

Tyranny and Despotism

INTRODUCTION

IF any point in political theory is indisputable, it would seem to be that tyranny is the worst corruption of government—a vicious misuse of power and a violent abuse of the human beings who are subject to it. Aristotle's remark that "no freeman, if he can escape from it, will endure such government," would seem to express the sentiments of all who, loving liberty and abhorring slavery, look upon tyranny as destroying the one and establishing the other.

Certainly the word "tyranny" is seldom if ever used eulogistically. Such phrases as "a just tyranny" or "a good tyrant" are at once seen to be as self-contradictory as "a round square." The great books of history give the impression that tyrants and despots, who vastly outnumber good rulers, are always objects of hate and fear, never of love and admiration. If there are exceptions, if there are peoples who willingly submit to or even deserve the yoke of despotism and tyranny, they are, in the judgment of ancients and moderns alike, politically primitive.

The traditional association of the word "despotism" with "tyranny" requires us to consider whether our understanding of these terms is as uniformly clear as the denunciation of what they denote seems to be universal. Are despotism and tyranny the same? It may be thought that the tyrant must always have despotic power at his disposal, power unlimited by law, so that the lawless ruler is at once both despot and tyrant. But need the despot, the absolute ruler, always rule tyrannically?

The familiar phrase, "benevolent despotism," at once suggests the negative answer, and also some line of distinction between despotism and tyranny. Tyranny can never be

benevolent. But despotism may be no worse than paternalism. While its injustice may consist in treating adults, able to govern themselves, as if they were children, it may also derive an air of justice from the fact that the despot, like the father, rules his subjects for their own good. If he treats them like slaves rather than children, exploiting them to serve his own interests, then he is not a benevolent but a tyrannical despot.

This understanding of the meaning of "despotism" and "tyranny" seems to be only partly supported by their etymology. The Greek word from which "despot" comes signifies the head of a household, the *paterfamilias* (as he is called by the Romans) who exercises the absolute authority of a master over chattel slaves, and of a parent over his children. In contrast, the Greek word *týrannos* refers to the ruler of a state rather than a family and is sometimes used as if it were equivalent in meaning to "king." Yet both words carry the connotation of absolute power, and when, in addition, the subjects of a tyrant are considered to be no better off than slaves, the difference in the meaning of the two words almost disappears.

The difficulty of grasping what is essential to the nature of tyranny and despotism seems to be complicated by certain criteria, originally proposed by the Greeks, for distinguishing between king and tyrant, or between royal and despotic rule. Both Plato and Aristotle speak of the king as a good monarch and the tyrant as a bad one. Both say that monarchy, or rule by a single man, is royal when it is for the welfare of the ruled and tyrannical when it serves only the interests of the ruler. Both make lawlessness—either a violation of existing laws or

government by personal fiat without settled laws—a mark of tyranny.

Yet, for Aristotle at least, some of these criteria also apply to despotism, and even to royal government, insofar as these are distinguished from political or constitutional government—government by law rather than by men. Furthermore, the association of either tyranny or despotism with monarchy—rule by *one* man, whether just or unjust—seems to be counterbalanced by Aristotle's discussion of the tyranny of the *few* and of the *many*. In a monarchy, the king can turn tyrant; but so can the wealthy become despotic in an oligarchy, or the poor in a lawless democracy.

The nature of tyranny thus seems to be more difficult to define precisely than would at first appear from the almost universal condemnation of it as the worst perversion of government.

To some extent, the difficulties may be verbal. The word "tyranny" is used with many meanings, not only by the Greeks, but throughout the tradition of the great books. Some writers identify tyranny and despotism; some distinguish the two sharply. Some writers consider tyranny and despotism only in connection with monarchy; some extend the consideration to other forms of government. The words are sometimes used descriptively, without the connotation of good or evil; and sometimes they are more derogatory than descriptive.

Even when the necessary verbal classifications are achieved, genuine issues still remain. Conflicting accounts are given of the causes of tyranny or the circumstances from which it develops. Concerning despotism, some writers take the position that it may be justified by conquest, or by the need of a people for absolute government, or, in the form of a temporary dictatorship, by emergency conditions. Not even the condemnation of tyranny seems to be unanimous, if the views of Hobbes are to be reckoned with; nor, among those who condemn tyranny, is the fairly general approval of tyrannicide free from the strong dissenting voice of Kant.

