
I. HISTORY OF ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

The Tyrant and the Philosopher: Xenophon's *Hiero* and the Reconceiving of the Philosophical Life

Dustine Peone (Mercer University)

Abstract

In this paper, I wish to argue that Xenophon's *Hiero*, which is ostensibly a political treatise about the nature of tyranny, is in fact a Socratic dialogue about the relationship between the philosophical life and the political life. Xenophon uses this dialogue to revise the definition of philosophy given by Pythagoras of Samos and to establish a new concept of what it means to philosophize. At the same time, *pace* Plato, he demonstrates that the life of political power is not necessarily anathematic to the pursuit of philosophy.

Keywords: the philosophical life, the political life, the definition of philosophy, Xenophon, Pythagoras of Samos, Plato

Xenophon was one of the first teachers of humanity. Until the end of the eighteenth century, he was considered a philosopher of the first order, and his works a necessary part of a humane education. His admirers were once legion. Cicero seldom mentions his name without the highest praise, such as "What a man he was!"¹ Machiavelli and Montesquieu reference his writings to great effect. Nietzsche has Xenophon as the object of one of his most outlandish claims: "If all goes well, the time will come when, in order to advance themselves on the path of moral reason, men will rather take up [Xenophon's] *Memorabilia* of Socrates than the Bible."² However, his reputation waned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scholars continued to read him as a historian, but his philoso-

¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De divinatione*, trans. William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), I.xxv.52.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 7: *Human, All-Too-Human*, trans. Paul V. Cohn (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 241–42.

phical writings were seldom taken seriously. Next to his Socratic colleague Plato, Xenophon's work was found dull and simple. Even Xenophon's translator for the Loeb Classical Library edition, E. C. Marchant, fails to hide his distaste. Marchant writes, "[Xenophon's] mind is a series of labelled pigeon-holes, each hole filled with a commonplace thought remorselessly analysed. These elementary thoughts he produces again and again. . . . But as with his thoughts, so with his words: he too often irritates the reader by incessant repetition of the same pattern of sentence, of the same formula, and even of the same word. . . . His mind moves in a narrow circle of ideas."³ This contempt is extraordinary for the editor and translator of a volume to announce.

It is only in the past few decades that Xenophon's reputation has begun to ascend once more in the English-speaking world. The first intellectual to attempt this rehabilitation was Leo Strauss, whose 1948 book *On Tyranny* remains the most significant study of Xenophon's *Hiero*. Since then, interest in the dialogues of Xenophon has had its periods of systole and diastole. The current moment seems to be a period of systole. Cornell University Press has been steadily publishing new annotated translations of Xenophon's works into English, and Landmark has released editions of Xenophon's *Hellenika* and *Anabasis*. The last few years have seen the publication of several books on Xenophon that all follow a larger trend in scholarship, namely the attempt to restore Xenophon's status not just as a historian and belletrist, but as a first-rate philosopher, and in particular as a Socratic philosopher.⁴

My contribution to this general movement concerns an aspect of Xenophon's *Hiero* that has been thus far overlooked by scholars. The

³ E. C. Marchant, Introduction to *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 4:xvi–xvii.

⁴ See Thomas L. Pangle, *The Socratic Way of Life: Xenophon's Memorabilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Pangle, *Socrates Founding Political Philosophy in Xenophon's Economist, Symposium, and Apology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); and Dustin Sebell, *Xenophon's Socratic Education: Reason, Religion, and the Limits of Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). See also the review article of all three books: Gregory A. McBrayer, "Xenophon as Philosopher," *Review of Politics* 84 (2022): 445–56. Slightly older significant literature following this trend includes: Vivienne Gray, ed., *Xenophon: Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Louis-André Dorion, *L'autre Socrate: Études sur les écrits Socratiques de Xénophon* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013).

Hiero is noteworthy as the only dialogue written by a Socratic philosopher that features a conversation between a wise man and a tyrant. Such a conversation never occurs in the entire body of Plato's work; the political life is always discussed and corrected by the philosopher in the absence of the tyrant. Given Plato's frequent subject-matter—the *polis* and its rule—this absence is conspicuous. One wonders, how would the philosophical speech about the good life vary in the presence of an absolute prince? How did Plato himself speak in the presence of Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse? Was he forced to play the *eirôn* like the clever servants in the plays of Aristophanes? Plato never brings his philosopher into converse with a true tyrant, so we are left to speculate. I surmise that this omission is intentional, that it *is* Plato's statement about the possibility of meaningful discourse between wisdom and power. The tyrant will not tolerate such discourse because wisdom is a form of authority that rivals his own authority. Plato's Socrates engages with would-be tyrants and future tyrants—Critias and Charmides, for example—because they are still amassing the tools of power and are therefore amenable to education. Once, however, they hold supreme power, all other loci of authority threaten the maintenance of their own station and cannot be tolerated. The warning that Anytus gives Socrates in the *Meno* is Plato's broad prudential advice to all philosophers: "I think, Socrates, that you easily speak ill of people. I would advise you, if you will listen to me, to *be careful*. Perhaps also in another city, and certainly here, it is easier to injure people than to benefit them. I think you know that yourself."⁵

Xenophon, however, does essay a dialogue between wisdom and power. In doing so, he moves into territory uncharted by Plato and also casts doubt upon Plato's standpoint on the matter. In *Hiero*, the two interlocutors are Hiero, absolute tyrant of Syracuse, and the poet and "wise man" Simonides. The question that guides the first part of the *Hiero* is posed by the poet to the tyrant: "You used to be a private person and are now a tyrant; since you have experienced both, you are likely to know better than I how the tyrannical life and the private life are distinguished in the enjoyments and pains of human beings."⁶ Hiero

⁵ Plato, *Meno*, 94e (emphasis added). All citations of Plato are from *Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

⁶ Xenophon, *Hiero, or the Skilled Tyrant*, trans. David K. O'Connor, in *Xenophon: The Shorter Writings*, ed. Gregory A. McBrayer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 1.2.

runs through a litany of complaints and hardships that follow from the position of the tyrant, in an effort to demonstrate to Simonides that the life of the private person is preferable. It is the very first of these grievances that I wish to consider.

