Virtue begets Freedom

The history of ancient Greece and Rome presents some challenging puzzles for the political philosopher. On one hand, many political thinkers dismiss democracy as a bad form of government, and even Socrates prefers a government modeled after Sparta, which is similar to communism.

> "[Pure] democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."[1]

> "... unlimited democratic government, which indeed is not a government, but, as Plato calls it, a market-place of governments"[2]

> "Democracy is not a system of liberty, but a form of tyranny: the tyranny of the majority."[3]

In contrast to the theories of both then and now is that fact that the Golden Age of Greece arose in Athens at the time of a radical democracy. Socrates himself, the greatest of philosophers, could hardly have occurred in any other less free society, and would not leave Athens even when the alternative was death.

> "You [Socrates] had your choice, and might have gone either to Lacedaemon [i.e. Sparta] or Crete, which you often praise for their good government.... Whereas you, above all other Athenians, seemed to be so fond of the State, or, in other words, of us her laws, that you never stirred out of her."[4]

How are we to resolve this conflict between theory and facts? My conclusion is that the form of government is of relatively minor importance in the question. The real determining factor in the amount of freedom a people enjoy is not their form of government, but the virtue of the people themselves. "Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws."[5] A truly virtuous people would be free under any form of government, or even none at all. An anarchy, being the weakest form of government, would only be sustainable among a very virtuous people, while a democracy is sustainable with a moderately virtuous people, and so on, with stricter and less free governments being required to maintain order among less virtuous peoples. The Romans were forced to shift their government from a republic to an empire, because they could no longer maintain order under the republic. Even Cato, the great defender of Roman liberty, supported declaring Pompey dictator to restore order at one point, saying that "he preferred any government whatever to no government at all."[6]

The ancient Greeks were a great example of the power of a virtuous people, who rose to world power on a wave of virtue, bringing ideals of freedom and philosophy and government along with them. Their legacies of culture and philosophy have long outlived the swell of virtue and have risen to much greater heights than their political powers ever reached. The peak of the Golden Age in Athens at about 450 BC was marked by their peak of prosperity, which peak comes somewhat after the peak of virtue in the

1   James Madison, The Federalist #10
2   Plutarch, Dion
3   Robert Garmong, "Liberty, Not Democracy, In Iraq." *Capitalism Magazine,* 2003. <http://www.capmag.com/article.asp?ID=2777>
4   Plato, Crito
5   attributed to Plato, authenticity uncertain.
6   Plutarch, Pompey

cycles of history. The peak of virtue is harder to pinpoint, being measured by less concrete artifacts, but it may have been at the time of the Persian Wars, when the Greeks were able to put aside their habit of squabbling and warring amongst themselves to unite against the outside invaders. This was done in the name of freedom and independence and at the cost of deeds of bravery, such as the Athenians at Marathon and the Spartans at Thermopylae, which rival the deeds of the heroes in their own rich legends.

The virtue of the Romans in the early republic is illustrated by a story from the life of Camillus.[7] While the Romans were besieging the Falerian city, a schoolmaster was able to lead his group of children into the hands of Camillus, betraying the Falerians by giving the Romans hostages which would cause the whole city to surrender. But Camillus replied, "A great general should rely on his own virtue, and not on other men's vices." He then stripped and bound the man's hands, and gave the boys rods and scourges with which to drive him back to the city. The Falerians were so struck with admiration at the justice of Camillus that they surrendered to the Romans, saying that "they did not so much confess themselves to be inferior in strength, as they must acknowledge them to be superior in virtue."

The decline in virtue during and after the Golden Age of Greece is seen in the Peloponnesian War, which Pericles starts and Athens pursues in a prideful attempt to gain supremacy over all of Greece, contrary to the ideals of independence and freedom she had fought for in the past. Except for a brief truce instituted by Nicias, the Athenians pursue the war for 29 years, while ignoring many overtures for peace from the Spartans. Athens is finally defeated, and loses its dominance and its sovereignty under the thirty tyrants. The decline in virtue continues even after the democracy is restored, since they can no longer endure the lone gadfly who continually reminds them to think on the importance of virtue. Socrates prophesies at his trial, "For if you think that by killing men you can avoid the accuser censuring your lives, you are mistaken; that is not a way of escape which is either possible or honorable; the easiest and noblest way is not to be crushing others, but to be improving yourselves."[8]

We should examine some of the characteristics which are evident in and evidence of a virtuous people. No doubt one could add to this list by reflecting on modern societies as well, but I will limit it to timeless values which are evident in both ancient and modern peoples.

