

## 10.6 | *Despotism and Tyranny*

Until fairly recently in the tradition of Western politics, monarchies, kingships, or autocracies have been the rule, and republics the exception. A single man seated on a throne and holding the sceptre of sovereignty has been the prevalent image of the ruler. In fact, for many centuries the words “prince” or “king” and “sovereign” were interchangeable. Our English word “king” carries the meaning that once attached to the Greek word *tyrannis* as well as to the Latin word *rex*. The tyrant was a monarch with absolute power; and the word “despot” derives from a Greek word that designates the rule of a master over his slaves.

With the beginnings of political philosophy in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, these terms take on the meanings they have for us today. A tyrant is a ruler who exploits for his own interests the subjects in his power; tyranny is the archetype of misrule, whether the power of government is in the hands of the one, the few, or the many. An elite can also misrule in a manner that deserves the appellation “tyrannical”; and since the beginnings of popular government and extensions of the franchise in the nineteenth century, there has been much concern about “the tyranny of the majority.”

The reader will find relevant materials on this in Section 10.4.

Despotism, as contrasted with tyranny, is sometimes qualified by the term “benevolent.” Both despotism and tyranny signify absolute power—government without the consent of the governed and with no participation on their part. But when such absolute power is exercised with some regard for the rights and welfare of the ruled, in a quasi-paternalistic manner, the despot is said to be benevolent.

The reader will find the authors quoted here in opposition on many points, some defending absolute monarchy as the ideal form of government or, as in the case of Hobbes, the only legitimate form of government; and some, like Locke and Rousseau, saying that absolute monarchy is not a form of civil government at all and has no legitimacy. The reader will also find a discussion of the question whether benevolent despotism is ever justified by the uncivilized or politically immature condition of the people over whom and for whose benefit it is exercised. For the condition of those subject to tyrannical or despotic rule and for their response to it, the reader should turn to Section 10.7 on SLAVERY and Section 10.9 on REVOLUTION.

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1 As a roaring lion, and a ranging bear; so is a wicked ruler over the poor people.

The prince that wanteth understanding is also a great oppressor: but he that hateth covetousness shall prolong his days.

*Proverbs* 28:15–16

2 Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravaging the prey, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain.

*Ezekiel* 22:27

3 *Nestor*. Nor . . . think to match your strength with

the king, since never equal with the rest is the portion of honour

of the sceptred king to whom Zeus gives magnificence. Even

though you are the stronger man, and the mother who bore you was immortal, yet is this man greater who is lord over more than you rule.

Homer, *Iliad*, I, 277

4 *Chorus*. Death is a softer thing by far than tyranny. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1365

5 Pisistratus, at a time when there was civil conten-

tion in Attica between the party of the Sea-coast headed by Megacles the son of Alcmaeon, and that of the Plain headed by Lycurgus, one of the Aristolaids, formed the project of making himself tyrant, and with this view created a third party. Gathering together a band of partisans, and giving himself out for the protector of the Highlanders, he contrived the following stratagem. He wounded himself and his mules, and then drove his chariot into the market-place, professing to have just escaped an attack of his enemies, who had attempted his life as he was on his way into the country. He besought the people to assign him a guard to protect his person, reminding them of the glory which he had gained when he led the attack upon the Megarians, and took the town of Nisæa, at the same time performing many other exploits. The Athenians, deceived by his story, appointed him a band of citizens to serve as a guard, who were to carry clubs instead of spears, and to accompany him wherever he went. Thus strengthened, Pisistratus broke into revolt and seized the citadel. In this way he acquired the sovereignty of Athens, which he continued to hold without disturbing the previously existing offices or altering any of the laws. He administered the state according to the established usages, and his arrangements were wise and salutary.

Herodotus, *History*, I, 59

- 6 *Theseus*. Naught is more hostile to a city than a despot; where he is, there are in the first place no laws common to all, but one man is tyrant, in whose keeping and in his alone the law resides, and in that case equality is at an end.

Euripides, *Suppliants*, 429

- 7 Wherever there were tyrants, their habit of providing simply for themselves, of looking solely to their personal comfort and family aggrandizement, made safety the great aim of their policy, and prevented anything great proceeding from them; though they would each have their affairs with their immediate neighbours.

Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I, 17

- 8 *Polus*. Then you would not wish to be a tyrant?

*Socrates*. Not if you mean by tyranny what I mean.

*Pol*. I mean . . . the power of doing whatever seems good to you in a state, killing, banishing, doing in all things as you like.

Plato, *Gorgias*, 469B

- 9 *Socrates*. How then does a protector begin to change into a tyrant? Clearly when he does what the man is said to do in the tale of the Arcadian temple of Lycaean Zeus.

*Adeimantus*. What tale?

The tale is that he who has tasted the entrails of

a single human victim minced up with the entrails of other victims is destined to become a wolf. Did you never hear it?

O yes.

And the protector of the people is like him; having a mob entirely at his disposal, he is not restrained from shedding the blood of kinsmen; by the favourite method of false accusation he brings them into court and murders them, making the life of man to disappear, and with unholy tongue and lips tasting the blood of his fellow citizen; some he kills and others he banishes, at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands: and after this, what will be his destiny? Must he not either perish at the hands of his enemies, or from being a man become a wolf—that is, a tyrant?

