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# Cyrus Among the Centaurs, or Why Not to Neglect the Ethico-Political Consequences of Technological Transformation.

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## Debating Cyrus

# **Xenophon Studies**



Edited by  
Christopher Tuplin, Gabriel Danzig and Emily Baragwanath

## **Volume 2**

# Debating Cyrus



Leadership in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*

Edited by

David M. Johnson, Gabriel Danzig and Rodrigo Illarraga

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# Preface

This volume was inspired by a virtual debate on Cyrus on September 6, 2020, organized by Rodrigo Illarra and featuring Dave Johnson as the keynote speaker and Gabriel Danzig as a respondent. There is a certain residue of that debate here in the otherwise peculiarly frequent references to Johnson's 2005 article, which formed the basis of his presentation. But the conversation has moved far beyond the issues raised there, and most of the scholars represented in our volume did not attend that now rather distant debate. All three editors developed the idea of the volume and read and commented on individual papers. The introduction is mainly the work of Dave Johnson, with input from the other editors. Johnson can also bear the blunt of the blame for copyediting, the index and this preface. Papers were submitted to us in 2022, so their authors naturally should not be expected to have taken account of work appearing since then. Johnson also gets most of the credit for the delay in publication, and he thanks the authors for their patience.

A few stylistic points. Authors were welcome to provide cross-references to other chapters, but as this was not always feasible (chapters changed over time in the natural course of things) we cross-reference major topics in section 5 of the introduction and provide a fairly full index. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are those of the authors, and the work cited is the *Cyropaedia*. Titles and abbreviations for Xenophon's works follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary (OCD)* but we have used *Spartan Polity* and *Lac. Pol.* for the *OCD's Respublica Lacedaemoniorum* and *Lac., Apology* for *Apologia Socratis*, *Horsemanship* for *De equitandi ratione*, *Cavalry Commander* for *De equitum magistro* and *Revenues* for *De vectigalibus*.

David M. Johnson  
Gabriel Danzig  
Rodrigo Illarra

August 2024



# Contents

## Preface — V

David M. Johnson, Gabriel Danzig and Rodrigo Illarraga

## Introduction — 1

## Part I: Techniques

David H. Thomas

### Chapter 1

**Xenophon's Expository Techniques and their Application to *Cyropaedia* — 25**

Luuk Huitink

### Chapter 2

**An Empire of Discourse: The *Paraklētikos Logos* at *Cyropaedia* 3.3.43–45 as an Intergeneric Dialogue — 37**

Benjamin McCloskey

### Chapter 3

**The Narrator of the *Cyropaedia*: Making Cyrus Ideal — 49**

Emily Baragwanath

### Chapter 4

**The Different World of the *Cyropaedia* — 59**

## Part II: Themes

W. E. Higgins

### Chapter 5

**Cyrus and the Ambiguities of Power — 71**

Milena Lozano Nembrot & Malena Sofía Battista

### Chapter 6

**The Power of Love or the Love for Power: Thoughts on Cyrus's Humanity — 83**

**VIII** — Contents

Lorraine Smith Pangle

**Chapter 7**

**Cyrus's Magnetism — 91**

Rodrigo Illarraga & Marie-Hélène Trépanier

**Chapter 8**

**Is Cyrus Really a Terrifying Tyrant? — 99**

Joseph R. Reisert

**Chapter 9**

**Cyrus's Manufactured Consent — 107**

Part III: **Passages**

Dustin Gish

**Chapter 10**

**Xenophon's Cyrus and Hunting in Paradise — 119**

Facundo Bey

**Chapter 11**

**Cyrus Among the Centaurs, or Why Not to Neglect the Ethico-Political Consequences of Technological Transformation — 133**

