

Cicero's View on the Merits of a Practical Life in De republica 1: What is Missing? A comparison with Plato and Aristotle

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ABSTRACT

Cicero's views on the theoretical–practical life controversy in *De Re republica* book 1 reflect his own career and accomplishments and are phrased in terms of the success of defending the state against those who wanted to destroy it. Cicero places himself in a tradition of men, from Miltiades to Cato, who entered the fracas of public life and saved the *res publica*. Plato addresses in *Politeia* 6 496b-e the theoretical–practical life controversy from the same perspective of defending or saving a desirable condition, however, for him it is not the government but the integrity of a philosophical life that needs to be protected. Philosophy is the highest form of existence and deserves all effort. Getting involved in politics would first of all jeopardize the integrity of a philosophical existence. Aristotle at *Politics* 7 ch. 2-3 approaches in a more Hellenistic manner the theoretical–practical life controversy from the personal perspective, that is the most desirable life. This is one of virtue which consists in acting. However, the highest form of activity is not that of the practical life but that of theory like that of god who is not engaged in “outside actions”. Cicero will follow Aristotle in focusing on *virtus*, however, he will do away with the theoretical side of human excellence which for both Plato and Aristotle deserved priority.

KEYWORDS

Theoretical life, practical life, Cicero, Aristotle

Cicero opens his dialogue *De republica* in the Aristotelian fashion with a proem in which he is the only speaker¹, and in doing so he reveals the influence of Aristotle in an important formal element of *De republica*. However, as a piece of political philosophy, *De republica* does not compete with Aristotle, but with

¹ *Epistulae ad Atticum* 13.19: quae autem his temporibus scripsi Ἀριστοτέλειον morem habent, in quo sermo ita inducitur ceterorum ut penes ipsum sit principatus. Cf. *epistulae ad Quintum fratrem* 3.5.1.

Plato's *Politeia* whose title Cicero adopts in translation. He intended *De republica* to become a counterpart to Plato's *Politeia*².

In Plato's works one finds reflections on the alternative of theoretical-practical life throughout all periods of his writing, starting with the *Gorgias*. There Socrates who is accused by Callicles of avoiding the market place, hiding instead in a corner whispering with a few boys³, claims to be in truth the only politician⁴. Socrates' "political activity" is not that of an elected official in Athens. For Plato as the author of the *Gorgias* the conflict of a philosophical versus an active life of politics seemed resolved – at least in democratic Athens. The solution was that a man of character would not be willing to become a leader of the demos and be forced to please it, constantly change his views, and follow the whims and fickleness of the people⁵. He would rather try to shape the souls of a small group of young men.

Cicero in the proem of *De republica* refers to the accusation of Callicles against Socrates. Cicero's charge that some "utter in their little corners what others bring to perfection in the real world, not in speech" (*rerum quas isti in angulis personant reapse, non oratione perfectio*, 1.2.2) is now directed against philosophers in general. The alternatives have become simple and straightforward again while in Plato a complicated relationship to politics leads to a new understanding of *politikē technē*. For Cicero, certain conditions in states require men who are willing to act and not to limit themselves to speaking. There is no need for him to take the almost paradoxical step of identifying the educational activity, even if limited to the smallest of audiences, with true politics, as the Socrates of the *Gorgias* had to – in a bold use of *politikē technē*, a term which is after all derived from *polis*, and not from a handful of

² *De legibus* I 5.15. quoniam scriptum est a te de optimo rei publicae statu, consequens esse uidetur ut scribas tu idem De legibus: sic enim fecisse uideo Platonem illum tuum, quem tu admiraris. The dream of Scipio in the final section of Cicero's *De republica* VI was inspired by a myth which is found at the end of the last book of Plato's *Politeia*.

³ *Gorgias* 485d3-e2 ὑπάρχει τούτω τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ... ἀνάνδρῳ γενέσθαι φεύγοντι τὰ μέσα τῆς πόλεως καὶ τὰς ἀγοράς ... καταδεδουκότει δὲ τὸν λοιπὸν βίον βιώναι μετὰ μειρακίων ἐν γωνία τριῶν ἢ τεττάρων ψιθυρίζοντα.

⁴ *Gorgias* 521d6-8 Οἶμαι μετ' ὀλίγων Ἀθηναίων, ἵνα μὴ εἶπω μόνος, ἐπιχειρεῖν τῇ ὡς ἀληθῶς πολιτικῇ τέχνῃ καὶ πράττειν τὰ πολιτικὰ μόνος τῶν νῦν. S. E. Schütrumpf, *Aristoteles Politik Buch I*, übersetzt und erläutert. Berlin 1991 (*Aristoteles, Werke in Deutscher Übersetzung* 9,1): 78-80.

⁵ *Gorgias* 481d ff.

boys⁶. Since Cicero himself in *De legibus* I puts in the mouth of Atticus the statement that *De republica* was written as the counterpart to Plato's *Politeia*, I will make brief comments only on the discussion of the theoretical-practical life choice in the *Politeia* and will focus on one passage that could well be autobiographical. However, I will start with Cicero.