Inevitably.

This, I said, is he who begins to make a party against the rich?

The same.

After a while he is driven out, but comes back, in spite of his enemies, a tyrant full grown.

Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 565B

- 10 [Socrates said] He who is the real tyrant, whatever men may think, is the real slave, and is obliged to practise the greatest adulation and servility, and to be the flatterer of the vilest of mankind. He has desires which he is utterly unable to satisfy, and has more wants than any one, and is truly poor, if you know how to inspect the whole soul of him: all his life long he is beset with fear and is full of convulsions, and distractions, even as the State which he resembles: and surely the resemblance holds?

Very true, he [Adeimantus] said.

Moreover, as we were saying before, he grows worse from having power: he becomes and is of necessity more jealous, more faithless, more unjust, more friendless, more impious, than he was at first; he is the purveyor and cherisher of every sort of vice, and the consequence is that he is supremely miserable, and that he makes everybody else as miserable as himself.

No man of any sense will dispute your words.

Come then, I said, and as the general umpire in theatrical contests proclaims the result, do you also decide who in your opinion is first in the scale of happiness, and who second, and in what order the others follow: there are five of them in all—they are the royal, timocratical, oligarchical, democratical, tyrannical.

The decision will be easily given, he replied; they shall be choruses coming on the stage, and I must judge them in the order in which they enter, by the criterion of virtue and vice, happiness and misery.

Need we hire a herald, or shall I announce, that the son of Ariston [the best] has decided that the best and justest is also the happiest, and that

this is he who is the most royal man and king over himself; and that the worst and most unjust man is also the most miserable, and that this is he who being the greatest tyrant of himself is also the greatest tyrant of his State?

Make the proclamation yourself, he said.

And shall I add, "whether seen or unseen by gods and men"?

Let the words be added.

Plato, *Republic*, IX, 579B

- 11 A man is not a king unless he is sufficient to himself and excels his subjects in all good things; and such a man needs nothing further; therefore he will not look to his own interests but to those of his subjects; for a king who is not like that would be a mere titular king. Now tyranny is the very contrary of this; the tyrant pursues his own good. And it is clearer in the case of tyranny that it is the worst deviation-form; but it is the contrary of the best that is worst. Monarchy passes over into tyranny; for tyranny is the evil form of one-man rule and the bad king becomes a tyrant.

Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1160<sup>b</sup>3

- 12 The appointment of a king is the resource of the better classes against the people, and he is elected by them out of their own number, because either he himself or his family excel in virtue and virtuous actions; whereas a tyrant is chosen from the people to be their protector against the notables, and in order to prevent them from being injured. History shows that almost all tyrants have been demagogues who gained the favour of the people by their accusation of the notables. At any rate this was the manner in which the tyrannies arose in the days when cities had increased in power. Others which were older originated in the ambition of kings wanting to overstep the limits of their hereditary power and become despots. Others again grew out of the class which were chosen to be chief magistrates; for in ancient times the people who elected them gave the magistrates, whether civil or religious, a long tenure. Others arose out of the custom which oligarchies had of making some individual supreme over the highest offices. In any of these ways an ambitious man had no difficulty, if he desired, in creating a tyranny, since he had the power in his hands already, either as king or as one of the officers of state.

Aristotle, *Politics*, 1310<sup>b</sup>8

- 13 Kingly rule is little affected by external causes, and is therefore lasting; it is generally destroyed from within. And there are two ways in which the destruction may come about; when the members of the royal family quarrel among themselves, and when the kings attempt to administer the state too much after the fashion of a tyranny, and to extend their authority contrary to the law. Royalities do not now come into existence; where such forms of

government arise, they are rather monarchies or tyrannies. For the rule of a king is over voluntary subjects, and he is supreme in all important matters; but in our own day men are more upon an equality, and no one is so immeasurably superior to others as to represent adequately the greatness and dignity of the office. Hence mankind will not, if they can help, endure it, and any one who obtains power by force or fraud is at once thought to be a tyrant. In hereditary monarchies a further cause of destruction is the fact that kings often fall into contempt, and, although possessing not tyrannical power, but only royal dignity, are apt to outrage others. Their overthrow is then readily effected; for there is an end to the king when his subjects do not want to have him, but the tyrant lasts, whether they like him or not.

Aristotle, *Politics*, 1312<sup>b</sup>39

- 14 As to tyrannies, they are preserved in two most opposite ways. One of them is the old traditional method in which most tyrants administer their government. Of such arts Periander of Corinth is said to have been the great master, and many similar devices may be gathered from the Persians in the administration of their government. There are firstly the prescriptions mentioned some distance back, for the preservation of a tyranny, in so far as this is possible; viz. that the tyrant should lop off those who are too high; he must put to death men of spirit; he must not allow common meals, clubs, education, and the like; he must be upon his guard against anything which is likely to inspire either courage or confidence among his subjects; he must prohibit literary assemblies or other meetings for discussion, and he must take every means to prevent people from knowing one another (for acquaintance begets mutual confidence). Further, he must compel all persons staying in the city to appear in public and live at his gates; then he will know what they are doing: if they are always kept under, they will learn to be humble. In short, he should practise these and the like Persian and barbaric arts, which all have the same object. A tyrant should also endeavour to know what each of his subjects says or does, and should employ spies, like the 'female detectives' at Syracuse, and the eavesdroppers whom Hiero was in the habit of sending to any place of resort or meeting; for the fear of informers prevents people from speaking their minds, and if they do, they are more easily found out. Another art of the tyrant is to sow quarrels among the citizens; friends should be embroiled with friends, the people with the notables, and the rich with one another. Also he should impoverish his subjects; he thus provides against the maintenance of a guard by the citizens, and the people, having to keep hard at work, are prevented from conspiring. The Pyramids of Egypt afford an example of this policy; also the offerings of the family of Cypselus, and the build-