Melina Tamiolaki

**Chapter 12**

**Rereading the Pantheia Story: *Erōs* and Politics in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* — 147**

Christopher J. Tuplin

**Chapter 13**

***Blepōn nomos* (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.21–22) — 155**

Richard Fernando Buxton

**Chapter 14**

**What's Funny About Pheraulas? — 167**

David Konstan\*

**Chapter 15**

**Fathers, Sons and Philosophy — 177**

Thomas L. Pangle

**Chapter 16**

**The Last Days and Deathbed Speech of Xenophon's Cyrus (*Education of Cyrus* 8.7) — 185**

Gregory A. McBrayer

**Chapter 17**

**Honoured Above All Others: Cyrus's Deliberate Destruction of the Persian Empire in the *Cyropaedia* — 197**

**Part IV: Comparisons**

Frances Pownall

**Chapter 18**

**Xenophon and Tyranny in the *Cyropaedia*: A Comparative View — 209**

Claudia Marsico

**Chapter 19**

**How to and Why Not: Xenophon's Views on Leadership and Excellence of Stock — 217**

Fiorenza Bevilacqua

**Chapter 20**

**Xenophon's Cyrus and the End of the *Oeconomicus* (21.10–12) — 229**

William H. F. Altman

**Chapter 21**

**Xenophon's Cyrus as Glaucon's Perfectly Unjust Man — 241**

Gabriel Danzig

**Chapter 22**

**Tragedy and the *Cyropaedia* — 251**

Jane Grogan

**Chapter 23**

**'An absolute heroicall poem': Epic and Empire in Early Modern English  
Readings of the *Cyropaedia* — 265**

**List of Contributors — 275**

**Bibliography — 281**

**Index — 297**

Facundo Bey

## Chapter 11

# Cyrus Among the Centaurs, or Why Not to Neglect the Ethico-Political Consequences of Technological Transformation

## 1 Cyrus, an exceptional shepherd

The image of the shepherd-king was widespread in Greek culture.<sup>1</sup> Shepherding was a common image of ancient sovereignty, evoking the king's duty to protect his subjects and was often employed to compare kingship and military leadership. Among the Socratic philosophers, however, the analogy between shepherding and ruling became a powerful political image whose meaning and extent are worth reconsidering.<sup>2</sup>

*Cyropaedia* opens with a puzzle that implies two crucial and mutually intertwined theoretical issues in Xenophon's account of Cyrus's leadership: the problem of political obedience in general and the motif of Cyrus as a shepherd-leader. At the opening of this work, Xenophon is wonderstruck by the phenomenon of political domination, i.e. how kings (and tyrants) manage to secure obedience (1.1.1–3). Cyrus, portrayed as a king, is a unique example of success at this rare achievement among humans (1.1.4), who, according to Xenophon, are less likely to accept rule than animals (1.1.2–3). Nor is this the only difference between flocks and subjects. Xenophon also remarks that 'herds are more intractable to strangers than to their rulers and those who derive profit from them' (1.1.2).<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, unlike beasts, humans can, on the one hand, refuse to submit to their rulers or conspire against those who intend to rule them, whether they are familiar to them or not. Paradoxically, on the other hand, they may willingly accept to be

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1 *Il.* 2.243, 5.144, 10.3, 11.506, 15.262, 19.251, 24.654, Aesch. *Pers.* 74–75, 241, Eur. *Supp.* 191–192, Pl. *Rep.* 343B, 345C–E, Pl. *Plt.* 264A–C, 267A8–C3, Pl. *Grg.* 516A–E; Pl. *Leg.* 694A–695B, Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.32, 3.2.1, Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1161a12–15. See Murray 1990; in relation to ancient Greek culture, see Haubold 2000: 9–11, 17–46; Haubold 2015: 246–248; Brock 2013: 43–52.

2 On the shepherd king in Xenophon and Plato, see Skemp 1952: 52–66, Miller 1980: 40–43, Márquez 2012, Atack 2018b, Atack 2020a: 122–178.

3 Translations from the *Cyropaedia* are from Miller's 1914 Loeb edition.

ruled by complete strangers. The emphasis is on humans' natural tendency to disobey, something that reinforces Cyrus's exceptional accomplishment.<sup>4</sup> This raises key questions: why do men obey when they do? In what respect are the shepherd-ruler and the *human flock* different in kind?

Since Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* 14.3.3), some authors have seen *Cyropaedia* as an episode in the rivalry between Plato and Xenophon and even as a response to book 1 of Plato's *Republic*. For instance, David Johnson relates Xenophon's reference to shepherding and animal exploitation to the speech of Thrasymachus in *Republic* 343B–D (Johnson 2005: 178). Both Xenophon and Thrasymachus refer to shepherds and animals when thinking of government. But Thrasymachus, while saying that justice means taking advantage of the weak, turns the shepherd into a master (Haubold 2000: 24) and assumes that the ruled have no option but to accept their inferior position. Xenophon, conversely, draws a contrast between the obedience of animals and the unruliness of humans, which speaks to the wonder of Cyrus's achievement and indeed of any political domination founded not on simple violence and terror but on the need for mutuality between ruler and ruled.<sup>5</sup>

This also recalls the more explicit statement in *Memorabilia* 1.2.32 where Socrates resorts to the image of the shepherd-ruler in order to demonstrate the incompetence of the Thirty, while in *Memorabilia* 3.2.1 the reference to Agamemnon as a shepherd serves to describe the responsible and right way to rule or com-

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<sup>4</sup> See also *Oec.* 21.4–5, 21.12.

