

Moralism and Imperialism: de Alvarez on Aristotle

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Professor de Alvarez's teaching on Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* is characterized by his emphasis on the distinctions between the moral life and the intellectual life, his insistence that there are broad tensions between the political and philosophical conceptions of the human good, and his rakish delight at the seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes that separate our moral longings from their satisfaction.¹ His task as a teacher of these works was to lead students—even and especially through their frustrations—to the recognition of these questions, tensions, and difficulties *as* questions, tensions, and difficulties, and to teach them to resist the easy assimilation of the intellectual and human into the moral and political. To teach these works is first to show how, in moral virtue and political life, we often fail to achieve the good we desire. Second, as

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¹ De Alvarez has no published writing on Aristotle. However, he taught regular courses on the *Ethics* and *Politics*. Arguments and teachings attributed to de Alvarez in this essay come from the author's extensive class notes, taken in Fall 2010 for the *Politics* and in Spring 2012 for the *Ethics*. In some cases I have reproduced his words verbatim, but nothing here has been reviewed by de Alvarez and in no case should my account be considered authoritative.

Aristotle does in the final portions of both books, it is to compensate the reader and the student for this frustrating failure, either providing alternatives to moral virtue and the political life, or means of making our moral striving more pleasant and less dangerous: music and poetry, the leisured pursuits of the gentleman.

Philosophy and the contemplative life, this teaching suggests, *have* what politics and the active life *want*. They are related, fundamentally, in a single conception of the human good. In his teaching on the *Ethics* and *Politics*, de Alvarez does not present a schizophrenic Aristotle, who spends most of his time on moral virtue before undermining it in the move to intellectual virtue. Like Plato, Aristotle works through consideration of *endoxa*, received opinions which reflect not only the truth about virtue and the good, albeit only partially, but also the almost equally important truth about how and why we come to the opinions about virtue and the good that we have. Through this examination, we come to see the gentleman and the good citizen as the reflection of the philosopher and the good man. There is, in the end, a deep connection, though not a unity, between the active life of moral virtue and the contemplative life of intellectual virtue. The contemplative life, according to de Alvarez, transforms the end of the *polis*. The *polis* properly conceived is the political reflection of the contemplative life. The proper conception of the *polis* is as a self-sufficient unity, complete in itself, not directed outward, but inward. The alternative—the political analogy to the political life—is tyranny and empire. “Moralism is imperialism,” de Alvarez is fond of saying, not without some joy at the consternation he is causing. If your political community is not in some way rooted in the understanding that the contemplative life, not the active life of moral virtue, is the highest life, then your politics will be imperial, violent, and despotic.²

IMPERIALISM

Imperialism has been a lifelong concern of de Alvarez's. It was the subject of his doctoral dissertation and of several of his lectures and essays, which focused on or at least started with the meaning of the phenomenon in the context of 18th and 19th century historical and

² For a sustained presentation of this argument, see Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 180–202.

economic developments.³ In that early work, he posed a strong objection to the definition of imperialism as an economic phenomenon borne out of the low motives of capitalism. On the contrary, he defended the antiquated and apparently naive notion that imperialism could be “the result of beliefs in high ideals or heroism (311),” resisting the remarkable victory in the West of Lenin’s teaching that imperialism is an economic mode, “the highest stage of capitalism,” through which industrialized nations preserve themselves through the exploitation of the undeveloped third world (312).⁴ In the face of this scholarly consensus, he returned to first principles, both in the sense of ancient history and philosophy, and also in terms of primary definitions. Imperialism, he wrote, “always refers to a policy of conquest and expansion.” The “essence of empire” is “pretension to universality and uniqueness” (312).

