In his book *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, Mark Lilla explores how several 20th century intellectuals, such as Heidegger and Foucault, were apologists for tyrannical forms of governments. In the book’s final chapter, Lilla applies Plato’s psychology to explain why these intellectuals supported tyranny. According to Lilla, the psychological force that draws certain men to tyranny is the same psychological force that draws other men to philosophy, namely, love or *eros*. Eros explains our yearning and striving for the good and the beautiful. The *eros* of some people leads them to become philosophers, and in others it leads to concern for the right ordering of cities. However, *eros* also induces madness. So although *eros* wants the good, it can unwittingly serve the bad. The tyrannical soul is one in which the madness of *eros* drives out all moderation. When an intellectual is passionate about the life of the mind, but unable to master that passion, his soul becomes tyrannical, and when that immoderate passion is directed towards political concerns, it tends towards a love of tyranny—what Lilla calls “philotyranny.”

What makes Lilla’s “Platonic” diagnosis of philotyranny plausible is that the love of a disordered form of government would seem to be a disordered love. Moreover, if what makes a love to be disordered is a lack of moderation, then philotyranny must be immoderate *eros*. However, there are a number of weaknesses in Lilla’s diagnosis. First of all, it is difficult to see, on Plato’s own philosophy, why the love of philosophy needs

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to be moderated (cf. *Phd* 66 b-68 b; *Rep.* 517 c; *Theat* 176 b-c). Second, given the
distinction between the theoretical and practical realms, which at times Plato draws rather
sharply (cf. *Rep.* 514 a-517 e; *Theat* 174 a- 175 e), it is difficult to see how the passionate
love of philosophy is connected to the passionate love of politics. Third, a love may be
disordered because it loves the wrong sort of thing (cf. *Rep.* 505 b-c) and not merely
because that love is immoderate, and so philotyranny need not be immoderate *eros.*
Therefore, Lilla’s diagnosis of philotyranny falls short of adequately explaining the
phenomenon.

In what follows, I propose a different account of philotyranny that connects it to
the part of the soul that Plato calls ‘*thumos*’ (spirit) and Thomas Aquinas calls the
‘*appetitus irascibilis*’ (irascible appetite). First, I offer a brief account of what this part of
the soul is and the passions associated with it. Next, I discuss how it is perfected by
courage and magnanimity, and perverted by recklessness, ambition, and vainglory. I
conclude the paper by offering an alternative account of philotyranny.

I

Plato discusses the three parts of the soul—reason, spirit, and appetite—in the *Republic*
and in the *Phaedrus.* Spirit is introduced in the *Republic* to account for anger and
aggression, especially the anger that fights against appetite (439 e-440 b) and injustice
(440 c-d). Since the parts of the soul correspond to the parts of the ideal city (435 d-e),
spirit corresponds to the auxiliaries who wage war in defense of the city (429 a-c, 440 d).
In the *Phaedrus,* spirit seems to be symbolized by a white horse with black eyes. This
horse is described as a lover of glory (253 d), a point that fits with the connection
between spirit and the auxiliary class of soldiers in the *Republic.* In both works Plato

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2 I leave aside the important question whether the two accounts are entirely consistent.
highlights, perhaps to the point of exaggeration, the way in which spirit is an ally of reason and is opposed to appetite (Rep. 440 b, 442 b; Phdr 253 d-254 d).

Thomas Aquinas’ account of this part of the soul—the irascible appetite—is less poetic but more precise. He describes the irascible appetite as one of the two species of sensuality, i.e., the appetite following from sense knowledge (ST I, q. 81, a. 1). The other species is the concupiscible appetite; its object is what is good or evil apprehended as such by the sense powers. The concupiscible passions are love, desire, and joy—all of which concern something apprehended as good, and hatred, aversion, and sorrow—all of which concern something apprehended as evil. The irascible appetite resists those things that inflict harm and hinder the acquisition of what is suitable. Its object is what is good or evil inasmuch as it is of an arduous nature, and the irascible passions are daring, fear, hope, despair, and anger (S.T. I-II, q. 23, a. 1). Employing an argument reminiscent of the Republic, Thomas insists that the two species of sensuality are distinct because “sometimes the soul busies itself with unpleasant things, against the inclination of the concupiscible appetite, in order that, following the impulse of the irascible appetite, it may fight against obstacles” (S.T. I, q. 81, a. 2). But unlike Plato, Thomas notes how the irascible appetite is sometimes an ally of the concupiscible appetite. He writes:

[T]he irascible is, as it were, the champion and defender of the concupiscible, when it rises up against what hinders the acquisition of the suitable things which the concupiscible desires, or against what inflicts harm, from which the concupiscible flies. And for this reason the passions of the irascible appetite rise from the passions of the concupiscible appetite and terminate in them. For instance, anger rises from sadness, and, having wrought vengeance, terminates in joy (S.T. I, q. 81, a. 2).