<sup>5</sup> As Atack remarks (2018: 521), this narrative strategy also differs from Socrates' reply to Thrasymachus in *Republic* 347C. However, Socrates raises no objections to the ruler-shepherd parallel and later employs the same analogy to compare the relationship between the guardians and auxiliaries with that between shepherds and dogs (*Resp.* 416A), who must be trained not to harm the flock they are expected to look after. The pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Minos* also provides an analogy between the human and the animal cattle (*Min.* 318A) although shepherds are compared not with rulers, but with *paidotribai* ('trainers'), for the laws or distributions of shepherds and trainers are good for animal and human bodies but only a king's laws are the best for human souls. Furthermore, the Stranger in *Politicus* rejects the analogies between kings and (divine) shepherds (*Plt.* 278B5) who possess absolute knowledge, statesmanship and *anthrōponomikē* ('human science' *Plt.* 266E, 267C), and animal and human flocks. He argues instead that subjects and rulers were in the present far closer than they had been in the Hesiodic Age of Kronos (*Plt.* 275B–C), in which rulers were gods, nature was abundant, and human life did not need to be organized within a *polis*, subsequently suggesting the weaver as a better *paradeigma* for the statesman as a human caretaker (*Plt.* 276D).

mand: by making one's subjects happy.<sup>6</sup> We must recall the distinction as well between the unwilling followers of unlawful tyrants and the willing obedience owed to lawful kings (*Memorabilia* 4.6.12), or even the sharp opposition in *Cyropaedia* between lawful Persian kingship and lawless Median tyranny, as articulated by Cyrus's wise mother (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.18), considerations which would have found no place in Thrasymachus' insistence on the advantages that rulers derive exclusively for themselves from their powerful position.

It is in *Cyropaedia* that we encounter the most striking comparison between ruling, herding and breeding (especially in 1.1.2). Cyrus himself states, – by comparing the good shepherd and the good king – that the task of a ruler is to derive benefits from his subjects as well as to make individuals and cities happy (8.2.14). Furthermore, Cyrus is portrayed not only as a friend of his subjects but also as someone who seeks 'to surpass all other men in attention to his friends' (8.2.14).<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the wise and exceptional shepherd-king and general (1.3.18, 1.5.4–5) was also an extraordinary friend to his subjects.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Cyrus is portrayed as *philanthrōpotatos* (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.1), benevolent (8.1.44), generous,<sup>9</sup> and fully aware of the political and military need for courage, self-control and temperance (7.5.76).

Accordingly, from the very beginning of the *Cyropaedia* we may observe a wonder within a wonder: Cyrus produced not merely obedience but willing, voluntary (*ekōn*) obedience (1.1.4).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Cyrus is portrayed as an exceptional individual capable of educating his subjects so that his own speech,<sup>11</sup> deeds, political decisions and laws (3.3.52) foster ethical virtues.<sup>12</sup> He was a beloved and respected leader – though feared by his enemies (1.1.4–5, 5.4.51) – who aimed to educate his subjects and did not strip his *human cattle*.<sup>13</sup>

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6 See also *Cyr.* 8.2.13–14. Plato also insisted on the fact that Cyrus's shepherding skills had fostered collective intellectual virtues by allowing his subjects to provide their advice to the ruler (*Leg.* 694B). See also Macé 2017: 121.

7 See Atack 2018b: 521. The political importance of friendship will be addressed by Cyrus again in his last (and fictional) speech to Cambyses (and Tanaoxares (Bardiya), *Cyr.* 8.7.13).

8 See also Illarraga 2021 on how Cyrus's psychological structure made him a virtuous and effective ruler, owing to his natural desires for *philotimia*, *philanthrōpia*, *philomatheia* (love for honour, of humanity, and of learning) as well as the virtues of *sōphrosunē* and *enkrateia* (moderation and self-mastery) acquired through education.

9 *Cyr.* 1.6.6, 6.1.23–24, 8.2.24–25.

10 See also *Oec.* 4.19.

11 *Cyr.* 1.6.19, 2.3.2–16, 3.3.34–40, 6.2.14–20, 6.4.13–20, 7.1.10–19.

12 See Biondi 2014: 611. It is worth noting the importance to Cyrus of his winning obedience through rhetoric, persuasion and *elenchus* ('refutation'). See especially Danzig 2017: 14.

13 *Cyr.* 1.5.7–14, 2.1.11–19, 4.1.2–6.

In the following section, we will analyse Cyrus's introduction of a technological military innovation that, although it may appear a mere change designed to advance Cyrus's expansionist military strategy, will in the long term have critical ethical and political consequences for the Persian Empire. In my view, this reform exerted a subtle yet deep pedagogical effect on his subjects that ultimately redefined their understanding of virtue in a politically uncontrollable fashion, something beyond even Cyrus's powerful 'single will', which was able to master 'the greatest and most glorious empire of all the kingdoms in Asia' (8.8.1) – and regardless of his initial and presumably lofty intentions. Although these educational outcomes became much clearer after Cyrus's death, we argue that they clearly began earlier, i.e. with the introduction of cavalry into his army (Johnson 2005: 181) – something that Xenophon highlights in his renowned dialectical portrayal of Cyrus (Whidden 2008: 33). At the same time, this reform also reshaped Cyrus's earlier shepherding skills and would therefore subtly alter the relationship between him and his subjects/flock not only from a political point of view but also at an ontological level (as I will suggest in the conclusion). The introduction of horsemanship accentuated Cyrus's exceptionality, especially after the consolidation of his kingship, leading to a further transformation of his leadership.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 Breeding *pseudocentaurs*: occasionalism and exceptionalism in Cyrus's imperialist project

