CHAPTER 4

Political Passions and Civic Corruption

Introduction

What images does the phrase "political corruption" evoke? Perhaps patronage, bribery, nepotism, and election fraud come to mind. Citizens of modern liberal democracies usually associate corruption with corrupt politicians who abuse their political power for personal gain. Many Americans will readily think of Watergate, when the investigation of a 1972 break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington, D.C. revealed a series of abuses of power by the Nixon administration that ultimately led to the President's resignation.

Corruption is harmful. It leads to the distrust of politicians and to cynicism about politics itself. As harmful as this may be, the solution to corrupt politicians is straightforward enough: vote them out of office. Not surprisingly, then, running against political corruption has a long history of propelling the candidacies of populist politicians, especially in American politics.

The notion of political corruption as the abuse of power for personal gain is not without analogues in the Roman Republic. For instance, in the first century BCE, as running for office became an increasingly competitive and expensive endeavor, electoral bribery increased, leading to the enactment of *ambitus* laws regulating the means by which candidates canvassed for votes (*ambitus*, a euphemism for bribery, comes from the Latin verb, *ambire*, "to go around [asking for support]"). And since many candidates entered office in debt from the election, cases of extortion (*repetundae*) by magistrates became a growing concern.[1]

When we consider the ideology of Roman republicanism, we find a much fuller and more robust sense of political corruption. In book 3 of

[1] For *ambitus* legislation and the related ideas of electoral corruption, bribery, and extortion, see Linderski 1985; Lintott 1990; Yakobson 1999: 22–43; Feig Vishnia 2012.

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De legibus, Cicero argues, "the entire civic community (*civitas*) tends to be infected (*infici*) by the passions and vices of its leaders" (3.30). In such a case, the political leaders are both themselves corrupted (*corrumpuntur*) and corrupt others (*corrumpunt*; 3.32). In Cicero's opinion, because of their position and status a very few members of the aristocracy "have the capacity to either corrupt (*corrumpere*) or restore the habits of the civic community" (*mores civitatis*; 3.32). Though the phenomenon of corruption begins with the inordinate passions and vices of leaders, it extends to the whole civic community; it infects and diminishes civic practices and ultimately the community itself. The verb *corrumpere* often indicates harm or injury to the body. Corruption in this sense denotes a lack of health in the body politic.

Cicero's account of corruption assumes that political leaders are the key to causing and remedying the civic body's infection. A different explanation is suggested by his contemporary Sallust in his monographs *The Jugurthine War* and, especially, *Catiline's Conspiracy*. A new man born in Amiternum, a town 50 miles northeast of Rome, Sallust endured an up and down career in politics. He held the office of tribune in 52 BCE, but he was subsequently expunged from the senate in 50. After serving in Caesar's army from 49 to 44, he was made governor of a province. Once again he suffered a setback, when he was charged with extortion. At this point, he retired from political life and turned his attention to writing history.[2]

Sallust's account of corruption begins with passions and the Roman honor code. The Republic fell into corruption when the Romans' unlimited and unrestrained passions overcame their virtue. The Romans wanted too much – too much money and power, "the root of all evils" (Sal. *Cat.* 10.3). These vices perverted the aristocratic code. Under the Roman honor code, wealth was a constitutive part of a wider life dedicated to the pursuit of public office, glory, and standing – hence, it had value only if pursued "by honest means" (Plin. *Nat.* 7.139; Sal. *Cat.* 7.6). Now money was desired for its own sake, the result of "boundless and insatiable" greed (Sal. *Cat.* 11.3). Similarly, the desire for glory, which previously held value only if achieved by honorable competition, had degenerated into the desire to exercise power over others. The excessive desire for glory gave way to the desire for power, and that desire in turn led to the desire to dominate

[2] For Sallust's biography, see Syme 1964; for his political thought, see Earl 1961 (virtue and the honor code); Kapust 2011b: chs. 2–3 (conflict and rhetoric); Connolly 2015: ch. 2 (justice, economic inequality, and judgment); Hammer 2014: ch. 3 (memory).

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others – the lust for domination (*lubido dominandi*), a dangerous desire that directly threatened freedom (Sal. *Cat.* 2.2; 5.6; *Hist.* 2.38).

Sallust's account moves beyond the corruption of aristocratic leaders considered by Cicero in *De legibus* 3 to consider broader political and economic dynamics. The proscriptions and constitutional reforms under the dictatorships of the general Sulla (82–79 BCE) intensified the struggles between the *optimates* and *populares*. Politically ambitious men appealed to the rights of the people or to the *auctoritas* of the senate to promote their careers, leading to a brutal power struggle without moderation or limit (38.4). They lost sight of the common good and mangled the *res publica* – the *common*wealth (cf. Sal. *Jug.* 41.9–10; 42.3–5). Add to this struggle for power widespread economic debt that left the poor subservient to the power of the few, and the stage was set for the revolution described in *Catiline's Conspiracy*.

Two episodes from *Catiline's Conspiracy* reveal characteristics of a corrupt political body. The first is Catiline's speech, as represented by Sallust, to urge on his supporters at paragraph 20. He points out the need of the dispossessed to reclaim their liberty from the sway of the few (20.7) who hold and control "all influence, power, honor, and wealth" (20.8). Catiline, emphasizing his followers' virtue (*virtus*) and faithfulness (*fides*), enumerates traditional Roman virtues, such as courage and hard work. Yet contrary to the impression in Sallust's introduction, the possession of these virtues does not lead to a share in the goods of the aristocratic political culture because of the many's subservience to the few (*obnoxii* at 20.7 has connotations of servitude). Their subservience is enhanced by an oppressive and widespread economic debt. Catiline emphasizes the unfairness and hopelessness of his followers' second-rate status despite their exercise of republican virtues. Despite displaying demagogic characteristics, Catiline's rhetoric reveals a deep connection between greed, economic standing, and citizenship. As Joy Connolly (2015: 105) observes, "Catiline claims that being a citizen of republican Rome is a matter not only of law and political freedom, but economic standing."

