
Review

Tyranny: A new interpretation

Waller R. Newell

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Waller Newell's *Tyranny: A New Interpretation* is an extraordinarily ambitious book. It represents the culmination of Newell's body of work so far, which until now has been divided between the German idealist tradition and more thematically driven treatments of ambition, leadership and statecraft. *Tyranny* bridges these literatures in its sweeping treatment of tyranny as it has been envisioned and recast in the history of political thought, positioning Heidegger as both the theoretical inspiration and historical terminus of its narrative.

Newell's central objective in *Tyranny* is to uncover the ontological foundations of tyranny, or the different understandings of nature that can be said to underlie different styles of tyrannical rule. According to Newell, the unprecedented brutality of tyrannical regimes in the twentieth century is traceable to their common basis in a distinctively modern ontology that has its beginning in Machiavelli, who rejected the transcendental orientation of classical political thought in favor of the belief that nature can (and should) be wholly mastered and made to serve the lower passions – a shift that Newell sometimes refers to as the liberation of *thumos* from the authority and guidance of *eros*.

Although Newell's attention to questions of ontology gives his book a kind of Heideggerian cast, *Tyranny* is not intended to validate Heidegger's own story about how Western philosophy has contributed to the development of an essentially technological disposition toward the natural world. Indeed, Newell frequently distances himself from Heidegger, and nowhere more obviously than his discussion of the rift between ancient and modern understandings of nature. Whereas Heidegger traces the modern technological project to Plato's metaphysics, Newell devotes the bulk of *Tyranny* to exculpating Plato (and 'classical philosophy' generally) from this charge, shifting the blame to Machiavelli's 'new science of politics' instead. In this regard at least, *Tyranny* owes much to Leo Strauss, whose interpretation of Machiavelli as the founder of modernity Newell cites approvingly throughout the book.

Tyranny is comprised of seven chapters, a substantial introduction and a brief epilogue. Chapter 1 asks the question 'Is There is an Ontology of Tyranny?' and

offers an affirmative answer, which Newell sketches by way of extended comparisons between Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle on the one hand, and Machiavelli on the other. According to Newell, the primary distinction between them concerns ‘the very belief in the existence of *eros*, of the longing for beauty and nobility’ (p. 31). Classical writers, who recognized and addressed this desire, possessed a ‘transcendental ... view of politics as directed toward a common end that lifts man above his passions and orients him toward permanence and eternity’ (p. 32). For them, tyranny was a perversion of this impulse that occurred when it had not been appropriately educated, ideally by a philosophic tutor. Modern writers like Machiavelli, by contrast, rejected the very concept of *eros* because it proceeded from a faulty view of nature, which was, in fact, fundamentally chaotic and dangerous. This reversal had several important effects, including the liberation of a more diminutive variety of *thumos*, or the spirited element of the soul that classical writers had figured as raw material from which all political greatness, good and evil, was formed. Now ‘reduced to mere human aggression’ (p. 65), *thumos* is finally displaced entirely by ‘the will to master Fortuna’ (p. 66), an objective that reshapes the complexion of reason in turn. Newell labels this a ‘primordialist’ understanding of politics and traces it ultimately to a temporalized conception of nature introduced by Christianity, which Machiavelli is said to have adopted and given a political valence.

In Chapter 2 (The Tyrant and the Statesman in Plato’s Political Philosophy and Machiavelli’s Rejoinder), Newell begins his interpretive work in earnest, contrasting Plato and Machiavelli in terms of how they envision the ultimate source of political prudence. While Plato stresses the importance of philosophic mentorship to ambitious young rulers, Machiavelli replaces this guidance with ‘a prince’s methodical exercise of the will’ (p. 81), which enables him to serve as his own source of prudence. Newell’s focus here is primarily on Plato, although he also usefully considers the views of pre-Socratics, who, in diverging from the central precepts of Platonic ontology, might be mistaken for early Machiavellians – an error that Newell corrects, highlighting the novelty of Machiavelli’s conviction that ‘man can remake his political condition from the ground up’ (p. 140).