The first significant socio-military reform of the Persian army undertaken by Cyrus in his effort to expand his domains happened before the introduction of cavalrymen, namely his provision of 30,000 light-armed *dēmotai* ('commoners', 1.5.5) with the same equipment as the heavily-armed *homotimoi* ('Peers') while assisting the Medes against the Assyrians (2.1.9–10). By arming the commoners in

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<sup>14</sup> Cyrus largely avoided the use of violence against his friends and subjects, even when, as king, he was beyond the reach of their eyes – yet his own eyes and ears were incarnated everywhere in those personally loyal to him (*Hdt.* 1.114.2, 1.100.2, 112.2, *Cyr.* 8.2.10–11).

the same way as the Peers, the Peers' understanding of merit as honour and their egalitarian *ethos*,<sup>15</sup> acquired by a harsh and long traditional education dictated by Persian customs, was replaced by a new meritocratic system in which those who performed more deserving deeds received a greater share of rewards. After Cyrus defeats the Assyrian army, the cavalry of the Medians and the other allies begin looting and acquire a substantial amount of plunder (4.2.27–33), while the new corps of Persian footmen remain idle. This provokes Cyrus's envy (4.3.3) and leads him to argue for the need for a Persian cavalry capable of securing greater rewards through similar plundering (4.3.4–14). Cyrus's lieutenant Chrysantas, in his speech supporting Cyrus's initiative, employs a mythical image of an impossible model, the centaur, while also invoking the quest for glory and the prospect of territorial expansion and economic gain with little need of allies (4.3.17–22). Yet his actual proposal would bring about a feasible transformation, turning egalitarian foot soldiers, educated in traditional Persian values, endowed with 'man's intelligence' but limited to human visual and manual skills, into an imperial, expansionist army of *pseudocentaurs*, who would now share in the 'fleetness and strength' of horses (4.3.21).

In his observant critical assessment of Cyrus's proposal for this military reform, David Johnson argues that Cyrus 'not only treats his followers like animals but transforms them into animals, and I even venture to identify the species: the centaur' (2005: 178). Although we have already explored how Cyrus related to his subjects, i.e. as a benevolent shepherd-king who did not treat them as beasts in Thrasymachean terms, further questions remain open in *Cyropaedia*. What does it mean that Cyrus trained the Persians in the image of centaurs, e.g. those enigmatic Kassite-Babylonian mythological creatures originally engraved on stones as guardians of boundaries and that were neither fully human nor fully equine (Dubois 1999: 27)? What kind of transformation did this *educational* treatment entail? What does this image of centaurs, who, according to mythographic rationalisation, originated from the transformation of shepherds into the first kind of cavalry, add to our initial question about Cyrus's shepherding?

Before delving further into Cyrus's transformation as shepherd, however, we must first understand more clearly the image of the centaurs as hybrid creatures. Traditionally, centaurs<sup>16</sup> have a three-sided nature: they are part human, part an-

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<sup>15</sup> Cyr. 1.2.3–4, 1.3.18, 2.2.2–4, 2.2.18, 3.3.70.

<sup>16</sup> It must be said that Xenophon, like Plato (*Phdr.* 229d), refers to the centaurs 'hippocentaurs,' following other ancient authors. According to Hansen, the use of this compound 'agrees with the myth in which *Kentauros* (that is, Centaur[us]) is properly the name of the father of the centaurs, and hippocentaurs are his composite offspring' (2004: 132). See also Pindar, *Pyth.* 2.21–48. As will be shown below, Xenophon's reference to centaurs through Chrysantas and Cyrus is closer to

imal, and wholly monster. This last element may hold the key to understanding the force of this image in *Cyropaedia*. The centaurs' ambiguous position along the porous and dangerous *boundaries* among the three domains of the human, the divine<sup>17</sup> and the monstrous, characterises them primarily as exceptional beings.

*Pseudocentaurism* would rest on a human combination of an act of voluntary self-creation as presented in Chrysantas's claims and a decision to impose external restraint shaped by Cyrus's knowledge and judgement. This combination would ensure not only a fierce mythological appearance for his army – terrifying to their enemies (4.3.22–23) – but also its reversibility, guaranteeing the retention of desirable human features among the cavalrymen (an expectation that will prove, in our view, not only impossible to fulfil but initially undesirable for Cyrus – or at least scarcely examined by him with any serious reflection). As a matter of fact, this reform programme effectively forged a unique army of *pseudocentaur*, superior and more exceptional even than their mythical counterparts, who eventually mastered the plains (8.5.23) under the command of an extraordinary shepherd – anomalously interested in horsemanship as a Persian<sup>18</sup> – who wanted to achieve an exceptional empire.<sup>19</sup> And this makes Cyrus's *parenthood* all the more wonderful: he is not only the careful father of his subjects, Persians and non-Persians alike,<sup>20</sup> but also the creator (1.6.38), shepherd, and mythologue of his own illusory creatures who should look like monsters without ultimately rejecting, by means of their behaviour, their traditional understanding of virtue (5.2.17).