3 All citations of the Summa Theologiae are from the Fathers of the English Dominican Province translation, (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947).
Concerning the passions of the irascible appetite, Thomas explains that there is a twofold contrariety: the contrariety of good and evil, and the contrariety of approach and avoidance (S.T. I-II, q. 23, a. 2). Hope prompts movement toward a future good that is difficult but possible to obtain. It differs from fear because fear regards what is evil. It differs from joy because joy regards a good that is present. It differs from desire because desire regards a future good per se, i.e., without the aspect of difficulty. It differs from despair, which is its contrary with respect to the same difficult good, because despair prompts avoidance of that difficult good (S.T. I-II, q. 40, aa.1, 4). Finally, hope causes daring “since it is in the hope of overcoming the threatening object of fear, that one attacks it boldly” (S.T. I-II, q. 45, a. 2).

Fear prompts movement away from an impending, difficult evil that surpasses the power of the fearful one to overcome it (S.T. I-II, q. 41, a. 2). It differs from sorrow because sorrow concerns a present evil without the qualification of arduousness (S.T. I-II, q. 42, a. 3, ad 2). It differs from daring, its contrary with respect to approach and withdrawal, because daring prompts movement toward an impending, difficult evil in order to achieve the good of overcoming it (S.T. I-II, q. 45, a. 1). Fear causes despair insofar as fear of the difficulty attaching to the good one should hope for causes one to avoid the struggle necessary to achieve that good (S.T. I-II, q. 45, a. 2).

II

Virtue is that which makes its possessors good and renders their work good by making it accord with reason, as Aristotle famously insists (EN II. 6, 1106 a 15-23, 1106 b 35- 1107 a 2). Based upon that principle, Thomas argues that virtues are habits that perfect powers of the soul (S.T. I-II, q. 55, a. 1) and are in those powers as in a subject (S.T. I-II, q. 56, a.
1). Moral virtues perfect the appetitive powers, for it belongs to the appetitive powers to move the agent to action (S.T. I-II, q. 58, a. 1). Accordingly, as one of the cardinal virtues, courage (fortitudo) perfects the irascible appetite (S.T. I-II, q. 61, a. 2). Courage makes its possessors’ actions accord with reason by enabling them to overcome those obstacles that disincline them from what reason requires (S.T. II-II, q. 123, a.1). The special matter of courage is grave danger, primarily the danger of death (S.T. II-II, q. 123, aa. 2, 4). The main passions remedied by courage are fear and daring. Courage curbs the fear of grave dangers and moderates the daring to withstand them (S.T. II-II, q. 123, a. 3). Courage addresses other passions as well. Insofar as anger, moderated by reason, is employed for the act of aggression against grave danger, it is involved in some acts of courage (S.T. II-II, q. 123, a. 10). Since hope causes daring, and fear is the cause of despair (S.T. I-II, q. 45, a. 2), these emotions are connected to courage as well (S.T. II-II, q. 123, a. 3, ad 3).

Magnanimity is a virtue that involves observing what reason requires concerning great honors that come from great and difficult deeds (S.T. II-II, q. 129, aa. 1-3). According to Thomas, magnanimity is a secondary virtue related to courage because the hardships involved in its great deeds are nevertheless minor compared to the hardships involved in courage (S.T. II-II, q. 128; q. 129, a. 5). Since hope is the passion that tends towards a difficult good, it is the main passion remedied by magnanimity (S.T. II-II, q. 129, a. 1, ad 2). Magnanimity also strengthens the mind against despair by urging the pursuit great things according to right reason (S.T. II-II, q. 161, a.1). Finally, since hope is the cause of daring (S.T. I-II, q. 45, a. 2), magnanimity deals with daring as well (S.T. II-II, q. 129, a. 7).
Among the vices associated with the spirited part of the soul are recklessness, ambition, and vainglory. Whereas courage moderates daring in the aggression against a grave danger, recklessness (*audacia*) involves an excess of daring and an eagerness to meet danger (*S.T. II-II*, q. 127, aa.1-2). Often, recklessness results in harm (*S.T. II-II*, q. 127, a. 2, ad. 2). Sometimes recklessness involves a lack of fear, but sometimes the reckless lose their nerve and become fearful once the danger is present (*S.T. II-II*, q. 127, a. 2, ad.3; cf. Aristotle, *EN* III.7, 1116 a 7-8).

Whereas magnanimity observes what reason requires concerning great honors, ambition denotes an inordinate desire for honor and so is opposed to magnanimity by excess (*S.T. II-II*, q. 131, a.2). According to Thomas, one of the ways in which the desire for honor is inordinate is when people desire recognition for excellences that they do not possess. Another way to exhibit ambition is to desire honor for its own sake and not for the profit of others (*S.T. II-II*, q. 131, a.1).