Hiero begins by asking Simonides to name the pleasures of private life. Simonides responds by distinguishing different categories of pleasures, the first being “things seen through the eyes.”⁷ It is with this category that Hiero begins his demonstration of the tyrant’s woes. He says,

First, when I reflect on the spectacles contemplated through sight, I find the tyrants get less. There are different spectacles worth contemplating in different places, and private persons can travel to each of them, and to whichever cities they want, for the sake of spectacles, and also to the common festivals, where the spectacles human beings believe are most worth contemplating are gathered together. But the tyrants have little to do with contemplating. For it is not safe for them to go where they will not be stronger than those who will be present, nor are their possessions at home so secure that they can turn them over to others to go on a trip. For it is to be feared that they might both be deprived of the rule and become powerless to take revenge on those who perpetrate the injustice.⁸

On the surface of things, it is bizarre that Hiero begins in this manner. There is much to complain about in the life of a tyrant. The tyrant, as Hiero will say, lives in perpetual fear of his subjects and even his own family. He is held in universal contempt for the injustice that he perpetrates. He is surrounded only by the worst men, and he knows no one that he can trust. These are existential dilemmas of the most tragic sort. It hardly seems worth beginning this litany of evils by lamenting that the tyrant is unable to enjoy the spectacle of the festivals. Why give this complaint priority of place in the argument? Is attending festivals even seen as a first-rate pleasure by private persons? Most persons attend the festival for some practical reason, either buying or selling or social networking. Those “spectacles” that one associates with festivals (athletic matches? animal shows? fire-eaters?) may be had on demand by the tyrant for private viewing. Hiero may summon the finest lion-tamers in the realm to put on a show at his home while he reposes on a comfortable outdoor couch eating grapes. It cannot be that tyranny poses an obstacle to witnessing such spectacles. Could it be that the festival *itself* is the spectacle that Hiero means?

⁷ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.4.

⁸ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.10.

I propose that this curious complaint has a much deeper significance than appears at first sight. The spectacle of the festival points the reader to another conversation between a wise man and a tyrant, Pythagoras of Samos and Leon of Phlius. We are told by Cicero and Iamblichus that it was in this conversation that Pythagoras gave the first definition of the word “philosopher.” The philosopher, according to Pythagoras, is the person who attends the festival “for the sake of the spectacle.” The tyrant who is kept from contemplating the spectacle of the festival is cut off not only from private life in general, but from the life of wisdom or philosophy in particular. The misfortune of Leon is that he can never become Pythagoras, and the misfortune of Hiero is that he can never become Simonides. In the sections that follow, I will (1) analyze the meaning of the encounter between Pythagoras and Leon; (2) reinterpret the lament of Hiero in light of this earlier encounter; and (3) argue that Xenophon intends this allusion to constitute a challenge—akin to that of Socrates—to the Pythagorean definition of philosophy.

Pythagoras in Phlius

The story of the confrontation between Pythagoras and Leon is similar in general details to that between Simonides and Hiero. Pythagoras and Simonides are both *xenoi*, strangers.⁹ Neither is a subject of the tyrant to whom he speaks, and each is radically free of the responsibilities of the subject and the demands of the city, whereas the tyrant is not. They are also both known to be “wise men.” Hiero expresses his surprise when Simonides begins their conversation by asking Hiero to teach him something, asking, “What sort of thing could it be that I could know better than you, who are so wise a man?”¹⁰ The wisdom of Simonides is not, however, the same as the wisdom of Pythagoras. Simonides never refers to himself as a “philosopher.”¹¹ He is a poet, and we know from Plato that there is (or rather, it is practical for us to say that there is) an “an-

⁹ Strauss is particularly sensitive to the significance of Simonides as a “stranger.” See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's Hiero* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1948), ch. 3a.

¹⁰ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.1.

¹¹ Others have pointed out that “philosophy” is not mentioned at all in the *Hiero*. See Pangle, *Founding Political Philosophy*, 201. I find this absence in itself meaningful since, as I shall argue, so much of the dialogue points toward a re-founding of philosophy.

cient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy.¹² These two disciplines are rival forms of wisdom, the one speaking through the image and the other through the concept. Philosophy can never completely supersede poetic wisdom because the poet is the master of language, and philosophy is condemned to express itself through language.

Because Simonides and Pythagoras are strangers, they are immediately suspect. Neither wise man had a spotless reputation. Simonides was the first poet to charge a fee for his recitations, and his greed was apocryphal. He is said to have told the wife of Hiero, when asked whether it was better to be wise or wealthy, “Why, rich, for I see the wise men spending their days at the rich men’s doors.”¹³ Pythagoras had no such stigma attached to his character, but he professed a radically new occupation, that of the “philosopher.” It is received tradition that Pythagoras was the first to use this term as a self-description.¹⁴ This label made Pythagoras doubly a stranger: an unknown person with an unknown mode of life and species of wisdom. Hiero says that the tyrant always fears wise men because they may “contrive something.”¹⁵ This “something” is indefinite; the tyrant cannot know what the wise man intends.