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Palaephatus's *Peri Apiston*, which derives the word 'centaur' from *kent-* ('to prick') and *tauros* ('bull'). In this account the centaurs would have been the first horseback riders, Thessalian mounted herdsmen, from a village called Nephelē, who killed with their javelins the bulls who were destroying King Ixion's orchards, crops and livestock, and thus 'won for themselves the name "Centaur", because "they stuck the bulls"' (*Palaeph.* 1.6, trans. Stern). Diodorus' rationalization of the myth follows Palaephatus' version (*Diod. Sic.* 4.70.1–2).

<sup>17</sup> Before offering his rationalisation of the myth, Diodorus first presents the Centaurs first as the offspring of Centaurus, son of Apollo and Stilbe (*Diod. Sic.* 4.69.1), and later, with Pindar and others, as the divine progeny of Nephelē, 'beings who were gods on their mother's side, who possessed the swiftness of horses, who had the strength of two bodies, and enjoyed in addition the experience and wisdom of men' (*Diod. Sic.* 4.12.5, trans. Oldfather).

<sup>18</sup> Cyr. 1.3.3; see Christesen 2006: 49 and Mueller-Goldingen 1995: 181.

<sup>19</sup> Cyr. 4.5.16; see Johnson 2005: 190.

<sup>20</sup> Cyr. 8.1.1, 8.2.9, 8.8.1–2; see Biondi 2014: 620, Brock 2004: 249.

Occasional *pseudocentaurism* requires (a) concrete instances of war not bound by a fixed nature or norm but demanding an exceptional political and military situation (and criterion for action) and, consequently, (b) a *kairologic* decision<sup>21</sup> by Cyrus – a lesson he learned from his father (1.6.43, 7.5.46) – as to when, why, and against whom Persians should become *pseudocentaurs*. Hence, the emphasis on the partial, temporary and occasional transformation of the army into centaurs constitutes a crucial feature of this metamorphosis (4.3.18–21), indispensable for avoiding the permanence of monstrosity among Persian soldiers when not on the battlefield (since incontinence and hubris are *also* distinctly human traits). In this regard, Cyrus's decisions entail a major responsibility: managing in a timely and suitable manner the occasional metamorphosis of his army through of a choice that could be made only by the most exceptional of *pseudocentaurs*. (We should recall that prior to Chrysantas' supportive speech, Cyrus says that 'for whenever we wish, we may at once fight on foot; for in learning to ride we shall not be unlearning any of our infantry tactics', 4.3.14). But is it really possible to determine precisely what might be a suitable or warlike situation for such a vast technical conversion given that we are not speaking of a (peaceful) *civil* society but of an army continuously at war and thirsty for conquest and plunder (4.6.1–7.5.86)? For war is not a contingent event for these warriors but their very way of life.

From the beginning, Chrysantas expects the *pseudocentaurs* to surpass the centaurs, not only as capable horseback warriors but also because they would be able to become creatures 'that can be taken apart and put together again' (4.3.20), successfully combining the horsemen's abilities and the values of the *homotimoi* ('Peers') with animal passion (without stressing centaurs' *negative aspects*, i.e. incontinence, lewdness, inebriation and appetite for raw flesh), and then shifting easily back and forth between them. Yet Cyrus proposes making it improper for those Persians who possess a horse 'to be seen going anywhere on foot', such that 'people may think that we are really centaurs' (4.3.21–22). However, when Cyrus later requests horses for the Persians from the Medes and Hyrcanians, he adds unequivocally that 'if it seems that by turning footmen again, we could assist to better advantage, it will be open to us to dismount and at once stand by you as foot soldiers' (4.5.49, trans. Miller), which is consistent with what he stated in *Cyropaedia* 4.3.14.<sup>22</sup> Later, when he realised that he could occasionally turn the Persians back into infantrymen, he seemed unconcerned about the long-term ethical

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<sup>21</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role of *kairos* ('the opportune moment') for Xenophon's Cyrus (as a military leader and as a king) see Attack 2018b: 530–538.

<sup>22</sup> See also *Cyr.* 8.3.16–17.

changes this reform might have brought about, most likely because, in his view, this new technical training could not erase the Peers' infantry expertise, still less the values they learned through Persian education (such as courage, prudence, justice, moderation, self-control and economy of effort). At that point, Cyrus's sole concern was to deceive his enemies (or at least to impress them), as his father had taught him (1.6.37–38), and to acquire ever greater wealth while prudently exposing neither his army nor himself to needless risks or abrupt action.