De Alvarez makes distinctions between four different kinds of empire. We concern ourselves here first with the most properly political form, what de Alvarez alternately calls the “ecumenical empire,” “political empire,” or “world-empire.”⁵ In explaining this type, he writes, “Every political empire tends to absolutize itself. A political community must always find [a] justification for its existence . . . that will . . . command the ultimate loyalty of its citizens—the loyalty even unto death” (314). In order to command such loyalty, the political community

³ Leo Paul S. de Alvarez, “The Romantic Imperialism of Benjamin Disraeli” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1970); “The Theory of Imperialism,” Lecture, ISI Summer School at St. Mary’s College in CA, 1965 (<https://home.isi.org/node/270>, accessed April 2019); “Imperialism: The Threat to Existence” (*Intercollegiate Review* 2, March–April 1966), 311–22. Subsequent parenthetical citations will be to the page numbers of this latter essay.

⁴ See V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, from *Selected Works* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1963), 667–766. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc>. Accessed April 2019.

⁵ The four types of empire are the cosmological, in which “the empire declares itself to be the representative of the order of the cosmos,” as in Egypt and Babylon (313), the “world-empire” (314), the empire based “upon a revealed faith” (316), and finally, what one may call the “gnostic” or historical empire, “based upon a heresy of the revealed faiths” (318–20). Insofar as this latter type of imperialism “is undertaken in the name of an as yet unrealized future order,” de Alvarez places it outside of the proper definition of imperialism (313n5). Insofar as the first type, the cosmological, considers what is outside its borders to be chaos and those who dwell there something less than men, it is not universal and concerned with expansion as are the middle two. Between these two, the distinction is entirely in terms of revelation. Both originate with “the realization” of “a common humanity” that comes with “the discovery of the soul and the discovery of the One God” (315).

has recourse to “orthodoxy”; by tying the soul’s deepest longings to the community,” it seeks always to weave the very being of men into the being of the community. . . .” Paradoxically, the political order based on universality and oriented toward expansion is in essence closed to the world. It is “a withdrawal from mankind,” but it is also “the center of significance in the world” (315). The universe is divided into Greeks and barbarians, believers and unbelievers, Christendom and the *saeculum*,⁶ *dar al-islam* and *dar al-harb*.⁷

In these latter examples, we find a new kind of empire, one based on belief. However, de Alvarez’s teaching would suggest that orthodoxy — though not necessarily revealed belief — is always implicit in empire insofar as political life makes use of or co-opts contemplative life: as empire is the political analogue of the active life, orthodoxy is the political analogue of the contemplative life. Philosophy and theology, conceived of in terms of the defense of the faith that sustains the political order, become subordinated to politics and empire. They become scholasticism. They become *kalam*.⁸ One may go so far as to say that insofar as politics understands philosophy *at all*, it perverts it and subordinates its ends to the ends of conquest and expansion, both moral and imperial. De Alvarez indicates in his teaching that, in these cases, the question whether the orthodoxy reflects the truth matters less to human flourishing than the question whether the active or contemplative takes precedence as the highest life. In the understanding of the noble gentleman with whom Aristotle is most concerned, this is a matter of whether the best life is a public or a private one. De Alvarez, for his part, resisted speaking to the question of what Aristotle would say about the prospect of politics swallowing up and repackaging philosophy, of philosophic teaching becoming political and religious orthodoxy. Rather,

⁶ The notion of the City of God, however, as de Alvarez notes, is fundamentally anti-imperialistic (317). This does not mean that the distinction between the Christian world and the non-Christian world was not in many times and places made the root justification of imperial expansion.

⁷ The *dar al-Islam* is the house of Islam, of true believers, while the *dar al-harb* is the house of war, consisting of non-Islamic countries called upon to embrace the faith. There is also the *dar al-sulh*, the house of treaty. These terms come from early Islamic jurisprudence, but not the Qur’an or Hadith.

⁸ *Kalam* is, roughly speaking, the Islamic equivalent of scholasticism in that it consists of philosophic argumentation which defends received doctrine against possible attacks that could be made by philosophy.

he indicated Aristotle's attempt to turn the more ambitious and morally upright citizens of the regime toward philosophy or something like philosophy as an antidote to the most destructive tendencies of the moral and political life.