It is characteristic of tyrants that they desire all of the good things

¹² Plato, *Rep.*, 607b. The passage is: “Let this be our defense—now that we’ve returned to the topic of poetry—that, in view of its nature, we had reason to banish it from the city earlier, for our argument compelled us to do so. But in case we are charged with a certain harshness and lack of sophistication, let’s also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy.”

¹³ Aristotle, *Rhet.*, II.16, 1391a9–12. All citations of Aristotle are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). On Simonides’ practice of charging for his verses, see *Rhet.*, III.2, 1405b24–28, and Cicero, *De oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), II.lxxxvi.352–53.

¹⁴ Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1986), 28: “It is also said, that Pythagoras was the first who called himself a philosopher.”

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 5.1. Alexandre Kojève says that Hiero is correct to fear the wise man’s capacity for contrivance. “If [Simonides] was able to ‘maneuver’ Hiero as he pleased, there is no reason at all why he could not beat him and outmaneuver him in the domain of politics, and . . . replace him at the head of the government—if he should ever desire to do so.” Kojève, “Tyranny and Wisdom,” in *On Tyranny* (Leo Strauss), expanded edition, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 149.

of their domains. If a private individual possesses some good that the tyrant lacks, this is a point of inferiority that the prudent tyrant cannot tolerate. It is incumbent upon the skilled tyrant to remove or acquire all rival sources of power. We know from Machiavelli that the prince must eliminate his rivals completely, and that “whoever is the cause of someone’s becoming powerful is ruined.”¹⁶ This tyrannical way of thinking underlies the confrontation between Simonides and Hiero. Hiero summons Simonides in order to assess whether the wise stranger poses a threat. Likewise, when Pythagoras turns up in Phlius, Leon summons him in order to assess what ought to be made of a “philosopher.” Does the philosopher possess a quality or a good that the tyrant lacks, and if so, does it pose a potential threat to the tyrant’s maintenance of power?

The story of Pythagoras’ conversation with Leon is most fully preserved in Cicero’s *Tusculanae disputationes*, and a variant is related by Iamblichus in his *Vita Pythagorica*. Cicero says that he takes the story from Heraclides of Ponticus, “the pupil of Plato and a learned man of the first rank.”¹⁷ The story was already classical at the time of Heraclides, and was a part of philosophical lore well before the time of Socrates. All Greeks who used the term “philosopher” were consciously assuming the mantle of Pythagoras and placing themselves in a lineage with their first ancestor. To practice philosophy meant grappling with the idea of philosophy that Pythagoras laid out to Leon.

Cicero reports that after Pythagoras had demonstrated to Leon a mastery of eloquence that astonished the ruler, Leon asked Pythagoras to “name the art in which he put most reliance; but Pythagoras said that for his part he had no acquaintance with any art, but was a philosopher.” Leon presses this claim, asking “who philosophers were and in what way they differed from the rest of the world.”¹⁸ This is the shrewd tyrant assessing a new figure in the human comedy. The response of Pythagoras must be quoted in full:

[Pythagoras] replied that the life of man seemed to him to resemble the festival which was celebrated with most magnificent games before a concourse collected from the whole of Greece; for at this festival some

¹⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), III, 16.

¹⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), V.iii.8.

¹⁸ Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.*, V.iii.8–9.

men whose bodies had been trained sought to win the glorious distinction of a crown, others were attracted by the prospect of making gain by buying or selling, whilst there was on the other hand a certain class, and that quite the best type of free-born, who looked neither for applause nor gain, but came for the sake of the spectacle and closely watched what was done and how it was done. So also we, as though we had come from some city to a kind of crowded festival, leaving in like fashion another life and nature of being, entered upon this life, and some were slaves of ambition, some of money; there were a special few who, counting all else as nothing, closely scanned the nature of things; these men gave themselves the name of lovers of wisdom (for that is the meaning of the word philosopher); and just as at the games the men of truest breeding looked on without any self-seeking, so in life the contemplation and discovery of nature far surpassed all other pursuits.¹⁹

Iamblichus does not mention the setting of Phlius or the conversation with Leon in his account of Pythagoras' teaching concerning the term "philosopher," but says much the same thing concerning the spectacle of the festival:

[Pythagoras] said that the entrance of men into the present life, resembled the progression of a crowd to some public spectacle. For there men of every description assemble with different views; one hastening to sell his wares for the sake of money and gain; but another that he may acquire renown by exhibiting the strength of his body; and there is also a third class of men, and these the most liberal, who assemble for the sake of surveying the places, the beautiful works of art, the specimens of valor, and the literary productions which are usually exhibited on such occasions. . . . But the most pure and unadulterated character, is that of the man who gives himself to the contemplation of the most beautiful things, and whom it is proper to call a philosopher.²⁰

This response to the inquiry of the tyrant is a masterstroke of eloquence and prudence. Pythagoras realizes that he must not appear to possess any art that would put him at variance with political authority. He therefore presents himself as a simple spectator of human existence, not in any regard an actor. The philosopher is not a knower, but a seeker after knowledge. He is not an active participant in any of the things with which political life is concerned, and his interest in these affairs is lim-

¹⁹ Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.*, V.iii.9.