The second episode is the concluding debate in the senate between Caesar and Cato over whether to execute the leading conspirators without trial. Sallust emphasizes the "extraordinary virtue" of these two political giants. Each attained greatness and glory, but by different routes. Caesar was known for his benevolence, generosity, compassion, mercy, easiness, devotion, and hard work. He needed the grand stage of combat upon which to display his virtue. Cato, on the other hand, built his reputation on integrity, severity, steadfastness, moderation, and abstinence.

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The paragon of republican virtue, "he preferred to be good than to seem good" (54.6). Yet as Sallust's readers would have known, for all of their virtues, these two men would soon find themselves opposed in civil conflict that would ultimately lead to the death of both (Cato by suicide; Caesar by assassination), and ultimately, to that of the Republic. Tethered to an unstable honor code that had lost its bearing on the common good, republican virtues could no longer ensure a free *res publica*.

Sallust links corruption to political division and factionalism, emotions like envy, greed, and the lust for power, and the loss of virtue. Corruption occurs because of a defect of the passions – either because they become inordinate and unlimited, or because they become perverted by seeking inappropriate objectives as defined by the Republican honor code – for example, mastery over others or money as a *per se* value. The defect of passions leads to a condition in which the civic virtues that facilitate cooperation among citizens are absent. Consequently, the civic body is corrupted, shredded, and diminished by faction. As the episodes from *Catiline's Conspiracy* show, a corrupt civic body is one in which part of the civic body is subservient, or in danger of becoming subservient, to another; its ill-health is manifested when displaying the "normal" social behaviors and virtues can no longer lead to civic wholeness.

For Sallust, then, corruption is a far deeper and more difficult matter than the misconduct of elected officials. As in the republican account of corruption described by the political theorist Peter Euben (1989: 223), corruption involves the

> systematic and systemic degeneration of those practices and commitments that provide the terms of collective self-understanding and shared purpose. In a corrupt society each part pretends to be the whole; each interest to be the common one; each faction to make its view and voice exclusive. Under such circumstances the common good is seen (and so comes to be) a ruse for fools and dreamers while the political arena is a place where factions, like gladiators, fight to the death.

We cannot understand Sallust's account of corruption without a deeper investigation of the passions than contemporary accounts of liberal democracy typically provide. Modern liberalism has long been suspicious of the passions, and with good reason. As Sallust himself shows, passions are instrumental in causing faction and corruption. Indeed, one of the virtues of the US Constitution, according to Madison in *Federalist Papers* 10 and 51, is that it provided devices to remedy the problem of faction arising from passions that destroyed ancient republics. In contrast, influential contemporary liberal theorists such as John Rawls largely sideline the emotions

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and place at the heart of liberalism a notion of justice as a principle of reason (but see Nussbaum 2013).

Contemporary liberal and democratic theories that neglect the emotions have been critiqued as being overly idealistic and offering an incomplete account of the human subject (Ferry and Kingston 2008: 4). To these considerations we may add another: by removing the emotions from our accounts of politics, we may indeed eradicate the harmful emotions (at least from our normative theory) but deprive ourselves of the opportunity to consider how to cultivate socially helpful emotions. Here the Romans are particularly useful.[3] In contrast to rationalist accounts of virtue, Sallust and other Roman authors within and beyond the republican tradition conceive of virtue in terms of the capacity to express emotions appropriately. In the words of Paul Woodruff (2001: 61–62), "a virtue is the capacity to have certain feelings and emotions when this capacity has been cultivated through training and experience in such a way that it inclines those who have it to doing the right thing."

This chapter follows Sallust's lead by looking at how select Roman thinkers deal with the key political emotions that threaten to corrupt and ultimately enslave the body politic – greed, envy, and the desire for power. These, of course, are not the only political passions – anger, for example, is an equally important political passion – but they are those most central to discussions of political corruption.[4] As in Sallust's account, the key issue before us concerns limits and restraints on the emotions insofar as they pertain to actions in public life. What dispositions or virtues should citizens cultivate to ensure appropriate emotional responses to other citizens or to events impacting the polity? How might these virtues mitigate the excesses to which the passions for power and wealth are prone, thereby forestalling civic corruption and promoting the common good?

In pursuing answers to these questions, we will focus on the thought of three philosophers – the Epicurean, Lucretius; the Stoic, Seneca; and the Platonist, Plutarch. These authors were not committed advocates of republicanism – though Plutarch would become a foundational source for the later republican tradition in both America and Europe (Richard 1994: ch. 3; Liebert 2016: ch. 2). Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Plutarch's

[3] Cf. Hammer 2014, who locates the ultimate power in Roman political thought in the Romans' exploration of the "affective foundation of political life" (3).

[4] On anger, see Harris 2001 and Nussbaum 1994: ch. 11 (political ramifications of anger in Seneca's *De ira*).

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Platonism have each been described at times as reflecting an unrepublican shift from the flourishing of the polity to the flourishing of the individual human being. We must be careful not to exaggerate this point: in grappling with the emotions that republicans like Sallust linked to civic corruption, Lucretius, Seneca, and Plutarch never lose sight of the implications for political society; indeed, Plutarch wrote his *Parallel Lives* precisely to educate and influence statesmen. Moreover, there are advantages to watching thinkers address a central problem of the republican tradition from the outside. In emphasizing the positive emotions of reverence and gratitude as correctives to the socially destructive emotions, these thinkers point towards virtues that have been underexploited by the republican tradition. They also raise questions about the role of hope in politics.