- ing of the temple of Olympian Zeus by the Peisistratidae, and the great Polycratean monuments at Samos; all these works were alike intended to occupy the people and keep them poor. Another practice of tyrants is to multiply taxes, after the manner of Dionysius at Syracuse, who contrived that within five years his subjects should bring into the treasury their whole property. The tyrant is also fond of making war in order that his subjects may have something to do and be always in want of a leader. And whereas the power of a king is preserved by his friends, the characteristic of a tyrant is to distrust his friends, because he knows that all men want to overthrow him, and they above all have the power.
- Aristotle, *Politics*, 1313<sup>a</sup>34
- 15 By the standard of popular opinion, I cannot imagine what greater boon could fall to a man than to be a king. But when I begin to consider the question from the point of view of the standard of truth, then I can think of nothing more disadvantageous than to have risen to such a height by means of injustice. For can it be regarded as an advantage to anyone to be confronted with all sorts of reasons for worry, anxiety, and fear day in and day out, and to live a life beset from all sides with plots and perils?
- Cicero, *De Officiis*, III, 21
- 16 A kingdom is the best form of government of the people, so long as it is not corrupt. But since the power granted to a king is so great, it easily degenerates into tyranny, unless he to whom this power is given be a very virtuous man; for "it is only the virtuous man that conducts himself well in the midst of prosperity," as [Aristotle] observes.
- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 105, 1
- 17 A tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good, but to the private good of the ruler. . . . Consequently there is no sedition in disturbing a government of this kind, unless indeed the tyrant's rule be disturbed so inordinately that his subjects suffer greater harm from the consequent disturbance than from the tyrant's government. Indeed it is the tyrant rather that is guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely.
- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 42, 2
- 18 The government of tyrants . . . cannot last long because it is hateful to the multitude, and what is against the wishes of the multitude cannot be long preserved.
- Aquinas, *On Kingship*, I, 10
- 19 Between a tyrant or usurping chief  
And any outlawed man or errant thief,  
It's just the same, there is no difference.
- One told to Alexander this sentence:  
That, since the tyrant is of greater might,  
By force of numbers, to slay men outright  
And burn down house and home even as a plane,  
Lo! for that he's a captain, that's certain;  
And since the outlaw has small company  
And may not do so great a harm as he,  
Nor bring a nation into such great grief,  
Why, he's called but an outlaw or a thief.  
Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*: Manciple's Tale
- 20 He who obtains sovereignty by the assistance of the nobles maintains himself with more difficulty than he who comes to it by the aid of the people, because the former finds himself with many around him who consider themselves his equals, and because of this he can neither rule nor manage them to his liking. But he who reaches sovereignty by popular favour finds himself alone, and has none around him, or few, who are not prepared to obey him. Besides this, one cannot by fair dealing, and without injury to others, satisfy the nobles, but you can satisfy the people, for their object is more righteous than that of the nobles, the latter wishing to oppress, whilst the former only desire not to be oppressed.
- Machiavelli, *Prince*, IX
- 21 *Richmond*. More than I have said, loving countrymen,  
The leisure and enforcement of the time  
Forbids to dwell upon: yet remember this,  
God and our good cause fight upon our side;  
The prayers of holy saints and wronged souls,  
Like high-rear'd bulwarks, stand before our faces;  
Richard except, those whom we fight against  
Had rather have us win than him they follow:  
For what is he they follow? truly, gentlemen,  
A bloody tyrant and a homicide;  
One raised in blood, and one in blood establish'd;  
One that made means to come by what he hath,  
And slaughter'd those that were the means to help  
him;  
A base foul stone, made precious by the foil  
Of England's chair, where he is falsely set;  
One that hath ever been God's enemy:  
Then, if you fight against God's enemy,  
God will in justice ward you as his soldiers;  
If you do sweat to put a tyrant down,  
You sleep in peace, the tyrant being slain.
- Shakespeare, *Richard III*, V, iii, 237
- 22 *King Richard*. For God's sake, let us sit upon the  
ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:  
How some have been deposed; some slain in war;  
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;  
Some poison'd by their wives; some sleeping  
kill'd;  
All murder'd: for within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king

- Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
  
To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks,  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh which walls about our life  
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!  
Shakespeare, *Richard II*, III, ii, 155
- 23 *Pandulph*. A sceptre snatch'd with an unruly hand  
Must be as boisterously maintain'd as gain'd;  
And he that stands upon a slippery place  
Makes nice of no vile hold to stay him up.  
Shakespeare, *King John*, III, iv, 135
- 24 *King Henry*. What infinite heart's-ease  
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!  
And what have kings, that privates have not too,  
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?  
And what art thou, thou idol Ceremony?  
What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more  
Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?  
What are thy rents? what are thy comings in?  
O Ceremony, show me but thy worth!  
What is thy soul of adoration?  
Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form,  
Creating awe and fear in other men?  
Wherein thou art less happy being fear'd  
Than they in fearing.  
What drink'st thou oft, instead of homage sweet,  
But poison'd flattery? O, be sick, great greatness,  
And bid thy Ceremony give thee cure!  
Think'st thou the fiery fever will go out  
With titles blown from adulation?  
Will it give place to flexure and low bending?  
Canst thou, when thou command'st the beggar's  
knee,  
Command the health of it? No, thou proud  
dream,  
That play'st so subtly with a king's repose;  
I am a king that find thee, and I know  
'Tis not the balm, the sceptre, and the ball,  
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,  
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,  
The farced title running 'fore the King,  
The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp  
That beats upon the high shore of this world,  
No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous Ceremony,  
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,  
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,  
Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind  
Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread;  
Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,  
But, like a lackey, from the rise to set  
Sweats in the eye of Phœbus and all night  
Sleeps in Elysium; next day after dawn,  
Doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse,  
And follows so the ever-running year,  
With profitable labour, to his grave:
- And, but for ceremony, such a wretch,  
Winding up days with toil and nights with sleep,  
Had the fore-hand and vantage of a king,  
  
The slave, a member of the country's peace,  
Enjoys it; but in gross brain little wots  
What watch the King keeps to maintain the  
peace,  
Whose hours the peasant best advantages.  
Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV, i, 253
- 25 *Brutus*. As Cæsar loved me, I weep for him; as he  
was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I  
honour him: but, as he was ambitious, I slew him.  
There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; hon-  
our for his valour; and death for his ambition.  
Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III, ii, 25
- 26 *Menteith*. What does the tyrant?  
*Caiithness*. Great Dunsinane he strongly fortifies.  
Some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him  
Do call it valiant fury; but, for certain,  
He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause  
Within the belt of rule.  
*Angus*. Now does he feel  
His secret murders sticking on his hands;  
Now minutely revolts upbraid his faith-breach;  
Those he commands move only in command,  
Nothing in love; now does he feel his title  
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe  
Upon a dwarfish thief.  
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, ii, 11
- 27 *Macduff*. Turn, hell-hound, turn!  
*Macbeth*. Of all men else I have avoided thee.  
But get thee back; my soul is too much charged  
With blood of thine already.  
*Macd*. I have no words;  
My voice is in my sword. Thou bloodier villain  
Than terms can give thee out!  
*They fight*.  
*Macb*. Thou lovest labour.  
As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air  
With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.  
Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;  
I bear a charmed life, which must not yield  
To one of woman born.  
*Macd*. Despair thy charm;  
And let the angel whom thou still hast served  
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripp'd.  
*Macb*. Accurs'd be that tongue that tells me so,  
For it hath cow'd my better part of man!  
And be these juggling fiends no more believed  
That palter with us in a double sense;  
That keep the word of promise to our ear,  
And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with thee.  
*Macd*. Then yield thee, coward,  
And live to be the show and gaze o' the time!  
We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,  
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit,  
"Here may you see the tyrant."

- Macb.* I will not yield,  
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet  
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.  
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,  
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,  
Yet I will try the last. Before my body  
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,  
And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold,  
enough!"  
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, viii, 4
- 28 *Pericles*. 'Tis time to fear when tyrants seem to kiss.  
Shakespeare, *Pericles*, I, ii, 79
- 29 *Wolsey*. O, how wretched  
Is that poor man that hangs on princes' favours!  
There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to,  
That sweet aspect of princes, and their ruin,  
More pangs and fears than wars or women have;  
And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer,  
Never to hope again.  
Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, III, ii, 366
- 30 It is a miserable state of mind to have few things  
to desire and many things to fear; and yet that  
commonly is the case of kings.  
Bacon, *Of Empire*
- 31 Princes are like to heavenly bodies, which cause  
good or evil times; and which have much veneration,  
but no rest.  
Bacon, *Of Empire*
- 32 I put for a general inclination of all mankind a  
perpetual and restless desire of power after power,  
that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this is  
not always that a man hopes for a more intensive  
delight than he has already attained to, or that he  
cannot be content with a moderate power, but  
because he cannot assure the power and means to  
live well, which he hath present, without the ac-  
quisition of more. And from hence it is that kings,  
whose power is greatest, turn their endeavours to  
the assuring it at home by laws, or abroad by  
wars: and when that is done, there succeedeth a  
new desire; in some, of fame from new conquest;  
in others, of ease and sensual pleasure; in others,  
of admiration, or being flattered for excellence in  
some art or other ability of the mind.  
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 11
- 33 In a body politic, if the representative be one  
man, whatsoever he does in the person of the body  
which is not warranted in his letters, nor by the  
laws, is his own act, and not the act of the body,  
nor of any other member thereof besides himself:  
because further than his letters or the laws limit,  
he representeth no man's person, but his own. But  
what he does according to these is the act of every  
one: for of the act of the sovereign every one is  
author, because he is their representative unlimit-

ed; and the act of him that recedes not from the  
letters of the sovereign is the act of the sovereign,  
and therefore every member of the body is author  
of it.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, II, 22

