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Cyrus the Great in the Cyropaedia

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Two-paper debate with R. Illarraga (San Sebastian University, Chile; University of Buenos Aires & CONICET,

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This paper explores Xenophon's depiction of Cyrus the Great as a ruler in the Cyropaedia*. Xenophon's Cyrus is often regarded by the scholarship as an ideal, benevolent leader sincerely concerned with virtue, friendship, and honour-related dynamics. However, it is clear that Cyrus equally resorts to malicious and divisive means, employing psychological subjugation, fostering mutual rivalry among his friends, and weakening his subjects. His actions ultimately arouse fear, envy, and insecurity, as Cyrus displays some of the typical features of a tyrant. Xenophon possibly meant to show how Cyrus, by successfully balancing different and contrasting aspects, succeeded in maintaining power no matter the costs by 'domesticating' his subjects.*

Main points:

- Cyrus' systematic use of fear, division, etc. as forms of 'soft' control over subjects and friends.

- Consistent manipulative, coercive, and oppressive attitude.

- In pair with compensation, gift-giving, generosity, friendship, honour-related dynamics.

- No moral evaluation by Xenophon.

- Work focused on the problem of stability of power, and how to solve it no matter what.

- Xenophon's opening reflections on herds-like masses and how rulers might handle them.

Xen. *Cyr.* 1.1.1-3 on human nature, herds, and power:

1.1.2. πάσας τοίνυν ταύτας τὰς **ἀγέλας** ἐδοκοῦμεν ὁρᾶν μᾶλλον ἐθελούσας πείθεσθαι τοῖς νομεῦσιν ἢ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοῖς ἄρχουσι [...].

1.1.3. ὅτε μὲν δὴ ταῦτα ἐνεθυμούμεθα, οὕτως ἐγιγνώσκομεν περὶ αὐτῶν, ὡς ἀνθρώπῳ πεφυκότι πάντων τῶν ἄλλων ῥᾷον εἴη ζώων ἢ ἀνθρώπων ἄρχειν. ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐνενοήσαμεν ὅτι Κῦρος ἐγένετο Πέρσης, ὃς παμπόλλους μὲν ἀνθρώπους ἐκτήσατο πειθομένους αὐτῷ, παμπόλλας δὲ πόλεις, πάμπολλα δὲ ἔθνη, ἐκ τούτου δὴ ἠναγκαζόμεθα μετανοεῖν μὴ οὔτε τῶν ἀδυνάτων οὔτε τῶν χαλεπῶν ἔργων ᾖ τὸ ἀνθρώπων ἄρχειν, ἤν τις **ἐπισταμένως** τοῦτο πράττῃ.

We noticed that all these **herds** (*agelai*) are willing to obey their keepers more readily than humans [are willing to obey] their rulers. [...]

We noticed, as we reflected, that for a human, by nature, it would be easier to rule over all other animals than over humans. But when we reflected that there was one Cyrus, the Persian, who reduced to obedience a vast number of humans and cities and nations, we were then compelled to change our opinion and decide that to rule humans might be a task neither impossible nor even difficult, if one should only do it **with competence** (*epistamenōs*).

A few comparanda and speculations:

- *Oeconomicus* 13.6-9 (Ischomachus to Socrates): slaves & education seemingly suitable for wild beasts (*dokousa thēriōdēs paideia* etc.); 13.10-12: 'meritocratic' approach.

- *Memorabilia*: recurrence of *epistamai* as practical competence in political/public matters (e.g. 3.6.17); 3.9.10-11: Socrates: kings and rulers are not those holding a sceptre nor those elected, but those who know how to rule (τοὺς ἐπισταμένους ἄρχειν).

  - 1.2.32: Socrates to Critias: cattle metaphor in politics; cfr. 2.7.14; 3.11.5 (Theodote's *agelē* of 'friends'); 4.1.3-4: dogs must be trained, just like humans – [Socrates/Xen.:] without education, humans are incompetent/unable to judge (κρίνειν γὰρ οὐκ ἐπισταμένους) what must be done.

  - *Varia* potentially relevant: oppress the weak to obtain obedience (2.1.13).

- Critias'(?) 'Sisyphus fragment' *ap*. Sext. Emp. *Adv. math*. 9.54 (= *Adv. dogm*. 3.54) = *Adv. phys*. 1.54:

  - Humans like beasts (*thēriōdēs*) in the past; someone invented (divine) fear (*deos*) for the benefit of mankind, introducing the idea that gods would hear and see everything.

- A set of Socratic ideas variously developed by his disciples?