Lucretius' Epicurean Treatment of Corruption: Reverence and the "Blessings Of Finitude"

De rerum natura (*On the Nature of Things*) is a remarkable work. The poem, written in dactylic hexameter, the traditional meter of epic, takes as its subject matter a topic of truly epic proportion – the universe itself. The work is also didactic and philosophical, instructing Romans about the teachings of Epicurean philosophy, which Lucretius takes to best capture the reality of our world, so that they can live happy lives of maximum pleasure and freedom from physical and (especially) mental pain. The founder of Epicureanism, Epicurus (341–270 BCE), established a school in Athens called the Garden. Among the topics covered by his voluminous writings are physics (the world consists of matter and void); theology (the gods live peaceful, blissful, and invulnerable lives elsewhere, unconcerned with human affairs); epistemology (he was an empiricist); ethics (a hedonist, he believed happiness was achieved by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain); and political thought (he espoused a social contract theory of justice). Like Epicurus' Greek followers, Lucretius venerated him as a godlike hero (Lucr. 1.62–79; 5.1–12, 19–21; 6.7–8). About Lucretius, we know very little. A contemporary of Cicero and Sallust, he was born around 99 BCE and died around 55 BCE.[5]

A number of prominent Roman politicians identified as Epicureans, including the consul and proconsul Piso; the former praetor and supporter

[5] For Epicurus' philosophy, see the English translation of selected texts in Inwood and Gerson 1994. Long and Sedley 1987 provides text, translation, and commentary.

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of Pompey, Torquatus, who fell in battle in Africa; one of Julius Caesar's murderers, Cassius; and, most likely, Caesar himself (Castner 1988). Though Epicurus exhorted his followers, "don't engage in politics" and "live life unnoticed," Geert Roskam (2007) has demonstrated that these prohibitions are not blanket statements but depend on a variable calculus that may allow a faithful Epicurean to engage in politics if certain conditions obtain (for instance, in emergencies where political abstention may threaten the Epicurean values of security and tranquility).

On the face of it, Lucretius can be particularly scathing of politics: he compares the politician seeking political power to the mythical condemned criminal Sisyphus, always pushing a boulder up a hill only to see his efforts frustrated (3.995–1002). At the same time, however, he encourages the work's dedicatee, Memmius, to continue his involvement in politics for the common good (1.41–43). Lucretius may not be as anti-political as the Sisyphus metaphor at first suggests. In describing the Epicurean position in Latin, Cicero uses the same word for "empty" to modify "desire" that Lucretius uses to modify "political rule" in the Sisyphus passage, which in Lucretius' text is immediately preceded by a discussion of the danger of the passions associated with romantic love (cf. Lucr. 3.994, 998 and Cic. *De finibus* 1.59). Perhaps in the Sisyphus passage Lucretius is targeting first and foremost not political rule but the *passion* for political rule, which Epicureans classified as an "empty" desire (cf. Fish 2011).

Regardless of Lucretius' own views on holding political office, *De rerum natura* is a profoundly political work, especially if we understand politics to take as its subject matter the *politeia*, which includes political culture as well as political offices and institutions. Lucretius engages with Roman political culture embodied in such values as *pietas*, *religio*, *honor*, *gloria*, *virtus*, *nobilitas*, *dignitas*, *auctoritas*, and *imperium* (Minyard 1985). In fact, as we will see, Lucretius is as concerned with the root causes of corruption, civil conflict, and inordinate passions as Sallust. He provides both a powerful diagnosis of civic corruption and a solution. According to Lucretius, Roman republicanism has failed to solve the problem of civic corruption because it has misdiagnosed the problem. At base both human happiness and social stability are threatened because human beings have transgressed the boundaries established by nature. The correct solution involves a proper understanding of and emotional response to nature's limits – for individuals, for society, and for our world.[6]

[6] Chapter-length overviews of Lucretius' political philosophy: Fowler 1989 (classic article); Schiesaro 2007; Hammer 2014: ch. 2. Nichols 1976 and Colman 2012 are monographs that follow the approach of Strauss 1968: ch. 5.

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Civic conflict and the accompanying corruption are an important theme throughout *De rerum natura* – unsurprising, given that *stasis* was a constant feature of the first-century BCE Roman political landscape as well as a concern for Lucretius' forebears in the atomistic tradition, such as Democritus and (likely) Epicurus himself (McConnell 2012). Consider a few examples. In the introduction to book 1, Lucretius points out that the troubles besetting the commonwealth are interfering with his composition of the poem, and he indicates his confidence in Memmius' help. The prologue to book 2 describes the traditional Roman *cursus honorum* and its accompanying antagonistic contest for rank, honor, wealth, and political mastery. The wise man, secure and well-fortified by Epicurean doctrine, looks down on the others "straying everywhere as they wander about searching for the path of life, contending for intellectual preeminence (*ingenium*), competing for rank (*nobilitas*), striving night and day with the utmost effort to rise to the summit of wealth and to be the master of political affairs" (2.9–13). Some of the lines just quoted appear again in book 3, which describes civic conflict in particularly vivid terms: "Greed (*avarities*) and the blind desire for political office (*honorum caeca cupido*), which often compel wretched human beings to overstep the boundaries of justice (*transcendere fines iuris*), and from time to time as conspirators and agents of crimes, to strive night and day with the utmost effort to rise to the summit of wealth …" (3.59–63). There is "civil war" and "the heaping of murder upon murder" (3.70, 71). Finally, the book 5 account of the origins of human society at 5.1105–60 contains another important discussion of corruption (see Schrijvers 1996). Kings – honored for their beauty, strength, and wisdom – ruled cities. After money was invented, people began to value instead reputation, power, and wealth. These desires, as well as envy, led to civic corruption, civil strife, revolution, and ultimately to violence and anarchy.