- 34 The name of tyranny signifieth nothing more nor  
less than the name of sovereignty, be it in one or  
many men, saving that they that use the former  
word are understood to be angry with them they  
call *tyrants*; I think the toleration of a professed  
hatred of tyranny is a toleration of hatred to  
Commonwealth in general, and another evil seed,  
not differing much from the former.  
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, IV, Review  
and Conclusion
- 35 Tyranny consists in the desire of universal power  
beyond its scope.  
There are different assemblies of the strong, the  
fair, the sensible, the pious, in which each man  
rules at home, not elsewhere. And sometimes they  
meet, and the strong and the fair foolishly fight as  
to who shall be master, for their mastery is of dif-  
ferent kinds. They do not understand one another,  
and their fault is the desire to rule everywhere.  
Nothing can effect this, not even might, which is  
of no use in the kingdom of the wise, and is only  
mistress of external actions. So these expressions  
are false and tyrannical: "I am fair, therefore I  
must be feared. I am strong, therefore I must be  
loved. I am . . ."  
Tyranny is the wish to have in one way what  
can only be had in another. We render different  
duties to different merits; the duty of love to the  
pleasant; the duty of fear to the strong; duty of  
belief to the learned.  
We must render these duties; it is unjust to re-  
fuse them, and unjust to ask others. And so it is  
false and tyrannical to say, "He is not strong,  
therefore I will not esteem him; he is not able,  
therefore I will not fear him."  
Pascal, *Pensées*, V, 332
- 36 *Michael*. Reason in man obscur'd, or not obeyd,  
Immediately inordinate desires  
And upstart Passions catch the Government  
From Reason, and to servitude reduce  
Man till then free. Therefore since hee permits  
Within himself unworthie Powers to reign  
Over free Reason, God in Judgement just  
Subjects him from without to violent Lords;  
Who oft as undeservedly enthrall  
His outward freedom: Tyrannie must be,  
Though to the Tyrant thereby no excuse.  
Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII, 86
- 37 That people must needs be mad or strangely in-  
fatuated that build the chief hope of their com-  
mon happiness or safety on a single person; who,  
if he happen to be good, can do no more than

another man; if to be bad, hath in his hands to do more evil without check than millions of other men.

Milton, *Ready and Easy Way*

- 38 It is lawful, and hath been held so through all ages, for any, who have the power, to call to account a tyrant or wicked king, and after due conviction, to depose and put him to death.

Milton, *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

- 39 To say kings are accountable to none but God, is the overturning of all law and government. For if they may refuse to give account, then all covenants made with them at coronation, all oaths are in vain, and mere mockeries, all laws which they swear to keep, made to no purpose: for if the king fear not God (as how many of them do not?) we hold then our lives and estates by the tenure of his mere grace and mercy, as from a god, not a mortal magistrate—a position that none but court parasites or men besotted would maintain.

Milton, *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*

- 40 They are much mistaken, who suppose that one man *can* by himself hold the supreme right of a commonwealth. For the only limit of right . . . is power. But the power of one man is very inadequate to support so great a load. And hence it arises, that the man, whom the multitude has chosen king, looks out for himself generals, or counsellors, or friends, to whom he entrusts his own and the common welfare; so that the dominion, which is thought to be a perfect monarchy, is in actual working an aristocracy, not, indeed, an open but a hidden one, and therefore the worst of all.

Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, VI, 5

- 41 It is evident that absolute monarchy, which by some men is counted for the only government in the world, is indeed inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all. For the end of civil society being to avoid and remedy those inconveniencies of the state of Nature which necessarily follow from every man's being judge in his own case, by setting up a known authority to which every one of that society may appeal upon any injury received, or controversy that may arise, and which every one of the society ought to obey. Wherever any persons are who have not such an authority to appeal to, and decide any difference between them there, those persons are still in the state of Nature. And so is every absolute prince in respect of those who are under his dominion.

Locke, *II Civil Government*, VII, 90

- 42 As usurpation is the exercise of power which another hath a right to, so tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a

right to; and this is making use of the power any one has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private, separate advantage. When the governor, however entitled, makes not the law, but his will, the rule, and his commands and actions are not directed to the preservation of the properties of his people, but the satisfaction of his own ambition, revenge, covetousness, or any other irregular passion. . . .

It is a mistake to think this fault is proper only to monarchies. Other forms of government are liable to it as well as that; for wherever the power that is put in any hands for the government of the people and the preservation of their properties is applied to other ends, and made use of to impoverish, harass, or subdue them to the arbitrary and irregular commands of those that have it, there it presently becomes tyranny, whether those that thus use it are one or many. . . .

Wherever law ends, tyranny begins.

Locke, *II Civil Government*, XVIII, 199–202

- 43 *Jones*. I know but of one solid objection to absolute monarchy. The only defect in which excellent constitution seems to be, the difficulty of finding any man adequate to the office of an absolute monarch: for this indispensably require three qualities very difficult, as it appears from history, to be found in princely natures: first, a sufficient quantity of moderation in the prince, to be contented with all the power which is possible for him to have. 2ndly, Enough of wisdom to know his own happiness. And, 3rdly, Goodness sufficient to support the happiness of others, when not only compatible with, but instrumental to his own.

Now if an absolute monarch, with all these great and rare qualifications, should be allowed capable of conferring the greatest good on society; it must be surely granted, on the contrary, that absolute power, vested in the hands of one who is deficient in them all, is likely to be attended with no less a degree of evil.

