Tragic Wisdom, Vigilance, and the Tyrant's Return: A Response to My Critics

Andrew Fiala

Fresno State University
afiala@csufresno.edu

THE TRUMP ERA IS TRAGIC. In saying this, I want to direct attention to three themes I discussed in my book, *Tyranny from Plato to Trump*. First, the *dramatis personae* of the Trump narrative can be understood as manifestations of characters familiar from ancient tragedies: the tyrant, his sycophants, and the moronic masses. Second, the dramatic narrative points toward a tragic, sorrowful, and unhappy conclusion. People died on January 6. The country is polarized. And the tyrant is threatening to return to the stage. Finally, this uncanny reality reminds us that human creations—governments as well as the edifice of political philosophy—are fragile and insufficient. Sophocles got it right when he wrote in *Oedipus the Tyrant* (line 1092—my translation):

> No human creation lasts forever.
> Plague and trouble make victims of us all.

In this essay, my response to my friends and critics, I will focus on the way the Trump tragedy exposes a tragic flaw in philosophy. I discussed this to some extent in the book. The point is this: philosophy is at odds with the world; and tyranny makes this very obvious.

I completed this essay as the Congressional committee investigating January 6 issued an unprecedented subpoena demanding Donald Trump's testimony. The committee exposed Trump's premeditated plan to steal the 2020 election. Trump planned to simply declare victory. When he lost—and he knew he lost—Trump continued to lie and pursue an unlawful effort to overturn the election. Trump's sycophants went forth and spread "The Big Lie" across the country. A mob invaded the Capitol to try to prevent Congress from certifying the election on January 6, 2022. When philosophers like myself who value truth, integrity, virtue, democracy, and nonviolence observe this, we shudder with revulsion. This is not the way things are supposed to work in a world of reason, honesty, and enlightenment. But maybe we are discovering that we do not live in such a world.

When I wrote the book, much of this was already known. A tyrannical personality attempted to overturn our democracy. A coterie of sycophants facilitated these maneuvers. And the mob cheered it. And yet, in the book, I struck a hopeful note. The good news was, as I argued there, that Trump remained a "would-be tyrant." The Constitution worked. Trump left power. But so far, not much has been accomplished to prevent Trump from running for office again. Trump has retreated to Mar-A-Lago, where he continues to threaten to return to power. The future is uncertain.

In the book, I argued that there were two keys to making progress: moral education and an enlightened constitution. These are perennial solutions, which can be traced through the history of philosophy. I stand by that account. We will do better when citizens are educated and when there is a rational Constitutional system that creates a separation of powers, a system of checks and balances, and that is oriented toward the rule of law. Of course, this is not a simple panacea. The remedy is fragile. It requires vigilance and effort. And tyrants do not simply fade away. Even in defeat, they threaten to return.

My Generous Critics and the Anxieties of the Moment

In reading the comments of my critics, I think that they mostly agree with me about the importance of education and a stable constitution. But where they each seem to disagree with me is with regard to my diagnosis of how these remedies apply in the contemporary world and the extent of their effectiveness. They are being generous, I think, in stating this gently. But I suspect they think I am naïve, overly sanguine, and utopian. Rob Metcalf suggests that fascism is the problem and that I ignore the sinister underbelly of white supremacy and hate. He says, "Fiala's concern with tyranny as opposed to fascism probably understates the problem that the book is meant to address." David Jennings suspects that education is insufficient in a world populated by a motley crew of morons. He says, "To protect a democracy from the tyrannical forces within it, Fiala thinks we need philosopher citizens. But with all the obstacles I've described in place, can we reasonably hope our educational system, be it the current one or a future iteration of it, will produce enough of them?" Carolyn Cusick suggests that our social world is broken and lacking in trust. We need a focused process of repair, she says, that builds social relationships. But she fears that this may be impossible in a world that is fragmented by atomic individualism. She says, "I remain unconvinced that educating the sort of coordination needed to resist the unhealthy coordination that enables tyranny to succeed is done by educating individuals in morality and civics." Jeremy Wisnewski is even more blunt about our inadequacy and in questioning my "faith" in democracy. He suggests that we are doomed because of apathy, indifference, and the scope of the problems confronting us. He implies that democracies cannot solve these problems, while hinting at Plato's dream of a benevolent despot and riffing off Heidegger in saying, "I suspect that only a tyrant could save us now." Wisnewski says, "I lack Fiala's faith in the US Constitution as well as his faith in moral and political education to meet our present challenges."