1. A virtuous people will choose the good over the expedient.

This is dramatically illustrated in the story of Themistocles when, after the united Greek naval forces had beaten the Persians at Salamis, he tells the Athenian people that he has a secret plan which will be of great benefit to their interests and safety. The Athenians have him consult with Aristides, to whom he reveals his plan, which is that they should burn the ships belonging to the other Grecians, which where all currently harbored together, so that Athens will be the only naval power in Greece. Aristides reports back to the Athenians only that "no proposal could be more politic, or more dishonorable,"[9] whereupon the Athenians immediately command Themistocles to think of it no more. Compare that attitude with that of today, when it seems that nothing is too dishonorable if it might help secure the safety of the public.

2. A virtuous people will choose virtuous leaders and will not long tolerate unrighteous and tyrannical rulers.

We see this illustrated clearly in the life of Tarquin Superbus ("the proud"), the last king of Rome.[10]

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7 Plutarch, Camillus
8 Plato, Apology (very reminiscent of Abinadi in the Book of Mormon)
9 Plutarch, Themistocles
10 Livy, History of Rome, Book 1:34 - Book 2:15

Although the Roman kings were traditionally elected by the people and confirmed by the senate, the Tarquins had begun to establish a family dynasty in Rome. Tarquin Superbus gained power and ruled for some time with tyrannical power in Rome, exasperating the Roman people, until his son brazenly flaunted the laws by raping the virtuous Lucretia. This was more than the people could tolerate, and they rose up and banished Tarquin. Then, because of the bad experience with the Tarquins, they wanted to do away with kings entirely, so they also banished the entire Tarquin family in order to rid the city of those who would aspire to be kings and so that they could establish a republican form of government.

Another example of not tolerating tyrants is the rather curious Athenian institution called the ostracism. Each year, the people of Athens could vote to banish one of the most prominent of their citizens from the city for ten years. This was not a punishment, but rather an effective check to prevent the rise of a popular leader, which would undermine the extreme form of democracy they had established. It served its purpose well for a long time, until in 415 BC when Nicias and Alcibiades, who were both candidates for the ostracism, conspired together to have their supporters vote for another citizen named Hyperbolos instead. It was considered so shameful that a person of little worth was selected for the ostracism that the custom fell into disuse after that time. Thus we see how declining virtue was able to corrupt the political institutions and allow popular leaders to begin to gain power in the Athenian democracy.

3. A virtuous people is characterized by equity and equal opportunity, while class conflicts abound in a non-virtuous people.

The Roman republic was described by Livy thus: "I would have every man apply his mind seriously to consider these points, viz. what their life and what their manners were; through what men and by what measures, both in peace and in war, their empire was acquired and extended; then, as discipline gradually declined, let him follow in his thoughts their morals, at first as slightly giving way, anon how they sunk more and more, then began to fall headlong, until he reaches the present times, when we can neither endure our vices, nor their remedies."[11] What Livy describes in his history of the Roman republic is a slow but steady decline in the virtue of the people, especially with regards to the conflicts between the rich patricians and the common people. The rich and powerful take advantage of the poor to become even more rich, while the poor may occasionally revolt and gain some advantage due to their larger numbers. A central issue is land ownership. There is a process, seen at many times in history, by which the poor fall into debt, lose their land, and the rich buy it and bring in cheaper foreign laborers to work the land. This issue is so important and difficult that it deserves its own bullet.

4. A virtuous people own their land and are self-sufficient.

The downward cycle of land ownership becoming concentrated in the hands of a few rich people is vividly described in Plutarch's lives of Agis and Cleomenes, who dealt with the problem among the Spartans, and of Caius and Tiberius Gracchus, who dealt with the problem in Rome. In Rome, it became so bad, that "there were comparatively few freemen remaining in all Italy, which swarmed with workhouses full of foreign-born slaves. These the rich men employed in cultivating their ground of which they dispossessed the citizens."[12] We see the benefits of land-ownership and self-sufficiency directly reflected in the valor of their armies. The Roman and Spartans armies were of great renown for their bravery and skill in battle, and yet they were not made up of professional soldiers, but of farmers who left their lands to fight for their country. In fighting for their country they were defending their own lands as well. When the poor are displaced from their lands, they fight poorly if at all, since they have nothing to gain or to defend, and may not be any worse off under different rulers. The rich rulers begin to hire full-time and mercenary armies instead of relying on the people.

