents the citizens from taking initiative in any deliberative function of political office. The establishment and recification of laws and rights is the single prerogative of the monarch and is not accessible to the will and decision of the commons, though such a capacity should, in Cicero's opinion, "belong to the whole people."²⁷ In a commonwealth, where an aristocratic type of government prevails, the situation is similar to that of a monarchy, since here likewise the few ablest are too ready to position themselves as the only rulers of the country. The people, in turn, are supplied with no executive or deliberative powers and must remain subject to the commands imposed from above. In an aristocratic state, as a consequence, the people are not free. Finally, the grave error of a democratic populace – for a democratic state consists of its populace – is that it seizes all to indiscriminately on what they call equality, thus obliterating all social distinction and paying no regard to an individual's personal deserts. Cicero candidly remarks that, "their very equality is inequitable in that it does not recognize degrees of merit."²⁸ The fruit

of one's accomplishment ought ever to eschew rising beyond the mediocre, in order not to incur the resentment and retaliation of the mass for whom even talents must be equally distributed.

Yet, there is another class of shortcomings much more serious and fatal that undermine and weaken the foundations of all three simple forms of state. It is their noxious disposition, so often attested to by history, to degenerate and assume a certain perverse and disfigured mold. Who is to assure that the monarch, who wields absolute dominion over his state, will not, all of a sudden, succumb to some utterly inhuman drive or passion and become a ferocious and brutal tyrant thirsty for blood and orgy? Who is not shaken by suspicion and unsettled by fear that one day the men naming themselves aristocrats will not turn into a clique of selfish demagogues looking only for the gratification of their avaricious desires and for this end oppressing their countrymen, even as the Thirty Tyrants did at one time in Athens? Similar misgivings surround the case of democracy, as well. Here Athens once more serves as a good example, the city wherein, in Cicero's vivid depiction, the "absolute power of the people degenerated into irresponsible madness of a mob."²⁹

Hence, the defect of monarchy is its inclination to degenerate into tyranny, that of aristocracy to become oligarchy, whereas democracy is vitiated by a proneness to

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I.XXVII, p. 132.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Compare this with the following passage from Aristotle's *Politics*, 1280a 8–10, p. 211–213: "For all men lay hold on justice of some sort, but they only advance to a certain point, and do not express the principle of absolute justice in its entirety. For instance, it is thought that justice is equality, and so it is, though not for everybody but only for those who are equal; and it is thought that inequality is just, for so indeed it is, though not for everybody, but for those who are unequal, but these partisans strip away the qualification of the persons concerned, and judge badly. [...] [T]hey think that what they say is absolutely just. For the one side thinks that if they are unequal in some respects, for

instance in wealth, they are entirely unequal, and the other side think that if they are equal in some respects, for instance in freedom, they are entirely equal"

²⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, I.XXVIII, p. 133.

gravitate towards ochlocracy. Some scholars have pointed to the fact, that Cicero is not consistent in designating the exact order of political transformation from a good form of state to an evil one. There are other passages in *De republica* where Cicero seems to intimate that monarchy can also degenerate into either ochlocracy or oligarchy, or that democracy under certain circumstances may turn either into tyranny or into oligarchy.³⁰ The preceding remarks, however, far from invalidating Cicero's general thesis, make it even stronger in that now it is not only the case that each good form of simple state may permute itself into a corresponding bad version but also that some good forms of simple state have more than one bad alternative.

Still, it would be quite dishonest and inconsiderate to criticize the three simple forms of state while giving no ear to what the advocates of either monarchy, or aristocracy, or democracy, have prepared in their defense. We are not in a position to consult all the texts of *De republica* in which Cicero spares no facility of phrase, saves no eloquence, for describing and presenting the views of such advocates. Here it will suffice to glance at their major claims and Cicero's replies to these.

The defenders of democracy, for instance, assert that "it is not right for democracy in general to be condemned because an uncontrolled populace has defects; that, so long as a people is harmonious and subordinates everything to its safety and freedom, there is no form of government less subject

to revolution or more stable."³¹ Yet, as far as Cicero is concerned, is not this precisely the decisive deficiency of democracy that the condition for its permanence, namely, a harmonious people that prizes safety and freedom, can in fact never be purveyed and secured by democracy itself? That the populace can be orderly at one time and rebellious at another remains a fact over which democracy has no sway whatsoever. As a result, it exerts no power over the fact which determines whether democracy is to stay what it is or is to devolve into ochlocracy.