THE FOREGOING INDICATES how the notions of tyranny and despotism are involved in other

chapters dealing with the various forms of government and, in addition, such chapters as JUSTICE, LIBERTY, and SLAVERY. The distinction, for example, between domestic and political slavery bears on one of the ways in which despotism and tyranny are distinguished; and the discussion in the chapters on MONARCHY and CONSTITUTION concerning absolute and limited government raises a question which must also be considered here, namely, whether absolute monarchy can be distinguished from despotism and whether it has an inveterate tendency to become tyrannical.

That question deserves immediate attention, because its answers are connected with opposed views of the justice or defensibility of tyranny and despotism. Plato and Aristotle, for example, treat tyranny as the prototype of political injustice, and the tyrant as the extreme case of the vicious man; yet there are passages which appear to have a contrary tenor. In the *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger proposes a good tyrant as the best means for establishing the laws. To the question, "What are the conditions which you require in a state before you can organize it?" he thinks the legislator's answer should be: "Give me a state which is governed by a tyrant, and let the tyrant be young and have a good memory; let him be quick at learning and of a courageous and noble nature"—in short, let him have temperance and every other virtue.

More readily than monarchy, democracy, or oligarchy, tyranny is the stepping-stone to the best state, according to the Athenian Stranger, because it involves the greater power concentrated in a single man. The combination of virtue and power may rarely be found, but, he says, "when the supreme power in man coincides with the greatest wisdom and temperance, then the best laws and the best constitution come into being, and in no other way."

Aristotle's classification of the types of kingship, or the forms of royal government, seems to include tyranny among them. He refers to the kind of monarchy which prevails among the barbarians who, "being more servile in character than Hellenes . . . do not rebel against a despotic government. Such royalties," he goes on, "have the nature of

tyrannies because the people are by nature slaves, but there is no danger of their being overthrown, for they are hereditary and legal." Even among the Hellenes in ancient times, Aristotle points out, there was a form of monarchy or "dictatorship" that may be defined "as an elective tyranny, which like the barbarian monarchy, is legal, but differs from it in not being hereditary."

These two forms of tyranny, Aristotle says elsewhere, "are both according to law, and therefore easily pass into royalty." The line between king and tyrant is not, however, as shadowy as might first appear. "Kings rule according to law over voluntary subjects, but tyrants over involuntary; and the one are guarded by their fellow citizens, the others are guarded against them." The forms of monarchy which Aristotle also calls "tyrannies" seem to him to have a mixed character. "They are royal," he says, "in so far as the monarch rules according to law over willing subjects; but they are tyrannical in so far as he is despotic and rules according to his own fancy." But there is also a kind of tyranny which, being unmixed, is "the counterpart of perfect monarchy. This tyranny is just that arbitrary power of an individual which is responsible to no one, and governs all alike, whether equals or better, with a view to its own advantage, not to that of its subjects, and therefore against their will."

Aristotle explains his association of tyranny with monarchy on the ground that "both are forms of one-man rule, but," he adds, "there is the greatest difference between them; the tyrant looks to his own advantage, the king to that of his subjects." Tyrannical government is "monarchy exercising the rule of a master over political society," and therefore deserves to be called "despotic" as well as tyrannical. When it has no admixture of royalty, tyranny is not only self-serving but lawless rule. It is "the very reverse of a constitution," or rule by law. Except for the hypothetical case in which the truly superior, the almost godlike man is king, Aristotle seems to identify absolute or unconstitutional monarchy with tyranny and despotism, and he condemns both for violating the very nature of the state conceived as "a community of free men."

THE LINE BETWEEN KING and tyrant is similarly drawn by Plato. Monarchy for him "divides into royalty and tyranny" according as one man rules by law or lawlessly, over voluntary or involuntary subjects. If the one man were like a god in relation to other men, it would be fitting for him to rule the state by his wisdom or science and without recourse to laws. "If there could be such a despot," the Eleatic Stranger says in the *Statesman*, "he alone would be the happy ruler of a true and perfect state," but men "can never be made to believe that any one can be worthy of such authority." (History suggests the contrary in such cases as Caesar, Napoleon, and Hitler.)