According to these passages, the cause of corruption is conflict due to passions, in particular envy and the desires for wealth and power. Commentators have noted parallels between Lucretius' and Sallust's descriptions of civil conflict and corruption, especially in the introduction to book 3 (Kenney 2014: 87; Fowler 1989: 138–39). As in Sallust, the desires for power and wealth are dangerous because they are limitless. In Epicurean terminology, they are non-natural and non-necessary, or empty, desires, which, having no natural limit, are infinite and unfillable, and therefore to be avoided. By warning human beings away from unfillable desires, Epicurus' teaching on nature "established a limit for desire and fear," as Lucretius notes later in the poem (6.25).

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The key to happiness is to achieve secure and stable pleasures by holding to nature's limits. For human beings, as for other species, "a fixed limit of growth and of holding onto life has been established, and what are the capacities and furthermore what are the limits of these capacities is established through the compacts of nature" (*per foedera naturai*; 1.584–87). Human beings "have not learned the proper limit to possession" (*habendi finis*), and so they spend their lives pursuing empty, unlimited, non-natural, non-necessary pleasures, the pursuit of which leads to frustration and civil conflict (5.1430–35).

It is not just nature that has the capacity to set limits. There is an analogue in human society to the limits established through "nature's compacts" (*foedera naturai*) – the social contract (Schiesaro 2007; Asmis 2008b). In book 5 Lucretius sketches the origins of human society. This influential account, which would inspire Rousseau's *Second Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, begins by describing a pre political condition in which human beings lacked customs, laws, and a conception of the common good (5.958–59). Life was hard. Human beings lived and died relying upon nature – that is, their own natural faculties and natural resources readily at hand. They gradually improved their natural condition through artifice: they built huts, made clothing, and developed fire and language. These developments softened human beings, both physically and emotionally. Civil society formed when early humans agreed that "it was fair for all to have compassion on the weak" (5.1023). Much as in Rousseau, the social bond consisted of compassion for bodily suffering. As a result, the first human beings established compacts among themselves "to neither harm nor be harmed" (5.1020). Although the social contract did not always ensure harmony, "the good and great part of human beings faithfully preserved their compacts (*foedera*); otherwise," Lucretius adds, "the human race would have been entirely destroyed then" (1024–26).

Four points are relevant for our discussion. First, the social contract in Lucretius echoes key features of Epicurus' own thought. Epicurus understood justice as a contract among parties who agree to forego their ability to harm in order not to be harmed (Epicur. *Principle Doctrines* (*PD*) 33 = Long and Sedley 22A). Second, while the social compact and the resulting political society belong to artifice – the city does not exist by nature, as Aristotle had argued in book 1 of his *Politics* – it is a human creation that responds to natural needs, much like the clothing and huts of early man. Third, society is based on a fundamental human desire – the desire for security (see also 5.1145–55). Epicurus taught that the desire for security was a fundamental human desire, and his successor, Hermarchus,

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made the desire for individual and social security the primary catalyst in his own account of the origins of political society (Long and Sedley 22N). Finally, Lucretius makes it clear that such compacts were not completely successful in preventing civic conflict, a problem that became worse as human beings developed more artifices in an attempt to fulfill even more capacious and potent desires.[7]

If the social compact and laws weren't enough to restrain the passions that lead to civic corruption and conflict, perhaps the non-institutional aspects of political culture might help? As we saw in Polybius' account of the Roman *politeia* in book 6 of his *Histories*, the Roman ruling class attempted to utilize religion as an important restraining mechanism to avoid civil corruption by checking inordinate desires (6.56.11; see chapter 1). Lucretius too recognizes the important role of religion in Roman society. However, for Lucretius the use of religious fear is doomed to fail, for at the very root of the passions responsible for corruption and *stasis* – greed, the desire for power, and envy – is the fear of death. Such passions are "nourished by the fear of death" (3.64). As Kenney (2014: 84) notes, Lucretius anchors his reasoning in Epicurean thought. Epicurus had identified the desire for security as the root of the passion for status (*PD* 7 = Long and Sedley 22C1). Lucretius simply takes the argument one step backwards, suggesting that people want security because they fear death, from which "they wish themselves to flee far away and to be far removed" (3.65–69, quote at 3.68–69). The fear of death destroys civic virtue and encourages civic corruption. It overturns key social virtues like shame (*pudor*), devotion (*pietas*), and patriotism, as well as the friendships and political alliances (*amicitiai*) at the heart of Roman political society (3.83–86).

Lucretius doesn't mean to suggest that people consciously recognize that the fear of death lies at the root of their socially destructive passions; indeed, most people "run from themselves" but "do not understand the cause of their sickness" (3.1068, 1070). But if we are going to deal with civic corruption, we must confront and accept death. This means, ultimately, that we must come to accept the limits established by nature. We are finite, mortal beings living within finite, mortal societies within a finite, mortal world. "All things gradually waste away and head to the tomb, worn out by the long lapse of time" (2.1173–74). Following his master, Lucretius argues that we must not only accept our mortality but come to realize that

[7] Social security and the social contract in Epicurean thought: Schofield 1999b: 748–56; Schofield 2000. Desire and artifice: Nichols 1976.

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we would be no happier if we were immortals.[8] Life, a personified Nature reveals, is like a banquet (3.931–62). Eating, drinking, and conversing with friends is a pleasant experience, but, once we have had our fill of food and drink, to continue consumption would actually decrease our pleasure and make us unhappy. As Nietzsche would later note, the eternal recurrence of the same is a curse rather than a blessing (see Lucr. 3.935–49). Mortality has its own pleasures. We must come to recognize, to borrow the language of biologist and philosopher Leon Kass (2002), "the blessings of finitude."[9]

Overcoming such a deeply ingrained and seemingly natural passion as the fear of death is a tall order. The heart of Lucretius' response, of course, is to make readers aware of the scientific truth-claims of Epicureanism: "Therefore it is necessary that this fear and darkness of the mind be dispelled … by nature's appearance and underlying principle (*ratio*)" (3.91–93; cf. 1.146–48; 2.55–61; 6.35–41). But along with the rational understanding of the universe, Lucretius points us towards an emotion that arises from and promotes the recognition of human finitude and limitedness: reverence.