The prospect of an orthodox empire seems to go beyond Aristotle, though. It seems to require divine revelation that belongs to all mankind, uniting man's political and intellectual purposes. The peculiarly modern form of this empire is a corruption of this union "based upon a heresy of the revealed faiths" (318), that is, a secularization of Christianity which mistakenly adapts the promises of salvation in the next life to this-worldly political regimes. Revelation properly understood teaches man the transcendence of his moral and political existence in a way consistent with the Aristotelian distinction between the active and contemplative lives; it reveals man's supernatural end, and thus does not lend itself to the aggrandizement of morality and politics. One could say that it thereby makes available to many the contemplative good previously known only to a few. But in the modern, gnostic form with which de Alvarez was most concerned early in his career, imperialism is based not upon "a revelation from God, but one achieved through rational speculation upon history" (318). According to this view, manifested in Marxism and in the socialist movement Marx spawned, the future holds out the possibility for man's perfection. Man can make himself into this new, perfect being, but to do this, the ones who know the future, the *gnostics*—The Party—must be given power; and all those who stand against the realization of their vision—their "private vision . . . as irrational as the predictions of the astrologer or palm reader" (318)—must be denounced and castigated as evil. Following Voegelin, de Alvarez characterizes modern Communism as the attempt to "immanentize the *eschaton*,"⁹ to "work in the present stage of history to achieve the Perfect Society" (319). Because the future cannot be known, this is "the most disastrous" form of empire (318). The other forms of empire are based on some order—in the city, in the soul, in heaven—but this one is based on an order that does not yet, and may not ever, exist.

⁹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 122.

In the project of perfection, however, *all* forms of empire are united; to that end, *all* political orders are potentially inclined. In the first place, as de Alvarez notes, there could be no gnostic heresy without the idea of history, and it is revelation itself which creates history: “A God who speaks with man is a God of history. In the act of revealing Himself, God . . . creates a unique event. There is now a time before the revelation, and a time after the revelation—there is now, in a word, history” (316). Or, as de Alvarez is fond of saying, “What’s new? Oh, nothing much . . . just the Incarnation.” Properly understood, revelation does not lead to imperialism, but “there can occur a profound misunderstanding” when the “chosen” community tries to “establish itself as a political rather than a spiritual community,” and its task becomes “to spread the new truth and to defend its purity” (316). The belief in divine revelation, in this case, only makes empire “more demonic” and terrifying, as it has behind it a god whose commands are absolute and based on a desire for the good of mankind and the knowledge of how best to realize it (316–17). Not just modern secular communism, but the Holy Roman Empire, Byzantium, and the Muslim Caliphate are attempts to “immanentize the *eschaton*”; they are, as empires, “the political expression of the human desire to incarnate the eternal in the secular” (317).

This desire is not, however, particularly Christian or even particular to revealed faith. It is right, of course, that revelation lends itself to the idea that truth unfolds in history, and thus also to the notion that a particular people could have access to a universal truth not yet known to others, and that this can make empire more terrible. De Alvarez’s analysis ultimately shows, however, that the desire of the particular political order to universalize itself is endemic to the nature of politics and morality itself. The post-Christian empires of modernity, such as Nazism, Communism, and even liberal democracy, do borrow their sense of history and inevitability to some degree from Christianity, but in their attempts to “establish a world community,” they are in the fundamental sense following the political impulse; they “mummify a particular form of government in the same mistaken belief of the ancient Egyptians that to preserve a body . . . is to ensure to it the eternal life of the soul” (317). Christianity, for its part, when rightly understood recognizes imperialism as “a destructive demonic force,” just as St. Augustine condemns the pagan conquest of the Roman Empire not so

that it can be replaced by a Christian conquest and a Christian empire, but because the attempt to make what is by its nature particular and limited into something universal is to try to bring heaven down to earth, and wreaks destruction and terror in the denial of legitimate “existence” to all but the particular—the faith, the race, or the ideology (317).