Although the theoretical reversibility of technological changes seems to make them easy to adopt, their deep ethical repercussions in the long term tend to be permanent. According to Johnson, 'the notion of assigning rewards in proportion to merit seems unimpeachable in itself. But it must undo the old ideal of equality, and . . . both the sort of merit under consideration (loyalty to Cyrus) and the rewards it will bring (plunder) are questionable' (2005: 187). Thus, through this second reform, which gave place to a useful, deceptive and deadly military *mēchanē* ('contrivance'), Cyrus bred a new kind of Persian subject/warrior type upon ethically disruptive grounds. Cyrus encouraged mutual envy among competitors in order to strengthen their reliance on him. This new character was fostered by Cyrus's recognition and praise of the Peers (2.1.13), to whom he gave a greater share of goods and booty;<sup>23</sup> this ultimately transformed men concerned with social honour and moderation into greedy horsemen with an unquenchable thirst for getting *quid pro quo*-exchanges from their shepherd.<sup>24</sup> As Johnson summarizes, 'here loyalty has become the only virtue that counts. Thus, the rise of the Persian cavalry coincides with the fall of the Persian infantry and the decline of the virtues embodied by the Peers of Old Persia' (2005: 193). In this view, Chrysantas' singularity as an obedient yet virtuous and thoughtful warrior, a fundamental support to Cyrus, might be interpreted as confirming the rarity of reflective traits among the other horsemen, as underlined in book 8 (8.4.11). This *ethical carelessness* of Cyrus may have stemmed either from a lack of serious reflection on long-term consequences of achieving an empire or from excessive confidence in his own moderation and in his ability to guide successfully the alternation between humanity and bestiality through his exemplarity (8.1.21–22, 30, 36–39). Or, why not both?

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Cyr.* 2.1.22–31, 3.3.6, 4.5.58, 5.2.1, 5.4.32, 7.1.46 and 7.4.12–16, 8.1.34–35.

<sup>24</sup> See Nadon 2001: 107, Johnson 2005: 188, 193. Yet Cyrus also teaches his men to give rewards to their allies so as to win their friendship. Furthermore, Pheraulas, a commoner who became rich thanks to his bravery and loyalty (*Cyr.* 3.5–49) and nonetheless remained humble (*Cyr.* 3.7–8), exemplifies the willingness to give away wealth (*Cyr.* 3.35–36).

This transformation not only shaped a new understanding of virtue among the Persians but also intensified and modified Cyrus's shepherding features. The confluence between a context defined by continuous expansionist military actions and the need for a kairologically extraordinary leader-*technitēs* ('leader-expert') could only progressively increase the shepherd's power and epistemic superiority in both Cyrus's and his subjects' eyes, contributing, despite Cyrus's intentions, to the permanence of undesirable qualities among his subjects in the long run.

Furthermore, as Johnson remarks, 'Xenophon chooses to credit Cyrus with introducing the horse to Persia, and by having Cyrus learn to ride at the same time he learns of Median luxury, he associates horsemanship with the luxuries of the Medes' (2005: 194). Thus, Xenophon's narrative not only points towards the effects of introducing a foreign and incompatible custom into Persia<sup>25</sup> through his military reform but also towards the effect of Cyrus's Median education, which fully unfolds after Babylon had been conquered – and reminds us of the concerns of Mandane, when Cyrus was still a child (1.3.18). As is well-known, Cyrus in Babylon adopts Median dress (8.1.40; cf. 4.5.54), shoes with thick soles and cosmetics (8.1.41), which had captivated him while he stayed in Media with his grandfather (1.3.3), to create new deceptive devices,<sup>26</sup> albeit ones now intended to 'bewitch' his subjects.<sup>27</sup> As Whidden (2007a: 146) suggests, during Cyrus's last years of rule, 'the old virtue of justice defined as adherence to the law gets replaced by the new virtue of obedience, not to law, which no longer exists, but to Cyrus's omnipotent will'. However, although some similarities can be seen with Astyages' style of rule,<sup>28</sup> Cyrus is never portrayed as a tyrant – i.e. he continues to reject *pleonexia* ('greed' 8.3.16–17) and, as Atack (2020: 144) remarks, 'legal processes clearly continue at least in the Persian part of the empire, with courts and judges (8.2.27)'. Nonetheless, I contend that his shepherding manners changed as the political order came to rest more heavily on Cyrus's embodiment of law and self-referential sovereign-epistemic command (7.5.46–47). Thus, the breeding of Cyrus's centaurs gave mere obedience a new critical relevance,<sup>29</sup> e.g. in measuring the friendship and loyalty of his subjects as criteria for punishing or rewarding them (8.2.13–14).

By placing the image of the centaurs in *Cyropaedia*, Xenophon may have meant to imply to his readers that the effect intended by Cyrus – namely, of mak-

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<sup>25</sup> See also *Hdt.* 1.135.