The beginning of the proem to *De republica* is missing. Fortunately we have Cicero's brief summary of the purpose of this initial section: "I had first to remove the hesitation about devoting oneself to the state" (*dubitationem ad rem publicam adeundi in primis debui tollere*, 1.7.12). What is preserved at the beginning of the palimpsest starts midsentence⁷ with a reference to extraordinary accomplishments made for the salvation of the Roman state. The men mentioned here are all military commanders, eight are identified by name, including the two Scipios who were killed in the 2nd Punic war and P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus who had defeated Hannibal in 202 on Italian soil. I am not aware that in Greek discussions of the theoretical-practical life dilemma generals were referred to at all, let alone so prominently as in Cicero. We have a reference to the fate of generals in the famous account by Xenophon on the trial against the generals who commanded the Athenian ships in the battle at Arginusai in 406 BC (*Historia Graeca* 1.7). It was an outrageous miscarriage of justice, however, it is not used by Xenophon to raise the question of the desirability of entering the practical life, but culminates in the account of Socrates' courageous behavior who dared to stand up against the mob and insist that the legal procedures in place be followed. Even by Socrates the issue of the choice between the theoretical or practical life is not raised in this context⁸, the trial against the generals and its outcome did not become an argument in favor of withdrawing from an active role in politics.

Why did Cicero refer prominently to military commanders? This strategy offered the opportunity to *single out individuals* as examples of a type of men who defended the well-being of a state and to whom its survival is owed.

⁶ The Greek word for boy is *pais*, and the method of dealing with them *paideia* – Socrates' understanding of *politikē technē* is nothing but the traditional idea of education, cf. 513e5ff. which, however, none of the Athenian politicians has practiced.

⁷ *De republica* 1.1.1. In a contrary to fact clause whose protasis must have expressed the idea: "if these men had not preferred virtue to the enticements of *voluptas* and *otium*," cf. J.E.G. Zetzel, *Cicero, De Re Publica. Selections*, Cambridge University Press, 1995: 95.

⁸ It is not raised either by Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 32a9ff.

Indeed, in the Punic wars in which Hannibal stood *ad portas*, as Cicero described the situation in a somehow exaggerating way⁹, the very survival of the Roman state was at stake. From the angle Cicero chose, the practical life is more than making speeches in the assembly, trying to convince opponents and participating in decisions of more or less importance, practical life is described as taking actions that decide about life or death of the state, *salus huic civitati, amor ad communem salutem defendendam* are Cicero's words (1.1.1). He presents the issue in a very extreme manner by placing the very survival of the state into the hands of one individual at a time who had chosen the practical life. The comparison with the one general to whom one owes the victory reflects the way in which Cicero views public life: it is the heroic act of one individual who alone takes responsibility for the decisions made and who accomplishes something extraordinary in a most severe crisis, in a battle between good and bad or evil forces.

Cicero appears not completely unselfish when using this angle. Although he was not a military man he describes his own role which was that of a consul¹⁰ in the very terms he had used for generals, and no other role he considers as a better example for this extraordinary accomplishment than that of a military leader whose performance decides not only about the fate of the troops he commands but of the state he is asked to protect¹¹. To be fair to Cicero, when he talks about himself he does not simply add his name to the memorable list of distinguished saviors of the state, but suggests that others brought up his name¹². Whether this was true or only a well-chosen literary strategy to avoid the impression of vainglorious posturing cannot be decided. However, Cicero's views on the theoretical-practical life controversy in *De republica* 1 appear to reflect his own – maybe somehow exaggerated – perception of his career and accomplishments and appear to be phrased in terms of the success, as he thought, he alone played in defending the state against those who wanted to destroy it when he was at the helm of the state. It is fair enough that one's life

⁹ *Philippicae* 1.5.11.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De republica* 1.6.10.

¹¹ Cicero, *De republica* 1.4.7: *is enim fueram, cui [...] non dubitaverim me gravissimis tempestatibus ac paene fulminibus ipsis obvium ferre conservandorum civium causa, meisque propriis periculis parere commune reliquis otium; In Pisonem* 6: *Ego cum ... is (tribunus plebis) mihi tantum modo ut iurarem permetteret, sine ulla dubitatione iuravi rem publicam atque hanc urbem mea unius opera esse salvam.*

¹² Cicero, *De republica* 1.3.6: *nec vero iam <meo> nomine abstinent, et credo quia nostro consilio ac periculo sese in illa vita atque otio conservatos putant .*

shapes one's views on what is important, and there is a temptation to overstate what one believes to have accomplished and to elevate the own achievement to a general principle and to make oneself a model for others. In any case what Cicero stressed in the beginning of what we have in *De republica 1* is the almost heroic role of the greatest military leaders in Roman history who saved the republic from its enemies, and later a similar role of two Athenian generals (1.3.4), and such will be exactly the role Cicero happened to play when he was consul. This means for the theoretical-practical life alternative that it places the focus on one person, the great leader, who mastered a crisis that threatened the very survival of the state¹³.

Another aspect of this approach is that it allows focusing on the quality of such an individual. Cicero's catchword is *virtus*, used right from the beginning of the preserved text: Marcus Cato is a model of virtue for all who share his goal¹⁴. Instead of enjoying the leisure he could have – this point is made twice – he preferred to be tossed around by the waves and storm here – background is the Epicurean imagery of the calmness of the life of the Epicurean compared with the rough sea of the real world in which one has to act¹⁵. *Otium* might have a negative connotation¹⁶, otherwise it receives it from the context as almost a synonym of *voluptas*¹⁷. And Cato's choice of an active life is presented from the perspective of *isti*, Epicureans, as the choice of a madman. So far we have a rather black and white description which contrasts *virtus* with *otium*, *voluptas*.