Lucretius' account of reverence begins by reclaiming piety (*pietas*) from religion (*religio*). Romans believed that the gods were influenced by cult practices. This Lucretius denies, but he argues that this denial does not make him impious. Religion, in fact, can lead to evil acts usually associated with impiety, as he illustrates by the example of King Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia to placate the gods so that he may launch his fleet (1.80–101). Lucretius concludes: "Such great acts of evil could religion (*religio*) urge" (1.101). In contrast to religion, properly understood, *pietas* consists of "the ability to contemplate all things with a tranquil mind" (5.1198–1203, quote at 1203). True piety, according to the Epicureans, involves the untroubled contemplation of (and indeed imitation of and communion with) the exalted nature of the gods (Fitzgerald 1951). Inasmuch as this nature surpasses human nature, it requires reverence, for "whatever is highest deserves rightful reverence" (Cic. *De natura deorum* 1.45). Epicurus noted that we should also conduct ourselves with the appropriate recognition of the exalted majesty or solemnity of the universe (*Letter to Herodotus* 77). Lucretius describes just such a response in himself to Epicurus' unveiling of the universe, nature, and the gods. "At these experiences at that time some divine pleasure seized me and a sense

[8] Epicurus on happiness and immortality: Epicur. *PD* 18–20; see also Cic. *Fin.* 2.87–88.

[9] Fear of death and limits: Segal 1990: ch. 5. The arguments of personified Nature: Nussbaum 1994: ch. 6.

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of awe (*horror*), since by your power nature, lying so clearly open, has been uncovered in every aspect" (3.28–30). This true piety allows the Epicurean to participate in the traditional cult practices of his regime's civil religion without embracing its harmful theological beliefs (3.68–79). Unlike other citizens, he understands "by what law the capacity of each thing is limited" and nature's "deeply clinging boundary stone" (6.65–66).

The best word to capture the recognition of the exalted and majestic nature of the universe and gods – and Lucretius' own emotional response – is reverence. According to Woodruff (2001: 63), reverence is "a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect, and shame." Reverence, Woodruff notes, is an important political virtue, inasmuch as the feelings of awe and respect come from the recognition of one's own limits. Tyrants bent on domination lack reverence.

Following his account of the plague that ravaged Athens during the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides observed that the Athenians' lack of reverence led to increased daring and lawlessness (2.53.1). Later in his *History*, Thucydides describes how daring from the lack of reverence (*eusebeia*) caused civil war and civic corruption at Corcyra, an Athenian ally, when greed and power led citizens to disregard the limits of justice and the interests of the city as a whole (3.82). Sallust, for whom Thucydides' historiography was an important model, likely found inspiration for his own account of corruption in this picture of civil conflict. Thucydides' narrative also inspired Lucretius. His poem concludes with an adaptation of Thucydides' account of the plague: Lucretius leaves his reader with the image of a distraught and lawless people fighting to the death as they struggle to burn dead bodies on funeral pyres. The "religion of the gods" counted for little. Epicurus, returning to the city a century later, would introduce a more socially salutary form of piety that accepted the transitory nature of human life and the world in which we live. Humans will become happy only when they embrace their own finitude.[10]

Gratitude and Society

There is a second socially salutary emotion experienced by those who recognize "the blessings of finitude" – gratitude, the capacity for thankfulness for past blessings leading to contentedness in one's present state. Gratitude

[10] Corcyra episode: Connor 1984: 95–105; Euben 1986: 226–27; 1990: ch. 6 (corruption); Balot 2001: 137–41 (greed). On Lucretius, see further J. W. Atkins forthcoming c. For a recent review of the different ways to interpret the plague, see Hammer 2014: 140–43.

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was an important Epicurean emotion (Cic. *Fin*. 1.57, 60, 62; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 10.122). In his writing on the topic, Seneca notes that Epicurus deserves credit for emphasizing the importance of this emotion (*Ben.* 3.4). Gratitude from reflecting on past blessings enables the Epicurean sage to experience joy on his deathbed just as his prior life was marked by gratitude from the habitual mental renewal of past blessings.[11] Fools, on the other hand, lack gratitude. As a result, they live lives of agony and fear, constantly grasping after the empty desires of wealth, power, and fame (Cic. *Fin*. 1.60).

This general testimony is consistent with Lucretius' portrayal of gratitude. Gratitude is an essential condition for dying at peace (3.935–43). People who chafe at death live lives marked by ingratitude. They overlook the giftedness of nature and therefore are constantly chasing after insatiable pleasures. Overlooking the definite and secure past, their hopes are in the limitless future, which is why they get so bitter at the prospect of death removing that future (cf. Cic. *Fin*. 1.60 and Sen. *Ben.* 3.4).

Ingratitude also characterizes civic conflict and corruption. Book 6 of *De rerum natura* begins by remarking how Epicurus had observed the habitual ingratitude that characterized the lives of the Athenians in their endless pursuit to fulfill their limitless desires (6.11–23). Given the importance of gratitude for confronting death in adverse circumstances, it does not surprise that the end of the book shows Athenian society utterly and spectacularly collapsing as it is beset by the plague.