Giving the name of "king" to the monarch who abides by and maintains established laws, the Stranger gets Socrates to agree that the ruler should be called a "tyrant" when he "governs neither by law nor by custom, but, imitating the true man of science, pretends that he can only act for the best by violating the laws, while in reality appetite and ignorance are the motives of the imitation."

In *The Republic*, Socrates refers to Euripides' praise of "tyranny as god-like," and gives, as another reason for excluding the poets from the state, the fact that "they are the eulogists of tyranny." Far from being godlike, the tyrannical man is described by Socrates as "drunken, lustful, passionate." Tyrants "are always either the masters or servants and never the friends of anybody; the tyrant never tastes of true freedom or friendship." Oriental despotism, Hegel later writes, appears to give freedom to one man, but "the freedom of that one is only caprice, ferocity—brutal recklessness of passion . . . That one is therefore only a despot; not a *free man*."

According to Plato, tyranny is not only the greatest evil a state can suffer, but the tyrant is also the unhappiest of men. "Will not he who has been shown to be the wickedest," Socrates asks, "be also the most miserable?" Polus, in the *Gorgias*, tries to prove that, like the successful criminal who goes unpunished, the tyrant who does injustice to everybody, but suffers none, achieves more happiness than other men. But Socrates, taking the position that it is better to suffer than to do injustice,

argues to the contrary that the tyrant is more miserable than those whom he oppresses.

If this is true, the confirmed tyrant is probably the man least able to perceive or acknowledge it. Plutarch reports the story of Plato's first meeting with Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse. When Plato tried to prove to him that "tyrants, of all men, had the least pretence to virtue," and that, since they lacked justice, they suffered "the miserable condition of the unjust," Dionysius would not hear the argument out. "He asked the philosopher in a rage," Plutarch relates, "what business he had in Sicily. To which Plato answered, 'I come to seek a virtuous man.' 'It seems, then,' replied Dionysius, 'you have lost your labor.'" According to Plutarch, Dionysius tried to have Plato killed on his return voyage to Greece; or failing that, to have him sold into slavery. He would not be harmed by that, Dionysius reasoned, because, "being the same just man as before, he would enjoy his happiness, though he lost his liberty."

ON THE WHOLE, THEN, Aristotle's and Plato's disapproval of tyrants and tyranny seems to be unequivocal. The passages which might cause this to be questioned can perhaps be accounted for by the ancient tendency to use the word "tyrant" descriptively to denote the possessor of absolute power. Yet even in the *Laws*, where such usage occurs, Plato observes that kings, unable "to sustain the temptation of arbitrary power," tend to overthrow the laws and so become tyrannical in the invidious sense of the word.

With the exception of Hobbes, medieval and modern writers are no less disapproving than the ancients. "Tyrannical government," according to Aquinas, "is altogether corrupt" and completely lawless. It is the tyrant himself, rather than those who may rebel against a government so lacking in justice, who is "guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely." When a king, by becoming a tyrant, "has dethroned himself and put himself in a state of war with his people, what shall hinder them," asks Locke, "from prosecuting him who is no king, as they would any

other man who has put himself in a state of war with them?"

In Locke's view, it is a mistake to think that the fault of tyranny "is proper only to monarchies. 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 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, if the law be transgressed to another's harm."

Tyranny is thus defined by Locke as "the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a right to." Such "absolute arbitrary power, or governing without settled standing laws, can neither of them consist with the ends of society and government." Tyranny so defined may not be limited to monarchies; but, according to Locke, absolute monarchy is always tyrannical. For that very reason it is, he writes, "inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all."

What Locke calls "tyranny" or, without change of meaning, "absolute monarchy," Kant calls "autocracy." But Kant distinguishes the monarch "who has the *highest* power" from the autocrat "who has *all* power." Hegel calls "despotism" that "state of affairs where law has disappeared and where the particular will as such, whether of a monarch or a mob, counts as law or rather takes the place of law." The writers of *The Federalist* use the words "tyranny" and "despotism" interchangeably, but do not vary from the definition which Montesquieu gives of despotic government as "that in which a single person directs everything by his own will and caprice." In all other governments, even in monarchy when it is constitutional, the separation of power puts some limitation on the power entrusted to the offices of state.