The hypothetical possibility that one possesses virtue without using it is dismissed. It does not seem to be recognized that Cicero follows here either Plato or Aristotle¹⁸. The Greek homoeoteleuta *kektēsthai* – *chrēsthai* (κεκτῆσθαι -

¹³ That a general needed as well a well-trained army of men who were willing to sacrifice their lives is conveniently ignored.

¹⁴ *De republica* 1.1.1: M. vero *Catoni* homini ignoto et novo, quo omnes qui isdem rebus studemus quasi exemplari ad industriam virtutemque ducimur, certe *licuit* Tusculi *se in otio delectare*, salubri et propinquo loco. sed homo demens ut isti putant, cum cogeret eum necessitas nulla, *in his undis et tempestatibus ad summam senectutem maluit iactari, quam in illa tranquillitate atque otio iucundissime vivere.*

¹⁵ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 2.1ff.

¹⁶ Zetzel (as n. 7): 96 on 1.2.

¹⁷ Cf. Cicero *De republica* 1.1.1 in illa tranquillitate atque otio iucundissime vivere.

¹⁸ Cicero *De republica* 1.2.2 Nec vero *habere* virtutem satis est quasi artem aliquam nisi *utare*; etsi ars quidem cum ea non utare scientia tamen ipsa teneri potest, virtus in usu sui tota posita est; Plat. *Euthyd.* 280d5 ἔφην, ὡς ἔοικεν, μὴ μόνον *κεκτῆσθαι* τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀγαθὰ τὸν

χρησθαι) or *ktēsei* – *chrēsei* (κτήσει - χρήσει) respectively are chosen for effect and, once discovered, invite to be imitated, as Aristotle obviously imitated Plato, and Cicero when he used *habere* – *utare* must have followed a Greek model; however, *patrii sermonis egestas*¹⁹ did not allow to find in Latin an equally catching phrase. If Cicero had either Plato or Aristotle in mind when expressing this idea in terms of *habere* – *utare* he completely ignored their views of the best life.

For Cicero the best *use* of *virtus* is governing a state²⁰, not devoting oneself to philosophy as in Plato or to the *bios theōrētikos* as in Aristotle²¹. That Cicero in his attack on philosophy had Plato in mind is obvious from the fact that he repeated Callicles’ jab against the Socrates of the *Gorgias* who is compared to the man who flees the marketplace and leads a life whispering in a corner with three or four boys.²² Having sided with a critic of Socrates, Cicero discovers additional potential in this criticism which allows him to launch a frontal attack against philosophers: “Nothing is said by philosophers, at least what is said correctly and honestly, that has not been created or confirmed by legislators”²³. After philosophers have been denied *usus virtutis*, Cicero goes on to deny to the theoretical work of philosophers either validity or originality since, if they were right, they were preceded by legislators.

Even the reference to the philosopher Xenocrates who described the learning experience of his students as “doing on their own what they are forced to do by the laws”²⁴ is not favorable. Cicero has found a new target, and these are no longer the philosophers of the Epicurean brand who seek leisure and lust, but the serious sort who advocate a character training that makes men conform to law. What is wrong with this goal? Cicero’s objection is *quantitative*: more successful is a man who forces *all* through the rule and punishment of the law to do what a philosopher with his speech could hardly persuade a *few* to do. We have now a double contrast, first with regard to effectiveness: the behavior of *all* is influenced by legislators versus that of a *few* by philosophers whose flaw is

μέλλοντα εὐδαίμονα ἔσεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ χρῆσθαι αὐτοῖς· Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.9.1098 b 31-33 διαφέρει δὲ ἴσως οὐ μικρὸν ἐν κτήσει ἢ χρήσει τὸ ἄριστον ὑπολαμβάνειν.

¹⁹ Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1.832.

²⁰ *De republica* 1.2.1 *usus autem eius* (i.e. *virtutis*) *est maximus civitatis gubernatio*, Cf. 1.7.12 quoted below n. 33.

²¹ See footnotes 32 and 39 below.

²² See above n. 3.

²³ *De republica* 1.2.2: *nihil enim dicitur a philosophis, quod quidem recte honesteque dicatur, quod <non> ab iis partum confirmatumque sit, a quibus civitatibus iura discripta sunt.*

²⁴ Cicero *De republica* 1.3.1.

their low success rate – this picks up on Socrates talking with a *few* young men – and second a contrast with regard to means: *force* used by legislators versus *persuasion by speech* practiced by philosophers. With this latter point Cicero does not only contradict Xenocrates, he contradicts Plato as well²⁵. In the *Laws*, the legislator, not the philosopher, first tries through proems of the laws, which precede each law, to *persuade* the citizens to do on their own accord what the laws will require. Legislation is considered an inferior alternative since it threatens with punishment and force (9 859a). Cicero, however, does not speak along the lines of Plato's *Laws* since he does not share the role Plato assigns to persuasion but puts it down with a clear indication of contempt. There is nothing desirable in the talking of philosophers; their lack of practical experience discredits them. Cicero's preference is the authority of the state with the power to use force.