²⁰ Iamblichus, *Life of Pyth.*, 28.

ited to bearing witness. This speech is an exemplar of wisdom speaking to power. It presents the philosopher as an innocent simpleton, rather than a spiritual guide. The philosopher alone has no business in the marketplace; he views the drama of the human world only from the eaves.

By way of contrast, Socrates is a different sort of philosopher. He is the gadfly of Athens, the corrupter of the children of the politicians. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates presents himself as a benefactor of the city and proposes that the "penalty" for his life ought to be free meals for life in the Prytaneum, as befits a patron.²¹ Socrates is condemned to death because he cannot keep from interfering. Pythagoras, on the other hand, being able to convince the mighty of his own innocence, flourishes and founds a school that spreads throughout Italy and Greece. We do not know what the immediate outcome was of Pythagoras' interview with Leon the tyrant, but we do know that Phlius became one of the foremost centers of the Pythagorean school, and that the city continued to be one of the largest Pythagorean communities in Europe into the fourth century BCE.²²

The definition that Pythagoras gives of the philosopher is not, however, merely a misdirection. It is a golden image, fit for a man with a golden thigh,²³ because it captures the very essence of the "lover of wisdom." The philosopher may *also* be a man of the world, but *qua* philosopher, he is a spectator. The things of the world pass before his eyes like a gallery of images, and his only desire is to know them. He attends the festival out of a sense of wonder, and wonder is the mainspring of philosophy for both Plato and Aristotle.²⁴ All of the other sorts of humans perform their business or their duties, and their focus is on one particular element of the festival. They all attend for some purpose or other—honors or profit or entertainment—and they could each name

²¹ Plato, *Apol.*, 36d–e.

²² See Charles H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 48–49.

²³ Pythagoras was said to have a "golden thigh" as a mark of his divinity. He once showed his thigh to his disciple Abaris. Iamblichus, *Life of Pyth.*, 49.

²⁴ Aristotle: "It is owing to their wonder [*thaumazein*] that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize. . . . A man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant; therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, evidently they were pursuing science in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end." *Meta.*, 982b12–22. Plato: "This is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else." *Theaet.*, 155d.

that purpose if called to account. The purpose one has for participating in the festival is the reflection of his or her social function. The philosopher alone is interested in the festival as a whole. More specifically, the festival as *spectacle*, as something to be seen. Philosophical speculation begins with the spectacle.²⁵ Here also is the social function of the philosopher: outsider, spectator, and non-participant. He has no part in any of the pleasures of those who engage in the doings of the festival, whatever esoteric pleasures he might know as compensation.

It must be noted that the Pythagoreans were not entirely private persons. Pythagoras' definition of philosophy must be taken in part as a bluff of prudence. It is to his honor that he has the shrewdness to avoid the envy of the tyrant Leon by presenting himself as an apolitical figure. Nevertheless, Pythagoras himself attained political rule in Croton, where his followers retained power for a period of eighty years. The Pythagoreans remained politically influential throughout southern Europe (including the city of Phlius) down to Xenophon's time. This does not, however, mean that the chief objects of the cult of Pythagoras were political. Their political authority was almost accidental.²⁶ It also does not undermine Pythagoras' definition of philosophy, which does not explicitly condemn political engagement.

Hiero's Lament

Returning to the *Hiero*, we must postulate that both Hiero and Simonides have the confrontation between Pythagoras and Leon in mind as the classical precedent for their own encounter. Hiero desires, like Leon, to hear wonders of eloquence from his interlocutor. Simonides, though, has learned the lesson of prudence from Pythagoras. He knows that it is a dangerous business presenting one's goods before an avaricious tyrant. Simonides upsets the will of Hiero, while at the same time flattering the

²⁵ Werner Jaeger points out, "The comparison depends on the ambiguity of the word θεωρεῖν, which means both watching a spectacle and contemplation and research in the 'theoretical' sense." *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, trans. Richard Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 432.

²⁶ Frederick Copleston writes, "The view has been held that the Pythagorean communities were *political* communities, a view, however, that cannot be maintained, at least in the sense that they were essentially political communities—which they certainly were not." *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1: *Greece and Rome* (New York: Image, 1962), 30.

king, when he immediately asks Hiero to teach him what he does not know (the difference between the pleasures of the tyrant and the private man). This puts the onus of instruction on Hiero, while Simonides remains in a position of humility.

Whatever his reason, Hiero wishes to demonstrate to Simonides that the private life is preferable to the tyrannical life. Hiero does not, however, forget that he is speaking to a “wise man.” Not being a wise man himself, he takes it that the *raison d'être* of every wise man is the *raison d'être* of the philosopher: namely, delight in the spectacle of the festival. He does not consider that the poet is a different sort of wise man than the philosopher. Vico tells us that the earliest poets, “without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination.”²⁷ The poet’s imagination is tied to robust sense, and therefore rooted in the body. The poet *does* take pleasure in those corporeal things to which the philosopher is indifferent. Simonides himself presses Hiero regarding not the pleasures of the eyes, but the pleasures of the animal body and of the purse. Concerning food, he insists, “But, by Zeus, for so long as the soul is eager, so long do those nourished by expensive provisions have much more pleasure than those served inexpensive ones.” Concerning sex, he says, “Perhaps it turns out that only the enjoyments of sex produce the desires in you to be tyrants. For in this, it is open to you to have intercourse with whatever you see that is most beautiful.”²⁸ Simonides presents himself in the early part of their conversation as an avowed hedonist.²⁹

We must consider, though, not the poet’s position vis-à-vis the spectacle of the festival, but the tyrant’s. Apart from what the speakers in the dialogue may wish to convey to one another, Xenophon is the prime mover of this dialogue, and more significant is what he wishes to convey to his readers. He begins the conversation with a reference to another conversation, thereby situating this dialogue in the context of an ongoing, never-ending conversation between authority and wisdom. He calls the reader’s attention at once to Pythagoras, the first “philosopher.”