The partisans of aristocracy in turn complain that the

perfect relationship between men [in such a state] has been overthrown [...] by the false notions that prevail about human excellence. For, as few men possess excellence, so few are able to recognize and judge it.³²

Even so, notwithstanding the mundane ineptitude of the mass to discern what is really excellent and what is not, is it not also true that the very connoisseurs of the nature of excellence so often fumble and grope once they face the task of determining what particular qualities are excellent and what are not, and among those that are excellent, which are more excellent than others. Cicero's question is this: "What, I ask, is the criterion by which [an] aristocrat is judged? Is it learning, or culture, or scholarly tastes, as I hear?"³³ It is also not clear, let us append, what difference it makes whether someone

30 See George Holland Sabine, Stanley Barney Smith, "On the Commonwealth: Introduction," p. 56 ff.

31 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, I.XXXII, p. 136.

32 *Ibid.*, I.XXXIV, p. 138.

33 *Ibid.*, I.XXXIII, p. 137.

knows what true excellence is or not, since, as is admitted by the proponents of aristocracy themselves, “being ignorant..., the masses suppose that men of wealth, influence, and important family connection are the best,” and does not this entail that as long as masses remain a vital part of a so-called aristocracy, it is bound to be something else than a genuine aristocracy, it is bound, that is to say, to degenerate into something else, and this for the worse of it.

At last, in order to uphold the case of monarchy someone may say that a king by definition is the dispenser of benevolent paternity, he tends and cares for his subjects as a parent for his children. And yet, retorts Cicero in response, when mellifluous words are set aside and the eyes are fastened on the lessons of history, is not there a plenitude of evidence that “mercy is as possible in a tyrant as cruelty in a king?”³⁴

The commonwealth: definition and critique

We thus have examined some of the reasons why Cicero is critical of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy as independent and simple forms of state. Even so, though he discards them individually, Cicero nevertheless thinks that by bringing them together and arranging their diverse political elements into a special structure of interdependence, a new form of state may emerge which would correct and overcome all the defects and shortcomings infecting the three simple forms of state, separately. At this point, after having learned the first

sense of commonwealth, we are better able to appreciate what Cicero means by commonwealth in the second sense. To put it briefly, it’s a composite state that attempts to combine and mix various political aspects of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The ideal of Cicero’s commonwealth is therefore to unite into one the king’s love, the wise man’s excellence, and the freeman’s liberty.

Unfortunately, as soon as one endeavors to inquire into the particular details and procedures of how the monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements interact one with another in the Ciceronian commonwealth, and further, as soon as one asks as to what persons and what institutions correspondingly represent those elements, he is left at best uninformed. This is in part due to the fragmentary state in which *De republica* was recovered,³⁵ yet, even in the extant portions of the book Cicero appears confusing and sometimes outright inconsistent. To try to reconstruct, the democratic element is likely to be embodied in the popular assemblies and councils which were at the base of the Roman state. The aristocratic element might be assigned to various magistracies and to the senate. And finally, the royal element would be exemplified in the two Roman consuls that presided over the senate or in the dictator who held absolute power in times of so-called *interrex* when the state was upset by either internal upheaval or external conflict. It is obvious, however, that such correlations are little more than tentative and fragile. Neither a

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The text was discovered by a librarian of the Vatican, Angelo Mai, who published it in 1822. It is generally ascertained to constitute about one-third of Cicero’s complete work known as *De republica*.

dictator, whose office is too transitive and precarious, nor consuls, of whom there are always two and who are subject to election, can satisfactorily encapsulate the kingly prerogatives of a monarch. To complicate the story even further, there are passages in *De republica* in which Cicero seems to attribute the legal rights, functions, and duties appertaining to royalty to the magistrates instead of the senate.³⁶

However scarce are the actual schemata explaining in practical terms the nature of co-operation of the three simple forms of state in the framework of the one composite commonwealth, still Cicero's general principle that the preservation and permanence of the state greatly depends on

a proper balance of the monarchic, the aristocratic, and the democratic elements may be retained and cherished. The hallmark of Cicero's commonwealth is its stability and permanence added to a people's common agreement about law and rights. The commonwealth, in contrast to monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, excludes the very possibility of degenerating into any bad type of government. Should therefore emerge an evil state, it cannot be a commonwealth.

We have thus approached the close of our investigation, for there is not much to be desired and sought after in political theory beyond the fortune of having contributed, even if in the smallest measure, to the permanence of laws and to the well-being of the people. It is in this sense, that Cicero was one of the most fortunate men who ever lived.

36 See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, II.LXXXIII, p. 185. See also George Holland Sabine, Stanley Barney Smith, "On the Commonwealth: Introduction," pp. 90–99.

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