I am thankful for the honesty and probing questions of these critics. In reading their comments, I experienced angst and despair—not about my book but about the world itself. I stand by my analysis of the basic problem. But these criticisms remind me that the story is

not over and there is no simple solution to the human problem. Trump has not exited the stage. Mar-a-Lago is his Elba, a retreat in which he is nurturing his grievances and planning a return to power. The present is fraught and the future unknown. While reading my critics comments and keeping my eye on the news, my anxiety is growing.

But anxiety has its uses. We ought not bury our heads in the sand or retreat to the ivory tower. Philosophy produces anxiety. If it does not produce anxiety, we are not doing it right. The philosopher's goal is not to provide pablum and panaceas. Rather, enlightenment requires critical work that points us toward the abyss. One purpose of philosophy is to see problems, paradoxes, and aporias. Philosophers can also suggest solutions. But philosophy is haunted by tragedy. Our proposed solutions may fall on deaf ears. And in the end, things do fall apart, while death looms on the horizon.

At the time the book was written, I said that the Constitutional system worked and Trump remained a "would-be tyrant." I mentioned that there was much work yet to be done to reform and improve the Constitution and to cultivate civic virtue among citizens. I suggested the need for vigilance. But my tone was hopeful. Trump did leave office, after all. I want to respond to my critics here by saying that this hopeful diagnosis does not necessarily promise a happy final conclusion to the drama. Much depends upon "us"—on what "we, the people" do and how we respond to ongoing threats to democracy, wisdom, and virtue.

And the tyrant may return. History reminds us that tyrants do not simply disappear. Alcibiades returned to Athens after he betrayed the city, until he was subsequently banished again. Napoleon escaped from Elba with a reconstituted Grand Army. He ran amok for one hundred days until he was finally defeated at Waterloo and sent to St. Helena. But these historical analogies are imprecise. Trump is neither Napoleon nor Alcibiades. And the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers are not the Grand Army. We search for historical analogies—as I did in my book—in order to make sense of the present. But each moment is unique. Nonetheless, the story of the tyrant's return is an anxiety-producing epilogue that we must bear in mind.

Revisiting The Irony of Political Philosophy

Philosophers are always at odds with reality. We stare into the abyss, feeling powerless in the face of chaos. The problem of tyranny makes this very apparent. Tyrants force us to bear witness to the radical insufficiency of reason, virtue, wisdom, and enlightenment. This is a source of consternation for philosophers. We detect this sense of exasperation in Plato's treatment of Thrasymachus, Callicles, and Alcibiades. There are those who simply cannot be transformed by reason, argument, and wisdom. Sometimes we ignore this tragic fact. But it cannot be denied. The abysmal truth of tyranny is that it reminds us of the radical insufficiency of philosophy. Tyranny shows us that political philosophy cannot change the world. It is a warning that philosophy is a kind of absurdity. And yet, we struggle onward. I must admit that already this seems overblown. And one significant objection must be put on the table. Maybe things are not all that bad. Maybe the moral arc of the universe really does bend in the direction of justice. And certainly, the worries of the present moment pale in comparison to the circumstances of Seneca in Nero's Rome or Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany. I hope this remains true. I hope that enlightenment will grow. But those two cases, as well as the case of Socrates himself, are reminders that reason, justice, and truth do not always prevail.