In short, our own religion furnishes us with adequate ideas of the blessing, as well as curse, which may attend absolute power. The pictures of heaven and of hell will place a very lively image of both before our eyes; for though the prince of the latter can have no power, but what he originally derives from the omnipotent Sovereign in the former, yet it plainly appears from Scripture, that absolute power in his infernal dominions is granted to their diabolical ruler. This is indeed the only absolute power which can by Scripture be derived from heaven. If, therefore, the several tyrannies upon earth can prove any title to a Divine authority, it must be derived from this original grant to the prince of darkness; and these subordinate deputations must consequently come immediately from him whose stamp they so expressly bear.

To conclude, as the examples of all ages show us that mankind in general desire power only to

do harm, and, when they obtain it, use it for no other purpose; it is not consonant with even the least degree of prudence to hazard an alteration, where our hopes are poorly kept in countenance by only two or three exceptions out of a thousand instances to alarm our fears. In this case it will be much wiser to submit to a few inconveniences arising from the dispassionate deafness of laws, than to remedy them by applying to the passionate open ears of a tyrant.

Fielding, *Tom Jones*, XII, 12

- 44 It is not enough to have intermediate powers in a monarchy; there must be also a depositary of the laws. This depositary can only be the judges of the supreme courts of justice, who promulgate the new laws, and revive the obsolete. The natural ignorance of the nobility, their indolence and contempt of civil government, require that there should be a body invested with the power of reviving and executing the laws, which would be otherwise buried in oblivion. The prince's council are not a proper depositary. They are naturally the depositary of the momentary will of the prince, and not of the fundamental laws. Besides, the prince's council is continually changing; it is neither permanent nor numerous; neither has it a sufficient share of the confidence of the people; consequently it is capable of setting them right in difficult conjunctures, or of reducing them to proper obedience.

Despotic governments, where there are no fundamental laws, have no such kind of depositary. Hence it is that religion has generally so much influence in those countries, because it forms a kind of permanent depositary; and if this cannot be said of religion, it may of the customs that are respected instead of laws.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, II, 4

- 45 Honour is far from being the principle of despotic government: mankind being here all upon a level, no one person can prefer himself to another; and as on the other hand they are all slaves, they can give themselves no sort of preference.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, III, 8

- 46 As virtue is necessary in a republic, and in a monarchy honour, so fear is necessary in a despotic government: with regard to virtue, there is no occasion for it, and honour would be extremely dangerous.

Here the immense power of the prince devolves entirely upon those whom he is pleased to entrust with the administration. Persons capable of setting a value upon themselves would be likely to create disturbances. Fear must therefore depress their spirits, and extinguish even the least sense of ambition.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws* III, 9

- 47 Luxury is . . . absolutely necessary in monarchies; as it is also in despotic states. In the former, it is the use of liberty; in the latter, it is the abuse of servitude. A slave appointed by his master to tyrannise over other wretches of the same condition, uncertain of enjoying tomorrow the blessings of to-day, has no other felicity than that of glutting the pride, the passions, and voluptuousness of the present moment.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, VII, 4

- 48 In despotic governments women do not introduce, but are themselves an object of, luxury. They must be in a state of the most rigorous servitude. Every one follows the spirit of the government, and adopts in his own family the customs he sees elsewhere established. As the laws are very severe and executed on the spot, they are afraid lest the liberty of women should expose them to danger. Their quarrels, indiscretions, repugnancies, jealousies, piques, and that art, in fine, which little souls have of interesting great ones, would be attended there with fatal consequences.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, VII, 9

- 49 There are two sorts of tyranny: one real, which arises from oppression; the other is seated in opinion, and is sure to be felt whenever those who govern establish things shocking to the existing ideas of a nation.

Montesquieu, *Spirit of Laws*, XIX, 3

- 50 One gives the name of tyrant to the sovereign who knows no laws but those of this caprice, who takes his subjects' property, and who afterwards enrolls them to go to take the property of his neighbours. There are none of these tyrants in Europe.

One distinguishes between the tyranny of one man and that of many. The tyranny of many would be that of a body which invaded the rights of other bodies, and which exercised despotism in favour of the laws corrupted by it. Nor are there any tyrants of this sort in Europe.

Under which tyranny would you like to live? Under neither; but if I had to choose, I should detest the tyranny of one man less than that of many. A despot always has his good moments; an assembly of despots never. If a tyrant does me an injustice, I can disarm him through his mistress, his confessor or his page; but a company of grave tyrants is inaccessible to all seductions. When it is not unjust, it is at the least hard, and never does it bestow favours.

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*: Tyranny

- 51 The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty. Hence the right of the strongest, which, though to all seeming meant ironically, is really laid down as a fundamental principle. But are we never to have an explana-



tion of this phrase? Force is a physical power, and I fail to see what moral effect it can have. To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will—at the most, an act of prudence. In what sense can it be a duty?

Suppose for a moment that this so-called “right” exists. I maintain that the sole result is a mass of inexplicable nonsense. For, if force creates right, the effect changes with the cause: every force that is greater than the first succeeds to its right. As soon as it is possible to disobey with impunity, disobedience is legitimate; and, the strongest being always in the right, the only thing that matters is to act so as to become the strongest. But what kind of right is that which perishes when force fails? If we must obey perforce, there is no need to obey because we ought; and if we are not forced to obey, we are under no obligation to do so. Clearly, the word “right” adds nothing to force: in this connection, it means absolutely nothing.