One final point about gratitude emerges from *De rerum natura* book 6: a link between ingratitude and security. Epicurus noted that the ungrateful Athenians enjoyed to the greatest possible extent a secure life (6.11). It is not hard to see how a sense of security could lead to ingratitude. Those who are secure forget the fragility of life, thereby taking their current favorable circumstances as givens rather than as precious gifts to be appreciated while present because they might be taken away (or not even have been bestowed in the first place). Interestingly, studies show that in the initial weeks following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City the most common emotion felt by Americans was gratitude (Watkins 2007: 50).

But gratitude is not an important emotion for Epicureans alone. According to Cicero, "gratitude is not only the greatest virtue but the mother of all the others" (*Pro Plancio* 80). Seneca, incredibly, ranks ingratitude as the greatest vice – worse than murder, tyranny, theft, adultery,

[11] Gratitude as sage faces death: Cic. *Fin*. 1.62. Epicurus' own deathbed experience: Cic. *Fin*. 2.96.

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sacrilege, and treason (*Ben.* 1.10.4). Ingratitude is the mark of a tyrant. According to Seneca, lack of gratitude accompanied Alexander the Great's unlimited desire for glory, which led him to become "a robber and plunderer of nations" (*Ben.* 1.13.3). What makes gratitude the premier social virtue among Romans of both the Republic and Principate? How precisely is this emotion related to civic corruption?

Perhaps the best place to start is with Seneca's *De beneficiis*, a work that tackles problems posed by ingratitude as part of its principal message (Inwood 1995). The chief philosophical inspiration behind *De beneficiis* is Stoicism. According to the Stoics, the cosmos is endowed with, and ordered by, reason, which human beings share. This reasoning capacity unites human beings to the gods and to one another, and virtue – the possession of which is both necessary and sufficient for happiness – consists in using our reason well, that is, according to the norms of nature. Human beings are by nature social animals born for the common good and mutual assistance (Sen. *Cl.* 1.3.2; *De ira* 1.5.2; Cooper and Procopé 1995: 187).

De beneficiis advises the reader about how to appropriately, that is, rationally, give and receive benefits in the context of Rome's "gift economy" (Griffin 2003; 2013). For our purposes, the relevant features of the Roman gift economy, which Seneca describes in detail, may perhaps be grasped most easily through a contrast with the sort of "capitalist meritocracy" characteristic of a liberal democracy like the United States of America (Brooks 2015). A capitalist meritocracy puts a high premium on individual autonomy, performance, and independence. The most important social virtue is justice. One's social duties regarding justice take the form of respecting rights and honoring contracts, so that all parties get what they deserve or are entitled to. In the Roman gift economy, by contrast, society – especially elite society – is held together by mutual freely given favors or kindnesses between individuals. Generosity was just as important a virtue as justice. When an individual receives a gift, there was a strong expectation that he would repay it in some way at some time, even if only by exhibiting a kind disposition to the benefactor. However, repayment was emphatically not offered as part of a contract, which legally stipulates conformity. Neither is the gift an investment whose primary purpose is to secure a future return. Moreover, the gift-giver is to be guided by the best interests of the recipient. Altruism and interdependence are built into this economy.

From Seneca's various discussions of gratitude in *De beneficiis*, we might generally define gratitude as an affection or cognitive state that duly recognizes a freely given gift from a personal giver to whom one becomes

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subsequently indebted. Gratitude is also a virtue: there are not just grateful *responses* by people in certain situations, but there are actually grateful *people*, people whose characters are disposed towards gratitude. Like other virtues, for Seneca the virtue of gratitude contributes to its possessor's happiness or flourishing. Gratitude thus is both individually and socially beneficial.

Two additional important aspects of gratitude stand out in Seneca's discussion. First, like Epicurus, Seneca emphasizes the indispensable link between gratitude and memory: "Memory makes gratitude" (*Ben.* 3.4.2). Gratitude sharply contrasts with hope: the former looks to the past; the latter, to the future. Ungrateful people do not adequately store up memories of past kindnesses, goods, and blessings. Because we tend to take our present goods for granted, not recognizing their contingent nature, we devalue them and become dissatisfied. We look towards the future in order to acquire more, which in turn makes it harder to feel grateful for the past; there is a reciprocal relationship between memory and gratitude.

Second, gratitude recognizes dependence and fosters interdependence. A grateful person acknowledges that he is dependent on others for what he has. He recognizes that there are some things that he has received by others' good graces and not merely by his own effort. As a result, he is willing to reciprocate in giving freely to others. Thus, the recognition of dependence leads to interdependence. When we recognize that we need one another and contribute to the good of others (even if they are not strictly deserving), society is strengthened. That is why, for Seneca, "nothing so dissolves and disrupts the concord of mankind as this fault. Our safety depends on the fact that we have mutual acts of kindness to help us" (4.18.1; trans. Cooper and Procopé).

Incidentally, the idea of dependence on a personal gift-giver provides Seneca with the opportunity to critique the Epicurean ideas of gratitude and reverence before the gods. Gratitude by definition requires a personal gift-giver to whom one is grateful. Yet notwithstanding Lucretius' personification of "Nature," the Epicureans do not recognize a personal gift-giver for the gifts of life. Can you really be grateful when "you have not had any favors from him [god], but have been congealed out of atoms and these motes of yours by blind chance?" (trans. Cooper and Procopé; 4.19.3). Rather, on the Stoic account, grateful human beings recognize their dependence upon the gods, leading to a socially interconnected city of gods and human beings (*Ben.* 2.29–30; for the cosmic city, see chapter 7).

Finally, Seneca links the loss of gratitude to civic corruption. The principal causes of ingratitude are the emotions that destroy society. The first is

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undue self-regard. We tend to overvalue our own worth, which leads us to treat the good gifts bestowed on us less as gifts than as required payments. Such a high self-estimation leads to ingratitude (we are not thankful for what we deserve) and even to indignation if we feel we have been undervalued. The other emotions are familiar from Lucretius and Sallust: greed – which Seneca links to both avarice and the desire for power – and envy (*Ben.* 2.26–28).