What does Xenophon mean to suggest by beginning his tyrant’s lament with a reference to Pythagoras? This maneuver clearly shifts the

²⁷ Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), §375.

²⁸ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 1.20, 1.26.

²⁹ Strauss makes a similar observation. See *On Tyranny*, 31 and passim.

terms of the investigation somewhat. Simonides asks about the difference between the tyrant and the private person. Hiero focuses from the start not on private life in general, but the private life *of the philosopher* as his point of contrast. The philosopher is perhaps the *most* private person in the city. He has no business with others, and therefore no need of others. Civic ties arise through the need human beings have of one another. Whatever obligations we feel toward the city and to our fellow-citizens are rooted in the recognition of benefits received from civic life. The Pythagorean philosopher does not benefit from civic life. The festival and the marketplace, those primary arenas of the social sphere, are for him a spectacle only, or a *speculum*, a mirror of human nature. Pythagoras is homeless, a perpetual stranger and traveler. He does not choose this life for the same reason as the sophists (or Simonides), who move from city to city in order to profit from the sale of wisdom; he chooses it because every city is for him a new spectacle, and the more that can be seen, the greater his wisdom grows.

The tyrant, on the other hand, is the least free person in the city. This is a trope common throughout Socratic philosophy. Plato calls the tyrant “really a slave,” and says that of all persons in the city, the tyrant is “in the greatest need of most things and truly poor.”³⁰ Hiero himself shares this grim outlook. He tells Simonides that tyrants require much more than others, and receive never enough. The labor of the tyrant is entirely for the sake of the city, of which he is a lover. The city is the sole object of the tyrant’s power, and its prosperity is his personal prosperity. However, the tragedy of the tyrant is that “tyranny forces tyrants to run down even their own fatherlands,” for the virtue of the city is a threat to tyrannical authority.³¹ The tyrant is in bondage not just to the city on which he depends, but to the nature of tyranny itself. From this, there is no escape back to private life, because as a private citizen the tyrant would never be able to atone for the injustice his position compelled. “For how,” Hiero asks, “could a tyrant ever have the capacity to pay back the money to all from whom he has stolen, or suffer a return in imprisonment for all he imprisoned; and how for all he killed could he hand over enough souls to die in return?”³² Tyranny is a form of condemnation, from which the only escape may be suicide: “Indeed, Simon-

³⁰ Plato, *Rep.* IX, 579d–e. Plato’s entire argument is at 571a–580a.

³¹ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 5.3.

³² Xenophon, *Hiero*, 7.12.

ides, if it profits anyone to hang himself, know that I find it profits the tyrant most.”³³

Against this extreme view of the bondage of the tyrant stands the figure of the philosopher, the wise man. The tyrant cannot know of what philosophical wisdom consists, for he is not himself a wise man. Hiero knows from hearsay what kind of man Pythagoras was, and what kind of life he led: he was an observer of spectacles. He was free to watch *la comédie humaine* as it played out before him, and to move from city to city unknown and unburdened. “All the world’s a stage / And all the men and women merely players,” says Shakespeare.³⁴ “All the world” is the domain of the philosopher, the true cosmopolitan. The freest man is also the least tyrannical, because he has no interest in this or that. To keep to our ocular metaphor, the Pythagorean philosopher sees the most and remains himself unseen. The things of the world pass before his gaze, one after another, but he is the subject of no one’s gaze. The many attend the games at Olympia to see feats of strength and valor. No one at the festival has come to behold the philosopher, and one never hears the common men crying out with Epictetus, “*Ecce philosophum!*”³⁵ The tyrant, by contrast, is both the most visible man in the city and the one who sees least because everyone hides what is of value from the tyrant. This lack of seeing is the source of his perpetual fear of the wise and the just. The tyrant can never be sure that good men are not “contriving something.” He sees only the surface of things, the veneer that everyone presents when faced with authority. Everyone, though, sees the tyrant, whose world is a hellish panopticon.

It is not just his freedom and invisibility for which the tyrant envies the philosopher. Hiero also has a genuine desire for the wisdom of the philosopher. This may be a characteristic of Hiero in particular, because he was once a private man, or it may be characteristic of all tyrants. Xenophon gives no evidence for one reading or the other. However that may be, Hiero summons Simonides because he would be instructed in the ways of wisdom. Apart from this dialogue, we have further historical evi-

³³ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 7.13.

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. John Jowett et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), II.vii.139–40.

³⁵ Epictetus, *Dissertationes*, ed. and trans. Fred. Dübner (Paris: Ambrosio Firmin-Didot, 1877), IV, 8.13.

dence that this is the case. The encounter between Hiero and Simonides seems to have been a real event, unlike some of the encounters that occur in the Socratic dialogues (for example, the *Parmenides*). Xenophon invents the contents of their discussion, but he does not invent the situation or the setting. Cicero refers in several places to the relationship between the tyrant and the poet, which must have been a traditionally received story at the time he was studying in Greece. In *De natura Deorum*, Cicero writes, “Inquire of me as to the being and nature of god, and I shall follow the example of Simonides, who having the same question put to him by the great Hiero, requested a day’s grace for consideration; next day, when Hiero repeated the question, he asked for two days, and so went on several times multiplying the number of days by two.” Hiero asked why Simonides did this, and the poet responded, “Because the longer I deliberate the more obscure the matter seems to me.”³⁶ By Cicero’s authority, the con-course between Hiero and Simonides was not the matter of a single afternoon, but an ongoing exchange. Hiero continued to invite Simonides to discourse with him, and desired to know from a wise man about the highest of things. The person who desires to know the truth about the gods is not necessarily a philosopher, but aspires in that direction.