Vainglory is another vice that is opposed to magnanimity. According to Thomas, glory signifies a particular clarity in the display of something that is attractive and approved by people. The desire for glory is not itself a sin; it is not sinful to know and approve of one’s own good works. But it is sinful to desire for empty or vain glory. Thomas adds that glory may be vain in three ways. First, when the thing for which one seeks glory is unworthy of it. Second, when the others whose approval one seeks are themselves unfit to give it. Third, when the glory is not sought for a due end, such as God’s honor or the welfare of one’s neighbor (*S.T. II-II*, q. 132, a.1). Since glory is an effect of honor, and magnanimity is about honor, magnanimity is also about glory and the moderate use of it. Hence, vainglory is opposed to magnanimity (*S.T. II-II*, q. 132, a.2).
This account of the passions, virtues, and vices of the spirited part of the soul allows for a more thorough diagnosis of philotyranny. But first we must recognize that other parts of the soul play a role as well. Since love and hate are passions of the concupiscible appetite, and since the passions of the irascible appetite rise from and terminate in the passions of the concupiscible appetite, the lover of tyranny is not merely acting from passions such as hope and daring. Moreover, since I presuppose, along with Plato and Thomas Aquinas, that tyranny is an unjust form of government, lovers of tyranny are mistaken about what forms of government best render to each person what is his or her due. Hence, philotyranny also includes a corruption of intellect.

Our diagnosis begins with what lovers of tyranny presumably love about tyrannical government, such as its order, its particular (albeit perverted) version of justice, the power it offers to those who support it, and possibly also the honors that lovers of tyranny receive under it. The lovers of tyranny also hate the various flaws that alternative states, such as the liberal West, possess. Depending on the particular lover of tyranny, these flaws may include class, racial, and gender inequalities, an over-emphasis on consumer goods and technology, a herd mentality, etc. (There is no need to suppose that all lovers of tyranny hate the same aspects of non-tyrannical governments.) The lovers of tyranny recognize that the re-ordering of the state is a difficult good to achieve, but nevertheless they hope to achieve this through some other form of government, such as Nazism or Communism. When the object of their hope seems achievable, the lovers of tyranny daringly support—to the point of recklessness—those leaders who might bring about a better state. Sometimes they seek important academic or government positions
because they mistakenly believe they can thereby influence the tyrants they admire. Sometimes their ambition and vainglory are rewarded. Of course, the tyrants often turn out to be less educable than the lovers of tyranny hoped and the tyranny eventually proves to be corrupt. Lovers of tyranny discover this late, if at all, and then, realizing that the perfect state that they hoped for is not achievable, succumb to despair and sadness.

Aspects of Lilla’s own account of various 20th century lovers of tyranny—including the very title of his book—bear out my diagnosis. In his account of Heidegger, Lilla cites Hannah Arendt, who believed Heidegger’s philotyranny was based in part on “delusions of grandeur and in part from despair” (Lilla p. 35). Heidegger’s delusion of grandeur indicates the vice of vainglory, his term as Rector of Freiburg University indicates ambition, and his despair over the future of the West indicates a lack of magnanimity. Lilla’s account of Carl Schmitt’s philotyranny stresses Schmitt’s admiration of “animal power” (Lilla, p. 66), which indicates an exaggerated view of aggression typical of the vice of recklessness. Schmitt also thought that by collaborating with the Nazis, he could “impose [upon them] his own interpretation of National Socialism” (Lilla, p. 52). This suggests ambition and vainglory. Lilla’s account of Walter Benjamin’s philotyranny notes that Benjamin’s “The Critique of Violence” criticizes only the official violence of bourgeois life and parliamentary politics. Benjamin advocates “a different kind of violence—a regenerative, ‘law-making’ violence—[that] can bring about a new social order” (Lilla, p. 91) and this indicates the vice of recklessness. Lilla’s account of Alexandre Kojève’s philotyranny mentions Kojève’s belief that:

Once modern philosophers realized that there were no… eternal ideas, that all ideas arise only out of the human history struggle, then they realized that they
must participate actively in history, bringing into existence the future truths that are latent in the present. Philosophers and tyrants therefore need each other: tyrants need to be told what potential lies dormant in the present; philosophers need those bold enough to bring that relationship about… Of their work, only history can judge (Lilla, p. 134).

Coupled with Kojève’s career in the French government, this suggests ambition and vainglory, along with recklessness. Finally, Lilla’s account of Michel Foucault mentions his 1971 debate with Noam Chomsky, in which Foucault declares:

The proletariat doesn’t wage war against the ruling class because it considers such a war to be just. The proletariat makes war against the ruling class because, for the first time in history, it wants to take power. When the proletariat takes power, it may be quite possible that the proletariat will exert towards the classes over which it triumphed a violent, dictatorial, and even bloody power. I can’t see what objection could possibly be made to this (cited in Lilla, p. 150).

It is difficult to find a better illustration of recklessness by an intellectual.

In conclusion, an adequate account of philotyranny must go beyond the observation that lovers of tyranny are gripped by immoderate eros. The diagnosis of philotyranny must also identify the disorders in the spirited part of the soul. In philotyranny, daring, hope, and despair are not regulated by reason. As a result, instead of courage and magnanimity, the lovers of tyranny frequently manifest recklessness, ambition, and vainglory.

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