I have always suspected that political philosophy was a tragic endeavor. In one of the first essays I ever published, "The Irony of Political Philosophy" (which was published in this journal, *Philosophy and the Contemporary World* in 1998), I claimed that political philosophy is "a paradoxical enterprise" (Fiala, 1998). It is an effort "to bring reason to bear upon the irrational proceedings of political life." In that essay, I pointed out that political philosophers can find themselves plagued by disillusionment, which might lead them to abandon the world of politics entirely. But the solution is not to rekindle wild hope by imagining a utopian panacea. Instead, the best we can do is adopt an attitude of irony that is only moderately hopeful. I concluded way back then that "a healthy sense of irony can help us work to actualize our ideals while also realizing that these ideals are contingent human productions." And: "There are no

panaceas: we must recognize this while continuing to act as if there were."

Now here I am, almost 25 years later, confronting this truth again but with a much more acute sense of absurdity, tragedy, and urgency. In the 1990's it was already clear to me that something was broken in the American system, with its two parties, special interests, disengaged populace, and penchant for guns and violence. American polarization was apparent even then. As was demagoguery and the cult of celebrity. These issues seem more acute today than they did 25 years ago. And I fear that things may become worse.

This sense of impending doom is present in the comments provided by my critics and friends. I am grateful for their attentive reading of my book. And I wish that I had better news to share with them. Each of these commentators expresses, in a different way, a profound worry about the stability, rationality, and virtue of the political world. I agree with them about these worries. And although I struck a hopeful note in my book, in my response to their critiques, I want to dig deeper into the seriousness of the malady we are confronting. I'll respond to a couple of points made by each. And I'll conclude with a very modest bit of hope. My goal in these remarks is not to defend my book or correct my commentator's interpretation of what I wrote. Rather, I want to extend the conversation into deep waters—and see if we can find something to keep us afloat.

Fascism and True Believers

Rob Metcalf focuses on the problem of fascism. I worry that he may be right that my focus on tyranny as a personality flaw fails to dig into the heart of the political problem. He also questions my "faith" in democracy and "hope" for the future. If he is right about fascism, he may be justified in his apprehensions. I still maintain that Trump is not a fascist leader. He is a celebrity and a narcissist, more concerned with himself than with "the nation" or "the party." And I still maintain that it is useful to see tyranny as a personality disorder. As Metcalf correctly notes, I associate fascism with a focus on party and nation. Now Trump does talk about "Making America Great Again" and weeding out those who are "Republican in Name Only." But on my reading of Trump, this is merely rhetoric and usually

insincere. Trump may play at being a fascist leader. But his narcissism prevents him from fully committing to a fascist ideology. And yet… There are those among his followers who may take this kind of thing more seriously than Trump himself does. And I frankly did not discuss those true believers in my book. Indeed, as I read Metcalf's critique, I worry that my analysis of these true believers is too light. In calling Trump's followers "sycophants" and the "moronic masses," as I do, I may have underplayed the sincerity and commitment of the fanatical true believers.

Metcalf says that my analysis of Trump as a would-be tyrant "does not preclude the possibility that a fascist political movement could make use of a would-be tyrant for its own aims." That remark is important—and I'll admit that I did not contend with that problem or with the problem of true believers. With regard to the true believers, Eric Hoffer's book, *The True Believer* (from the 1950's), is helpful—in addition to the sources cited by Metcalf. Hoffer says that all mass movements breed "fanaticism, enthusiasm, fervent hope, hatred and intolerance; all of them are capable of releasing a powerful flow of activity in certain departments of life; all of them demand blind faith and singlehearted allegiance" (Hoffer 1951, Preface). Among other things, Hoffer explains:

> The fanatic cannot be weaned away from his cause by an appeal to his reason or moral sense. He fears compromise and cannot be persuaded to qualify the certitude and righteousness of his holy cause (Hoffer, 1951, sec. 61).

If this is true, then the true believer cannot be "enlightened" by moral education. My analysis of the morons of political life views them as blind. The education I have in mind helps the moron see better. But the true believers of fascism may not be blind in the way that I suggest the morons are. They may be fanatically committed to the darkness. I fear that this is what Metcalf is pointing toward when he suggests that fascists can use a would-be tyrant for their purposes. The fanatical true believers will project their own fantasies and desires onto the person they worship and adore, even if that person is a narcissistic would-be tyrant.