This is a lopsided view of the two sides, philosophers and legislators. Neither group combines both qualities, theory and practice, however, in Cicero's account only on the one side of the equation, philosophy, the absence of the other quality, of practical experience, hurts whereas no theoretical knowledge is assumed or demanded of political leaders, and its absence is not held against them, just the opposite: it is no obstacle against granting them even the distinction of *sapientia* – this is a rhetorically phrased paradox: one can be *sapiens* without possessing knowledge, with the result that philosophers are inferior in the very quality associated with philosophy, *sapientia*²⁶.

The following line of argument picks up on the first which condemned *pursuit* of leisure and lust, now from the perspective of a more passive attitude, that is of simply *avoiding* the *troubles* of public engagement, and here Cicero shifts to the consideration of the consequences of leading a political life and

²⁵ From the Ciceronian argument it would follow that one should not study the works of philosophers with their limited success but those of legislators. One could think to have a Platonic reminiscence here since Cicero's praise of the role of the law reminds of a work with which Cicero was familiar to some degree, Plato's *Laws*, and with which he competed by writing his own version, *De Legibus*. Here the Athenian recommends of all literature the study of the works of lawgivers in order to learn what is noble, good, and just (*Laws* 9 858c ff.). However, Cicero prefers legislation because of the *force* laws threaten.

²⁶ Cicero, *De republica* 1.2.3ff.: quae est enim istorum *oratio* tam exquisita ...? eos qui his *urbibus consilio atque auctoritate praesunt*, iis qui *omnis negotii publici expertes* sint, longe duco *sapientia ipsa esse anteponendos*. The role of philosophers is only described in negative terms, namely with regard what they lack—there is no positive result in the pursuit of philosophy.

refers again to circumstances when the fatherland is under attack so that someone is needed to come to its defense. The whole passage is characterized by high intensity: the situation of the fatherland is extreme, it is in a crisis. Cicero claims to reproduce the arguments of others²⁷ who refer to the sad experience that those who averted the collapse were not rewarded but suffered badly, and this injustice is rhetorically exploited: Miltiades who was able to *save his life from the weapons of the enemy* wasted it then *in the prison of his fellow citizens*, and Themistocles' fate that was characterized by even more undeserved turns that called for rhetorical antitheses²⁸. This not a detached deliberation of the pros and cons of a political life, it is the passionate description of political turmoil and rule of injustice, and it is not detached because it is the prelude to the description of Cicero's own role and the treatment he experienced, at least in the judgment of others.

Cicero's person and fate receives more space than that of any other Greek or Roman example mentioned before. He appears as a late Cato; they are alike in the alternatives of life that were open to both and are alike in the course they chose²⁹, however, Cicero makes important additions in his own case: his leisure would not be one of lust, it would be useful because of his studies, and as a statesman he saved his fellow citizens and acted for the common well-being³⁰. There is some allusion to Socrates' argument in the *Crito* who, in his defense of

²⁷ They list again, as Cicero had done in the first section, famous men of the past who shared the experience that after extraordinary accomplishments they were subjected to grave injustices by the same people who benefitted from their heroic acts: they start with Miltiades and Themistocles—as in the beginning Cicero talks of military leaders in battles or wars that were of the greatest importance for the survival of their countries—the Persian Wars certainly qualify for such an assessment and the important role of Miltiades and Themistocles cannot be denied. Then they add famous Romans, and this list culminates in Cicero. Cicero is placed in a tradition of men from Miltiades to Marius who entered the fracas of public life, saved the *res publica* but did not receive any gratitude.

²⁸ Cicero, *De republica* 1.3.5: hinc enim illa et apud Graecos exempla, Miltiadem victorem domitoremque Persarum, nondum sanatis volneribus iis quae corpore adverso in clarissima victoria accepisset, vitam ex hostium telis servatam in civium vinclis profudisse, et Themistoclem patria quam liberavisset pulsum atque proterritum, non in Graeciae portus per se servatos sed in barbariae sinus confugisse quam adflixerat ...

²⁹ Cicero *De republica* 1.4.7.

³⁰ We might grant Cicero that he believed that his actions against Catilina were needed and appropriate for the survival of the Roman state. The proem of *De republica* 1 presents the opportunity to tell, without any specifics, his side of the story again, without any regrets, just the opposite, with pride: he saved his fellow-citizens and acted for the common well-being, cf. above n. 11.

his willingness to accept the death sentence imposed by the Athenian legal system, referred to the expectations the fatherland has of its citizens. Cicero stresses much more the obligation to serve the country than Plato had done, and Cicero can look back to it as something already accomplished³¹. What in Plato's *Crito* is a duty to follow the law becomes in Cicero a new argument about the relatively small share in *otium* a citizen is entitled to, compared with the duties he has towards his fatherland which deserves almost all his attention and energy.