Xenophon’s allusion to the story of Pythagoras, located as it is at the very start of the *Hiero*, makes clear that the two ways of life that are at issue are *not* the tyrannical life and the merely private life. The tyrant does not measure himself against shoemakers or merchants or the discus throwers competing in the Olympian games, nor even the farmer, who is a sort of ideal figure of private life in the other dialogues in the *Corpus Xenophonticum*.³⁷ None of these persons attends the common festivals for the sake of *seeing*, but for the sake of doing and profiting. Hiero measures himself, in his own mind, against one type of private person. The tyrannical life is placed on a scale with its polar opposite, the philosophical life. Hiero lets us know at once that the philosopher is the standard by which he evaluates his own happiness.

³⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De natura Deorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), I.xxii.60.

³⁷ See especially Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, trans. E. C. Marchant, in *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), vol. 4. Xenophon writes, “Helpful, pleasant, honourable, dear to gods and men in the highest degree, [the art of farming] is also in the highest degree easy to learn. Noble qualities surely!” (XV.4).

Correcting Pythagoras and Rewriting the Origin of Philosophy

It is not enough to simply state that Xenophon alludes to Pythagoras, and that he means to propose the philosophical life as an alternative to the life of the tyrant. This contradistinction is a commonplace amongst Greek philosophers. If that is all that Xenophon means to do, then we might be forced to concede with E. C. Marchant that Xenophon's mind moves in only a narrow circle of ideas. Xenophon intends more than this. In alluding to Pythagoras, he does not simply accept what his predecessor says, but he challenges it. There is a sense in which the *Hiero* can be said to offer a correction to Pythagoras' definition of philosophy.

The same endeavor to rewrite the Pythagorean definition of philosophy is tacit in Plato's *Phaedo*. I have been silent about this dialogue until now, but the classicist will have already recalled that the *Phaedo* marks the second significant role that the city of Phlius plays in the history of philosophy. In the time of Socrates, Phlius remained a stronghold of Pythagorean thought and the seat of one of the largest Pythagorean communities. The *Phaedo* is the story of the death of Socrates, related after the fact by Phaedo, in Phlius, to a group of Pythagoreans. These Phlisians question Phaedo for news from Athens, because "hardly anyone from Phlius visits Athens nowadays, nor has any stranger come from Athens for some time who could give us a clear account of what happened, except that he drank the poison and died, but nothing more."³⁸ The silence between the two cities is likely the result of the political tension between Athens and the Peloponnese. It is noteworthy that the Pythagoreans in Phlius know and honor Socrates as a philosopher and wish to hear about his final teaching. Further, two of Socrates' interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes, are from Thebes, which had another major settlement of Pythagoreans, and both were associates of the leading Theban Pythagorean, Philolaus.³⁹

The argument of the *Phaedo* concerns the immortality of the soul, which was one of the central dogmas of the Pythagorean philosophy. Pythagoras taught that the soul underwent metempsychosis after the death of the body, and was repeatedly reincarnated. Porphyry writes, "First he declares that the soul is immortal; then that it changes into other kinds of

³⁸ Plato, *Phd.*, 57a–b.

³⁹ Plato, *Phd.*, 61d–e. See also John M. Cooper's introduction to *Phd.* in *Collected Works*, 49.

animals; in addition that things that happen recur at certain intervals, and nothing is absolutely new. . . . Pythagoras seems to have been the first to introduce these opinions into Greece.”⁴⁰ This is another philosophical field in which Pythagoras may be credited as a founder. Pythagoras himself claimed to have already passed through many phases of reincarnation. Diogenes Laertius reports (on the authority of Heraclides), “After Euphorbus died, [Pythagoras] said that his soul had passed into Hermotimus. . . . Then he said that he had become Pyrrhus, a fisherman of Delos; and that he still recollected everything, how he had been formerly Aethalides, then Euphorbus, then Hermotimus, and then Pyrrhus. And when Pyrrhus died, he became Pythagoras.”⁴¹

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates takes up the Pythagorean doctrine of the immortality of the soul as a theme. If there is any doubt that he is self-consciously engaging with the ideas of the Pythagoreans, this is dispelled when he tells Simmias and Cebes that what he has to say is essentially the same as the teaching of Philolaus.⁴² Socrates’ four arguments are commonly known as the cyclical argument; the argument from recollection; the affinity argument; and the argument from the Form of life. Each has been subject to a thousand and one critical responses, and it is not our purpose to examine them in detail. It must be mentioned, however, that having gone through these demonstrations of the soul’s immortality, Socrates admits, “No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation.”⁴³ The Pythagorean dogma is taken by Socrates as a likely story, edifying and noble but far from certain. Socrates teaches the Pythagoreans present that their doctrine has the moral and logical status of an “as if” rather than a first principle.

The key passage of the dialogue does not, however, concern im-

⁴⁰ Quoted in Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 84 (quotation 9.10).

⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 340.

⁴² Plato, *Phd.*, 61d.

⁴³ Plato, *Phd.*, 114d.

mortality. Having used this theme to situate himself squarely within the universe of Pythagorean discourse, Socrates essays a redefinition of philosophy, thereby seizing the club of Hercules from Pythagoras. The Socratic definition of philosophy is not bearing witness to the spectacle of the festival. The new definition that Socrates gives of philosophy is learning to die. He says, “Those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying [*hoi orthos philosophountes apothneskin neskein meletosi*] and they fear death least of all men.”⁴⁴ Dying is not, of course, a craft that one perfects through practice like shoemaking or cookery. Learning to die entails learning to live rightly. The best death is the death of a man who has lived and done as he ought and as was fitting. The person who achieves this may die easily, like Socrates himself, with a joke on his lips. Philosophy is therefore not simply a matter of seeing, but of *doing* and *being*. With this definition, Socrates suggests a new basis for philosophy and therefore a new founding. He announces this second founding to the Pythagoreans schooled in the first founding, both those of Thebes (through Simmias and Cebes), and those of Phlius (through Phaedo).⁴⁵

Xenophon, like Plato, intends to shine a new light on the practice of philosophy, though with greater restraint than the *Phaedo*. The *Hiero* is closer to a corrective or expansion of the Pythagorean doctrine than a radical reinvention. This is suggested when Simonides returns at the end of the dialogue to the issue of the festival.

Following the breakdown of *Hiero*, in which the tyrant contemplates suicide, the roles of the interlocutors are reversed and achieve their natural order. The wise Simonides becomes the teacher, demonstrating his wisdom for the first time, and *Hiero* the pupil. The tyrant lays down his authority and wisdom is able now to speak. Surprisingly, Simonides does not castigate the tyrannical life, but offers a pragmatic program for ameliorating its evils. He says, “I can, I believe, teach you how ruling does not at all prevent being loved, but even gets more than living privately.”⁴⁶ He suggests that *Hiero* may do well by doing good. A benevolent tyrant, who works for the good of the people, who dis-

⁴⁴ Plato, *Phd.*, 67e. Among those luminaries who accepted the Socratic definition of philosophy as the true definition are Cicero and Montaigne.

⁴⁵ See Dustin Peone, *Making Philosophy Laugh: Humor, Irony, and Folly in Philosophical Thought* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023), ch. 1.

⁴⁶ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 8.1.

penses gifts and rewards personally but delegates punishments to others, who honors commerce and uses his personal guard to enforce justice, who spares no expense to improve the city rather than aggrandizing himself—such a tyrant wins the love, honor, and respect both of other cities and of his own subjects. Simonides says, “If you make the city you lead the most happy, [you will] be victorious in the most beautiful and magnificent contest among human beings.”⁴⁷ The portrait of the tyrant sketched by Simonides is not necessarily that of a just man; he appeals to the desire of Hiero for love and honor rather than to his innate sense of justice or right.⁴⁸ All the same, it is a portrait not of an oppressive despot, but of a benevolent father of a grateful people. It must be kept in mind that the Greek τύραννος does not necessarily mean an oppressive autocrat, as the word “tyrant” does in modern usage. The Greek “tyrant” was any monarch who ruled without law.⁴⁹ The king who rules without law is most often oppressive, but may in theory be benevolent.

Having shown Hiero the benefits of ruling with virtue, Simonides returns at the end of his speech to Hiero’s complaint concerning the spectacle of the festival. He says, “And because you would be safe, you could, if you wished, travel somewhere to contemplate [the spectacles], or do this while remaining here. For there would always be a festival gathered around you of those who wish to display something, whether wise or beautiful or good, and of those who desire to serve you. Everyone in attendance would be your ally, everyone absent would desire to serve you.”⁵⁰ There are several aspects of this passage that merit scrutiny.

First, we find that in his return to the topic, Simonides emphasizes that the particular objects valued by the spectator of the festival are the True, the Beautiful, and the Good, the three highest things and the classical objects of philosophical speculation. These are what St. Thomas would much later call the “transcendental predicates” of God. This sheds light on how Xenophon—and probably the Greeks in general—

⁴⁷ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 11.7.

⁴⁸ In Plato’s language, this is an appeal to a silver soul, not a gold soul. *Rep.* III, 415a–c.

⁴⁹ Rousseau mentions the *Hiero* as evidence that “the Greek authors used the word tyrant in another sense [than the pejorative sense].” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), III.x, note. Aristotle distinguishes the oppressive from the (apparently) benevolent tyrant in *Pol.* V.xi.

⁵⁰ Xenophon, *Hiero*, 11.10.

understood Pythagoras' encomium of the "festival." The spectacle pursued by the philosophic life is not the ugliness and folly of the back stalls and pig races. The eye of the philosopher does not promiscuously range where it ought not. Rather, the philosopher gazes upon the festival in order to discover the finest things: truth, beauty and goodness.

Second, Simonides claims that the spectacle of the festival is open not just to the private person, but to the tyrant as well. The contrast that is posited at the beginning of the dialogue between the tyrannical and the private, philosophical life is annulled. The gap between the two lives is shown to be traversable. This is to say that pursuit of the philosophical life is an open possibility for the tyrant. If this is so, then it is likewise an open possibility for politicians in *poleis* with non-tyrannical forms of government. The lover of wisdom need not be a purely private person, and need not be invisible. This means that the "philosopher king" is not just a phantasm within an ideal city. The tyrant may philosophize even in the imperfect cities of this world.