Modern imperialism, as de Alvarez suggests, following Voegelin, is thus a corruption of Christianity: it is not simply an economic mode of existence made possible by capitalism, but the destruction of existence made possible by the idea of revelation. However, this account only explains the sense of historical inevitability that characterizes modern imperialism, insofar as revelation gives birth to a progressive or at least a linear view of history. In this family of imperialisms, we should place not only communism or international socialism, but also liberal democracy, the exponents and prophets of which proclaim it to be the “fullest articulation of political order that man can achieve” and the destiny of all nations (317).¹⁰ It does not adequately explain pre-modern or ancient imperialism or even the complete motivations of modern imperialism. For not only Lenin, but non-communist and only mildly progressive and historicist imperialists like Carlyle, Disraeli, and Theodore Roosevelt made their appeals, not in terms of historical inevitability or the knowledge of what the future perfection of mankind entails, but in terms of what Aristotle calls “*the noble*.” Their imperialist turns were calls to overcome petty individualism and to raise the consciousness of their own peoples by raising up others to higher levels of civilization. Some of the flavor and language of their appeals is modern and Hegelian, but the moral part is universal and perennial. As the basis of empire, it dates, according to de Alvarez, to the discovery of a common human nature. He points to Socrates, Zoroaster, Confucius, and the prophets as examples of those who have made this discovery (315).¹¹ With the recognition that the human good is the same for different peoples comes the suggestion that one moral and political order could serve all peoples, and then the attempt to achieve it.

¹⁰ For a similar, recent argument, see Ryszard Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016).

¹¹ For this point, see especially de Alvarez’s 1965 ISI Summer School lecture at St. Mary’s College.

ETHICS & POLITICS

What is it about concern for virtue that would lend itself to expansion and conquest, not simply to the recognition of abstract universality, but to the desire and attempt to achieve that universality concretely? De Alvarez does not attempt to answer this question in the essay on imperialism we have been examining. But it is a constant theme in his lectures on Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*.

What he finds is that we cannot dismiss imperialism as a political phenomenon that owes its force to low human motives—the desire for power over others, for acquisition of wealth and the means of satisfying tyrannical desires—or to the hubristic claim that one knows where history is going and is therefore justified in the attempt to bring about its ends in practice. On the contrary, there is something in the very idea of moral virtue itself which is imperialistic, which seeks to show itself, extend itself, and, ultimately, to rule. The political danger comes not from those who do not take moral virtue seriously enough, but from those who take it too seriously. Political orders have more of a need to rein in the high than to curb the abuses of the low. Aristotle is, read in this light, much more like Machiavelli than he would at first appear.

As evidence for these suggestions, de Alvarez would point to Aristotle's use of the word *autarkês*, or "self-sufficient."¹² Aristotle presents this as an essential aspect of what we want happiness to be: "the self-sufficient . . . is that which by itself makes life choiceworthy and in need of nothing, and such is what we suppose happiness to be."¹³ It does not mean that one is alone and has no need of others, but that one has everything one needs in order to do the proper work of a human being well, and thus to achieve the human good. In the immediate context of the introduction of this term in the *Ethics*, it seems that moral virtue is that proper work, and thus that if one is virtuous, one will achieve the human good and be happy. But this relationship between virtue and happiness is not regular and consistent. Through the examination of the *endoxa* surrounding moral virtue we find that our happiness can easily be taken away through accidents of fortune. The life of moral virtue,

¹² I present here my own speculation based on my notes from de Alvarez's courses.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.7, 1097b15–17. References to this work are to the book, chapter, and Bekker numbers.

understood in terms of choices and actions made within the context of the political, points toward and longs for the self-sufficiency of happiness, but fails to achieve it.

Aristotle indicates early in the *Ethics* the possibility that only the contemplative life is self-sufficient and complete, but he does not verify this until much later in the work.¹⁴ He delays this teaching because his project is not to dismiss moral virtue and politics but to redeem them, to reveal what they are more fully through an examination of their implicit questions and longings. It is not a question of making the choice for the philosophical life over the political life, but of establishing more solidly the basis for the achievement of what we want from the political life. In the *Politics*, too, we do not find a discussion of the contemplative life until late in the work. There, Aristotle asserts that the end for the individual and for the city is the same, and argues that one cannot achieve the human end through any form of politics understood without philosophy.¹⁵ The problem, however, is that few would agree that the philosophic way of life is best.¹⁶ The legislator must be able to see “how a city, a stock of human beings, and every sort of community will share in the good life and in the happiness that is possible for them.”¹⁷ The good life and happiness that is possible for “a stock of human beings, and every sort of community” will not and cannot be the contemplative life. All that the good legislator can do is moderate the political.