Following Montesquieu's doctrine, Madison declares: "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." He reinforces his point by quoting Jefferson's dictum that concentrating "all the powers of government . . . in the same hands, is precisely the definition of despotic government."

HOBBS SEEMS TO BE the one exception in the great books to this variously expressed opinion of the evil of absolute power. Locke may have him in mind when he says that absolute monarchy is "by some men . . . counted the only government in the world." Certainly Hobbes would not repudiate the charge that he thinks none but absolute government feasible; nor is he dismayed by the tendency of other writers to call absolute government "tyrannical" or "despotic." On the contrary, he dismisses this as so much empty name-calling.

In every form of government, according to Hobbes, the sovereign power must be absolute to be effective. "Though of so unlimited a power, men may fancy many evil consequences, yet the consequences of the want of it, which is perpetual war of every man against his neighbor, are much worse." Describing the absolute dominion of the father over his children, and the equally absolute dominion of the master over his slaves, Hobbes says that "the rights and consequences of both paternal and despotical dominion are the very same with those of a sovereign by institution," for unless the sovereign is also absolute, "there is no sovereignty at all."

To the cry "Tyranny," Hobbes replies that just as men who "find themselves grieved under a democracy call it *anarchy*," or those who "are displeased with aristocracy, call it *oligarchy*," so "they that are discontented under monarchy, call it *tyranny*." He holds Aristotle's *Politics* responsible for spreading the fallacy of regarding anything except popular government as tyrannical; and in general he blames the Greek and Roman writers for fomenting sedition against kings by treating tyrannicide as lawful.

Hobbes offers a historical explanation of the origin of these confusions. "A *tyrant*," he writes, "originally signified no more, simply, but a *monarch*. But when afterwards in most

parts of Greece that kind of government was abolished, the name began to signify, not only the thing it did before, but with it the hatred which the popular states bore towards it: as also the name of *king* became odious after the deposing of the kings in Rome."

A word like "tyranny" carries only emotional force. Used descriptively, Hobbes declares, it "signifieth nothing more nor less than the name of sovereignty . . . saving that they that use the former word are understood to be angry with them they call *tyrants*." He is willing to make himself the object of that anger by identifying "a professed hatred of tyranny" with "hatred to Commonwealth in general," and by regarding the toleration of both hatreds alike as evil seeds of sedition.

IN ONE NEGATIVE RESPECT, Rousseau seems to agree with Hobbes. Not that the man who holds that only republican institutions are legitimate, in any way accepts the identification of either prince or popular government with sovereign power. But he, like Hobbes, rejects Aristotle's distinction between the king and the tyrant as good and bad monarchs, the one governing for the good of his subjects, the other in his own interest. Rousseau contends not only that most Greek authors used "the word *tyrant* in a different sense . . . but also," he adds, "it would follow from Aristotle's distinction that, from the very beginning of the world, there has not yet been a single king."

It is only according to a vulgar usage that a tyrant is conceived as "a king who governs violently and without regard for justice or law." The more precise conception, Rousseau insists, defines the tyrant as "an individual who arrogates to himself the royal authority without having a right to it. This is how the Greeks understood the word 'tyrant'; they applied it indifferently to good and bad princes whose authority was not legitimate. *Tyrant* and *usurper* are thus perfectly synonymous terms."

The usurpation of power is, according to Rousseau, the root of both tyranny and despotism, but they are not for that reason to be confused. "I call him who usurps the royal authority a tyrant," Rousseau writes, "and him

who usurps the sovereign power a *despot*. The tyrant is he who thrusts himself in contrary to the laws to govern in accordance with the laws; the despot is he who sets himself above the laws themselves. Thus the tyrant cannot be a despot, but the despot is always a tyrant."

Other writers distinguish between tyranny and despotism on different principles. They accept, where Rousseau rejects, the notion that tyranny is not merely a usurpation of power, but always a self-serving or unjust use of that power. They reject Rousseau's conception of despotism as inseparable from usurpation. Absolute power can be gained and held in other ways.