<sup>26</sup> See Azoulay 2004b: 150.

<sup>27</sup> *Cyr.* 7.5.37, 8.1.40–41, 8.3.1.

<sup>28</sup> See Tuplin 1990, Gera 1993: 285–299, Azoulay 2004b.

<sup>29</sup> *Cyr.* 8.3.14, Gera 1993: 292.

ing his enemies believe that his cavalrymen were ruthless centaurs (just as, according to Diodorus' rationalisation, the gullible neighbouring inhabitants of the village of *Nephele* did in remote times) – would ultimately work against him. Cyrus perhaps took for granted that his gluttonous, pig-like (compare 5.2.17 and 8.8.9) *pseudocentaurs* would never cease to behave as *homotimoi*, either after the consolidation of his kingship, or, still more problematically, after his own death. Cyrus's reforms would fail ethically insofar as they required 'an inhuman mixture of continence and greed' (Johnson 2005: 202),<sup>30</sup> making Cyrus's unstable chimerical Persian-Median combination of values utterly unattainable beyond himself (and his intimate circle of *entimoi*). In this sense, as Atack (2020: 144) observes, once Cyrus rules far from his subjects, his virtuous exemplarity and 'the model for the political *ethos* he wishes to encourage (8.1.12, 27, 30, 33, 37)' became unreachable beyond the limits of the court (cf. 8.1.23, 39) as it became more and more dependent on how his image was interpreted and imitated. Hence, even though Cyrus recognized the importance of the power of images in military and political contexts, the indirect projection of the virtuous depiction of the centaur-king was condemned to a progressive degradation among his distant, though obedient and prosperous, *pseudocentaurs*.

### 3 Conclusion: the limits of the human and the philosophico-political importance of technological innovation

Cyrus, like Ixion in the Pindaric myth (*Pythian* 2.40–45), fathered unique illusory creatures, giving rise to deceptive descendants unfit to prolong his legacy and the life of the Persian Empire. Ultimately, an army of *pseudocentaurs* could never remain *sōphrōn* ('moderate') without all of Cyrus's exceptional political and military skills (Blaineau 2008: 211). Thus, what was meant a technical and temporary change would later shape the destiny of the whole empire in the absence of the extraordinary and virtuous shepherd.<sup>31</sup> Once *pseudocentaurism* has already consolidated a new imperial *ēthos* there was no turning back to the old and shared understanding of virtue, manliness and *enkrateia* ('self-mastery'). The exceptional shepherd-king and virtuous Persian-Median centaur, although an unprecedented leader with

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<sup>30</sup> See also Illarraga's different interpretation: 'it is indeed an extraordinary mixture but not an impossible one' (2021: 13).

<sup>31</sup> *Cyr.* 7.5.72–85, 8.1.7–8, 8.8.5.

kairologic military and political knowledge, failed to recognize that the subtle ethical transformations arising from an incompatible mixture of values, a monstrous duality, would ultimately produce a Persian moral decadence and political failure arguably already under way long before his death (7.5.76–77). Thus, in *Cyropaedia* book 8, after Cyrus's death, Persians subjects are described in the present as

much more effeminate now than they were in Cyrus's day. For at that time they still adhered to the old discipline and the old abstinence that they received from the Persians, but adopted the Median garb and Median luxury; now, on the contrary, they are allowing the rigour of the Persians to die out, while they keep up the effeminacy of the Medes. (8.8.15)

In Xenophon's eyes, Persian society - the society of *pseudocentaurs* - would eventually become unjust, voracious, soft, weak, sumptuous, cowardly, self-indulgent (8.8.16–18) and impious (8.8.27). Rulers and ruled are depicted as opportunists (8.8.4–5). Even equestrian training was soon abandoned (8.8.13), and army horses, with the systematisation of the *angareion*,<sup>32</sup> lost their military function, becoming instead an innovative pony-express intelligence service (8.6.17–19). In the long run, the *pseudocentaurs* were unable to shake off their monstrous identities by themselves and did not even perceive it as a problem.

In this sense, Chrysantas' speech in book 4, together with the metaphor of the Persians as centaurs, provided Xenophon with a strategic narrative vantage point from which to observe the ethical decadence arising from 'coupling Median luxury with Persian restraint' (Johnson 2005: 177) and from deploying for imperial purposes<sup>33</sup> technological innovations designed to complete what nature leaves imperfect, neglecting the ethical changes that these transformations may eventually entail. For this innovation seems inseparable from Cyrus's devotion to war and expansion, and from its subsequent consequences for the education of the non-warrior *paides* ('boys', 8.8.13–14), as Plato noted (*Laws* 694A–695B). In this regard, Xenophon seems to have anticipated Aristotle (*Politics* 1268a–1269a), a pioneer in addressing philosophically 'the tension between political stability and technological change' (Strauss 1996: 129–130).<sup>34</sup> The fact that this programme of military reform – i.e. the introduction of horses in Persia by Cyrus – may not

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<sup>32</sup> The Persian royal messenger service. Cf. also the adoption of a bodyguard of eunuchs, whose genital ablation, a barbaric practice from the Greek point of view, is compared by Cyrus to gelding vicious horses in order to make them less aggressive but still fit for war and to the castration of high-spirited bulls that remain strong enough to work thereafter (*Cyr.* 7.5.62–63).