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11 Livy, History of Rome, introduction
12 Plutarch, Tiberius Gracchus

We can see the profound effect of land ownership in the history of Sparta. The ancient laws of Sparta forbade gold and silver from the city. Plutarch relates that "upon the prohibition of gold and silver, all lawsuits immediately ceased, for there was now neither avarice nor poverty amongst them, but equality, where everyone's wants were supplied, and independence, because those wants were so small."[13] Only iron money was allowed, and since iron was not worth much, there wasn't much point to trying to amass riches. They also lived a rather communal life, without fancy food, fine furniture or other luxuries. When Sparta won the Peloponnesian War against Athens, gold and silver and other rich spoils from the wars were brought into the city. As a result, the country was filled with avarice and luxury and the laws were subverted. The ancient laws specified that lands must be passed on by inheritance and could not be sold to others. After the laws were subverted, the rich began buying up lands, until there were only about one hundred land-owning families left. "The rest were destitute alike of wealth and of honour, were tardy and unperforming in the defence of their country against its enemies abroad, and eagerly watched for the opportunity for change and revolution at home."[14] The Spartans were in such a low state that the Aetolians were able to invade and take 50,000 slaves. Yet a short time after Cleomenes released the people from their debts and equalized the property, "by merely recurring once again to their native customs, and re-entering the track of the ancient discipline, they were able to give ... the most signal instances of courage and obedience, raising Sparta to her ancient place as the commanding state of Greece."[15]

[*More discussion on land-ownership has been moved to an appendix.*]

5. The virtue of a people is exemplified by their leaders.

As noted earlier, a virtuous people will choose virtuous leaders, and the most virtuous people will place the most virtuous among them in power. One of the best examples of this is Numa, the second king of Rome, who was in fact a Sabine, not a Roman. He was chosen because of his great virtue in order to settle the conflict between the Roman and Sabine factions of who should be the next king after Romulus. Yet it was difficult to persuade him to accept the kingdom, for he was used to peace and worship and philosophy, and was very reluctant to govern a city whose greatness was founded in war. His father persuaded him that it would be a field for noble actions, and so he took it upon himself to endeavor to teach the people the worship of the gods, love of justice, and abhorrence of violence and war. When he divided the lands, which Romulus had acquired by warfare, among the poorer people, he did it as a means to moral rather than economic profit. "For there is no employment that gives so keen and quick a relish for peace as husbandry and a country life, which leave in men all that kind of courage that makes them ready to fight in defense of their own, while it destroys the license that breaks out into acts of injustice and rapacity."[16] He would sometimes inspect the lands in person, forming judgments of each man's character by the results evident on the land he owned. "He banished all luxury and softness from his own home, and while citizens alike and strangers found in him an incorruptible judge and counsellor, in private he devoted himself not to amusement or lucre, but to the worship of the immortal gods, and rational contemplation of their divine power and nature." By his example he established peace not only among the warlike Romans during his reign but also among all of the neighboring tribes, "for the mere sight itself of a shining and conspicuous example of virtue in the life of their prince will bring them spontaneously to virtue."[17] Not only is the virtue of its leaders an indicator of the society's virtue, it also serves as an anchor for maintaining the people's virtues. On the other hand, leaders can also instill vices into a people, so that a government which spends recklessly and incurs enormous debt will find that the

13 Plutarch, Lycurgus
14 Plutarch, Agis
15 Plutarch, Cleomenes
16 Plutarch, Numa Pompilius
17 Plutarch, Numa Pompilius

common people behave in the same manner. Good leaders are as Homer repeatedly describes Odysseus, king of Ithaca, "blessing the people, and by the people blessed."[18]

The surest guarantor of freedom is virtue. Many people believe in the right to "freedom from fear," even though any God-fearing person should immediately recognize the fallacy behind that belief. If one expects a government to protect us from anyone which might threaten us, in the end one will fear the government more than anything else. If such a state were possible, it could only be through trusting one's neighbors because they are as virtuous as oneself.