If this argument is inspired by Plato it does not soften Cicero's position towards philosophers. Sections 1.5-6.9-11 address the desire for *otium*. The *sapientes* are identified as the source of the following objections against involvement in politics which Cicero dismisses outright as excuses made in order to enjoy *otium*. Here to the earlier motives assumed, namely leisure and lust, additional ones are put into their mouth that don't make philosophers look any better: they express a low opinion of the worth of most politicians, they fear the dangers of having to fight an enraged crowd, mention the impossibility for a wise man to control the masses, and predict to have to suffer injustice. Here *otium* appears as the choice of life for an elitist sort of people who love an undisturbed, peaceful life but do not want to do, let alone risk, anything for it.

Cicero mentions another group of philosophers who do not reject political involvement outright, but only that on a lower level. They would be willing to become active if a crisis of the state would demand it. Cicero points out the contradiction in the argument of these learned men, *in hominum doctorum oratione* (1.6.11): they feel qualified to take over responsibility in troubled times while they admit they can't do that under favorable circumstances. The discovery of this contradiction opens the road for a rant against wise men who confess that they have not studied the knowledge of public affairs but still consider themselves qualified to take over the helm of the state when things get rough. This attitude does not work. One has to be prepared for this situation, as Cicero claims he was (1.6.10).

When Cicero makes the transition from the proem to presenting the dialogue he assumes a more conciliatory tone. He obviously has Plato and Aristotle in mind when he concedes that they performed some sort of public

³¹ Cicero *De republica* 1.4.8. He turns his personal experience in an almost Socratic way into the question of how one should live one's life: it is deplorable that one's life ends because old age rather than returning it to nature, as it must be, but honorably, *pro patria*.

service³². However, they are considered inferior to the seven wise men. Almost all of them spent their lives serving the community. In no other way might “human virtue come closer to divine power than by either founding new states or preserve those which are already founded”. If Cicero echoes Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1,³³ he disagrees with him on the identity of a life that is close to that of the gods. For Aristotle it is not the political life but that of theory.³⁴ All in all, Cicero dismisses objections against participating in politics.³⁵

Clearly Cicero’s own life meets all the requirements of a life in the service of the country. As far as his argument is concerned, there are three fundamental assumptions that allowed him to come to the conclusions he drew.

1. Securing the survival of the state is the most important task imaginable, closest to divine power.

2. A few men who have devoted their lives to politics and have the required *virtus* and experience were able to protect or save the state if *necessitas* called upon them.

3. Philosophers who live the life of *otium* cannot succeed in this.

However, the contrast of *otium* of lazy men who prefer pleasure (3) and an active life of men who save through *virtus* their fatherland (2) is overly simplistic and unconvincing with regard to the subject, namely the merit of a practical life, because the relevant assumption (2) does not exhaust the possibilities of an active life. There exists in the preference for a practical life a negative side, namely that of extreme political ambition. Such men use every means to gain power and then to keep it, and this hunger for power rather destroys than saves the state. Sallust is aware of this other side of a practical

³² Cicero, *De republica* 1.7.12 quos ego existimo, etiamsi qui ipsi rem publicam non gesserint, tamen quoniam de re publica multa quaesierint et scripserint, *functos esse aliquo rei publicae munere*.

³³ Cicero, *De republica* 1.7.12 neque enim est ulla res in qua *propius ad deorum numen virtus accedat humana, quam civitatis aut condere novas aut conservare iam conditas*. Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1 1289a3 ὥς ἔστιν οὐκ ἔλαττον ἔργον τὸ ἐπανορθῶσαι πολιτείαν ἢ κατασκευάζειν ἐξ ἀρχῆς, s. Schütrumpf. *Aristoteles Politik Buch IV-VI, übersetzt und erläutert*. Berlin 1996 (Aristoteles Werke in Deutscher Übersetzung 9,3), 220 n. on a3.

³⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.8 1178b21. For the priority of the theoretical life see below n. 39.

³⁵ The arguments of those who refuse to take part in politics are from the outset presented as not convincing, and their motives as insincere if not outright selfish and as an attempt to serve as cover for a comfortable life of leisure.

life of men who are not *boni* and do not employ *bonae artes*³⁶. Philosophers might have failed to come to the rescue of the state, and in this respect they deserve blame, but they have not caused the political problems some of which have actually been created by the evil sort of men of political practice.

Why was Cicero silent about the dangers of power and did not deal with every sort of people who strive after power in the same way as he did with philosophers? If Cicero with admirable love for subtle distinctions can find so many subgroups of philosophers who have different reasons for their refusal to participate in politics, why would he not distinguish within the camp of politicians at least between those who possess *virtus* on the one hand and those who seek power for a variety of personal reasons on the other? Page after page he can discover new negative sides with philosophers, but not a single one is mentioned for politicians. This is a strangely unbalanced account of the theory-practice alternative in which only one side is subjected to thorough scrutiny, not the other. As a reader, one might regret that this discussion is not found in the dialogue section of *De republica* where the views of all participants are treated with respect and conflicting opinions are presented as deserving equal attention instead of some of them being introduced with negative comments before Cicero even started to present their position, e.g. when he wrote: “To these pretenses they take as excuses in order to enjoy leisure with more ease one should not listen at all” (1.5.9); “who finally can approve of that exception ...?”³⁷. Cicero creates the impression as if the alternative to the despicable and irresponsible *otium* of philosophers is alone the fatherland saving statesman and ignores that there exists a group of power hungry men as well.