Obey the powers that be. If this means yield to force, it is a good precept, but superfluous: I can answer for its never being violated. All power comes from God, I admit; but so does all sickness: does that mean that we are forbidden to call in the doctor? A brigand surprises me at the edge of a wood: must I not merely surrender my purse on compulsion; but, even if I could withhold it, am I in conscience bound to give it up? For certainly the pistol he holds is also a power.

Let us then admit that force does not create right, and that we are obliged to obey only legitimate powers.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*, I, 3

- 52 A people, says Grotius, can give itself to a king. Then, according to Grotius, a people is a people before it gives itself. The gift is itself a civil act, and implies public deliberation. It would be better, before examining the act by which a people gives itself to a king, to examine that by which it has become a people; for this act, being necessarily prior to the other, is the true foundation of society.
- Rousseau, *Social Contract*, I, 5
- 53 Kings desire to be absolute, and men are always crying out to them from afar that the best means of being so is to get themselves loved by their people. This precept is all very well, and even in some respects very true. Unfortunately, it will always be derided at court. The power which comes of a people's love is no doubt the greatest; but it is precarious and conditional, and princes will never rest content with it. The best kings desire to be in a position to be wicked, if they please, without forfeiting their mastery: political sermonisers may tell them to their hearts' content that, the people's strength being their own, their first interest is that the people should be prosperous, numerous and

formidable; they are well aware that this is untrue. Their first personal interest is that the people should be weak, wretched, and unable to resist them. I admit that, provided the subjects remained always in submission, the prince's interest would indeed be that it should be powerful, in order that its power, being his own, might make him formidable to his neighbours; but, this interest being merely secondary and subordinate, and strength being incompatible with submission, princes naturally give the preference always to the principle that is more to their immediate advantage.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III, 6

- 54 For a monarchical State to have a chance of being well governed, its population and extent must be proportionate to the abilities of its governor. It is easier to conquer than to rule.
- Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III, 6
- 55 If, according to Plato, the “king by nature” is such a rarity, how often will nature and fortune conspire to give him a crown? And, if royal education necessarily corrupts those who receive it, what is to be hoped from a series of men brought up to reign? It is, then, wanton self-deception to confuse royal government with government by a good king. To see such government as it is in itself, we must consider it as it is under princes who are incompetent or wicked: for either they will come to the throne wicked or incompetent, or the throne will make them so.
- Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III, 6
- 56 Instead of governing subjects to make them happy, despotism makes them wretched in order to govern them.
- Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III, 8
- 57 *Johnson*. If a sovereign oppresses his people to a great degree, they will rise and cut off his head. There is a remedy in human nature against tyranny, that will keep us safe under every form of government.
- Boswell, Life of Johnson (Mar. 31, 1772)*
- 58 *Johnson*. “Why, Sir, absolute princes seldom do any harm. But they who are governed by them are governed by chance. There is no security for good government.” *Cambridge*. “There have been many sad victims to absolute government.” *Johnson*. “So, Sir, have there been to popular factions.” *Boswell*. “The question is, which is worst, one wild beast or many?”
- Boswell, Life of Johnson (April 18, 1775)*
- 59 There is not a crowned head in Europe whose talents or merit would entitle him to be elected a vestryman by the people of any parish in America.
- Jefferson, Letter to Washington (May 2, 1788)*