Locke, for example, conceives despotic dominion as the rule of a master over slaves, or the government of a vanquished people by their conquerors in a just war. "Despotic power," in his opinion, "is an absolute arbitrary power one man has over another to take away his life whenever he pleases." Unlike tyranny, it is not "power beyond right," for "the conqueror, if he have a just cause, has a despotic right over the persons of all that actually aided and concurred in the war against him." Since, in Locke's view, "a usurper can never have right on his side," despotic dominion, when justified, is not achieved by usurpation.

For Montesquieu, despotisms constitute one of the three major forms of government, the other two being republics (aristocratic or democratic) and monarchies. Though he regards despotism as an intrinsically corrupt form of government, in which the rulers wield personal power without the restraint of law, he also judges it to be appropriate to the servile natures or temperaments of certain peoples. Like Aristotle and Hippocrates before him, he attributes to the climate and disposition of the Asiatic peoples their submissiveness to the worst excesses of despotism.

Montesquieu does not so much condemn despotism as he deplores the conditions which seem to render it necessary or natural for a large part of mankind. He does not suggest, as J. S. Mill does, that despotic government can and should serve to civilize those who are as yet unprepared for self-government. Despo-

tism is benevolent, according to Mill, only if it prepares a people for freedom; if it tries to perpetuate itself, it is tyrannical or enslaving.

Though Mill holds the view that, relative to a free society, there cannot be a "good despot" no matter how benevolent his intentions, he also thinks that, in dealing with barbarians, "despotism is a legitimate mode of government . . . provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind has become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one."

Under certain "conditions of society . . . a vigorous despotism," according to Mill, "is in itself the best mode of government for training the people in what is specifically wanting to render them capable of a higher civilization." In his opinion, still other conditions justify despotism. "I am far from condemning," he writes, "in cases of extreme exigency, the assumption of absolute power in the form of a temporary dictatorship." In another place, he says that "the establishment of the despotism of the Caesars was a great benefit to the entire generation in which it took place" because "it put a stop to civil war, and abated a vast amount of malversation and tyranny by praetors and proconsuls."

But in all these cases the essential point is that the despotic rule should be temporary. Mill applies the same criterion to the despotism which occurs in the government of colonial dependencies. It should aim to benefit a subject people by training them in the arts of government, and it should not seek to outlast the conferring of this benefit. "The ruling country," he thinks, "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 of barbarian despotisms . . . Such is the ideal rule of a free people over a barbarous or semi-barbarous one."

This may be the ideal, but critics of imperi-

alism, like Swift or Marx, think that colonial policies are in fact otherwise motivated—by land-grabbing, by the desire for national aggrandizement, and by the profits to be made from the economic exploitation of colonies or subject peoples. Throughout the pages of Thucydides and Tacitus, the spokesmen for empire dwell upon the blessings which Athenian or Roman rule bestows, only to be answered by the protests of the colonists or the conquered, who seem to prefer the insecurities and uncertainties of liberty to the mixed motives of even the best despot.

AS ALREADY INDICATED, the political significance of tyranny and despotism is broader than the conception of the tyrant as an unjust king or of the despot as an absolute monarch. The reign of the Thirty Tyrants at Athens and of the Decemviri at Rome are classical examples of oligarchic tyranny. Advocates of republican or democratic institutions, like the writers of *The Federalist* or Mill, are as much concerned to safeguard constitutional or representative government from the tyranny of special interests—whether of a dominant majority or of concentrated wealth—as they are to protect the rule of law from the encroachments of despotism which begin with usurpations of power by elected officials.

Moderns and ancients alike fear the susceptibility of the mob to the wiles of the demagogue, who encourages their lawlessness in order to take the law into his own hands. Both Hegel and Plato see in the alliance between a scheming demagogue and an unruly populace the step by which a corrupt democracy turns into a tyranny. Though Aristotle disagrees with what he takes to be the theory of Socrates in *The Republic*, that tyranny normally arises from democracy in the progressive degeneration of the state, his own opinion seems to be that “tyranny is a compound of oligarchy and democracy in their most extreme forms” and that “almost all tyrants have been demagogues who gained the favor of the people by their accusation of the notables.”

In Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, there is a striking passage on a form of oppression to which democratic societies are

prone that he thinks worse than the tyrannies and despotisms known to earlier centuries. According to him, “The type of oppression which threatens democracies is different from anything there has ever been in the world before . . . Such old words as ‘despotism’ and ‘tyranny’ do not fit.” The word that Tocqueville could not come up with, we, in the 20th century, call “totalitarianism.” The oppression that he describes, 20th-century authors often call “totalitarian democracy.”

These aspects of tyranny are discussed in the chapters on DEMOCRACY and OLIGARCHY. The traditional emphasis, however, is on the individual tyrant, whether he is a hereditary prince who misuses his autocratic power, the usurper of an established throne, or the demagogue who makes himself dictator. However tyranny arises, monarchy is the form it usually takes in the pages of history or poetry—the domination of the state by one man. But while the great political philosophers offer conflicting theories of the origin of tyranny, there seems to be remarkable agreement concerning the methods the tyrant uses to maintain himself in power.

Other political practices may vary greatly from one historical epoch to another, but the devices of tyranny seem to have a certain timelessness. When they are describing the actions of the tyrant, Herodotus, Plutarch, Tacitus, and Gibbon tell stories of iniquity, of cruelty, of cowardly and unscrupulous stratagems, so alike in detail that the reader loses all sense of time and place. Nor need he exert any effort of imagination to place the figure of the tyrant thus delineated in the setting of contemporary events.

The past also speaks with contemporary relevance in Plato's enumeration of the tyrant's desperate measures, his stirring up of foreign wars to smother domestic discord, his assassination of enemies, his purging of friends or followers, and his confiscation of property as well as his generally indiscriminate bloodletting. The resort to unwarranted searches and seizures, the creation of *ex post facto* crimes, the arrest and punishment of men without trial “have been,” writes Hamilton, “in all ages the favorite and most formidable

instruments of tyranny." So, too, in all ages, the tyrant, fearing reprisal and revenge, lives in a state of war, turns his palace into an armed camp, and goes nowhere without a numerous bodyguard which, as both Aristotle and Machiavelli suggest, functions most efficiently when composed of hirelings or mercenaries.

The great books contain not only the record of tyrannical perfidy and violence, but also recommendations to the would-be tyrant of the best means to use for his nefarious purposes. Though Rousseau refers to Machiavelli's *The Prince* as "the book of Republicans," and thinks that "the choice of his detestable hero, Caesar Borgia, clearly enough shows his hidden aim," the rules which Machiavelli formulates for the prince seem, on the surface at least, to be essentially similar to the advice Aristotle gives the tyrant.

The end in both cases is the same—success in the effort to gain and keep power. The means, in general, are force and fraud or, as Machiavelli phrases it, the methods of the lion and the fox. Machiavelli counsels the prince "to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred." He tells him that he should appear to keep faith without hesitating to break his promises, that he should avoid flatterers and sycophants, and that he should acquire a reputation for liberality without cost to himself. Not very different

is Aristotle's advice to the tyrant—to lop off the heads of those who are too high and to humble all the rest, to sow discord among his subjects, to impoverish the people by multiplying taxes, to employ informers, and to encourage the betrayal of one faction by another.

But in his suggestion of another course for the tyrant to take—the policy of not merely pretending, but of actually trying, to conduct himself like a just king—Aristotle seems to deviate from the spirit of Machiavelli's maxim that the appearance of virtue is profitable so long as it does not interfere with doing whatever is expedient, however vicious. Yet even here Aristotle says that "the tyrant must be careful . . . to keep power enough to rule over his subjects, whether they like him or not, for if he once gives this up he gives up his tyranny."

The best commentary on these recommendations seems to be indirectly expressed by their authors. Both Aristotle and Machiavelli draw one striking conclusion from the history of those—call them princes or tyrants—who have tried to put such rules into practice. Whether its collapse is due to the inherent weakness of might without right, as Aristotle suggests, or, in Machiavelli's terms, to the unforeseeable mishaps of fortune, tyranny, of all forms of government, seems to be the shortest-lived.