Illuminating is a comparison with Aristotle. At *Politics* 7 ch. 2-3, he approaches, in an almost Hellenistic manner, the theoretical-practical life controversy from the personal perspective, namely the most desirable life. This is one of virtue which consists in being active. Aristotle begins with *aretē*, as Cicero in *De republica* 1 starts with *virtus*, however, Aristotle distinguishes

³⁶ Sallust, *Coniuratio Catilinae* 11: Sed primo magis ambitio quam avaritia animos hominum exercebat, quod tamen vitium propius virtutem erat. Nam gloriam, honorem, imperium bonus et ignavus aequae sibi exoptant; sed ille vera via nititur, huic quia *bonae artes desunt, dolis atque fallaciis contendit*.

³⁷ Cicero *De republica* 1.5.9: Iam illa perfugia quae sumunt sibi ad excusationem quo facilius otio perfruantur, certe minime sunt audienda; 1.6.10: illa autem exceptio cui probari tandem potest...?

immediately two forms of *aretē*, one practiced in politics, the other in philosophy³⁸ – differently than Cicero, Aristotle does not deny *aretē* to philosophy. With the justification of a practical life as the best use of *aretē* as it is proposed by certain men – as Cicero will later do – Aristotle contrasts immediately a more radical claim, namely the praise of despotic or tyrannical rule – exactly what is missing in Cicero.

Aristotle is more balanced since on the one hand he concedes *aretē* to philosophers and on the other he is aware of the tyrannical form of an active life. In the end, the highest form of activity for Aristotle is not that of the practical life but that of theory³⁹ like that of god who is not engaged in “outside actions” (7.3 1325b28). Cicero will follow Aristotle in focusing on *virtus*, however, in the proem of *De republica* I he will do away with the theoretical side of human excellence which for both Plato and Aristotle deserved priority.

The other and more significant aspect of the lopsided view of Cicero is that he ignores or denies the tyrannical side of an active life. Were such men not the problem of his own time? Wasn't Catilina power hungry – at least in Cicero's and Sallust's views – whose ambition and actual plans were a threat to the republic more than any leisure loving philosopher could ever be? We read in Sall. *Coni. Cat.* about Catilina: “After the dominance of Lucius Sulla the strongest desire of winning control over the state had entered him; he did not give any thought to the manners by which he could achieve it, provided he could win kingship for himself”⁴⁰.

By passing over in silence the strong political ambitions of some Romans and the use of questionable means to come to power, Cicero seems strangely unaware of the problems of the late republic where a Sulla strove for extraordinary powers for himself. Isn't the same true, *mutatis mutandis*, for Caesar in his rivalry with Pompey? Did Cicero not fail in *De Rep.* 1 to take into account the development after his consulship whose challenges he described as

³⁸ Aristotle, *Politics* 7.2 1324a25 ἀμφισβητεῖται δὲ παρ' αὐτῶν τῶν ὁμολογούντων τὸν μετ' ἀρετῆς εἶναι βίον αἰρετώτατον πότερον ὁ πολιτικὸς καὶ πρακτικὸς βίος αἰρετὸς ἢ μᾶλλον ὁ πάντων τῶν ἐκτὸς ἀπολελυμένος, οἷον θεωρητικὸς τις σχεδὸν γὰρ τούτους τοὺς δύο βίους τῶν ἀνθρώπων οἱ φιλοτιμότατοι πρὸς ἀρετὴν φαίνονται προαιρούμενοι ... Ibid. a39 μόνον γὰρ ἄνδρὸς τὸν πρακτικὸν εἶναι βίον καὶ πολιτικόν, ἐφ' ἐκάστης γὰρ ἀρετῆς οὐκ εἶναι πράξεις μᾶλλον τοῖς ἰδιώταις ἢ τοῖς τὰ κοινὰ πράττουσι καὶ πολιτευομένοις. οἱ μὲν οὖν οὕτως ὑπολαμβάνουσιν, οἱ δὲ τὸν δεσποτικὸν καὶ τυραννικὸν τρόπον τῆς πολιτείας εἶναι μόνον εὐδαίμονά φασιν.

³⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3 1095b14-1096a10; 10.7 1177a27-8. 1178b33.

⁴⁰ Sallust, *Coniratio Catilinae* 5: Hunc post dominationem L. Sullae libido maxuma invaserat rei publicae capiundae; neque id quibus modis adsequeretur, dum sibi regnum pararet, quicquam pensi habebat.

the greatest any statesman could face?⁴¹ Cicero's success in putting down Catilina's attempt at overthrow of the republic is one important accomplishment, but still remains an isolated incident: the *Bellum Civile* was not over, the *salus rei publicae* was not restored for good.

On the other hand, is Cicero with his refusal to join the triumvirate not rather himself standing on the sidelines instead of leading the battle to protect the republic? Does his attack against philosophers in *De republica* I in reality reveal a lack of courage to identify publicly, in a work written for the public, the real causes, and the players, of the ever recurring political crises, and is beating up on the poor philosophers a thinly disguised act of diverting attention from the real category of people who caused the problems? In which way could the attack on *otium* of certain men make sense at the time when Cicero wrote *De republica*? Was he hoping for support in his fight for the republic from certain individuals who were using *otium* as pretext for staying out of the conflict? This would be a very indirect and awkward strategy since he needed the support and cooperation of senators, or of men who had a following, instead of philosophers who are political novices and inexperienced.