<sup>33</sup> Johnson 2005: 202–205, Whidden 2007a: 148–153.

<sup>34</sup> See also Strauss 1964: 21–22.

have been historical<sup>35</sup> but rather an authorial invention (Christesen 2006: 48) can only strengthen the case that Xenophon is here making a philosophico-political point. After all, *Cyropaedia*'s ending in book 8 takes us back to book 1 in showing not only that (a) ruling over people and treating them as such is extremely difficult, and that (b) doing so while creating an empire is a complete wonder, but also that (c) the seeds of the empire's further ethical dissolution lay within the very military reform that made this political entity possible, and, lastly, that (d) to preserve that marvel once the cultivation of virtues has been neglected conjures not a utopia but a chimaera. From our point of view, if we are grant any credit to those who have argued that Xenophon with his *Cyropaedia* contributed to the genre of the 'mirror of princes', we must add, paraphrasing Vidal-Naquet's (2002: 62) account of the relation between Greek tragedy and the *polis*, that he did so with a 'broken mirror'<sup>36</sup>. Cyrus, through his use of technology, as an anti-Prometheus, expanded the Persian Empire during his lifetime, but at the cost of jeopardising its survival. As Carol Attack adduces, 'while Xenophon praised Sparta's Agesilaus in terms of virtue kingship, his portrait of Cyrus enables him to explore the difficulties inherent in "scaling up" rule from *polis* to empire, and how that might affect the role of the king as a *paradeigma*' (2020: 134).

Furthermore, Cyrus's uniqueness and superiority were exacerbated at an ontological level by the intensification of his extraordinary character and nature. Cyrus aspired to become the most perfect of the *pseudocentaurs* himself, combining human intelligence, divine lineage (1.2.1, 7.2.24) and animal strength, for only this could make him worthy of being the shepherd-king of his creatures (8.1.37–39, 7.5.75–77), as Johnson (2005: 97) also noted.

Cyrus's exceptionalism might be seen not only as a successful performance of rule over his subjects but as an experiment aimed at achieving a superhuman character for himself (*Oeconomicus* 21.19), one that Xenophon criticised not in psychological terms but on the grounds of its political inability to achieve lasting stability. Thus, Xenophon's Cyrus alternated between occasional cruelty and subhuman

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<sup>35</sup> Herodotus 1.133–136, Briant 2002: 19–20.

<sup>36</sup> The simile of the broken mirror, '*le miroir brisé*', was first introduced by the French historian Henry Rousso in his *Le Syndrome de Vichy* [1987].

traits,<sup>37</sup> on the one hand, and a divinely endowed humanity,<sup>38</sup> on the other, an unstable mixture at the threshold between the domains of the human and the monstrous that no regime can sustain for long.

Reading Xenophon's work as part of a critical acknowledgment of the political risks of technology may enable us to enrich our understanding of his original philosophical legacy. The exceptionality of Cyrus's leadership and shepherding cannot solve Xenophon's initial puzzle concerning political obedience. Instead, it raises many further questions for the modern reader. Nevertheless, it may also offer us some interesting insights into Xenophon's critical approach to Cyrus's uniqueness, his concerns about the political stability of imperial expansionism, and, last, but not least, the ethical grounds and political risks of technological innovation in the long term.

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<sup>37</sup> In *Cyr.* 4.5.6 we are told that Cyrus allowed the sentinels who captured men attempting to escape during the night to keep the spoils, while ordering the prisoners to be killed. In *Cyr.* 7.5.31, Cyrus sends out cavalry companies along the roads with orders to kill anyone found outside, instructing those who could speak Assyrian the inhabitants to remain indoors: whoever was caught outside would be killed. In *Cyr.* 7.5.69, Cyrus imposes a cruel tax on the Babylonians to pay the wages of his, thereby ensuring the continued subjugation of the Babylonian people.

<sup>38</sup> In *Cyr.* 1.4.24 we can see Cyrus's concern for wounded soldiers. In *Cyr.* 3.1.16, Cyrus shows mercy to the Armenian captives after Tigranes persuades him that such clemency would benefit his empire. In *Cyr.* 4.2.25, Cyrus educates others to exercise self-restraint and to abstain from what is disgraceful in order to defeat the enemy: his troops do not flee when battle turns against them, nor do they plunder when it goes in their favour. In *Cyr.* 4.4.6 Cyrus releases prisoners once again, since it proves the more profitable strategy.

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