The danger in presenting this moderation of politics from the beginning as a work of philosophy, however, would be in not taking the political seriously enough. The philosopher, in failing to understand the active life, the life of moral virtue, would be in danger of being co-opted by the political life because he would fail to understand that the political cannot be philosophical. Philosophy in such a case becomes orthodoxy, the reflection of the contemplative life within the context of the choice for

¹⁴ *Ethics*, 1.5, 1096a4; 10.7, 1177a28–b3.

¹⁵ *Aristotle's Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 7.2, 1324a5–7. References to this work are to the book, chapter, and Bekker numbers. Cf. *Ethics*, 1.2, 1094b7–11 and Augustine, *City of God*, 1.15. De Alvarez has said that “*City of God* is a great critique of empire” (lecture on *Politics*, 7.3, Fall 2010; see also “Imperialism,” 317). For this section, see also Thomas Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 227–40.

¹⁶ *Politics*, 7.2, 1324a29.

¹⁷ *Politics*, 7.2, 1325a8–10.

the political as the best human life. Indeed, one might justly assert that the attempt to make the political philosophical is the error of ideology, the stuff of modern imperialism. Rather than attempting to transcend the political and thus only providing intellectual weapons for imperialism, then, Aristotle takes moral and political longings seriously, shows their deficiency, and finally provides for them a kind of satisfaction or completion.

Before turning to that satisfaction, we must explicate in outline here what is meant by the claim that politics and moral virtue, without moderation by philosophy, are inherently tyrannical and imperialistic. In the *Ethics*, we see this in the idea that virtue needs to show itself, to be seen.¹⁸ We see this especially in the height of ethical virtue, the great-souled man, who demands the greatest of external goods, honor, and acts so that he will receive it.¹⁹ But this point is finally made explicitly by Aristotle in book 10, where he writes that while “happiness . . . is held to reside in leisure,” and “we wage war so that we may be at peace,” “the activity of the virtues bound up with action . . . consists in matters of politics or war, and the actions concerned with these seem to be without leisure.”²⁰ The ethical virtues thus need to be limited, to be given their end. In themselves, they are tied up with the passions.²¹ Aristotle is not as explicit about this as Plato, who is himself circumspect about it, but the fact that the virtuous person acts for the sake of the noble in giving up what he perceives as good things for himself, and thus sacrifices his own good, implies that the unqualifiedly good things are those very things he gives up.²² As with Plato’s Myth of Er, where the one who is morally virtuous because of habituation and law, without philosophy, chooses the life of greatest tyranny,²³ in Aristotle’s *Ethics* the suggestion is that the city without philosophy will choose the path of imperialism and domination.

This is a kind of tragic conclusion. Just as Plato’s Socrates declares that while without rule by philosophers, politics is a realm of great ills that precludes the achievement of personal or public happiness,

¹⁸ *Ethics*, 10.8, 1178a34.

¹⁹ *Ethics*, 4.3, 1123b20, 1124b7–20.

²⁰ *Ethics*, 10.7, 1177b6–8.

²¹ *Ethics*, 10.8, 1178a16–20.

²² Consider *Republic* 3, 363d1.

²³ *Republic* 10, 619c–d.

philosophy is rarely allowed to rule, and thus we are separated from our happiness,²⁴ Aristotle suggests that while the action in politics and war with which moral virtue is bound up aims ultimately at rest and leisure, they do not arrive there; the “activity of the intellect” that constitutes “the complete happiness of the human being” exists outside of the political context and even, in a way, “exceed[s] what is human.”²⁵ And yet the person most seems to *be*, Aristotle declares, “what is authoritative and better in him,” and thus his best life, his happiest life, consists in this extra-political, even extra-human activity.