In order to pinpoint the particular twist Cicero gives to the alternative theoretical-practical life I would like to end this paper by comparing briefly a passage from Plato's *Politeia*. I will leave aside the internal conflict of the philosopher between his total commitment to philosophy⁴² and his obligation to rule the city – he has to be forced to first receive the training he needs in order to be qualified as a politician and then again has to be forced to shoulder in regular intervals the burden of politics as it is the situation in *Politeia*⁴³.

⁴¹ See *De republica* 1.4.7, cited above n. 11; cf. 1.6.10.

⁴² S. E. Schütrumpf, Magnanimity, Megalopsychia and the system of Aristotle's Ethics (1989), now in E. Schütrumpf, *Praxis und Lexis. Ausgewählte Schriften zur Philosophie von Handeln und Reden in der klassischen Antike, Palingenesia* vol. 95, Stuttgart 2009 (241-250), 244f.

⁴³ Plato, *Republic* 7. 539e2ff.: μετὰ γὰρ τοῦτο καταβιβαστέοι ἔσονται σοι εἰς τὸ σπήλαιον πάλιν ἐκεῖνο, καὶ ἀναγκαστέοι ἄρχειν ... (καταβιβαστέοι, cf. Cicero *De republica* 1.6.11 ut verum esset sua voluntate sapientem descendere ad rationes civitatis non solere); Plato *Republic* 7. 540a5ff.: ... πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἀκτέον, καὶ ἀναγκαστέον ἀνακλιναντας τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς αὐγὴν εἰς αὐτὸ ἀποβλέψαι τὸ πᾶσι φῶς παρέχον, καὶ ἰδόντας τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτό, παραδείγματι χρωμένους ἐκεῖνω, καὶ πόλιν καὶ ιδιώτας καὶ ἑαυτοὺς κοσμεῖν τὸν ἐπίλοιπον βίον ἐν μέρει ἐκάστους, τὸ μὲν πολὺ πρὸς φιλοσοφία διατριβόντας, ὅταν δὲ τὸ μέρος ἦκη, πρὸς πολιτικοῖς ἐπιταλαιπωροῦντας καὶ ἄρχοντας.

In *Politeia* 6 496b-e Plato describes philosophy as an attractive pursuit for many although they are completely unsuited for it. Only those with the appropriate nature and thorough study should devote themselves to philosophy. He sees for the few who meet this criterion the danger of becoming corrupted by various influences, and one chance of avoiding this corruption is that “a big soul is born in a small city, has little regard for its affairs and ignores them” (496b3). The few who enjoy their possession philosophy realize the madness of the many and are aware that nobody does anything sound about states and that there is no ally with whom one could come to the help of what is just and survive since one man could not hold out against the unruly mass but would perish before he could be of help to the city or one’s friends. Keeping quiet and minding his own business and seeing that the others are full of lawlessness, he is satisfied to live this life free of injustice and end it with good hopes⁴⁴.

Plato addresses in *Politeia* 6 496b-e the theoretical-practical life controversy from the same perspective as Cicero, namely that of defending or saving a desirable condition, however, for Plato it is not the *salus rei publicae* but the integrity of a philosophical life that needs to be protected. Philosophy is the highest form of existence⁴⁵. Getting involved in politics would jeopardize a philosophical existence and in addition to this would jeopardize the integrity of one’s character and force one to commit or suffer injustice.

The difference to Cicero consists in Plato’s strategy of reducing, or even questioning, the belief in the power of statesmen – regardless of their personal abilities – by taking seriously the conditions of society and balancing these two factors. With his emphasis on the virtue of statesmen Cicero seems guilty of a certain naiveté since he leaves the impression that all it takes to protect or secure the *salus rei publicae* is one man who is not enticed by leisure or pleasure, but is tough and willing to sacrifice his personal happiness for the greater good. There is no indication in *De republica* 1 that difficulties or even the greatest

⁴⁴ Plato *Republic* 6 496bc5 ff.: καὶ τούτων δὴ τῶν ὀλίγων οἱ γενόμενοι καὶ γευσάμενοι ὡς ἡδὺ καὶ μακάριον τὸ κτῆμα, καὶ τῶν πολλῶν αὖ ἰκανῶς ἰδόντες τὴν μανίαν, καὶ ὅτι οὐδεὶς οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν περὶ τὰ τῶν πόλεων πράττει οὐδ’ ἔστι σύμμαχος μεθ’ ὅτου τις ἰὼν ἐπὶ τὴν τῷ δικαίῳ βοήθειαν σφύζοιτ’ ἄν, ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ εἰς θηρία ἄνθρωπος ἐμπεσὼν, οὔτε συναδικεῖν ἐθέλων οὔτε ἰκανὸς ὦν εἷς πᾶσιν ἀγρίοις ἀντέχειν, πρὶν τι τὴν πόλιν ἢ φίλους ὀνῆσαι προαπολόμενος ἀνοφελὴς αὐτῷ τε καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἂν γένοιτο—ταῦτα πάντα λογισμῷ λαβὼν, ἡσυχίαν ἔχων καὶ τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττων [...], ὁρῶν τοὺς ἄλλους καταπιμπλαμένους ἀνομίας, ἀγαπᾷ εἴ πῃ αὐτὸς καθαρὸς ἀδικίας τε καὶ ἀνοσιῶν [ἔργων τόν τε ἐνθάδε βίον βιώσεται καὶ τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν αὐτοῦ μετὰ καλῆς ἐλπίδος ἴλεως τε καὶ εὐμενῆς ἀπαλλάσσεται.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Republic* 7 516c-521c.