And how do we remedy that? Well, education alone may not work, which is why in addition to education we need the rule of law

and a stable constitution. But Metcalf's worries remain on the table. And our anxiety grows.

Moronology and Polarization

David Jennings's exploration of the variety of morons is useful—and builds upon what I said in the previous section. I could imagine Jennings or some other author writing a book of "moronology," which catalogues the array of morons in the world. Among the morons, there are true believers and fanatics, although Jennings does not use those exact terms. He does speak of party loyalists and sworn-tribe morons. I discuss these folks in the book to some extent. But Jennings doubles down on the worry that these folks may refuse to be educated. Like Metcalf, he brings in the problem of disinformation, defactualization, lies, and confusion. There is also the problem of relativism. As Jennings points out, "one person's hero in another man's tyrant, and one person's activist judge is another man's champion of natural, divinely ordained, or constitutional rights." I discussed this in the book, in light of the way that terms like "tyrant" and "sycophant" are used as pejorative epithets that malign and denigrate opponents.

My proposed solution to these problems was education. I suggested that education can cure the morons and cut through the problem of relativism. If the morons are merely "blind," then we ought to enlighten them. And we should adhere to an objective definition of tyranny. But Jennings digs into the problem of education, pointing out the depth of our polarization and the lack of common ground in our educational system and culture. He ends with a pessimistic rhetorical question: "can any democracy hope to last?" Again, our anxiety grows. It is easy to imagine things getting worse in terms of moral blindness, polarization, and relativism. As I said before, there are no panaceas. No democracy has lasted forever. But that does not mean we should stop working to find common ground, to defuse polarization, and to look for facts and objective standards that can remedy the problems that Jennings discusses.

Social Isolation and Repair Work

This brings me to Carolyn Cusick's profound claim about the insufficiency of our cultural and social world. On Cusick's telling, the problem is our isolation. We lack trust. And we have no concrete way of repairing the divide and pulling society together from the silos of polarization. Cusick says, "I argue that preventing tyranny takes three, not just two, conditions: in addition to maintaining the US Constitution and increasing moral and civic education, we need a collective understanding of the coordination of citizens needed to create and sustain a democracy." That's a social effort—the third element between individuality and political life.

I appreciate Cusick's strategy here. It hearkens back to Hegel's notion of civil society and beyond that to Aristotle. But Cusick is not content to dwell in nostalgia for a lost *Gemeinschaft*. She well knows that the communities of the 19th Century and of the ancient world were fraught with contradictions involving the subordination of women, the presence of slavery, and all of the ills of hierarchy and inequality. I take one of Cusick's important suggestions to be that we must continue the work of liberation from tyranny across society and in our communities. She asks, "Might we need to do a lot more to disrupt the tyrannical father in order to be able to educate everyone and for that education to work?" My answer is, "Yes!" I agree that we need a continual critique of tyranny. I pointed out in my book that we need an ongoing critique of tyranny in the family and elsewhere. And I agree with Cusick that this would help us to cultivate genuine friendship. Genuine friendships are not tyrannical. Rather, they are a free relationship of equals.

But—and here angst appears again—we lack friendship and trust in our polarized polity. Cusick calls for repair work to be done. In light of her focus on society and community, this repair work will not be political. Nor will it be individual. It will be relational. But how can we do that? How can we repair relationships in a world that has been disrupted by the would-be tyrant and the long legacy of tyranny and inequality? I'm not sure. But without that work, I think Cusick might warn us there is a risk of the tyrant's return.

Existential Dread

Finally, I want to thank Jeremy Wisnewski for his cheerful pessimism. I say cheerful because Wisnewski often presents his gloomy arguments with a smile. He presented a paper at the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World in the summer of 2022, which runs parallel to his critique of my book. At that conference he discussed our "imminent extinction" drawing on the work of Gunther Anders. Nuclear weapons and climate catastrophe are key factors that cannot be ignored, along with dismal race relations (which Wisnewski discusses in his commentary) and other existential risks such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Given the need for quick responses, scientific analysis, and substantial changes in policy, Wisnewski may be right that democracy cannot save us from our imminent extinction.