Plutarch on Gratitude, Hope, and the Passion For Power

Perhaps no writer focuses more intently on greed, envy, and the passion for power than Plutarch. A Greek who eventually attained Roman citizenship, Plutarch (46–120 CE) studied philosophy and rhetoric; he was also active in public life, holding political office in Chaeronea, a city in his native Greece, and a priesthood at Delphi. He was granted equestrian status by the emperor, though in his case it did not lead to a career in imperial administration at Rome; nevertheless, he had access to the Roman elite in Italy (Jones 1971). His *Parallel Lives* sought to instruct the Roman ruling class by providing examples for emulation or disapprobation from the lives of leading Greek and Roman statesmen. As Stadter notes (2014: 25), Plutarch wanted his readers to move from the specific circumstances in the lives of these individual statesmen to consider larger, timeless themes. Central among these themes is civic corruption and the related emotions of envy, greed, and above all, *philotimia* (ambition or the love of honor) and *philarchia* (the love of political office and power). In Plutarch's *Marius* and *Pyrrhus*, his presentation of corruption and the political passions intersects with our earlier treatment of gratitude and amplifies the concerns expressed by the Epicureans and Seneca with the contrasting emotion of hope.[12]

Considered biographically, the link between Marius (157–86 BCE) and Pyrrhus (318–272 BCE) is not obvious. They were born 150 years apart. The former held the Roman consulship an unprecedented seven times and extended Rome's empire; the latter was a Greek who numbered among Rome's most formidable enemies. But for Plutarch they share a common struggle. Though supremely accomplished men of immense natural talent, both were undone by a lack of contentment, coupled with greed,

[12] For Plutarch's treatment of statesmanship (broadly conceived) in the *Lives*, see de Blois et al. 2005. Liebert 2016 brings Plutarch's *Lives* into conversation with concerns in contemporary political theory.

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ambition, and immoderate hope for the future (Duff 1999: 103). In the case of both men, this condition led to civic conflict and corruption.

Perhaps the best way into Plutarch's treatment of these issues in the *Pyrrhus* is through an encounter between Pyrrhus and an accomplished Thessalian orator named Cineas. The conversation occurred as Pyrrhus, enjoying a period of secure and peaceful rule over his native Epirus, was preparing to act on a request for help that would bring him into war with Rome. When asked by Cineas about his plans once he had conquered Italy, Pyrrhus replied that he would move on to Sicily. "Would the taking of Sicily be the end of our expedition?" Cineas wondered (14.4–5). Pyrrhus assured him that it would be the prelude to the conquest of other Mediterranean powers like Libya and Carthage in North Africa – the acquisition of which, Cineas adds, will no doubt help Pyrrhus reacquire Macedonia and solidify rule in the rest of Greece. But what, Cineas asks, will Pyrrhus do once he has managed to conquer the world? Upon hearing Pyrrhus describe how they will live a contented life of peace, pleasure, ease, and friendship, Cineas finally has Pyrrhus set up: Why not live this way now without incurring the costs of war (14.7)? At this "Pyrrhus was more troubled than he was converted; he saw plainly what great happiness he was leaving behind him, but was unable to renounce his hopes of what he eagerly desired" (14.8; trans. Perrin, Loeb).

Cineas' questioning laid bare Pyrrhus' motivations. Despite already having the resources at hand for happiness, he cannot be content until he has satisfied his desires for power, a desire that is limitless and will not be satisfied until he has conquered the world. Like the dashing Greek general Alcibiades, who in a parallel passage had his own ambitious hopes exposed by Socrates (Plato, *Alcibiades* 1 104e–105e), Pyrrhus wants power for power's sake. Thus Pyrrhus' life is characterized by several interrelated themes: disregard for boundaries and limits, inordinate desires (especially for power), lack of contentment, and hope. All of this has profound political implications. Driven by these desires, leaders pursue advantage regardless of justice (12.3), and the people, seeing such examples, imitate them and do likewise (12.7).

In the case of Marius, Plutarch provides his thesis statement at the outset. Marius was a naturally gifted leader and politician – indeed, Plutarch notes that Julius Caesar, the greatest of the Romans, looked to him as a model (6.2). But he dismissed an education in Greek language and literature; he scoffed at the idea of learning a literature "whose teachers are enslaved to others" (2.2). As a result, he put the "ugliest crown upon a most illustrious career as a general and politician when he was driven aground

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upon the shore of a most premature and savage old age by the blasts of passion, untimely love of rule, and insatiable greed. However, his actual deeds will at once bring this into clear view" (2.3).

Plutarch's account delivers on this promise. In Marius we see a discontented man whose desire for power knew no limit (34.4). After his fifth consulship, he was as desirous of a sixth as another man would have been of his first (28.1). And as he faced the approach of his enemy, Sulla, as a seventy-year-old man, now wealthy and having held Rome's highest office more frequently than any other man, he yet lamented the fact that he was dying with his desires for power still unsatisfied (45.7).

Plutarch concludes the work with his own assessment of Marius' condition by contrasting his discontented and ignominious death – his ambitions seem to have driven him mad – with the deaths of the philosophers Plato and Antipater of Tarsus. Much like Epicurus, these philosophers were able to meet death well by remembering past blessings with gratitude.

> Unmindful and thoughtless persons, on the contrary, let all that happens to them slip away as time goes on; therefore, since they do not hold or keep anything, they are always empty of blessings, but full of hopes, and are looking away to the future while they neglect the present. And yet the future may be prevented by Fortune, while the present cannot be taken away; nevertheless these men cast aside the present gift of Fortune as something alien to them, while they dream of the future and its uncertainties. And this is natural. (46.3–4; trans. Perrin, Loeb)

The *Marius* concludes with a now familiar account of gratitude, but it is the contrasting passion of hope that receives the more sustained treatment in the *Pyrrhus* and *Marius*. The word for "hope" appears twenty-one times between the two biographies, with thirteen of those within the *Pyrrhus*, as befitting a man who "was always entertaining one hope after another" and allowed "neither defeat nor victory to put a limit to his troubling himself and troubling others" (30.2; trans. Perrin, Loeb).