- 60 I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.  
Jefferson, *Letter to Benjamin Rush* (Sept. 23, 1800)
- 61 The obvious definition of a monarchy seems to be that of a state, in which a single person, by whatsoever name he may be distinguished, is entrusted with the execution of the laws, the management of the revenue, and the command of the army. But, unless public liberty is protected by intrepid and vigilant guardians, the authority of so formidable a magistrate will soon degenerate into despotism. The influence of the clergy, in an age of superstition, might be usefully employed to assert the rights of mankind; but so intimate is the connection between the throne and the altar, that the banner of the church has very seldom been seen on the side of the people. A martial nobility and stubborn commons, possessed of arms, tenacious of property, and collected into constitutional assemblies, form the only balance capable of preserving a free constitution against enterprises of an aspiring prince.  
Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, III
- 62 Of the various forms of government which have prevailed in the world, an hereditary monarchy seems to present the fairest scope for ridicule. Is it possible to relate, without an indignant smile, that, on the father's decease, the property of a nation, like that of a drove of oxen, descends to his infant son, as yet unknown to mankind and to himself; and that the bravest warriors and the wisest statesmen, relinquishing their natural right to empire, approach the royal cradle with bended knees and protestations of inviolable fidelity? Satire and declamation may paint these obvious topics in the most dazzling colours, but our more serious thoughts will respect a useful prejudice, that establishes a rule of succession, independent of the passions of mankind; and we shall cheerfully acquiesce in any expedient which deprives the multitude of the dangerous, and indeed the ideal, power of giving themselves a master.  
Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, VII
- 63 The generality of princes, if they were stripped of their purple and cast naked into the world, would immediately sink to the lowest rank of society, without a hope of emerging from their obscurity.  
Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, XXII
- 64 Kings will be tyrants from policy, when subjects are rebels from principle.  
Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*
- 65 Tyrants seldom want pretexts.  
Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*
- 66 The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.  
Madison, *Federalist* 47
- 67 *Salemens*. Think'st thou there is no tyranny but that  
Of blood and chains? The despotism of vice,  
The weakness and the wickedness of luxury,  
The negligence, the apathy, the evils  
Of sensual sloth—produce ten thousand tyrants,  
Whose delegated cruelty surpasses  
The worst acts of one energetic master,  
However harsh and hard in his own bearing.  
Byron, *Sardanapalus*, I, ii, 113
- 68 Strip your Louis Quatorze of his king-gear, and there is left nothing but a poor forked raddish with a head fantastically carved.  
Carlyle, *The Hero as Man of Letters*
- 69 God said, I am tired of kings,  
I suffer them no more;  
Up to my ear the morning brings  
The outrage of the poor.  
Emerson, *Boston Hymn*
- 70 Even despotism does not produce its worst effects, so long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called, and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men.  
Mill, *On Liberty*, III
- 71 A people may prefer a free government, but if, from indolence, or carelessness, or cowardice, or want of public spirit, they are unequal to the exertions necessary for preserving it; if they will not fight for it when it is directly attacked; if they can be deluded by the artifices used to cheat them out of it; if by momentary discouragement, or temporary panic, or a fit of enthusiasm for an individual, they can be induced to lay their liberties at the feet even of a great man, or trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions; in all these cases they are more or less unfit for liberty: and though it may be for their good to have had it even for a short time, they are unlikely long to enjoy it. Again, a people may be unwilling or unable to fulfil the duties which a particular form of government requires of them. A rude people, though in some degree alive to the benefits of civ-

ilised society, may be unable to practise the forbearance which it demands: their passions may be too violent, or their personal pride too exacting, to forego private conflict, and leave to the laws the avenging of their real or supposed wrongs. In such a case, a civilised government, to be really advantageous to them, will require to be in a considerable degree despotic: to be one over which they do not themselves exercise control, and which imposes a great amount of forcible restraint upon their actions.

Mill, *Representative Government*, I

- 72 A people in a state of savage independence, in which every one lives for himself, exempt, unless by fits, from any external control, is practically incapable of making any progress in civilisation until it has learnt to obey. The indispensable virtue, therefore, in a government which establishes itself over a people of this sort is, that it make itself obeyed. To enable it to do this, the constitution of the government must be nearly, or quite, despotic. A constitution in any degree popular, dependent on the voluntary surrender by the different members of the community of their individual freedom of action, would fail to enforce the first lesson which the pupils, in this stage of their progress, require. Accordingly, the civilisation of such tribes, when not the result of juxtaposition with others already civilised, is almost always the work of an absolute ruler.

Mill, *Representative Government*, II

- 73 I am far from condemning, in cases of extreme exigency, the assumption of absolute power in the form of a temporary dictatorship. Free nations have, in times of old, conferred such power by their own choice, as a necessary medicine for diseases of the body politic which could not be got rid of by less violent means. But its acceptance, even for a time strictly limited, can only be excused, if . . . the dictator employs the whole power he assumes in removing the obstacles which debar the nation from the enjoyment of freedom. A good despotism is an altogether false ideal, which practically (except as a means to some temporary purpose) becomes the most senseless and dangerous of chimeras. Evil for evil, a good despotism, in a country at all advanced in civilisation, is more noxious than a bad one; for it is far more relaxing and enervating to the thoughts, feelings, and ener-

gies of the people.

Mill, *Representative Government*, III

- 74 There are, as we have already seen, conditions of society in which a vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilisation. There are others, in which the mere fact of despotism has indeed no beneficial effect, the lessons which it teaches having already been only too completely learnt; but in which, there being no spring of spontaneous improvement in the people themselves, their almost only hope of making any steps in advance depends on the chances of a good despot. Under a native despotism, a good despot is a rare and transitory accident: but when the dominion they are under is that of a more civilised people, that people ought to be able to supply it constantly. The ruling country ought to be able to do for its subjects all that could be done by a succession of absolute monarchs, guaranteed by irresistible force against the precariousness of tenure attendant on barbarous despotisms, and qualified by their genius to anticipate all that experience has taught to the more advanced nation. Such is the ideal rule of a free people over a barbarous or semi-barbarous one. We need not expect to see that ideal realised; but unless some approach to it is, the rulers are guilty of a dereliction of the highest moral trust which can devolve upon a nation: and if they do not even aim at it, they are selfish usurpers, on a par in criminality with any of those whose ambition and rapacity have sported from age to age with the destiny of masses of mankind.

Mill, *Representative Government*, XVIII

- 75 By and by, when they was asleep and snoring, Jim says:  
 “Don’t it s’prise you de way dem kings carries on, Huck?”  
 “No,” I say, “it don’t.”  
 “Why don’t it, Huck?”  
 “Well, it don’t, because it’s in the breed. I reckon they’re all alike.”  
 “But, Huck, dese kings o’ urn is reglar rapsallions; dat’s jist what dey is; dey’s reglar rapsallions.”  
 “Well, that’s what I’m a-saying; all kings is mostly rapsallions, as fur as I can make out.”  
 Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, XXIII