I believe that if you can establish virtue in people, the governmental form will take care of itself, with little effort or struggle. We need prophets more than patriots. Maybe an effective counter-argument is that I am being too idealistic. There will always be some few wicked people, and we need the right governmental system to keep them in check. But there are two parts to the decay in governmental forms: (1) some leader flaunts or ignores the check or law, and (2) the people do not object. The rich and powerful can find ways of subverting the laws and government at any time, but they can only do as much as the people will tolerate. Putting a new system in place will be futile if the people will continue to accept "business as usual." Therefore, any reform in government must be preceded by a reform in virtue, or it will prove futile in the end.

As modern political philosophers have written, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."[19] And again, "Government is instituted for the common good; for the protection, safety, prosperity, and happiness of the people."[20] Government is merely a tool which the people use to establish and secure their liberty. The success of the American Revolution was a reflection of the virtue of the American people at that time. "It was *preceded* by a healthy shift in the culture and perspective of the people."[21] It is the people's job to protect liberty, and the government is merely their tool.

Whenever the people abdicate their responsibility and believe that it is the government's job to protect their freedom and liberty, they have already lost it. And when they have lost it, it can only be restored by reforming the virtue of the people, not by reforming the government.

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18 Homer, Odyssey
19 Declaration of Independence
20 John Adams, Thoughts on Government, 1776
21 Oliver DeMille, The Coming Aristocracy, p. 95 (emphasis added)

Appendix: further discussion of the the Land Ownership problem.

Different cultures have tried different ways of dealing with the problems of land ownership, and it is something all cultures who desired to have a virtuous populace have had to deal with. The Romans had a law limiting the amount of land any individual could own. This worked for a while, but as greed increased, the rich found a way around the law by owning it in other people's name, and eventually by ignoring the law completely. The Spartan law forbidding lands from being sold to other families was effective until the general decline of virtue accompanied by the influx of money from plundering Athens. Ancient Israel had the Jubilee every fifty years, when debts were forgiven and lands were returned to their original owners. America avoided this problem for a long time because of the vast tracts of land which were opened to settlement in the west, giving the poor somewhere to go when lands in the east were lost.

On a few occasions when the divide between rich and poor had become extremely unjust, a return to virtue was accompanied by a return to individual ownership by division of lands or remission of debts. "For a mere law to give all men equal rights is but useless, if the poor must sacrifice those rights to their debts."[22] Solon, the lawgiver of Athens, Lycurgus, who established of the laws and customs of Sparta, and Numa, the philosopher-king of Rome, all undertook such measures, but it is a difficult and dangerous task. Plutarch observed that such actions usually cause civil disorder and violence[23] and noted that Solon's action was unique in that it ended violence instead of causing it. At the time of Solon all the poor people in Athens were indebted to the rich and could be sold into slavery to pay off the debt. Many would sell their own children or flee to another country to avoid the cruelty of their creditors. The people wanted a change, and because Solon was wealthy, but also honest and not involved in the abuses of the creditors, he was chosen by the people to liberate the debtors, divide the land, and change the government. He freed the people from their debts and mortgages but chose not to meddle with the lands, which at first pleased neither side, because the rich lost their money and the poor did not get land, but they soon perceived the good it had accomplished, for those who had been sold into slavery were liberated and those who fled into exile were able to return. Then after he had established peace in the land, he undertook to reform the government. The laws he established became a model studied by other nations, including Rome, for a very long time afterwards.

Increasing opportunities for ownership can be a great benefit to virtue in a society, but mere handouts and free lunches will not help a people who are not sufficiently educated to put the gifts to good use. Tiberius Gracchus and his brother Caius both tried to effect a division of land among the Romans, who were ignoring the law limiting the amount of land each could own. These attempts infuriated the rich landowners, who fought to keep their land. Their tactics are instructive. While Tiberius and Caius proposed laws to give the people land and make them self-sufficient, the rich landowning Senators proposed laws to give benefits to the people which would make them popular with the people, but keep the people dependent on the government. "[The] whole design being to outdo Caius in pleasing and cajoling the populace (as if it had been in some comedy), with obsequious flattery and every kind of gratifications."[24] In the end, both Tiberius and Caius were murdered to prevent them from carrying out their plans to divide lands among the poor. Perhaps they failed because they tried to solve problems caused by lack of virtue by reforming societal systems, assuming virtue would follow form rather than the other way around. We see this same land-ownership problem continuing today in some countries with varying amounts of failure and violence.

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22 Plutarch, Poplicola and Solon compared
23 Plutarch, Poplicola and Solon compared
24 Plutarch, Caius Gracchus