Politics cannot be philosophical, yet it must be philosophical. Aristotle achieves this conclusion through defining and limiting the political in the same terms as happiness itself: it must be *autarkês*, self-sufficient.²⁶ That is, it must be capable of keeping and being satisfied with what it has, not directed by its principle outward but inward, toward its own good. The contemplative life becomes a model for the *polis*.²⁷ In contrast to the active life in pursuit of the noble, with its concern for praise and blame and the appearance of virtue and vice, the contemplative person looks inward; his activity and pleasure consists in the activity of his own soul—he does not “need others” to whom and on whom to demonstrate his virtue.²⁸ Likewise, Aristotle describes the activity of the *polis* as active *internally*, in terms of “shared activities undertaken by the parts of the city in relation to one another.”²⁹ In this way, he says, “the same way of life” is “best both for each human being individually and for cities and human beings in common.”³⁰ But since most will not choose the philosophic life, the city has within it analogues to that life, providing images of the kind of unmixed pleasure in which philosophy consists: pleasures without pains, consisting in contemplation of the good. This is found in the noble leisure of poetry and music, the subject of the last three chapters of the *Politics*.

²⁴ *Republic* 5, 473c–e.

²⁵ *Ethics* 10.7, 1177b4–28.

²⁶ *Politics* 1.2, 1252b29.

²⁷ Lord, *Education and Culture*, 197.

²⁸ *Ethics* 10.7, 1177a28–b3.

²⁹ *Politics* 7.3, 1325b27.

³⁰ *Politics* 7.3, 1325b31–33. See with *Politics*, 1.2, 1253a27–29 and *Ethics*, 1.2, 1094b7–11.

CONCLUSION

In closing I offer a suggestion that is beyond anything de Alvarez taught about imperialism and Aristotle, but which I aver is consistent with his teaching. He asserted, while acknowledging that it is milder than Soviet communism or Nazi fascism, that modern liberal democracy, with its universalizing tendencies and its proclamation to be the final form of all regimes, is imperialistic.³¹ Liberalism cannot escape the fundamentally intolerant moralism and imperialism which is at the root of all political orders. Even if in its American form it is not inclined to military conquest, it teaches that all illiberal political orders are illegitimate. It is not content merely to be self-sufficient, to concern itself with its internal activity; the whole world must be liberal, commercial, and open.

However, liberalism has something anti-imperial in its DNA, and that something may be the best we can hope for. Insofar as liberalism is rooted in the freedom and security of the individual, it is rooted in the philosophic teaching that the highest human life is not the moral and political life, lived in public through noble action, but the contemplative, private life, consisting in the activity of the intellectual virtues. Aristotle, of course, does not promote radical autonomy or teach that the best political order is the one in which each individual can choose how best to live his or her own life. However, like Plato's, his teaching serves to rein in the destructive and fundamentally tyrannical moral impulses of human beings by showing that we can never reach the happiness we desire by politics alone, that no human order, of itself, can bring us to our end.³² He understood that philosophy is a life only for a few individuals, but made it the model for politics in a way that limited politics without taking from it the essential role of authoritative opinion about the human good. Modern liberalism uncorks this bottle through the popularization of philosophy, teaching that each individual is authoritative. But this revolution is itself predicated on the Christian revolution that popularized the Socratic teaching that the best and noblest life for human beings cannot be circumscribed by the city, and which made available to all an extra-political pattern according to which each person, regardless of philosophic inclination, could form himself,

³¹ "Imperialism," 317.

³² For more on this connection, see Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. 207–15.

and attain the happiness of contemplation. Liberalism in its contemporary form has a moralism and imperialism all the more ferocious for its status as a kind of divine-historical revelation of such a pattern. But for all that one cannot reject liberalism, because liberalism is coeval with philosophy. It came into being with the teaching that the highest way of life is a private life, and it will die with that teaching.