crises cannot be mastered as long as virtue is present and practiced and a strong and experienced statesman adopts a lifestyle that shuns leisure and lust. Such virtues are found in generals. However, Cicero's analogy of military and political leaders, of battles and politics ignores one difference between the two: A successful general who defeated and destroyed an enemy army may have put an end to the aspirations of the enemy at least for some time and can be said to have preserved the fatherland. In the Roman republic in the middle of the first century B.C. there was no decisive "victory" which restored the *salus rei publicae*. The conspiracy of Catilina is just one chapter in a long crisis; Cicero's success in putting it down was a short-lived reprieve. The *salus huic civitati* was at best temporary, and the evils of the time reemerged. Could the defeat of Catilina not rather be compared to cutting off the head of the mythological figure Hydra which did not prevent that more grew after it?

Plato does not share Cicero's optimism about how much individuals could singlehandedly accomplish for their country. Plato's model is not great generals, as they were for Cicero, but Plato's model was Socrates whom the Athenians executed. With this fate in mind, Plato considers, in addition to the quality of a man who is willing to do everything in his power for the country, the citizens' response to such an effort. A philosopher can according to Plato not succeed in the midst of the madness (*mania*) of the public life in most states. One needs a radical, fundamental change of society and politics, and the *Politeia* drafts the blueprint for a radically different society that allows a philosopher to succeed as a king⁴⁶. If that change does not occur the philosopher, instead of becoming a martyr without having benefitted his country, will make the choice of staying out of politics, and thus he will be able to save his own integrity, remaining unaffected by the injustice and ungodly acts of the rest of men, and he will be able to survive morally and physically.

For Plato, the issue is not, or not only, the qualification of the statesmen but the quality of society in which they operate. He recognizes the interdependence between these two. Cicero mentions that generally prevailing madness of the masses (*cum insanos atque indomitos impetus volgi cohibere non possit*) was used as argument of philosophers to justify withdrawal from politics, but dismisses it as unbecoming a courageous man (1.5.9). In other words, the

⁴⁶ At *Leges* 4. 709e6, the lawgiver requests that he be given a tyrant to secure the implementation of the laws for the new colony.

very evils Plato identifies as reason to stay out of politics are for Cicero the best justification for becoming active. He does not consider that in addition to the requirement of being qualified and possessing courage, an assessment of the chances to accomplish something is needed. Insofar Cicero in his polemic against Plato does not do justice to Plato's concerns who stresses the larger context, in particular the quality of the political climate which allows certain actions to be successful or determines their failure. Plato's view of the issue will, however, be shared by Sallust who described Catilina's personal character and development and the history of Rome and its contemporary condition for that matter against the background of *mores*.⁴⁷

Cicero's focus on heroic efforts of always one individual makes him strangely detached from the society and its condition, and he overlooks that the state of affairs affects not only the chances of statesmen to succeed or fail with their activities but might determine their own fate. In *De republica* 1 he might well have underestimated the viciousness and brutality of the political fight, the savagery of wild animals, as Plato describes it. It turns out that Cicero was not given the chance a Themistocles had in Greece to escape and flee to the enemy. Plato is much more aware of the forces in society that hinder one's efforts and turn without mercy against those who try the best for their country. Plato's reference to the death such men might face from their own citizens is not only an echo of Socrates' end; it turns out to be a prophecy of future similar fates, even a dire prediction of Cicero's end. Plato in his rather pessimistic assessment of politics and of the chances of an individual to succeed with the necessary changes appears a much more realistic judge and prophet of what happens in politics. Plato's reference to the madness of the masses as an argument that renders any reasonable attempt to "come to the help of what is just" futile should not be dismissed as a weak excuse of men who like leisure as it is done by Cicero.

Using both Aristotle and Plato as a standard from which to pass judgment on the proem of Cicero *De Republic* 1, one cannot help registering some disappointment not only over what Cicero says and how he says it, but even more so over what he omits.⁴⁸ Considering that he emulates Aristotle in the

⁴⁷ *Coniuratio Catilinae* 5: Incitabant praeterea corrupti civitatis mores, quos pessuma ac divorsa inter se mala, luxuria atque avaritia, vexabant. Res ipsa hortari videtur, quoniam de moribus civitatis tempus admonuit ...

⁴⁸ This comment should not be construed as a judgment on Cicero but only on the proem of *De republica* 1 since at the beginning of book 3 3.4-4.7 he expresses a much more balanced

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form of the proem and emulates Plato in the content of *De republica* the standard used here to judge Cicero's arguments might not be completely unfair.

account (cf. 3.6 *qui utrumque voluit et potuit*) which compares favorably with the contrasts of book1.