Chapter 3 (Superlative Virtue, Monarchy, and Political Community in Aristotle’s *Politics*) figures Aristotle himself as an example of the moderation that modern political thought cannot nurture or sustain. In this chapter, Newell explores the tension between Aristotle’s endorsement of monarchy, or rule by a man of superlative virtue, and his more prominent and well-known preference for communities in which political power circulates more widely. Holding that Aristotle’s *Politics* culminates in the paradox that ‘[t]he one constitution that meets the requirements of justice is not itself a political community’ (p. 172), Newell goes on to contrast the relationship between monarchy and nature in Aristotle and Hobbes, arguing that Hobbes sees nature as supplying a very different justification for monarchy, one rooted in its ability to fabricate unity and order.



Chapters 4 and 5 ('Tyranny and the Science of Ruling in Xenophon's Political Thought' and 'Machiavelli, Xenophon, and Xenophon's Cyrus') work together to bring into focus Machiavelli's posture toward the classical tradition. In these chapters, Newell shows that it was Xenophon's own rejection of the moderation characteristic of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy that enabled Machiavelli to jettison the essence of classical political thought while appearing, conveniently, to embrace it. The focus of Chapter 4 is Xenophon's departure from classical precedent, that is, Plato and Aristotle, in replacing philosophy with empire as the highest form of 'universality' (p. 225) available to statesmen. Chapter 5 turns to Machiavelli's attraction to Xenophon, and particularly his realism, which Machiavelli foregrounds and radicalizes in the *Prince*.

In Chapter 6 (Glory and Reputation: The New Prince), Newell distances Machiavelli from classical political philosophy in terms of his thinking about political immortality, weaving together elements of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 into a more comprehensive argument concerning the development of an impersonal concept of the state. Whereas classical writers had understood glory to be a product of a statesman's harmonization with nature, Newell argues, Machiavelli treats glory as something that statesmen can fabricate out of worldlier cloths, so long as they are sufficiently ruthless and clever. In advising princes to repress their native urges, Machiavelli is said to have introduced the notion of '[r]ule as denatured management' (p. 343), which eventually came to replace the more constructive intersections of power and character found in classical political philosophy.

Finally, Chapter 7 (The Republic in Motion: Machiavelli's Vision of the New Rome) addresses Machiavelli's use of the Roman example to overturn classical views about the irreconcilability of republican virtue and imperial expansion. At more than a hundred pages long, it offers a wide-ranging analysis of Machiavelli's *Discourses* aimed at showing how '[t]he rational clarity of the Platonic Ideas becomes the goal to be imposed on nature by the willpower of the Abrahamic God's efficient cause, the power to create ex nihilo, transferred to the secular prince' (p. 410).

Tyranny is a book that unfolds with a muscularity reminiscent of its subject matter. Like the tyrannical figures described in its pages, *Tyranny* is bold, decisive and unflinching in its pursuit of what it understands to be the greatest things. These characteristics make *Tyranny* an engaging and illuminating read; but (as Newell himself might have predicted) they also yield some argumentative overreaching that more cautious readers may find frustrating. For instance, *Tyranny's* examination of Machiavelli in relation to certain Greek writers, while incisive, is still a rather slim foundation on which to erect the many contrasts between 'ancient' and 'modern' political thought that Newell advances throughout the book, particularly his contention that 'the moral and psychological issues surrounding the tyrannical character' are 'sharply distinguish[ed]' (p. 19) in antiquity and modernity. What about Roman writers, for example? Is it really so clear that Livy, Seneca, Appian, Cicero and Sallust are closer to Plato than Machiavelli on the nature of tyranny? Likewise, *Tyranny's*



central empirical claim – that modern tyrannies, including the great totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, owe their key characteristics to the ontological presuppositions of modern political thought – is very loosely argued for, inviting the charge that *Tyranny* contributes to the very ‘obfuscation’ (p. 495) of tyranny that Newell, following Strauss, attributes to contemporary social science.

Still, *Tyranny* is well worth reading. Even those who are not persuaded by its synoptic claims about the history of political thought will benefit from its nuanced readings of particular authors, especially Xenophon, and its more daring provocations are sure to prompt valuable responses.

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