Third, if it is possible for politicians to learn to philosophize, then it is best that they do so. This is the crux of the teaching that Simonides offers to Hiero. Hiero is neither loved nor honored by his subjects because he fails to practice justice.⁵¹ His life is without beauty or truth because he fails to pursue goodness. Because his subjects fear him and hate him, they present him with only the semblance of truth and beauty when they have to deal with him. Hiero is acutely aware of this disparity between truth and appearance, and it is at the root of his inability to trust those around him.⁵² Simonides offers the possibility of a new way of life, which pursues the three objects of goodness, truth, and beauty. In practicing the good—namely, what benefits the city as a whole—the tyrant may (in theory) win love and fidelity. With these, he will have access to the beautiful and the true. It is to the tyrant's benefit to learn to philosophize, because only by so doing may he attain the happiness he so desires. The failure to live a philosophical life leads the tyrant only to thoughts of the noose.

⁵¹ Hiero correctly says, "I judge being loved to be so great a good that I hold goods really come automatically to one who is loved, from both gods and human beings. And it is of just this sort of possession that tyrants get less than anyone." Xenophon, *Hiero*, 3.5–6.

⁵² "It is more difficult to find one trustworthy person than very many workers for whatever work you want." Xenophon, *Hiero*, 6.11.

Socrates, as he is presented by both Plato and Xenophon, never abandons the hope that politicians and statesmen may learn to become philosophers also. The “philosopher kings” of the *Republic* are the ideal, probably impossible fusion of the two types of life.⁵³ The disciples of Socrates were for the most part the aristocratic youth who were bound to one day rule Athens. Socrates’ influence with these young men ultimately vexed enough powerful citizens that it led to his trial and death. It is debatable whether Socrates succeeded with any of his politically-inclined students in inculcating a true love of philosophy, and both Plato and Xenophon generally suggest that he did not. Xenophon writes of these politically ambitious followers in his *Memorabilia*, “So soon, then, as they presumed themselves to be the superiors of the politicians, they no longer came near Socrates. For apart from their general want of sympathy with him, they resented being cross-examined about their errors when they came. Politics had brought them to Socrates, and for politics they left him.”⁵⁴ It seems that these young men learned dialectics from Socrates while lacking the true love of wisdom. Nevertheless, Socrates never gives up on the project, and this appears to be the same project Simonides has in mind in his discourse with Hiero. It is fitting that the *Hiero* ends with the silence of the tyrant, and we do not know what results come of Simonides’ exhortation.

Fourth, Xenophon suggests that it is in fact *easier* for the tyrant to bear witness to the spectacle of the festival than for a private person to do so. The festival, he says, gathers around the benevolent tyrant. The ruler need not go out of his way to seek out the spectacle of *la comédie humaine*. Instead, it follows him wherever he goes. His position in the city is privileged, and to continue the metaphor of the festival, we may speak of him having a raised dais upon which he has a more expansive view of things than others. Because the city is his patrimony, he is authorized to look into all affairs. This requires, however, that he be a benevolent ruler who has won the love of his people. The lover wishes above all to be seen by the beloved. If the tyrant is beloved by all, then all present themselves to his view and pass their finest possessions and virtues before his gaze. The spectacle that the private philosopher must seek out, the ruler receives as an offering. This is true not just of the

⁵³ Plato, *Rep.*, V–VI.

⁵⁴ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, trans. E. C. Marchant, in *Xenophon in Seven Volumes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), vol. 4, I.ii.47.

subjects of the ruler, but of other cities also, which, loving and admiring their just and happy neighbor, likewise allow him to behold their finest things. The philosophical tyrant is able to benefit from the natural cupidity of the human condition. The tyrant, then, has the potential to become a greater philosopher than the private person.

In what way is all of this meant as a corrective of Pythagoras? The shortcoming of the Pythagorean definition of philosophy is that it creates a dichotomy between the philosophical and the political life. Pythagoras presents himself as a radically private person, and his image of the philosopher is the image of an outsider. For the Socratic philosophers, on the other hand, this dichotomy is invalid. In the *Hiero*, Xenophon reinforces the idea that philosophical thinking is rooted in the spectacle of the festival. However, he expands this idea to be more inclusive. He allows philosophy to be a possibility (even if never fully actualized) for the political person as well as the private person. He invites the tyrant into the practice. Moreover, Xenophon binds together the love of the spectacle with the love of the city, which is a connection that Pythagoras avoids. The Pythagorean philosopher, a perpetual stranger, lacks the element of patriotism.

Conclusion

We have now reached an understanding concerning Hiero's lament about being unable to witness the spectacle of the festival. Taken out of its historical context, this is a baffling article of sorrow. Only when understood as a direct reflection of the conversation between Pythagoras and Leon does its significance become clear. At stake is the very idea of philosophy and the character of the philosopher. Xenophon, like Plato in the *Phaedo*, has in mind a new definition of philosophy and a re-founding of the tradition on principles that bring the philosophical and the political life closer together. The teaching of the *Hiero* reaffirms the image of the festival as the proper object of philosophical speculation. However, it proceeds to offer this image as something desirable not just for private persons and unknown strangers, but for gentlemen and even monarchs as well. This maneuver actually shows that the tyrant is correct to suspect the philosopher, because the philosopher does in fact possess a good that it would be good and beneficial for the tyrant to have. As to the effect of this argument on its listener, I can only repeat that at the end of the dialogue Hiero remains silent.