And now the angst is clearly out in the open. No democracy lasts forever. No civilization or species lasts forever. And yet, I can't help but hear Wisnewski chuckling as he brings us this dismal news. Despite his pessimism, Wisnewski delivers the bad news with a smile on his face. He continues to read, think, and write his provocations despite the dismal truths he explores. Which returns me to irony and the insufficiency and absurdity of philosophy. The nervous chuckle is one way that we process and express irony and absurdity. We know what ought to happen. We understand the truth. But the world does not conform. And so, we chuckle and shrug. What can a philosopher actually do to fend off the abyss? That nervous laughter is a sign of angst—but also, I would argue, a hint of hope. Wisnewski's doomsaying speaks a terrible truth. But in speaking truth in this way, there is a light in the darkness. It's not much light—certainly not "enlightenment" of the sort I so boldly discussed in my book. Rather, it is a modest candle in a sea of darkness. This is more like Camus's Sisyphus than Kant or Thomas Jefferson. And I think that we ought to embrace this chastened sense of enlightenment as a candle in the darkness, rather than some myth of the gleaming triumph of pure reason.

Metaphor, Irony and Stoic Pragmatism

With Sisyphus and candles, I've resorted to drama, poetry, myth, and metaphor. That's part of the problem; and understanding this is part of the solution. Political philosophy is not only a

compendium of truths. It is also a play of metaphors. Even the Constitution is such metaphor. There is no such thing as "we, the people." That's a dream that ignored the exclusion of slaves. This kind of contradiction drives philosophers mad. We want ideas to be grounded in concrete reality. But political language is not objective. It is also provocative, metaphoric, and aspirational. It is about hopes and dreams—and fears and anxieties—and critique. In the political world, the philosopher's voice is strange, alien, and often ineffective (as I argued twenty years ago in *The Philosopher's Voice*). But without that quiet voice, the darkness wins.

So, in conclusion, let's explore some images and see if we can resurrect some hope. I picture Socrates now on his deathbed, reclining as the poison settles in. He pulls the sheet down from over his eyes and says to Crito, "We owe a cock to Asclepius." And then he dies. This is a joke, I think. Nietzsche suggested that Socrates was telling us that death was the cure for life. But I see it otherwise. As long as you are alive, you've got a chance to speak, and think, and do. To say, as you are dying, that you owe a debt to the god of healing is a last attempt at good cheer—and also a remind of duty.

What else do we have in the end but to pay our dues, do our duty, and laugh in the face of inexorable fate? We think, we question, and we do our best to understand and improve things. But we know that in the end, there is the abyss. Socrates was killed by the morons of Athens. And Nero ordered Seneca to commit suicide. As Seneca killed himself, he said, we have nothing to leave behind us but our virtue. To wallow in despair solves nothing. Better to try to fix what you can before the end arrives.

It's not true that all things end well. But we cannot give up hope—and good humor. My mentor, John Lachs, once said, "Of course we die. But why should that spoil breakfast?" (Lachs 1998, 109). He advocates for what he calls "Stoic Pragmatism." From the Stoics we learn fortitude and good humor. And from the pragmatists we learn to focus on amelioration. We do our best to make progress. But it is wise for philosophers to cultivate a sense of ironic detachment. There are no utopias. This generation's tyrants will pass away. But our grandchildren will have tyrants of their own. We hope they can learn from our mistakes and from our vigilance. Perhaps they will read our words and glean some insight. But history is beyond our control.

In conclusion, let me offer a further bit of hope against the angst and existential dread. My book aimed to provide an intellectual history of tyranny and its cure that could help us understand the present moment. I noted that the founders were astute readers of ancient philosophy. Ideas do matter in history and in the world. And so, while the light shed by philosophy is modest, it can be effective. It is not always effective. And there is darkness. But it helps to know that human beings can learn from the past and from our mistakes. After Napoleon left Elba, it only took 100 days to defeat him at Waterloo. The world was vigilant and prepared for his return. And so too should we remain vigilant as we burn our candle in the dark.

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