In order to grasp fully Plutarch's account of hope, we must recognize the influence of Thucydides. Thucydides contrasts hope with foresight and planning. Hope is a comfort in danger, but a cold one, for it causes individuals and states to take unnecessary and unwise risks. It is an irrational expectation of success given one's resources and likely challenges. It is the plight of the desperate that no more saved Nicias, the Athenian leader of the disastrous Sicilian expedition, than it did the Melians, who were destroyed by Athens despite their reliance on hope. Through these episodes, Thucydides seems to suggest that human beings have a natural disposition

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to rely on hope and to take unnecessary risks, a disposition that good leaders should recognize and counter. As Diodotus mentions in Thucydides' version of the Mytilenaean debate in book 3, "hope and desire are present in every situation … Desire thinks out a plan and hope offers an abundant supply of good fortune. These passions cause the greatest harm, and because they are unseen they are stronger than visible dangers" (3.45.5).[13]

Plutarch's critique of hope echoes Thucydides'. Hope unites with passionate desire (see esp. *Pyrrhus* 26.1) to drive leaders always to believe they can attain the next object that their passion for power places before them. In the process, they trade the securities of the present for the uncertainties of the future. Like Thucydides, Plutarch suggests that hope is "natural" for human beings; people generally are seduced by hope into trading present goods for an uncertain future. Like contemporary philosopher Roger Scruton (2010b), Plutarch warns of "the dangers of false hope," especially when hope is embraced by naturally talented and ambitious leaders.

What is Plutarch's solution? If human beings have a natural tendency to overestimate their capacity to achieve their desires in the future, they should undergo a liberal education in order to reshape their natures. Through education and the development of our rational capacities, we may attain an appropriate foundation for dealing with life's "external goods," thereby forestalling our soul's chase after an endless stream of unattainable desires (*Marius* 46.4).[14]

Conclusion

Reverence, according to Paul Woodruff, is a "forgotten" social and political virtue. The same has been said about gratitude (Scruton 2010a; Ceaser 2011; Leithart 2014). Still, these virtues are part of the American political tradition. Abraham Lincoln's first public address to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois – "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions" – proposed in response to increasing violence and factionalism the cultivation of the "reverence for the laws." As Ceaser (2011) notes, one of the problems Lincoln tackled in this address was how to promote gratitude to those from whom we have inherited our political institutions and way of life when they are no longer living.

[13] On hope in Thucydides, compare Schlosser 2013, who holds that hope is "chastened" rather than "rejected."

[14] For the psychology of Plutarch's leaders, see Duff 1999: 72–98.

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One common set of devices for promoting public gratitude are monuments, memorials, and national memorial days like Memorial Day in the United States or Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom and other commonwealth nations. Monuments and observances utilize the link between gratitude and memory noted by the Epicureans, Seneca, and Plutarch to instill in citizens a sense of dependence upon those who have gone before. They also undermine the sense of entitlement that comes with taking for granted one's current security. By remembering past struggles and considering the possibility that past events could have turned out differently, we become aware of the contingency of our present blessings. We remember the fragility of life.

One might object that gratitude is a vestige from the ancient world that modern liberal democracies would do well to forget. Gratitude in the ancient world was an instrument for stabilizing a hierarchical order; inasmuch as it emphasizes dependence, it perpetuates the status quo by squelching the independence necessary for change and revolution. Gratitude is a virtue for those in power; for the oppressed, hope – generally denigrated by the ancient Greeks and Romans – is the more appropriate virtue.

Before dismissing gratitude, consider at least the three following points. First, the memorialization of past blessings required for gratitude need not lead to the nostalgic desire to turn back the clock to the good old days. Gratitude reminds us that our present blessings were contingent upon past actions, and frequently the persons and events that we memorialize involve past struggles for a better world that current citizens should both appreciate and imitate. The repayment of gratitude prompted by memorials involves living out past virtues in order to make a better future. For instance, citizens might be reminded of the principles by which they can, from patriotic allegiance, question aspects of the present political order – one of the functions of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in the National Mall according to Charles Griswold (1986).

Second, hope need not be the sort of dangerous, groundless optimism disparaged by Plutarch and Thucydides. In fact, as the influential twentieth-century historian and social critic Christopher Lasch argued, hope, unlike optimism, expects disappointments; indeed, hope is "the disposition to see things through even when they don't [work out for the best]" (1991: 81). Unlike but not opposed to gratitude, hope requires a belief in and commitment to justice, and like gratitude hope "rests on confidence not so much in the future as in the past" (Lasch 1991: 81). Working from a different perspective, political philosopher Cornel West (1999: 12) likewise distinguishes hope from optimism, while emphasizing commitment to

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justice and the "best of the past" for the "prisoner of hope." Such conceptions of hope necessarily complement rather than compete with gratitude since they emanate from a common root: dependence on what has been given already and thus presently exists (e.g., the principles inherent in the natural or divine order of our world, God). Whereas gratitude is the emotion derived from backwards-facing dependence, hope pivots and faces the future expectantly in light of the past.

Third, as the republican tradition warned, independence and assertiveness may lead to civic corruption. If this tradition is correct, then liberal democracies need virtues like reverence, which fosters respect for others in light of the acknowledgment of one's own limitations, and public gratitude, which is a necessary handmaiden of "our communal aspirations towards wholeness" (Griswold 1986: 691).

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